

Graduate College Podcast: Kamau Grantham Transcript

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, counseling center, students, day, mental health, feel, telehealth, important, learning, thinking, offer, stress, clinicians, counseling, graduate students, connecting, salt, illinois, pandemic, listening

SPEAKERS

Shelby, Kamau, Sebastian, Abby, Cat



Abby 00:00
Hi I'm Abby.



Cat 00:05
I'm Cat.



Sebastian 00:06
I'm Sebastian.



Shelby 00:08
And I'm Shelby and you're listening to the Graduate College Podcast.



Abby 00:12
Where we take a deep dive into topics regarding graduate students in Illinois, one conversation at a time.

- C** Cat 00:18
Today, we talk to guidance counselor Kamau Grantham, Assistant Director of Clinical Services and clinical counselor at the University of Illinois Counseling Center on his advice to graduate students.
- S** Shelby 00:30
And finally we conclude this episode with part one of our segment called "me-sources", where we take campus resources, local resources, and our own self made resources to brighten our days and improve our own mental health and.
- A** Abby 00:42
Before we begin, we just want to say that this episode is not intended to cure any mental health issues someone may have, we are merely recommending things that have helped us along on our graduate school journeys and hope that these might help to. If you need more help, please consider calling the University Counseling Center at 217-333-3704.
- S** Sebastian 01:04
With all that being said, thank you for listening and let's get into our interview with Kamau.
- C** Cat 01:13
Hi, again I'm Cat.
- A** Abby 01:16
And I'm Abby and today we are interviewing Kamau, Kamau would you like to introduce yourself?
- K** Kamau 01:24
Sure. My name is Kamau Grantham, and I'm a psychologist, I'm the Assistant Director for clinical services here at the counseling center, and I've been with the Counseling Center going on seven years now. At the center I have an administrative role but I also co-chair St. COFA which is our black student outreach team. And I also co started black men's therapy, group.

A Abby 01:53
Very cool. So first can you just briefly tell us kind of how you got into the counseling field, and a little bit more about what it is you do for the Counseling Center?

K Kamau 02:05
Sure, why, how did I get into counseling?

A Abby 02:09
I know that's kind of...

K Kamau 02:11
I gotta go back, you know, I took introduction to counseling as an undergraduate, and I got like a C plus, my worst grade. So, here I am 25 years later, well more than 25 years later, and this is what I do for a living. So I thought that was kind of funny, but I don't know I always knew I enjoyed kind of talking to people and helping people and so I did a master's degree in counseling psychology and got a little bit of experience and then felt like I wanted a little bit more and so I went back and got a PhD in Clinical Psychology and I've worked in a lot of different settings, I've worked in hospitals, I've worked in community based clinics, I've worked in high schools, I've worked with higher education. And so I just got into higher ed within the past 10 years and I really enjoy working in higher education. I do a little bit of everything at the counseling center we're a comprehensive Counseling Center and so we offer clinical services, but we offer also kind of like triage and kind of crisis services we are a Training Center we train masters level, clinicians, we train doctoral level interns. And we do outreach. And so, I do a little bit of all of that at the counseling center so I have an administrative role, but I also do some clinical work I run a group as I mentioned I see students individually. I'm also a member of our suicide intervention team.

C Cat 03:50
Yeah. Can I just ask one follow up question, I don't have a background in psychology or any, like, mental health, you mentioned Counseling Psychology what exactly is that?

K Kamau 04:02
What's counseling psychology? Counseling psychology is basically, you study how to do counseling and so, you know, you, you really learn, you know when you sit down with

another person, how to have that conversation and that kind of like a therapeutic way and you learn the theory and you learn that the techniques so it's pretty much very... teaching a very specific skill, group counseling, sometimes you can specialize in couples counseling or family therapy so it's very specific.

A Abby 04:37
Yeah we did, we did briefly kind of theme on marital counseling...

K Kamau 04:43
Okay.

A Abby 04:45
I think that would be really difficult, it's a very, you have to have a certain set of skills for sure.

K Kamau 04:52
Right, because you're dealing with more than one more than one person and you know, then the dynamics between that and so...

A Abby 04:59
Can I ask one more follow up question, what was your thesis on?

K Kamau 05:03
My dissertation, I was looking at several variables: I was looking at internalized racism, Afro-centrism, black racial identity, and how those variables connected to how black people felt about their physical appearance like our skin color, our hair. And so I wanted to see if there are any relationships between any of those variables and and just kind of how we felt about themselves.

A Abby 05:30
Wow, that's amazing.

K Kamau 05:32
Thank you.

C Cat 05:33
So my next question is, what's your favorite part of your job. And on the flip side, what's one of the most challenging parts of your job?

K Kamau 05:40
I have a lot of our favorite parts like I love--

A Abby 05:43
We want to hear them all!

K Kamau 05:45
Okay, I love supervising so I've had the pleasure of supervising doctoral interns for actually in some capacity every year since I've been at the counseling center. And so, I think because so much of, I feel like I spent so much of my young adult life being a graduate student, that I still kind of identify, you know, I identify with graduate students and with taking me forever to finish my, my PhD. Um, so I really welcome the opportunity to be like a supervisor and work with the doctoral students, and not just doctoral students but graduate students kind of coming through the process because I feel like it wasn't that long ago where I was in that place too. And if I can share what little I know with other people that I'm supervising, I feel like I'm doing something. I love running the black men's therapy group, my coworker Chris Lofton and I started this group three, almost four years ago and we were kind of concerned and hesitant about starting this group because, you know often there's a lot of stigma around black men getting mental health services and we didn't think we'd have enough people to sustain a group, and here we are four years later, and the group has been running strong, and I'm definitely very proud of that, it almost doesn't feel like work like I really enjoy running that group. I enjoy doing outreach, like, I like getting out of the Counseling Center and in this context, you know, virtually getting out of the Counseling Center. I love talking to people about mental health, they just de-stigmatizing mental health and giving people suggestions and pointers on how to take care of themselves, giving people permission to take care of themselves. So I love that.

