

Graduate College Podcast: Abby Interview Episode

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pandemic, students, kids, feel, people, schools, grad school, mental health, resources, day, identify, abby, work, life, big, joy, social workers, bit, adults, person

SPEAKERS

Shelby, Sebastian, Abby, Cat

-
- A Abby 00:06
Hi I'm Abby.
 - C Cat 00:06
I'm Cat.
 - S Sebastian 00:07
I'm Sebastian.
 - S Shelby 00:09
And I'm Shelby and you're listening to the Graduate College Podcast.
 - A Abby 00:13
Where we take a deep dive into topics regarding graduate students in Illinois, one conversation at a time.



Cat 00:19

Today we interview, our very own Abby Valtierra, was a second year graduate student pursuing her master's in social work with a concentration in school social work. And finally we conclude this episode with part two of our segment called, "Mesources", where we take campus resources, local resources, and our own self made resources to brighten our days and improve our own mental health in grad school.



Sebastian 00:41

With all that being said, thank you for listening and let's get into our interview with Abby. Okay Hi everyone I'm Sebastian.



Shelby 00:52

And I am Shelby.



Sebastian 00:54

And we're here with our very own Abby, Abby, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you study what you do?



Abby 01:04

So my name is Abby Valtierra, and I am a second year masters student and I'm getting my master's in social work with a concentration in school of social work. So what that means is by the end of my program, I will be able to work as a social worker in any setting. But specifically, there's some extra things that you have to do and some extra hoops you have to jump through to work specifically in the schools. So that will be my focus, and then, hopefully, after my internship is complete, next May, and I will be able to get on at a school district and help trying to start working with students, and specifically in the school setting, social workers do a lot. They run small groups with kids, they do a lot of social emotional screeners to kind of identify these kids early on, that are going to need maybe need some additional resources. And basically I mean they kind of serve as like a liaison to any resources that the kids need they work with the teachers, if they're having, you know trouble with a particular student. So they kind of do a little bit of everything. But essentially, that's the summary of what social workers do in schools.



Shelby 02:34

Also I commend you for doing a, a career like that because I think that that requires a very special type of person.

A Abby 02:41
Thank you.

S Shelby 02:44
So yeah. Since we're talking mental health for this episode, what kind of experiences have you had working with kids in terms of their mental health and have you been able to kind of take some tools that you've used with them and apply it to your own personal life or advice for other grad students?

A Abby 03:05
Yeah so, I think a lot of the techniques that we that we teach kids, and that we work with kids on can really apply to a lot of adults. So, big technique that we talk about with kids is called the like 5-4-3-2-1 mapping, have you ever heard about that? So it's five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. So when you're having these like negative thoughts or you're feeling anxious or you kind of can feel yourself spiraling or you know just feel yourself, you know, getting heated or elevated, what you do is you go down the list and you identify these things, you know, I can see the trees outside, you know I can. I can see this pencil on the desk and it kind of going through those steps kind of brings you back in to the center, you know, just to try to get more focused and kind of calm back down and get back in touch with your body. So that's one that we do a lot. Another one that you guys have probably heard of is just progressive muscle relaxation. So you can lay down, or you can do it sitting down but you basically go from head to toe, and you isolate each part of your body and you focus on completely relaxing it, you know, so you could start at your shoulders, and then kind of go all the way down. So kind of just little things that you can do to get back in touch with your body and kind of recenter yourself, and try to give you some time and some space to kind of, like I said recenter yourself and maybe re-frame, what you're what you're feeling what you're thinking.

S Sebastian 05:11
That's awesome. I think I've done that in yoga, and at the end in this final corpse pose we like really tighten everything up. Yeah, so a similar variation of it, where are you tighten everything up, let it go.



Abby 05:27

Just different ways to be mindful of, you know your body and your space and your surroundings and basically center yourself back.



Sebastian 05:36

Right I'd be interested to hear if any part of what you studied so far shows any sort of behaviors that you identify in children or in schools that adults are that normally carried through with that into adulthood. So habits that they have for their mental health, but things that they do to either cope or, you know, not cope, that they carry into adulthood. So any part of, is there any part of your work that focuses on identifying those things into them, made, may they be good or bad.



