

Mental Health Awareness Month

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Although we try to make our mental wellness a focus each month, May's focus on the importance of this piece of ourselves offers us an opportunity to try some new tools and strategies. How does this relate to Professional Learning, you may ask?

To be in a headspace—and heartspace to dedicate time to our professional growth, there are important pieces that need to be in place (or on their way to being in place). The Conference On New Techniques and Classroom Teaching is a unique learning opportunity where teachers, specialist teachers and administrators who are members of the Council of Atlantic Provinces' and Territorial Teacher Organizations (CAPTTO) learn from one another during workshops and to expand their networks during social activities. This year's theme for CONTACT, an initiative of the Professional Development and Professional Learning officers of CAPTTO is *Taking Care: Your Profession, Your Community, Yourself*. Are you interested in learning more about CONTACT and possibly attending from your Local? Please reach out to your Local President. To connect with this year's theme for CONTACT, I wanted to share a resource with you that has offered some important takeaways for me.

One of the bilingual giveaways this month is Michelle Obama's, *The Light We Carry*. I purchased this through Audible, which has become a part of my own self-care, as I travel the province to connect with our members. I really appreciate the flexibility of apps like Audible for the flexibility of allowing me to enjoy books while I am on the go.

Without giving away too much of the content of this impactful work, I would like to share some of my salient moments and hope that you too will find your own 'a-ha' moments as you read.

What words come to mind when you

hear the term PD or Professional Learning. A lot of times, we think of strategies or tools we can put to use in our learning spaces. In her book, Obama writes:

"That's what tools are for. They help keep us upright and balanced, better able to coexist with uncertainty. They help us deal with flux, to manage when life feels out of control. And they help us continue onward, even while in discomfort, even as we live with our strands exposed." p. 6

When we enter spaces where we are the learners, we bring an expectation of the material and the experience to help us move forward. The tools and strategies we seek are those concrete answers and ideas that can help keep us focused and anchored, especially when so much is uncertain. In my counselling space, I would often use a graphic of two concentric circles to discuss the idea of focusing on what we can control instead of expending energy trying

to change something we cannot. This idea is also a tool to help us centre our efforts around the seemingly 'small' pieces that can end up being so much more. Leaving ourselves vulnerable to unlearn can be an uneasy process. This is why having trusted colleagues and friends can support us in this process.

The facilitators or leaders of these sessions bring their experience to our collective learning space to share in the hopes that the participants might take something away that helps them. That is how I approach workshops I have prepared and presented. Further in the first chapter, Obama writes about the energy we bring to a space. Whether as a leader or a learner, or sometimes both, we, just like our students, bring so much each day. What can sometimes get lost is the importance of trusting our experience and ourselves;

Continued on page 2

making time to recognize what one another is bringing to a space and allowing that sharing to contribute to creating a learning community that is informed and authentic.

“I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual. A flame that’s worth protecting. When we are able to recognize our own light, we become empowered to use it. When we learn to foster what’s unique in the people around us, we become better able to build compassionate communities and make meaningful change.” p. 16.

This next quote, although it appears much later in the book, allows for a road map of how we come together as a community to create change. It is important that we do the inner work first. This can be hard work; flipping the script of what we have come to know over time what we have been told about how things work. Dismantling: the process of unlearning to work towards a better sense of ourselves and others is not easy.

Our differences are treasures and they’re also tools. They are useful, valid, worthy, and important to share. Recognizing this, not only in ourselves but in the people around us, we begin to rewrite more and more stories of not-mattering. We start to change the paradigms around who belongs, creating more space for more people. Step by step by step, we can lessen the loneliness of not-belonging.” p. 234

An integral piece of my professional practice centers on wellness; for myself and for our members. One of the largest factors that promotes a feeling of safety for any workplace is a

sense of belonging. As we open ourselves to learning and making way for knowing better to do better, we can help to create the space we need to feel safe and hold that space for others. I have had the privilege to hold space for colleagues and hope that this time allowed them to feel heard and supported. I am grateful for my takeaways from these opportunities.

“Going high is about learning to keep the poison out and the power in. It means that you have to be judicious with your energy and clear in your convictions. You push ahead in some instances and pull back in others, giving yourself opportunities to rest and restore. It helps to recognize that you are operating on a budget, as all of us are. When it comes to our attention, our time, our credibility, our goodwill toward and from others, we work with a limited but renewable set of resources.” p. 291

When we find ourselves challenged; when what is happening around us doesn’t match with our values and causes discomfort, it is important to try to refocus on what we can control. “Going high” is a concept that is interwoven throughout Michelle Obama’s writing. When we compromise ourselves for the sake of others, we give away a part ourselves that is so integral to how we show up. As we work towards self-care, each day we have the opportunity to replenish. As we head into what will hopefully be a restful long weekend, I sincerely hope you are able to make the time to rest and restore. Next week, I challenge you to notice the positivity that we give to and receive from others and just sit with the feeling that gives. The more we are able to find opportunities to renew our energy, the more we can be present—for ourselves, our communities and our profession. Take care.