A

Abby 07:38

Did you feel like the black men's therapy group came out of just a need, like you saw a need that wasn't being met in the community and you felt like you wanted to kind of have a provide a space to fill that need.

K

Kamau 07:53

I definitely felt there was a need like Chris and I were seeing a lot of black men individually at the counseling center and we were seeing like we would get so many coming in, we were like, "We should do a group!" You know I was running a general men's group at the time and I was like, you know Chris and I were like "Let's try black men's therapy group!" let's see how that goes and, you know, we were able to take some people we were working with individually and get them into a group and as well as new people coming in and we did some advertising about it with some of our campus partners, and...

A

Abby 08:27

Yeah I think, recently we've seen like a huge emphasis on the need to create these safe spaces for healing so it sounds like you were ahead of your time.

K

Kamau 08:41

Absolutely. We definitely, saw a need. And you know we're toying with the idea of maybe adding a second one, I won't get too ahead of myself but you know there's definitely have been points where we've had to say we're full. You know we can't take any more people and so it'd be nice to have another group to refer people to. So I think it's good that there's a need because often in particular communities there's so many barriers to getting to getting help. And so if we can offer a service like that to our, to our students, that's what it's all about.

A

Abby 09:20

So any, any struggles? It can be an exhausting field...

K

Kamau 09:26

it's definitely, you know, you definitely have to prioritize taking care of yourself. And so you know this is what I try to practice what I preach right when I talk to students about self care, it's like, I have, I do these things myself and so it can be exhausting and draining kind

of work but you know, having that sense of awareness in yourself and what your needs are and it's okay to take a step back, it's okay to have a mental health day it's okay to pace yourself and so I think that can be challenging. And I know for a lot of people that get in this field you're in this field because you want to help. And so sometimes you know having those boundaries, you have sometimes you have to take care of yourself like you're trying to overextend yourself and do too many things, and so just being able to dial back sometimes and just, it's nice that that we want to do those things, but also, you know, they're all these wonderful means like you can't pour from an empty cup right? You got to take care of you have to take care of yourself, so that can be challenging. What kind of things do you do in your downtime to kind of refresh yourself and keep your, your mental health intact? I enjoy spending time with my family I have a partner and two young sons, so I enjoy spending time with them. They keep me active

A Abby 10:55
How old?

K Kamau 10:57
Nine and Eleven. So I just spending time with my family, I enjoy music. I'm a music fan, and music person and so I listen to music, I dabble with creating music. I do a lot of DJing, something I've been doing since undergraduate school so just sitting just like playing music for hours. Not hours now that I have children I used to be able to do that but, just having an opportunity to just listening to music really is relaxing. I enjoy eating. I'm a soccer fan I like watching soccer; talking to my friends, hanging out with my friends. Getting a little exercise. So those things--Getting a good night's sleep is really important to me.

A Abby 11:57
Are you local to, like, are you from the Champaign Urbana area? Or did you relocate somewhere else?

K Kamau 12:04
I've relocated my partner and I relocated from from Queens, New York.

A Abby 12:09
Oh wow, I bet that was a big shift!

K Kamau 12:12
It was a bit of a change, there was a bit of a change from New York City to to Champaign-Urbana.

A Abby 12:18
And around and all the corn!

K Kamau 12:20
Yes, yes, when I came here for my interview in the cornfield, you know, the corn fields I was like okay, I mean I have seen corn fields before. I never thought I would live around them but... So you know my partner is the reason that we're here. She took a really wonderful position here in the faculty, and so they just so happened to be hiring at the counseling center and here I am.

A Abby 12:50
That's amazing. Do you have a local favorite restaurant?

K Kamau 12:53
I do I'm, I like a lot of them, I'm a big fan of Broadway food hall in Urbana.

C Cat 12:58
So good! I live pretty close to there.

K Kamau 13:01
Do you? Do you? So that's, that's one of my favorites. One of my favorite places, and I'm also now starting to go to the Poke-Shack out in the fields in Champaign, because I like Poke.

C Cat 13:14
I've never heard of this, I mean Abby's not local. So these are new things for her.

A Abby 13:20
Yeah I did my undergrad there.

K Kamau 13:22
Where are you?

A Abby 13:23
I am in Springfield, so I'm like a hybrid. But with COVID...

K Kamau 13:31
We're all hybrid,

A Abby 13:32
I know but my program was hybrid before...

K Kamau 13:36
Springfield is nice.

A Abby 13:40
I miss the food I missed some Ko-fusion was my favorite. It's just no place like it in town.
Um, all right, but to get back on track so can you tell us about some of the mental health challenges in general that you've seen, but maybe more specifically during the COVID pandemic?