Abby 06:10

I mean I think a lot of the work we do, is learning how to give kids, positive coping mechanisms but also giving them the language to identify what they're feeling. I know we talked about that, you know a little bit in the first podcast that you know you can't, you know, fix what's going on if you can't identify it and if you can't communicate it. So a lot of what social workers also do is trying to bake in that social emotional learning into the curriculum so that the teachers have the resources to kind of just teach that into their curriculum so it's integrated so that the kids can, you know, have these tools that will positively affect them later on in life, so that they know what they're feeling and tips and strategies they can use to deal with that.



Shelby 07:13

Do you think that there are differences in the way that kids will cope with their mental health or deal with it based on. I mean obviously age would be a big factor but as well as like sex or gender home lives?



Abby 07:32

Those are socio economic status is a big one, gender, race, unfortunately, you know, you can see some of those inequities happen there but I think a big thing that we try to focus on is community, you know, the more involved students and parents can be in the community generally we see the better that they're going to do, and we, social workers work at like a multi-tiered system so you've got like a tier one, that's the social emotional learning you want all kids to have that right. And then if you, you know, the kids that need

a little bit more, or like what we call tier two, and then tier three are like usually a really small percentage of the students but they are students that need really intense services, we call those wraparound services, and a huge component of wraparound services generally involve trying to reach out to someone in the community that they can connect with, then we see really positive results around that and it doesn't always have to be a specific person, you know, it can be someone, you know, like a business, it can be, you know someone at a church, it's not a one size fits all program we try to really individualize it, but keeping that really strong community bond is where we see a lot of students really turn it around and have much better outcomes.



Sebastian 09:09

What is it about that community bond that actually helps them and what might that look like in an adult's life so could you maybe give a few examples of what being involved in a community would be like?



Abby 09:23

I mean I think you see you're seeing this kind of play out a little bit with the pandemic you know when you have grad students that are basically just having to do Zoom classes online and then log off, you know, yes, they are still a student, but they're they don't feel like they're part of a community, you know they're not having those meaningful interactions they don't have people that they're checking in with daily that, you know, at the end of the day, really we see students do well when they feel seen and when they feel heard, or when they feel like someone cares about them, you know, so having a mentor in school, even if it's just one person can make a huge difference and I think that is similar at a graduate school level. If you don't have that support of people who, you know, have been through similar things and kind of have that collective wisdom, then, I think you kind of feel like you're just going at it alone, and it can just be really disheartening and I think kids can kind of lose hope and I think you see that in grad school as well it just, it can feel like a hopeless time if you don't have that support, and those, you know those checking points with your support system.



Shelby 10:47

Abby, I wanted to know if there are any kids that you've worked with recently or, you know, in the past or throughout your career so far that have, like, really inspired you or influenced you in a very, you know, positive or memorable way.

A

Abby 11:09

So, I haven't actually gotten put much into practice yet, since I start my internship, but I will say as a parent, it's given me definitely a perspective on parenting, and I say one positive I have from this as I know so much more about just the resiliency that kids have. And just the beautiful way that they can just adapt, and the way that they think about the world and I feel like I am a better parent because I didn't get to spend so much time with him. And just seeing those struggles and the way that they overcome those struggles so I feel like I know a lot more about him, but just in general, I mean every, every kid that I meet, just amazes me, I think, just their perspective on life is phenomenal and I think they're just the future, I think, you know they're going to do great things and I don't know I just, I think they're amazing.

S

Shelby 12:23

I could not agree with you more. Every, every time I work with kids, they do not disappoint in terms of bearer. Yeah, they just can bounce back.

A

Abby 12:33

So, and just joy, joy that I think just gets lost along the way sometimes. You know, the wonderful thing about kids is that they appreciate the simple things, you know, and I think a big thing about this pandemic is you've had to come back to those simple joys, right, and getting creative on where you take joy, I did some research on grief gardens, and those have had some positive outcomes with schools who do grief gardens, they've had some uptick in, you know, positive student behaviors. And, at the height of the pandemic, I was like okay, if it can work for kids, it can work for me. So I started gardening, and it really has taken off and it's become a new hobby of mine and it really does bring me an immense amount of joy. So I think you just have to look for some creative outlets, you know, what brings you joy and what can you capitalize on that, you know, makes you happy, even if it's not totally in the box and I think it's also...One great thing about kids is that they're not afraid to try new things, I think the older that we get, the more we become resistant to doing things that we don't already know we're going to love. And so I think you know just be mindful that you might try something and not like it and that's okay but that shouldn't you know dissuade you from trying to move on to the next thing you know find what your passion is and what brings you light.

