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MHTTC

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Flourishing at Work: A Plan for Helping Professionals

Podcast Series

Transcript – Outside the Box

Michelle: Hi there! My name is Michelle Zechner, I'm faculty at Rutgers University School of Health Professions, Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions, and I'm with Dr. Tony Zippel, a psychologist with years of building effective organizations and teams. We are the host for Flourishing at Work, a Plan for Helping Professionals, a podcast series.

Hey Tony!

Tony: Hi, Michelle great to be with you today.

Michelle: Oh, I'm so glad you're back and we're in our favorite podcast room. I'm really looking forward to this episode because we're going to be talking about the kinds of things we can do to build our flourishing, and those creative strategies or thinking about resilience building using our imagination. So, fasten your seatbelts and enjoy the journey as Tony and I explore how you might use innovative ways to expand your resilient mind to live a thriving and flourishing life.

So, Tony this idea of creativity. I got very excited about it because I'm all about the rainbows and sparkles as we've discussed. But, what do you think about the idea of building more creativity in our lives for flourishing?

Tony: Creativity in our lives is so important and, and it's harder for us I think today. We've got so many distractions, we have so many demands on us that, we tend to just develop a kind of tunnel vision. We're going to plow through things, the only thing we're focused on is getting this thing done that we need to do and then we're going to do the next thing. We're kind of reactive in that sense, and we're we're in that kind of a mode, it's harder for us to look laterally, and to see the range of possibilities and the interesting things we never thought about before.

So, creating room is harder these days and it's one of the foundational elements I think of enhancing creativity.

Michelle: Wow, I think that's an interesting statement. I was imagining driving on the highway and always taking the same route to a place and you never look to the side and one day you get off the highway and you find just an amazing beautiful garden or a cute little farm stand in my case, or maybe a horse, or you see something that you never knew was there just because you've been sort of in that rut.

Is that kind of what you're talking about.

Tony: It's a wonderful strategy for enhancing creativity. You know, we get into these grooves so that we kind of run on autopilot and driving is a good example of it but it happens in our jobs, it happens in our relationships, and all of our lives. We tend to run on autopilot a lot of the time and miss things. And so, by making variations that disrupt the autopilot a little bit; I'm going to take a different kind of a route. You know I always eat the same thing for breakfast but I'm going to change that up. We always go to the same restaurants or the same movie theater. Let me change that up, making those kinds of changes in your routine and your environment push you to notice things that you hadn't noticed before and open doors and perceptions that you hadn't thought about before.

Michelle: Nice! Why I love that adage because it's also a lot more fun sometimes to take these little side trips into the imagination or creativity. I know for me, something that I've been thinking about a lot is physical activity and movement and I've done some research in that and the interesting thing about that is just to go to the gym and exercise is really boring. I'm not very good at persevering. But if I sort of mix it up and I'm doing some walking one day with a friend and I might be doing Tai Chi, yoga, Zumba, gardening or some really deep cleaning in my house, the list goes on. Then I noticed that I'm much more energized to do that physical activity which I feel is really beneficial for my brain and other ways.

Tony: Yeah, I think that's right, We're hardwired to notice and appreciate novelty, you know some people have even talked about mindfulness, as the ability to notice novelty in your environment. We can train our minds through things like mindfulness to find novelty in front of us no matter what, but you can force the issue by intentionally changing your routines. It's one of the reasons I think vacations are so important and so great. You know when you go to another country, and tool around for a couple of weeks, everything is different. You have no choice except to be immersed in differences and disrupted routine. And it just opens all kinds of doors and windows for you.

Michelle: So you heard it here folks, Dr Tony's Zipple is recommending that we all go on vacation, preferably in a foreign country but I mean I'm kind of curious Tony. I mean I'm joking, of course. Would we see some of that same stimulation or creativity developed if we're just maybe going to a town that we've never been to, or part of our own town that we've never visited or taking a bus that we've never seen and a certain neighborhood or something like that.

Tony: Really small things can make a big difference. You get into a rut. You wear the same clothes every day. You have your hair cut the same way for years at a time. When you get glasses that are replacements for your old glasses you lean toward glasses that look just like the old glasses. As I mentioned earlier, you eat the same thing for breakfast every morning. Small changes that we intentionally make in our life change our perspective, and that pushes creativity.