K Kamau 14:04
Oh absolutely and, you know, probably some obvious ones I mean I think isolation is a big one. A lot of the students that we're seeing are just so much more isolated obviously right you're, you're doing virtual classes and you're not really meeting, quote unquote, meeting people in real life and so people that I see often, it's just like you're in your dorm or your apartment without really seeing many other people, particularly as a, as a graduate student, so we'll, you know, we'll see students that didn't go to undergrad here and so you just come here as a grad student, and don't really have... it's hard enough being a grad

student, you know because grad students can be in your, you know you're in your own little world. But if you've never lived in this community and you've never gone to school here it's even more isolating so I definitely think that the isolation. And then often when we're isolated that can exacerbate other things that we're feeling and so if you already were a little anxious, the isolation, that's just going to make your anxiety a little bit worse if you already were a little depressed or a little sad or angry, I think the isolation, you know exacerbates those symptoms so I would say, that's the main one. And again just with the social connections it's just harder for students that I've been talking to it's harder to maintain social connections and start new connections, a lot of students are like, this isn't the college experience I thought I was getting like I thought I'd be meeting people and developing relationships that last a lifetime and I'm not meeting people, you know you're in your zoom class and you're done. Like there's no...You have to be a little bit more intentional about connecting with other people and so I know that's been a challenge.

A

Abby 15:55

So can you tell us, maybe some strategies that you recommend to people who may be feeling really isolated or depressed?

K

Kamau 16:07

Yeah, I would say just in terms of the social connections as I kind of mentioned that we have to be more intentional about that and so you know what that could look like is, you know, scheduling time. Maybe it's with people you you know you already know, I know we're all tired of Zoom but you know, are there ways that we can be intentional about connecting with other human beings, even though I'm on Zoom all day, I kind of welcome, like Zooming with my friends back in New York and in other places. I welcome that. And so it's still Zoom but you know, it's not work. And I always feeling better afterward, like why didn't we do this before?

A

Abby 16:53

I FaceTime, my friends, it's not Zoom so it's something about not being on Zoom...It's comforting.

K

Kamau 17:04

Call it whatever you want to call it, Google meets whatever you know, whatever, whatever platform you want to use. So I think being more intentional. And it's definitely harder on campus like I encourage students to look at whatever RSO's they're interested in and

what RSO's doing virtually, and then whatever people feel safe doing, you know, in, in person, you know, following the social distance guidelines, you know maybe it's taking a walk. Intentionally taking a walk with a friend on a regular basis, you know, somehow having some social connection. It's definitely a little bit harder.

A

Abby 17:50

Do you feel like the pandemic has maybe made mental health services a little bit more accessible? Because, you know everyone is on Zoom, or do you feel like it's had the opposite effect?

K

Kamau 18:05

I do, I think, I think that that is a benefit now that everything is through telehealth. And I know previously students have been asking for telehealth therapy I don't think this is the way we wanted to go... Students were inquiring for years about telehealth and so I think it's been a really interesting process and definitely a learning curve for all of us, this is new technology and none of us, you know, we had to figure out how to do telehealth rather quickly as none of us were trained this way you know I'm Super old school. But I think it's definitely opened up more possibilities and so now, Abby, so you know you're in Springfield, you can see a therapist here in Urbana, you know, you can still access the services at the counseling center for example, where previously that would be a barrier because you're physically in a different location, or maybe there's a therapist in the Chicagoland area that has a very unique specialization. Now anyone in the state of Illinois can access services since everyone is working remotely. And there are some clinicians that I've worked things out with licensing boards where they can see people across state lines and internationally as well. And so I think it really opens, you know this technology kind of opened up the doors for people being able to access clinicians that maybe they couldn't have before because they were limited by where they lived, particularly people that live in like rural rural areas, for example. And that's often been a challenge.

A

Abby 19:46

Absolutely.

C

Cat 19:48

Related to that, do you think that this telehealth is going to stick around and also do you think there are other parts of mental health and counseling that will, that COVID has changed that are going to remain, how they are now or?

K

Kamau 20:01

That's a good question. I don't see how telehealth can't stay around on some level it's like we've all gone in and, you know we've all been trained and we've all figured out, Zoom, I'd be surprised if, if anyone kind of phased it out I think that issue going forward is just figuring out how much of a part telehealth will play, I have colleagues that even before the pandemic were doing telehealth. So some people have already been doing it but this definitely opens up some more options and opportunities. Right now I could definitely say, you know, it might be a while for group therapy for example, you know if you have 10 people 10 students in a room and two group therapists. It's pretty tight. So, you know, definitely at the counseling center we're going to continue to offer group through telehealth. I don't know, it's hard to see what, what things will look like going forward but I definitely see it as being difficult for it to go away completely like, it's out there and people are using it, I think it'll be incorporated into what therapists do. It might even be something that the new graduate students get drained and at some point. It might be part of the curriculum.

A

Abby 21:26

Do you have any advice for our listeners about how to avoid some of the things that can be typical of grad students? I'm thinking about like burnout and imposter syndrome. We talk a lot about those. So I just wondered if you had any thoughts on that.