S

Sebastian 14:33

I love that my, I back to Kids bringing joy, I'm the eldest of five so I've got four little ones

underneath me and I don't live with them but when I do go visit them, it's always cracked me up every time I always know I'm gonna leave there feeling a lot more endorphins, just laughter after leaving here, but he doesn't have a grief garden he has a grief. One of those plants called a succulent, he has a succulent out every day, he got it after the, after the pandemic happened and he was just at home all the time, but he tends to it every single day so that's definitely something I didn't think that kids could garden really, but yeah I've killed every plant I've ever had.

A

Abby 15:19

They even have little kits now, they have suction cups so you can stick them on any window in your house, and it's like a little premade kit that comes with the dirt and you just have to put a little water into it so even if you live in like an apartment, you can do it pretty much anywhere.

S

Sebastian 15:41

One thing that I would like to know if, if you have any advice or insight on, how could we bring a more childlike mentality to adults when they're seeking to, you know, care for their own mental health because I think there is that really thick stigma behind it where people either don't want to acknowledge problems or are afraid to start, you know, any sort of care. So what would you say is the advice for that?

A

Abby 16:04

You know I think one of the things about kids, is that they're brutally honest, for better or for worse, you know they're going to tell it like it is, and they're not afraid to ask for what they need, and I think again somewhere along the way, we lose that. And I feel like I've been working from home for the past year plus, and it really has forced me to kind of reckon with myself and I think a lot of adults don't want to do it because it is uncomfortable, you know, growing is not a comfortable process and so it's, it's a little bit easier I think to just push those things down. But I think when you do the work, and you really dive into who you are and what are your strengths. I mean, you know, a huge part of social work is looking at strengths based perspectives, you know, what are you good at, what do you really thrive when you do, but I think it's also acknowledging your weaknesses, and like I said that it's okay to ask for help, you know you're only one person and you can only do so much. And, you know, honoring mental health, and I think kids just have a more honest way of looking at themselves, so I've tried to take this year to learn a lot about myself and really sit down and almost kind of in the grad school mentality, like you have to make an assignment right you know like I'm going to learn more about myself

whether that's journaling. I love personality tests have you guys ever heard of that Enneagram?

S Sebastian 17:51
Oh yeah.

A Abby 17:53
Okay so the Enneagram completely changed my life and it changed the way that I look at myself as it relates to be to parent to being, you know, in a relationship. My career. And so there are a lot of really great books on, you know, the various personality tests, I think, you know that one might not speak to you but there are a couple out there but I think they're really meaningful and really trying to sit back and reflect on yourself and what you struggle with, and what is triggering to you I think is another big one is trying to be proactive and, you know, identify those things early and try to already have strategies that you can use, because you know you're going to get triggered, but if you've already identified what, you know what that instance is most likely going to be then you can be more prepared.

S Shelby 18:56
Have you have you like read about in the literature or applied this with other kids. Mindfulness and meditation with kids I've seen that a little bit and I've studied a little bit with like activity breaks in the classroom and sometimes they talk about like yoga and meditations up so have you read up on doing that with kids?

A Abby 19:21
Yeah, so that's kind of baked into the social emotional learning. So, and it's mostly up to the teacher, kind of how they want they give you the general you know like, objectives, they want you to meet and then it's kind of up to the teacher how they do it so I know that there's a one where they start out at the beginning with like different animals and they breathe, try to breathe like different animals. You know and again I focus more on elementary so you know you got to you got to tone it down and make it in a fun way. But yeah, they have trauma informed yoga, that they do, they have a lot of programs, they're a little bit more relatively new. And the problem is that they're generally very expensive.

S

Sebastian 20:16

All are skills that are very important in all aspects of life, how would you recommend that people of any age, overcome the fear of actually asking for mental health when they really need it. So maybe they don't know how to you know find or how to self, you know, self care but they want to seek that out but they are afraid to actually do so.

