

**Emily:** [00:00:00] Welcome back to Stay Tuned Supporting Transition Age Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute of Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your co-host Emily.

**Mei:** And I'm your co-host Mei.

**Emily:** and today we are joined by Amanda Baczko Costa. Amanda, do you want to introduce yourself?

**Amanda:** Sure, thanks. I'm really glad to be here, so thank you both, Emily and Mei, for having me. I'm Amanda Baczko. I work at Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, and my role is serving as the Director of Learning and Community Engagement.

So a little bit of my work is about helping to bring disability family, uh, voice and expertise into the work we do, um, and into community outreach with the disability community, and then also professional development and growth and retention of our staff and ensuring that our staff who work in the field of human [00:01:00] services are understanding the needs of the disability community and able to successfully provide support.

Um, I'm also a individual who has lived experience of mental health conditions. Um, Which I consider to be mental health disabilities, and so I'm kind of on a long term journey of mental health recovery and progress, um, and I actually used to work with UMass and the Transitions Center, so honored to be here with my former employer and a group that was really a catalyst on my own career journey, but also kind of just my mental health and well being and connection to community.

**Emily:** Yeah, we're glad to have you. I think you left the center maybe like right before I came or maybe we were like kind of passing a little bit, but yes, passing ships in the wind, I think. Yeah, not to say your name a lot, though. So it's nice to have you back.

**Amanda:** Thank you. Nice to be [00:02:00] back.

**Emily:** All right. Well, you kind of just touched on this a little bit, but um, would you mind explaining a little bit more about what the Massachusetts

Rehabilitation Commission does and like the benefits of your services, um, especially for like young adults with disabilities and mental health conditions?

**Amanda:** Yeah, absolutely. So, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission is one of the Commonwealth state agencies, which is really tasked with serving and supporting the disability community. Um, and so generally our services are about some primary prongs of life. One being helping people find meaningful careers, um, and a work life that they find joyful and connected to, and helping individuals with disabilities also engage in the community and community living and independence and really following kind of like the independent living movement and supporting folks engaging in the community in the ways that feels fulfilling to them.

And then we also [00:03:00] have, um, a portion of the Social Security Administration called DDS, or Disability Determination Services, which sits under us, which helps determine eligibility for benefits, disability benefits, which is run by the federal government and kind of housed in Mastery Lab. Um, specifically for young adults, we have some really cool and innovative partners and programs that we help support.

Voc Rehab or Vocational Rehabilitation is all about helping people find careers and for young people who have not yet graduated high school, we have what we call Pre Employment Transition Services or Pre-ETS, and so those are services where it's more a little bit of a light touch career exploration so folks can find out about what kind of career might I be interested in, or what types of things am I passionate about during high school that I may want to pursue after high school as a kind of a job opportunity or an employment? Um, we offer internships, we [00:04:00] offer services in the community to help people kind of shadow jobs, learn more about what's out there, learn how to apply and get work experience and figure out kind of what's next.

Um, and then for younger adults who are post graduation, we have full traditional employment services, which runs the gamut from helping people think about kind of what job field makes sense to me and what skills do I have that would transfer into that path to doing kind of career assessments to say, hey, I have all these passions, but I don't really know where I would land with those and how they would lend well to a career.

We can also support people's educational backgrounds and going to school or to a vocational certificate program if it helps them on their path to a career. And then on the community side, we have some cool opportunities for young people where we partner with groups like Easter Seals and, um, think about young

leaders and how we promote advocacy and energy and young adult [00:05:00] leaders and kind of empowerment and, and support.

So we also support folks in getting their own apartments and finding community resources or partnering with groups like independent living centers, which are all about for us by us programming for the disability community to help people get connected and to learn about what's out there to support them.

So there's kind of a ton of different things that we can do to support individuals with disabilities, but especially for young adults. We have some really cool opportunities to help people find jobs they love, find community spaces that kind of fill their cup, and think about what's next on their path.

Because I know as a young person myself, I didn't really know and I felt like my mental health recovery kind of took over my life and derailed me from thinking about what do I want to do next and what, what feels fulfilling to me. And so I wish that I knew about services like this when I was struggling with my mental health in young adulthood, because I feel like it would have gave me a community and also a place to ask these questions with someone [00:06:00] who could help kind of advise me and, and bring me along for that journey with them.