K

Kamau 21:44

Sure, I'll say like kind of some of my general things that I share and I've kind of alluded to some of these things, being intentional about taking care of yourself, is really important. I think a lot of us have learned that we feel that there's a relationship like the more work you do, like your productivity will also go with that and, it doesn't affect us like often the more you work your productivity is gonna plateau and then at some point it's just gonna go down but everyone's probably in graduate school because they worked really hard and are hard workers. So I would say just being mindful about pacing yourself and also being intentional about creating things for yourself, like if you don't schedule that space, that time for yourself, that's not gonna happen, you're gonna do something else, like, oh I could do more of this, I could do more of that. And I often see this imbalance, I always ask people, so how are you taking care of yourself, you told me all of the things that are stressing you out, but I didn't hear anything about how you're taking care of yourself and students are like "What?" like, so this is the issue right, you know there's that there's this imbalance and so I think just being mindful of the space you create for taking care of yourself. And it's the basic stuff, I mentioned like sleeping like a good night's sleep, that goes a long way. We know if we're not getting a good night's sleep. Sometimes we're, you

know, we get a little cranky. We're fatigued. How can you focus and concentrate when you're, exhausted and you're tired, so I think sleep is important. You know scheduling a bedtime for yourself, I remember being a college student, you know I was going to bed at all hours of the day and night out, but I think trying to be intentional about when you go to bed and when you wake up. So scheduling in bedtime... Eating! And so when I say eating, I know sometimes we're, we're all on the go and we're busy and doing other things. A lot of people skip meals. Just giving your body the nutrition it needs to function like we need a certain amount of nutrients to be able to function. And so if we're not getting enough nutrition, again, that's going to affect our energy levels, our ability to focus and concentrate and our mood, so just being mindful about eating. Social connections I mentioned, things are so much harder when you try and do things by yourself and so whether it's people in your cohort, or even, you know, outside of your program, sometimes for grad students it's healthy to get some perspective, outside of your grad program, you know, because it's like breathing the same air, like sometimes you got to open the door and, and get out and meet some other people, but I think social connections are really important to have people you can bond with and talk about, you know, things that are other than school and people that you feel that are supportive and encouraging. So I think that's important. I'm a big fan of hobbies and engaging in activities that bring you joy and I was asking someone, like what do you enjoy like what, what relaxes you, what makes you feel good? And do more of that, provided you not hurting anyone else, but you know what are the activities that you enjoy doing? So if you like collaging, collage that's important. If you play the ukulele play the ukulele. That's important. If you like sports, writing poetry, stand up comedy, whatever your thing is, I think that's really important to be able to create that space and just for that hour, you're in your own little world, you're not worrying about your paper, you're not worried about your thesis. You can just read or collage or draw, or play your guitar for an hour and just be in that special place. I think that's important. And then of course I have some nice little psychological things I like to share with people, and maybe that ties into the imposter syndrome. You know, so the imposter syndrome so we're talking about like thoughts in our head, and so I'm really attuned to... "So what is that dialogue that we all have going on in our head?" We all have that little voice in there, that's telling you you're not good enough or you're not smart enough, but you don't deserve to be here. So there are a couple things I like to talk about one thing is self compassion, I love self compassion, and it's just a fancy word for being nice to yourself. Most of us are really nice to other people, there's always that one person I talked to who was like, "Oh, I would definitely say that to someone else" But most people are really kind and considerate to other people, there's always that one person I get that I see that. That's like "oh yeah I would do that", but most people are really kind and compassionate to other people. And so, you know, one of the self compassion exercises is to step outside of yourself, and imagine so what you know what would you say to someone else to be compassionate, if you didn't do well on an exam as well as you would

like sometimes we'll beat ourselves up. I should have studied harder. I'm not good enough, and then we'll start to make generalizations. And, you know, If I can't do well on this exam. How do I expect to graduate the program? And if I can't graduate in this program with this degree, how am I going to be a successful so and so what if I can't be a successful student so I'm probably just going to be that person that lives with like a bunch of cats and my life is going to be awful. Right, we take those ideas and we generalize, but if it was your friend or your roommate that didn't do well on an exam, would we say the same thing? Would we tell them they're not smart enough? Would we tell them they're not good enough, when we tell them they're going to be that cat lady at the end of the block? We probably wouldn't we would be more encouraging most of us we would be like "Hey, it was just one exam, like you've got so many other wonderful qualities you have so many other opportunities to do well this is not going to make or break you know your whole career", like we take some other positive and encouraging things. That's the stuff we need to then step back and say to ourselves, to remind ourselves. So that's kind of self compassion, that compassion we would extend to other people, how do we then extend some of that to ourselves? And you know the other thing I'm really into his cognitive behavioral therapy which is, you know, kind of ties into these internal voices that we have in our head. I really think it's about countering the narrative in your head so you have that one voice in your head that's telling you you're not good enough and you don't deserve to be here. And often we just listen to that one voice, there need to be some other voices in your head saying, "What are you talking about? Like, I have got it going on... I've got this, I've got that this is just one exam", you know, how do we counter those voices in our head to have more positive and encouraging voices? I like a ratio of-- for every one negative thought like, what would it be like if we had three or four positive thoughts. I like to use the metaphor of baking. And so you know if you've ever baked cookies or baked anything like ratios are important. And so, I like to think of the negative thoughts in our head is like a tablespoon of salt that you're adding to your chocolate chip cookies, so you got to have salt in your cookies right. It's an necessary ingredient meaning, we're gonna have negative thoughts, we're going to be self critical as normal, it's okay. But for a lot of us, we add one tablespoon, and two tablespoons, and three tablespoons, and four of the negative thoughts, how those chocolate chip cookies tasting?

A Abby 30:00
Very salty.

K Kamau 30:01
Yeah, so you know a lot of times we're like well I don't understand? If you're putting those ingredients in. It's going to impact the outcome. And so how do we shift that ratio for

every negative thought, we have three or four tablespoons of sugar? Maybe pecans I like nothing my chocolate chip cookies...