A

Abby 20:40

I think, you know, especially our generation is really, you know, heavily tuned in to social media, and I think there's a lot of different organizations out there that are trying to offer these healing spaces for, you know, different various groups. But I think that can be a little less overwhelming is seeking out the resource on social media so you're not actually having to, you know necessarily call a live person, even maybe sending an email. Sometimes I find that, again, just people get anxious about that first phone call, and they're not sure if they want to go through with it, they just want to get some more information. And I think information can be really empowering, so having a way that people can, you know, reach out via social media or email so that they can get over that first hurdle, without, you know, having been quite so anxious and feeling like they can retain some of that power but I do feel like, you know, a really positive aspect of the pandemic is that the mental health resources are becoming a little bit more accessible, you know with telehealth, and like I said there's just, I think more of a push, about mindfulness, and, I think our generation is great about trying to break that stigma down that it's okay to go to therapy, it's not a taboo word, I think everybody should go to therapy. Love therapy, I think it's really helpful. So, that would be my advice.

S

Sebastian 22:21

One thing that I heard recently on the radio, there's a lot of because of specifically the pandemic, because a lot of students are back to the classroom is that a lot of them are doing something like a homeroom where they sort of just sit and be the can talk about their feelings. It's like a homeroom or something like that for K through 12 What would you say, are schools already doing well or something similar to that does it look like that. How does it look to you?

A

Abby 22:47

I think, I mean I think it's easy, you know, to see what isn't being done and you know there's always change to be had, especially you know from a social worker point of view, but I think there's been an amazing shift in curriculum, over the last 10 to 20 years where,

you know, when we were kids social emotional learning, wasn't a thing, it wasn't talked about, and you know I mean I can see firsthand with my first grader, that they are very consciously, now making that effort to, you know, put that in their curriculum they're showing them videos, you know they're having them read books that talk about their feelings, they're having these discussions. So I do think that it is much more intentional even than it was when we were in school and I think it definitely is moving in the right direction, I think. And we're beginning to see that shift where people are beginning to recognize that we do have to provide students with the support I know our district has a grant where every student gets free breakfast and lunch, regardless of their economic status so that was a big thing is that some schools would offer free lunch to students, but only if they were, you know, under a certain income bracket and that can be really stigmatizing to kids. So our district just offers them to all students regardless, which I think is really amazing. So I think we're definitely getting there. And I think that schools are also increasing their partnerships like I know we have a Boys and Girls Club, that the school works very closely with so we're getting there. I think we're moving in the right direction. I think schools have moved heaven and earth to try to get these kids learning during the pandemic, which I very much appreciate I mean there are teachers doing amazing work at all hours of the day, you know, trying to just get keep these kids on track during this crazy time.

S

Shelby 24:57

That's very encouraging. So, speaking of, you know, the changes that they've made with the pandemic or things that they've already had implemented Do you see any of these practices, staying after pandemic or, you know, being improved upon even more?

A

Abby 25:19

I'm really hopeful that they are going to be improved upon, because I think we're going to see kids have a lot of mental health needs, coming out of the pandemic and I think it's gonna be several years before we truly can, you know start feeling the effects but a lot of kids have had that learning loss you know since they've been home for so long. So I think that they're going to build even more social emotional learning into the curriculum and I think there's a lot of grant funding that's going to come through to provide some more programs with some more resources to address those needs. So I think it's going to get better than it was. Absolutely

S

Shelby 26:03

I think that that is a really really good note to end on. So I want to thank Abby for joining

us.

S

Sebastian 26:12

Thank you, Matthew, this was a very insightful combo.

S

Shelby 26:16

Yeah, you can kind of apply some things that you're doing with kids to, you know us in grad school even adults that aren't in grad school who just may be going through a stressful time do the 5-4-3-2-1 and one. Thank you so much for joining us, Abby.

S

Sebastian 26:39

Absolutely. Thank you again Abby for your wisdom at great insights.

A

Abby 26:48

Now it's time for our last segment in our Part Two episode on mental health in grad school. Let's talk about resources on campus, and resources we tried ourselves that help us maintain mental stability in grad school. Who wants to go first?