Michelle: Yeah, yeah, so I'm sort of thinking that you mentioned that word "change" again. So much of our series about flourishing are these tiny steps. We're not saying go out and run a marathon or change who you are from top to bottom. We're saying take these small actions, every day, to encourage yourself to think like I'm a "doer" and I'm going to do different things and those actions, helps us be creative, to help us guide our thinking our actions our choices and in doing things different I'm just thinking like I might try, using myself as an example, to find a new recipe to try that is completely different.

It's challenging but then it is sort of is exhilarating at the end when I sort of feel like wow, I tackled that complicated recipe and I am on it now.

Tony: And so much of what you're talking about rests in your intention with it. So it's not just doing stuff for the sake of doing stuff. It's your intention to do things that are a little out of the ordinary for yourself. It's a weird way in which boredom can help drive creativity too. We live in a world where there are 101 things that can fill up our time instantly. We carry massive computer power in our pockets and we can download the entire Library of Congress on our smartphone. We can look at vast libraries of music, art and movies. Video Games. There is never a shortage of things to occupy our time. And sometimes if we resist that and we just let ourselves get a little bored, it opens that sense of "I wonder what", lets us daydream, a little more. But, by being intentional about it you can make the most of it. It's like being able to say, "I'm not going to just waste time on Facebook for the next hour". You know, I'm just going to sit and be by myself and let my mind wander and daydream a little bit, be bored a little bit and see what comes. See what I begin to see laterally. So the intention is really important.

Michelle: That is really an interesting statement and I just want to clarify when you say laterally, like seeing something lateral. Are you meaning looking around and noticing things that you might have missed before?

Tony: Well, yeah and and I mean it literally and figuratively. Right. Literally you know when you're you're in a place that you've been 100 times. Just looking around a little bit and noticing the place in a fresh way is a tremendous driver of creativity. That is what mindfulness is all about. Let me be present, right where I am and take in the sights and sensations, right here and now. So literally, you can do that. But figuratively, you can as well. You know I'm driving towards goals, I'm very occupied. I'm in a routine. I've got to get this thing done. Mental health professionals you know are all about I got to get more units of billing, time is money. I'm driving in this direction, but slowing down and thinking about what sits outside of that push to get a specific thing done, what's on either side of it, Where are those opportunities. That's thinking laterally.

Michelle: And you know, as you're saying that, like the slowing down and the thinking laterally, I imagine that helps people really remind themselves of what's important to them, to feel sort of this sense of wellness. I really love the concept of multi-dimensional wellness where we have all these different components of who we are, when we're feeling well and thinking about like, when we open the door for our mind to sort of pay attention, be mindful and be present that we're really actually able to connect more to our sense of well being, maybe even our spiritual wellness for some folks at least connecting to values, purpose and meaning. What do you think about that?

Tony: I think that's a great insight, you know when we begin to slow down and notice what's happening for us internally, notice what's happening around us, and we begin to make choices. You know, we exercise our agency, you know, what do I really think about that? How do I really feel about that? What do I want to do next? What are the choices I'm going to make? It opens lots of doors.

Michelle: Yeah, I can really resonate with that. What's funny though when I think about creativity is that it really can drive us towards meaning and purpose. When we're really creative we are able to

remember about slowing down and being aware of all these things. We can remember why we're doing the work that we're doing, why these things are helping people, why we're doing it. But the other side of the coin for me, anyway, is it's also a lot more fun. And there's this element of play that creativity can sort of spark, a sense of joy and just delight that may not have been there if I didn't slow down and notice things.

What's your thoughts about play and flourishing?

Tony: You're right about about creativity triggering those things, but those things can also trigger creativity. It's a wonderful virtuous cycle, slow down and play a little bit, celebrate. Enjoy. And notice the good things that are happening right here in front of you, and see what that does for your creativity. So it works in both directions.

Michelle: Yeah I, for one, I love being creative and it always gets me very excited and enjoying my life a lot when I think I flourish. I feel what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the positive psychologist, talked about. Flow, and when you're like in that moment of pure enjoyment because you're working on something and you're solving a problem. I think that's what he's talking about. But I feel a flow when I'm tackling something creatively, ideas or artistically.

Tony: Yeah. We talked earlier about working with your signature strengths, you know when you're exercising your signature strengths you're more likely to find yourself in flow, and you're more likely to find yourself thinking creatively about things when you're inside those signature strengths. Some of the other things we've talked about are also important to supporting this. It's hard to be a creative if you're only getting five hours of sleep a night, you know, being so exhausted that you hallucinate doesn't count as creativity.