A Abby 30:22
It's hard no on the nuts.

K Kamau 30:25
Oh you don't like nuts? My partner doesn't like nuts in her cookies either I like, I think it just adds that extra flavor to the chocolate chips

A Abby 30:34
Not in brownies. No, no.

K Kamau 30:37
So you can substitute them in your, in your metaphor here it could just be all sugar, or maybe you want to add some other things. But you know, how do we add more delicious ingredients, more delicious thoughts, and that changes the ratio right so the salt is still in there, but we have a four tablespoons of sugar. It absorbs it, it's almost not noticeable, and so I like to look at the ratio in terms of positive and supportive things we're doing. That's the stuff that helps cushion and buffer, the negative stuff there's always going to be negative stuff, and there's just, it's the small print in life. Drama, stress, chaos, it's there, so that's never gonna go away, but I think if we can change our relationship to these things, if we can develop systems and a lifestyle to create that buffer, that's what it's all about. So, you're still gonna have the salt in your cookies if that makes sense, but the other good ingredients the other positive and supportive thoughts or the other things that you're doing in your life are designed to kind of absorb and dilute the drama, and if there's more salt that gets added guess what? You always keep that ratio. And so I don't know if that makes sense...

A Abby 30:38
Totally, yeah I love that analogy, it's like, you know you're learning how to challenge those automatic thoughts, and you're recognizing that they serve a purpose right there, there's you know, you have to find the ways to counteract that to get that correct, mental health balance.



Cat 32:22

I was gonna say. I really like the salt analogy also, when you add salt to baked goods, it actually makes like this sweetness tastes better and it exactly like follows with what you're saying like the negative thoughts do they have a purpose but you can't have all salt.



Kamau 32:39

Right and it almost enhances like you know you can appreciate the sweetness with it with the salt right, they almost complement each other and there's such thing as having something that's like too sweet. So, you know, they cut they kind of play off of, you know, they kind of play off of each other. And I think...I like being proactive. It's so hard for the moment, like, when that imposter syndrome sets in, it's hard to be like okay let me now, think positively, how do we be proactive and just kind of live a lifestyle where we're just always having these positive thoughts like what if you just wake up and start your day, and you've already got three tablespoons of sugar in there already? You know the salt is coming. You know what I'm saying? It just gets absorbed, but if you're starting with a blank slate, neutral, and then something happens and you get that one tablespoon of salt, it's overpowering. So how are we proactive where we're just always doing positive things. So what does it look like, and I know I'm speaking theoretically, this is all easier said than done, but what would that look like theoretically if someone is well rested, they got a good night's sleep. They wake up, maybe they start their morning with with positive self, self affirmation you can't see all this stuff but I got a couple affirmations, up here, and that's what's well it's mostly for me, but you know you can you can find whatever self affirmation speaks to you what if you read a positive self affirmation every morning when you wake up, what if you start your day, and you put that song on that makes you feel good and you get ready and start your day listening to that song. Maybe you start your day with a walk, maybe you start with something to eat right so you can start with some nutrition and then throughout the day, you're just doing various things you're going to class and you're studying, but you're also reminding yourself maybe you're looking at your little self affirmation again, maybe you're listening to music, as you work or walk across the quad. Maybe you are being intentional about meeting with friends or connecting with people throughout the day. Every day at four o'clock, from four to five you play your guitar, like, you know you schedule these times like you're intentional about doing these things. What would that look like after you know after six months for example?



Abby 35:16

I was gonna say I think you know it sounds small in the moment but when you practice these things intentionally, like you're saying on a long term, it really does have a cumulative long term effect.

K

Kamau 35:33

Oh absolutely. You know, I jokingly tell people I don't have a magic pen, like it doesn't work that way it's really when you're learning to take care of yourself when you're learning to reduce anxiety and stress, it's a new skill. Anytime you're learning a new skill, it takes time, doesn't it? I don't know how to ride a skateboard ramp would take me some time, it's a practice to learn how to ride a skateboard. And certainly you know I'm not equating people's emotional problems with riding a skateboard but you know you follow what I'm saying. It's a new skill. And so it takes time. And so I, you know you need to be riding a skateboard every day. Are you going to fall? Is it going to be awkward and uncomfortable? Are you going to be... All I know about skateboarding as Tony Hawk, that's all I know. Are you gonna be Tony Hawk? After a few weeks. No. Are you going to be competing in skate competitions? You know, probably not. But this understanding that it takes time, but in six months, if you're riding your skateboard every day and you're intentional that I'm doing this two hours a day. I guarantee you you will be better in six months than you were right now. And so it's the same thing about learning to take care of yourself it's not an overnight process, and in many ways, the emotional stuff is more complex than the physical stuff right because the physical stuff, you can get into muscle memory and, all that other stuff but emotional stuff is a little bit more later, there's a little bit more going on so it's more challenging. It might take a little bit longer.

A

Abby 37:16

Yeah and I like I like giving it a concrete analogy like that because I think there's a lot of stigma around mental health that it's just so much in the background I think for a lot of people that they expect, you know that it's just gonna be some kind of switch that you flip, and you have to do a lot of intentional digging to get to those learned behaviors that when you really, you know, do the work, and look back on, you know these things, I mean, a lot of times they go back 20-30 years so it's gonna take you know more than like you're saying more than a couple of weeks to learn how to kind of reframe, you know how you think and maybe how you deal with stress.