S

Sebastian 27:03

I think you mentioned. Well, one thing that I did during undergrad I'm a two-time Illini so I was around undergrad, as well, but I loved volunteering. It was very friendly environment, the Re-store for Habitat for Humanity, you can volunteer there and they always need people. I'm doing that now as well. But that's really nice but I don't have any pets, but I'm on my first successful plant so far that I haven't killed, and I've had a lot of soldiers, that just didn't make it over the past few years, and I think that having something to take care of I mean I'm not a huge pet person, but having that little plant grow, has been very therapeutic. And hopefully it will last, but I'll be very sad, but it has been very helpful just to know that something's moving and that it's sort of because of me and then it's also cleaning the air just makes me sort of feel a little bit better.

S

Shelby 28:12

Is there anything that you guys say to yourself every day to kind of like get through a stressful time, or...

A

Abby 28:18

I think for me the hardest part about COVID was that it didn't, it just felt like life was on a pause, you know what I mean it just didn't feel like enough was progressing so I like to try to tell myself like. Today is a new day, you know, this is what I did today that I didn't do yesterday you know what I'm you know like just try to remind myself that, you know, the small things are still, you know progression, and they're big things so just kind of mentally checking in with yourself and just reminding myself that this is not forever, and that, you know, I am still growing and still progressing, even though it feels a little bit slower than I'm used to.

C

Cat 29:05

I really like that, that's something that way back in May so my lab group was able to go back to work in the lab, earlier than a couple other groups in like a safety plan. And something that I would do at the start of the lab book for each day is write down, "This is our goal for today", and I don't usually do that I kind of just go and work until I ran into a wall or I stopped working. But during COVID it was just like really important for me to be like, "I'm gonna do this today, even if it's like the smallest thing", just so at the end of the day it's like I completed a task, I did something because it for me at the beginning, it just felt like I was just wandering, spinning my wheels, and it's like what am I what am I doing? So setting these like small but like actual goals to reach each day helped.

A

Abby 29:53

I went through a huge Animal Crossing phase is just those small tasks right they were so comforting and it was like this great world where there was no COVID...

C

Cat 30:04

I got into Stardew Valley which is like the other version of it so I totally get that.

S

Sebastian 30:11

I am not, there's no games on my apps, if that's what you're talking about. But I don't do that but I do make a little list, used to be a sticking out and then I tried being green, I don't know if it's working, but it's just five things though, so I think that was key to, you know, because I started listening, "okay this is what I want to get done" and before I knew it I had a whole document full of bullet points that I want to get done and that was having the complete opposite effect that I wanted it to, but now I have sometimes it's a little sticky

note and there's only five things that can be on there and also helps me prioritize and sort of remember, I used to stick it on a wall or it's in an app that I'm always using so I'm always seeing it, so it helps me sort of like when I do get off track and I'm like, on Instagram or somewhere I shouldn't be. At that moment, I'm gonna go away, I write this down. But yeah, one thing I don't have anything to like say to myself necessarily like a mantra, but what I have been doing. I think they've learned this from Oprah, She does this. And trust all things Oprah, but she says that she goes about her day, like, "I'm typing on my keyboard, or I'm turning on the stove I'm reaching for the water", and I didn't think that was gonna help me I did it for, I don't know like a week, and it really helped me be a lot more grateful for things, to really tap into this sense of gratitude because even though I can't do a million things that I want to do because of COVID. At least I know that I don't know my limbs were moving and that my mind is able to perceive sight, and so it's, it sounds small, but I think that when you tap into those little bits of gratitude that are so helpful because they're just your basic human functions that are just working out at that minute. You realize wow there's a million other things that I could be grateful for and you just are in a happier mood, I think for a lot of the day.

C

Cat 32:04

I think that's a really beautiful I think gratitudes, like such a powerful thing it's like been proven scientifically how good it can be for your mental health and just in general, but I actually do, I don't know if I call it mantras, but I have like a series of affirmations and it's something that actually I worked through with my counselor back a couple of years ago and I, my first year of grad school here. So it's, I think the type that I was doing was called a loving kindness, like meditation, loving kindness affirmations, so I just have like a series of like five phrases that really resonate with me, and it's really goofy, but it's important to say them out loud like you're saying, Oprah told you to do but yeah saying these things out loud is important. And what's even more weird, but also makes it better, I think, is you say them out loud in a mirror so you actually look at yourself while you're saying these things, and it sounds really weird and it does feel kind of odd when you're doing it but it's like, it's powerful.