So, making sure that you're taking good care of yourself so that you have physical stamina, sleep, exercise, good nutrition helps you I think, to also exercise creativity.

Michelle: Also, I was just thinking, as I was laughing, reasons to laugh. I mean literally sometimes I write myself a laughter prescription where I'm sort of saying, okay I need to watch a stand up comedian now or I need to look up knock-knock jokes because there's hasn't been a lot of play in my life so I need to sort of prescribe that for myself.

Tony: And those are changes that you're making in your environment. It's the great thing about humor, It's a way that you can look at the world right in front of you. And there's something in the humor that jars your worldview and makes you see it in a fresh way and and that's a version of changing your environment to help push creativity.

Michelle: Yeah, I hadn't thought about it that way. Thank you, Tony. That's great. We've talked a lot about different versions of creativity and sort of this interconnection of mindfulness but anything else you feel like we need to touch before we wrap it up?

Tony: I think maybe, just the last thing is, you need to make room for it. And I think that's a cultural thing in organizations as well. Managers and people who run organizations need to create space in the organization for their employees. They need to give them room to do these kinds of things and it doesn't mean you can't have rules, structures and goals. You can't drive towards metrics. You have to do all of that. It's running an organization. But you have to balance it by creating space for people to

play, for people to see things that are a little bit different, to mixing things up in the environment. You have to give people room to pursue their passions and exercise their signature strengths in the connection to their work. Organizations, I think have a responsibility to help people to be more creative and there's a lot that they can do to do that.

Michelle: Right. And I mean I think I hope you'll correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that more creative employees often improve productivity so it's not like a ...Sometimes I get stuck and I think people I know get stuck in the amount of time you spend on a task equals the amount of creativity and productivity you're going to have as an output but it's really not that way for me anyway, is I need it is time on task but it's also the room to breathe as you say, and the mindfulness and being in the present. That's critical for my productivity.

Tony: Well, it's a version of sharpening the axe. Abraham Lincoln said if I had eight hours to cut down a tree, I would spend the first six sharpening my axe. Organizations do well to pay attention to their human capital and human beings are beings that do best when we've got some room to exercise agency. When we have some room to connect with each other we have some room for fun. It's part of making us more effective and complete people, and more effective and complete people deliver better for organizations.

Michelle: Well, thank you very much Tony. That has really been a fabulous talk. I think we're at the end of our time here. We talked today about this notion of creativity and the importance of changing up our routines, disrupting that rut that we may get into of doing things repeatedly over and over. And those actions or intentions that we can take each day, little ones, to sort of shake things up and the importance of boredom, actually letting ourselves disconnect from our phones. Okay, Michelle, turn off the Tick Tock. I mean, do what you need to do so that you're not glued to your phone all the time because sometimes standing in the grocery line can actually be a good thing without your phone distracting you. We've really talked a lot about slowing down, being mindful and moving towards that sense of meaning and purpose because that slow down lets us see the scenery on the other side of what's happening. And encouraging some play at creativity is great. It has this directional thing between playing, creativity and flow, and making more room for the ability to be creative and using our strengths and creativity. Anything I missed Tony that we talked about?

Tony: That's a long list but absolutely right and you know it's like all the other things we've talked about, the important part of it is to get started, to do it. And, if you walk away from this podcast and do nothing except start to make small changes in your daily routine and see what happens. They don't have to be big, but do it intentionally. That would be a great place to start.

Michelle: I love it and that's of course where we get to our questions for our audience, our listeners.

What's one small thing you can do today, that will sort of mix your day up a little bit?

And then I think we'd also like to ask, how can you bring in some more creativity to your life? What would that look like and how might you bring in more light and laughter and play?

And I would ask what would you play prescription look like? I gave you my examples but what might some of that look like for you?

So believe it or not, the next episode, episode six, is our last episode of the Flourishing At Work podcast. I can't believe it. And Tony and I will be trying to wrap up all of the ideas we've shared about flourishing to encourage you to build your own plan and we'll be focusing on our personal strengths.

Thanks for listening, I'm Michelle Zechner and I'm with Dr. Tony Zippel and we're grateful for the important work you're doing. Remember to take time for your self-care today. You matter! Be sure to like and subscribe to this podcast series wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast is a production of the Northeast and Caribbean Mental Health Technology Transfer Center at Rutgers University, and made possible by funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.