K

Kamau 37:59

Absolutely. And I jokingly tell people like I think I'm good but I'm not that good. Yeah, if you, you know, that's, if that's your whole worldview, like if you grew up thinking a certain way that maybe you're not smart enough or you're not good enough that you know that's really ingrained into the fabric of who you are and that takes a little bit more time to untangle that and reprogram yourself in a way to think differently. And just also the

services that we offer at the Counseling Center I mean we, well I think there's over 50,000 students, and we have about 30 clinicians at the university. And so, most college counseling centers, the goal is really to offer some time-limited kind of services to really get in there, do some short term work with students, and then help them get connected to, to a more appropriate place. Because as much as we would like to, in order for us to reach as many students as we can we really have to kind of work with people for a short time and then kind of move them on. I also think people's idea of mental health is like it's a one size fit all. Just like with physical health, like, you know if you're having particular problems. Sometimes you need a specialist or your primary care physician is not the one that's going to do surgery on, you get referrals to other specialists and mental health works the same way there are a lot of different levels of care in college counseling centers are not designed to be the top level of care. We're great, I love the Counseling Center I work at and I think we do really great work I'm really proud to work where I work, but I think people also need to have an understanding, at the level of service that we can offer, and in the instances, if we can't help, or if we can't offer that level, talking about people that have been dealing with things 20 or 30 years. We can un-do that in a semester. We will help connect people to private therapists in the community that can take the time to really unpack, some of that stuff.

A

Abby 40:22

Awesome. So lastly, with the pandemic, I think there's been a lot of uncertainty. And I know there's a lot of grad students that are kind of asking themselves like these big questions about where to go next after your research. Can you give any insight into that?

K

Kamau 40:44

I would say those are good conversations you know each field is going to be different. I think those are good conversations to be having within your area or your department if you're lucky you know if you're fortunate enough to have like a mentor, I think those are good conversations to have. So what does that look like? What does the job market look like in your particular area and what resources are available? What steps can you take? I think the main takeaway I want people to have is, take some of the pressure off of yourself, if you can. I think a lot of times we, we just feel that life should move in this kind of linear direction, like you go to undergrad school and then you go to grad school and then you get a job and then you get married and then you have kids, and then you buy a house and that way you don't I'm saying, like, there's so much pressure to kind of follow this, but I think in reality, it often doesn't go that way, but that's also okay. So how do you take the pressure off of yourself in saying, "There's a lot of different ways to do this thing called life and it's all it's all valid, it doesn't have to be in that particular order" Myself for

example, I took a couple of years off before I got into a PhD program after I earned my Master's, it was forced because I couldn't get into any PhD programs, it was so hard. So I worked for a couple of years, you know, that wasn't what I was thinking in my head I wanted it to go a particular way, but I took a couple years off, went back to school, worked in different settings so I'm in higher education now, but I had to work in some other areas that maybe I wasn't too thrilled about to finally wind up where I wanted to be. So if there's any way you can take some pressure off of yourself not to immediately go into the workforce, sometimes there could be extenuating circumstances so you know if you live on your own and you need income and you don't have any other places to turn there might be a little bit more pressure. But even with that, are there other options? So just taking some of the pressure off of yourself. But definitely specific about careers, I think having a good mentor is really helpful to help guide you up...so what are the next steps? And if there are any associations that are connected to your field and so for me it's the American Psychological Association and the Association of Black Psychologists was really helpful because there were other grad students that were in the same boat as I was and there were other people that were psychologists that have been through what I've been through and so using that as a resource, like so what do I do now? And then, you know you could learn from the collective wisdom. And so, just going back to what I was saying earlier about connections, it's really important to pull from that collective wisdom. So, yeah, any organization that are connected to your field I think can also be a great resource.

A

Abby 43:54

Awesome. Well Kamau this has been amazing. You have offered us so many great insights and thank you so much for taking the time to answer our questions.

K

Kamau 44:05

It was my pleasure. I hope there was like one or two things that you could take away and you know I'd be remiss if I didn't do my pledge for the Counseling Center. You know we, we offer same day appointments, not too many places you could call and be seen on the same day I know I can't do that with my doctor, but we offer same day appointments, and so, you can call at any time during the day; earlier is always better because you can have more selection in terms of what appointment would work for you, but basically we're open from from eight to five every day and we start taking appointments as early as 7:50. If you're a real early person, if you're not, you call later. And I like to tell people because sometimes when they, when they call you also have the option to speak to a clinician, if for some reason all of our appointments are filled. Students are given the option to talk to a clinician on the phone. So definitely check out our website we've got some really

great workshops that we offer. We've got a YouTube channel. Did you know that we got a YouTube. We got some cool YouTube videos are like time management, motivation, check out our YouTube channel, check out our website. A lot of great workshops and other things that people can access remotely, and you don't have to be a client at the center.

S

Sebastian 45:38

Thank you again come out for your wisdom and great insights

A

Abby 45:41

now and it's time for our last segment in our part one 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.

C

Cat 45:55

Well, I can go first. Um, so I'll say the first resource that I've ever used. Illinois was the Counseling Center. So I went to McKinley. I had a counselor for a couple months. And what I did there is I worked on like a lot of techniques for managing like my stress and my depression, and I found that really useful. I don't go anymore because, I was able to like just pick up stuff that I learned, and try to really exercise those in my day to day.