S

Shelby 33:11

It reminds me of that video of like a dad and his daughter, you know what I'm talking about? And they do the affirmations, in the mirror, and they say something like, I am smart. I am beautiful I am kind, something like that...super cute and that's awesome and a great way to remind yourself that you know you are special and you are better than you feel sometimes and I sometimes will say, I have a more silly approach to it but whenever I like accomplish something. And whether that be like, you know, the code line that was

missing in something or just something small. I will be like, "Wow I am like one of the smartest people I've ever met", like, just to like continue to, or sometimes even when I'm like cooking something and I think it's really good. I'm like wow I have really outdone myself, five stars, I'll give myself reviews. So, sometimes you can just, you know, be your own judge and be like wow I am amazing!

A

Abby 34:26

Positive self talk, it's powerful. I've also heard of people taking like a shoe box, and then putting like all their negative thoughts and like things that maybe they feel like they need a minute to like process, and then physically like putting that somewhere different, like in the closet or in the garage. And then when they're in like a better headspace going back and saying like, Okay, do I still feel this is this something that I need to process or like was this maybe just something that, you know, was kind of spiraling in my head and now that I've like taken the time to physically like...Just that aspect of making it physical and then removing it, or putting it somewhere different has kind of giving you that space to, you know, let it go.

S

Sebastian 35:11

Yes, that I did that for two things: purchases and feelings. I would like if I really felt terrible. I really wanted like this candle that I really really wanted but it was expensive and I was like okay I'm gonna write it down, and put it in a drawer and if I open that thing and I didn't even remember it well then I'm glad I didn't buy it right, and so then it same with feelings I started doing that and I was really, really upset about something, and I wrote down like I'm angry about this for all these reasons, it was short but I put it away, and then I was cleaning something up and I was like, "I've totally forgot about that thing." And then when I get angry about other things I'll probably do the sticky note angry situation. But I also like to, when I am with my friends and I don't know, that's weird for outing myself that I do this with my friends sometimes but sometimes we like she started doing it, my friends are doing it too, and we'll go over things like that like silly things that we found later on where it's like we're you know being vulnerable with each other even though without video I mean even if the pandemic wasn't a thing she's very far away. So, we you know, it just works but just to think about the stuff that we find that was funny about ourselves even though at the moment it was the biggest deal in the world, really, it really helps, especially with knowing that other people sort of have similar mindsets.

A

Abby 36:40

And I think that COVID has definitely made like its major communication has to be more

intentional. So there's actually some friends that live far away from me that I've talked to, now more, because now that we both work from home we have that flexibility so my communication has actually gotten better with them. You know even though, you know, we haven't been able to see each other in person, we talk more frequently because you just get more in that mindset of having to be intentional about the way that you communicate with people.

S

Shelby 37:11

Speaking of friends like it's super important to maintain strong relationships in grad school and before I came into grad school, students and, you know, people that I know that had already gone through it had told me you know, it can, it can get lonely. It's really easy to fall into a routine of like, always being in your office always being your lab, there's always something due. Right? And so, maintaining relationships and making those a priority as well, you know, if you're in a romantic relationship, like making sure that your partner is high priority just as much as your schoolwork and your lab work or other grad school related things and not to let friendships, partners, family kind of fall behind because you're so focused on the next manuscript that you have due or a job you're applying for or something.

A

Abby 38:22

Yeah and I think it's been hard too, because I am a remote student so I'm not even physically on campus, you know what I've seen my cohort, you know, a handful of times, but we do have a Facebook group and so it's like you know it's a little thing but even if it's just like a silly meme, it's been really useful when you know people are struggling with internship placements or you know things like that they'll reach out and people are always really great about resource-sharing so it has helped to allow us to feel a little bit more connected even though. We have always been partially virtual even before COVID.

C

Cat 39:05

It seems like a great place to end for now but we would just like to say thank you again for listening.

S

Sebastian 39:10

We hope these tips pieces of advice and resources have been helpful to listen to and we hope you give some a try.

A Abby 39:19
Until next time, I'm Abby.

S Shelby 39:21
I'm Shelby.

C Cat 39:22
I'm Cat

S Sebastian 39:24
And I'm Sebastian and you just listened to the Illinois graduate college podcast.