Three professionals share perspectives on mental health

By: Violet Shetler

Not every mental health professional is a therapist. Oftentimes, professionals deal with mental health challenges despite the field of work they have chosen. These three professionals provide support to others in unique ways and have devoted their lives to helping others.

-This comma could probably be removed

It is especially important to consider mental health this time of year as holiday stress and seasonal depression can heighten symptoms. Mental Health challenges are often more prevalent at the end of the year while people deal with holiday stress, family obligations and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD, is a mental disorder that follows weather patterns. While it can occur at any time throughout the year, winter SAD is the most common.

-These are necessary

Brian Swavey, Crisis Intervention Officer



Brian Swavey, the Crisis Intervention Officer for the Meadville Police Department, a new role that was introduced through a three-year grant to the department, adds his insight on mental health, specifically as the holiday season approaches.

-I think this could be worded differently and maybe split into two sentences

“Mental health picks up a lot during the holidays because it's not a good time for a lot of people. The holidays bring out a lot of bad things, family issues, but it can also be a good time for others,” he said. “There's nothing set in stone. When the clocks change, it triggers mental health issues, too. I don't think there's any gospel as to when it's good and when it's not…Sometimes bad weather makes things better because nobody's out. But then staying in the house can trigger domestic violence issues.”

Brian Swavey, Crisis Intervention Officer

For the Meadville Police Department | Brian Swavey

Statistically, one of the peak times for domestic violence is around the winter holidays. This is just one of many areas that Swavey specializes in as a Crisis Intervention Officer. Despite the stressful nature of his job, he says he loves it and the people he gets to help, which is what inspired him to make the decision to take the job. After being a juvenile probation officer for over 30 years, he decided he wanted to make a bigger impact.

“Everybody's gifted in different areas, and so once you find where you're gifted at, that you can excel at helping people, the biggest thing is my main job is to help people,” he said. “Whereas with probation, I could help people, but I also had conditions at court that I had to follow. I had to supervise and make sure they were doing things they didn't want to do. Well, this position is strictly helping.”

Swavey explained that he might care a little too much about his job and that his wife describes him as a “workaholic.”

“I like to work. You know, some people have their hobbies, some people like sports, some people go hunting. I work,” he said.



Paula Doyle, Reconstructive Pelvic Surgeon

Paula Doyle, a reconstructive pelvic surgeon at the University of Rochester, also added her insight.

Similarly to Swavey, Doyle chose her profession later in life because she felt the need to help people. She first entered this field after being in the Peace Corps and working with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

In the first half of my article alone, there are way more commas than I expected. I definitely think that a lot of them could be removed and split into separate sentences. This is not something I have thought a lot about, especially with college essays and commas being more “correct.”

“I was always working with women. And after that, I decided that I wanted to become a doctor so I could help women that were sexually assaulted, raped and all the things that go along with it,” she said.

Paula Doyle, a reconstructive pelvic surgeon at the University of Rochester. | Paula Doyle

Doyle says that mental health is a huge part of her role, not only with her medical training for the position but with her patients too. She says she does notice the effects of the holiday season, especially in her patients.

“I can tell you around the holidays, I see the biggest change in my patients. I work with a lot of chronic pain patients and there's a big link between mental health and chronic pain,” she said. “So people tend to have an increase in their pain related symptoms when they're under stress around the holidays…so their chronic pain tends to get worse. And when chronic pain gets worse, mental health gets worse too.”

Doyle says that her work is fulfilling but also takes a toll on her own mental health.

“The most challenging part I find in my job is that I deal with real problems every day. My patients have serious problems every day and I give myself to the patients but I also carry their hurt with me throughout the day,” she said.



Robert Klasen, engineer and wildlife firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service. | Robert Klasen

Robert Klasen, Engineer

Robert Klasen, an engineer and a wildland firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service, expanded on his knowledge and training in mental health. Although his position may not seem like a traditional mental health focused role, he argues that it is one of the most important parts of his job.

“With the wildland firefighting side, [we have] extensive experience and training in mental health, and I was recently at a week-long training for dealing with suicide and deaths on the fire line,” he said. “One thing that we were taught, it's not a matter of if someone's going to die under my supervision, it's when.”

The intense pressure of this reality makes a mental health focused approach essential in his position. Klasen says his priority is making sure his team has an outlet to deal with the harsh conditions of his job, but he says he has trouble setting boundaries for his own mental health.

“I've tried to create a supportive environment for my staff where taking a mental health day is a text away, it's a call away and it's gonna be an easy conversation where I'm fully in support,” he said. “I don't have that for me so much. I'm able to create that buffer for my staff. I don't really have that buffer for myself.”

Klasen explained that although the summer is the busiest for him, the aftermath of fire season stays with him and his team year round.

“It is most demanding during the midst of fire season when it's high pressure. A lot of staff are on fires. There's going to be injuries, there's going to be deaths. I get weekly reports on wildfire fatalities in the United States, specifically for U.S. Forest Service firefighters,” he said. “Separate around the holidays with a higher rate of fatalities. It seems to be that people struggle more with loss, the loss of family, of loved ones, of people they served with in the past.”

Despite the increase in depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and domestic violence over the winter months, suicide rates are actually lowest during these months. It is a common misconception that suicide rates are higher in the winter months, but studies show that the summer has the highest rates. It is still important to keep in mind a mental health professional’s essential role in all fields of work.

Brian Swavey, Paula Doyle, Robert Klasen and others like them are working to make the world a better place, reducing mental health challenges one person at a time.