S

Sebastian 46:28

So sorry. I used the Counseling Center as well. What I really liked about that was the... Some people might find this as a con rather than a pro but the way that at least when I used it the appointments that you have to make you make them on the day for at least some of them, and that helped me just sort of remember that day like oh I want it to go this day and figure out the availability later so it's not crammed in and my school schedule didn't revolve around that. But also it helps just to be able to know that this was something that we talked about every single week, if we wanted to and I think, in opposition to some traditional ones. They really want you to go like once a week, twice a week or you know there's a given timeline versus this one they're way more accommodating to students, because they know sort of who their consumer is, I guess.

C

Cat 47:26

So I think there's a difference between the McKinley Mental Health, and the Counseling Center, because what I went through is I didn't have to the day on mine was actually a

scheduled thing, and for me personally that worked a little better, I'm a planner as a scheduler so, I didn't like the day of thing like so it was a con, that would be a con for me but it's nice that at Illinois that you have options for both you could do the schedule and sort of the day or whatever works for you.



That's awesome, that you have those options. I have some experience with counseling centers in other locations and it's always nice, that you know that you have somebody, close by, that you can talk to and stuff. Since I've been at Illinois though I haven't used the counseling center but you know for mental health and stress I put a lot of emphasis on my lifestyle, so I try to exercise and be active. I listen to my Fitbit when it tells me that I have to take 250 steps every hour I try my best, but that's not always possible, but, you know, de-stressing using physical activity and exercise is always my go to I would say.



Abby 48:47

Yeah, Shelby I would definitely agree with that. I would say one of the few positives that's come from COVID is, since I have been, you know, since we've all been home, it does give you a little bit more flexibility so now I take three walks a day and it's really impacted my mental health and I honestly feel so much better when I can be outside and it's just been, you know, it's like a safe haven right it's like the one thing about this that kind of, you know, it like felt safe and constant. The other thing I think is that you have to be, you know...it's forced everyone to have to get a little bit more creative about, you know, trying to find joy just, in the little things. Not taking those for granted; so I love coffee. So last year I finally pulled the trigger and started a coffee subscription, I had thoughts like it's expensive you know, like you don't need it, but I figure like we're saving money not, you know, traveling or going out to eat, so it was a small thing that I did, but it is amazing, like I really wake up, joyous to what you know my new cup of coffee is going to bring every day and so just small things that have been helpful.



Shelby 50:03

I think that's really good for you know even like outside of COVID just daily life like rewarding yourself with little things, and being excited about something and following through on that like I'm always looking forward to my time at the gym because that's my time out of the lab. I try my hardest not to open up my email. While I'm at the gym but I will sometimes subconsciously have the app but, you know like, that's, I think it's really good to....If you are able to schedule out a few minutes a day, or, you know, hopefully a

few hours if you're able to just be with yourself, do something that you really like to do, reward yourself with something, I like to buy things; so buy something if you can, but money in grad school is a whole different policy.

S

Sebastian 50:56

I, for that same reason I loved yoga at Krannert, I'm pretty proficient in yoga and so when, usually I go to classes that are sort of mass appeal. I don't like them because like I can, do a lot more than that and when I go to yoga I like to sort of let go and my version of letting go is different than someone else's. But what I loved about the Krannert one is that because of the way that they teach it and the basic that they implement into it, whether you're more proficient like I am, it really helps you get back to the core movements and connecting to your breath because the more confident you become, the more you know, you get prompted thinking that it's about the pose and that's really not what it's about. And for me, I'm super type A, so I don't know what it is I can never take the walks that I want to take like, I don't go on walks because I don't know what it is I'm just like I'm not going anywhere why would I take a walk? So, but what I love is that Krannert is not super close to my apartment, so I can get there. But also, when I'm just doing yoga regularly I think it lets me go there, let's be focused on that, and only on that it's tricky to actually, you know, I think we all talk about mental health and what it means and I think part of what it is is sort of a little mental break and I mean, yoga, if you like, listen to what the instructor is actually telling you to do and the breathing, it's all about just connecting everything your breath which forces you to only think about that minute right there so I'm really glad that they've been offering that because I'm a huge, huge advocate for it.

C

Cat 52:41

Yeah, I don't do yoga, much anymore. I used to in the past but it just kind of fell out of my favor but you're talking about like connecting to your breath, then what I do almost every day is meditation. So, I have a headspace subscription. They have a student version that is pretty reasonable that you have access to in your Illinois email address. That's something that like Sebastian said to just sit there and connect with your breath, and it's something that I'm also pretty type A and my mind is kind of going a mile a minute, especially thinking about all the things I have to do, but like when I start one of these meditations, I'm gonna sit there for the whole time and that's something I really like remind myself it's like this is all I have to do right now is just sit there and be in the moment, check in with myself and related to that also is another thing that I like to use and it's also kind of sponsored through the university so they have a link to one of the Counseling Center, mental health pages. It's this app called WellTrack, I downloaded to a couple of months ago actually, and I don't, I guess, use it as its intended, but the purpose of it is for you to

like check in with your mood, throughout the day. And the part that I like about it is just every couple of hours, you just get a little notification it's this like meditation chime bell sound and it just gives you like a little prompt that just says how are you feeling right now? And I just really like having that like even if I'm caught in the moment working, I look at my phone when I got like a buzz. I see it as like, oh, how am I feeling right now like where are my emotions or what's my body feel like and I think that's, that's something that's really helped me throughout this time.

A

Abby 54:22

I love that. That's awesome. That makes my social work heart so happy. But I think too, it's also really important to think like, to kind of hone in on how things make you feel I feel like especially in the age of social media, we kind of have to be mindful you know of, kind of the information that we consume so frequently and how it, you know affects our body and our minds and just general stress. So, you know, finding ways to step back from that if you, you know, feel like it's harming your mental health.

S

Shelby 55:02

Yeah I think it's important to highlight feelings that he said at the end like recognize them and not just recognize them, but pay attention to them and, like, I, I've done a little bit of meditation, but journaling is something that I have a lot of experience with and both of those things require you to admit to yourself that you feel a certain way, and just be with that feeling. And that really helps and I think that that's something that, you know, a lot of us would benefit from is, if you're stressed, then say, I am stressed and sit with that for a little bit and sometimes that helps you get through it and, if you say to yourself "I'm stressed", and then you go on a walk that might help you get through it, if you write down why you're stressed. That's why I like to journal it gets it out of your head and, you know, onto a piece of paper or you could talk to somebody, I think it's really important to get those feelings out of your heads, you're not thinking about them all the time.

C

Cat 56:12

Yeah, Shelby. I really like that and mostly been reading a book right now that's kind of, it's about dealing with processing, and thinking about feelings. It's called, "Permission to feel", and it's by this researcher who talks about emotions and that's one of the things that he talks about in this book where, you have to recognize that you're experiencing, experiencing an emotion and then also understand like where it comes from, as it goes through like this, this process of it. And another thing that he points out in this book is that like most adults don't know a lot of like words for emotions like, good, bad, stress, but like

there's so much nuance to actual emotions, there's like a difference between feeling versus emotion and, you can't do that all in your head simultaneously it's like you're saying something like journaling or meditation, it's really a chance to like work through the things that you're feeling to not run away from them but to kind of like jump into them and understand everything about it.

A

Abby 57:12

Yeah, in school social work we tell the kids like their big feelings right? Like feeling the big feelings and learning to not just immediately react to those big feelings, but learning how to process them and to understand that they're happening for a reason and they're trying to tell us something. So, you know, working on decoding what that is, but they are there is a big push now in the schools for more like social emotional learning curriculum so teaching the kids, even in like kindergarten how, you know to first recognize label and then how to start processing so I think that's great.

C

Cat 57:54

The book that I mentioned that researcher is one who like is kind of at the forefront of developing social and emotional learning in schools.

S

Sebastian 58:04

I really like that I think that it's, like, to some people it can be really superfluous to try to recognize their emotions I feel like that's the first barrier Isn't it like I don't want to. Why, like why do I need to feel? And I think that, especially with after you know the pandemic, whenever a lot of things shifted to email and a lot of things you know your emotion was that much more impercievable, because you know you're either typing it out or it's through here and you can't really tell. So we've gotten very good at having to hide it, but one thing that I absolutely love is SoulCycle, and I encourage anybody when you get the chance to take a class like that would take some sort of thing because they incorporate dancing into it, I'm not a huge person that's always dancing but what I love to do with it and it's kind of pricey so it's a momentous sort of just treat myself but I love to do that class and then go somewhere after and get something very green, but my point is is that you go to a class that engages you in this vigorous physical activity, and you've already treated yourself because it's kind of expensive, but then afterward like the see that I want to get and sort of treating myself to some sort of food, and that being cleaner it ends up being greener and it ends up being better for me, which I think that once you take that step to, you know, not only is it for my physical activity but those classes make me feel fantastic, and there are a lot of other things like that that sort of try to empower your

mind to think more positively and let go of those doubts but it taps you on a path to, you know, make everything else level with, "Okay one taking care of my mind, how can I take care of my body by also exercising or putting better food in my body?" Just like checking in with myself like that.

S Shelby 59:52

I really love that you brought that up because I love spinning, and those types of those SoulCycle types of classes where it's like really intense and like loud music and it's usually like EDM or some sort of electronic thing and they do dancing and stuff. You have no choice but to pay attention to what's going on in the class so like with other forms of exercise. Sometimes they're pretty passive so you could be on a run but thinking about all these things while you're on a run but when you're spinning, and you have to like pick up one hand and then lower it and another hand and then like, do this dance and move around, it's much more difficult to be thinking about all these other things. So it's doing like rigorous exercise like that where you have to really, really focus is one like super fun, I think, but also like great for your mind because it, you can't do anything else but think about what you're doing in the moment, and it's awesome to treat yourself with food as well. But one of my spinning Instructure instructors that I had a few years ago, actually, was telling me that she really liked to teach because it made her feel really good to like help other people. And I think that that's also something that people could consider is, you know, volunteering your time, or you know getting, if you have the ability, getting a small second gig, that is something new that you love, that involves like giving back to people or animals; I know people that volunteer in animal shelters, and I think giving back to the community does so much, it's very rewarding to work with people that are in need and help people who aren't as fortunate as you are so I think that, you know, when you are feeling down, it actually feels good to make somebody else feel better.


C Cat 1:02:04


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


S Sebastian 1:02:09

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 1:02:17

 Until next time, I'm Abby.

 Shelby 1:02:19
I'm Shelby

 Cat 1:02:21
I'm Cat.

 Sebastian 1:02:22
And I'm Sebastian, and you just listened to the Illinois Graduate College Podcast.