**Mei:** Yeah, that is a lengthy list of supports you do it. It is awesome to hear all of the different facets you guys help with. And I think like two things stood out to me. Um, like in high school, I just remember, we took one test, I can't remember what it was called, but it was basically like a, what career is right for you.

And it gave you like seven different random options that I'm like, I don't even know what these are and I have no interest in this. And I'm just thinking like how helpful it would have been to just have more guidance and more of an understanding of like the different jobs that are out there based off of my interests, not just like what this test perceives my skillset to be, um, And I, yeah, I just think it's kind of ridiculous.

Like you go to college and you're like expected to choose a major and just know what [00:07:00] you want to do. And like, you, like I'm graduated two years out and I still don't know all the job options there are. So I think that's incredible to just like. Guide young people through that process, especially those, you know, with a disability who, are facing other challenges, but having that extra support around their career and next steps is fantastic.

Um, and then the other thing too, that I'm thinking about was recently went on medical leave. I'm back now, but, um, it was like for, I think five months or so I was on medical leave due to, um, some mental health stuff and like this year was sorta in my head, it was supposed to be the year that I kind of figured out what I wanted to do career wise.

And I mean, being a research coordinator here is great, but it's definitely like a stepping stone in a person's career for sure. I think that's like widely acknowledged here at the center. [00:08:00] And during that time, it was like, I mean, I'm still just very much in this place of figuring out my mental health and feeling like this whole year has been derailed while watching my friends who don't necessarily struggle as much with their mental health, or A disability, um, like move on with their careers in education and it kind of stinks, like it, it just stinks seeing everyone move ahead while I'm still trying to figure that part of my life out.

And, um, yeah, so I, I really get what you're saying about, um, sort of feeling like there's not adequate support around figuring out what you want to do with your life while also facing recovery.

**Amanda:** Yes, I couldn't agree more. I think I feel a lot of similarities in your journey in a different way, Mei, when I Was navigating high school.

I really started struggling with my mental health and it peaked [00:09:00] starting in college and I think a big transition of independence and living away from home and trying to kind of figure out myself, um, is when my mental health took a dark dive, a deep dive down and I ended up failing. Uh, I went from being on the Dean's list in college to failing an entire year of classes, being put on academic probation, being politely asked to leave and take a, take a break.

Assess what mental health supports I needed, and I really struggled to figure out what to do with that and felt like I was in that place where all of my friends were on these very, what felt to me as clean paths forward and, and clean lines to where they wanted to go with their careers. And I was just trying to get my head above water and survive to the next day, a career development and passion and, uh, was in the background for me.

And then once things started stabilizing and I came to a place where I could devote more energy to figure out kind of who I wanted to be in the world and what I wanted to do [00:10:00] with my time and who I was and how I could

kind of bring that to a potential career. I felt like I lacked a space to have those conversations.

And so I love Mass Rehab for that approach of having a counselor. And supports and peer support and family support and people that can have that conversation with you and remind you that no one's path is actually linear. We perceive these clean paths for everyone else. But once you start talking to people, just like you Mei you start realizing, Oh, we all have detours.

We have sharp curves in different directions. Um, but it often feels like when we're having mental health experiences, we fall behind, um, our peers and we're kind of in this other space. And so having people who understood that and could help me feel empowered to kind of get back on a track that felt good for me, but also figure out what that track was when I already felt a little behind.

My friends had already had these conversations. They felt clear. I was feeling gray and they were feeling real clear about their next step, or at least that's how it seemed to [00:11:00] me. Um, so to have a space to kind of have those honest conversations, do some career exploration, job shadow, um, apply for different things, try different things and not feel like there's anything wrong with

looking at different options, um, was really something that I wish that I had. And I love being able to help support in mass rehab, because I think many people get there to what you were describing about this journey of feeling a little left behind, a little unclear and looking around saying like, where do I fit?

Um, and I think most of us are having that conversation internally and having a space where you can have that conversation externally and someone who might have a clear picture of how we can help use our passions and skills really makes a difference. It helps us not feel alone, but I also think helps us in the next step, um, where some people might feel stuck, like they're hitting a wall.

**Mei:** Yeah, yeah, I definitely appreciate you sharing your personal journey with that [00:12:00] and also just talking about like how the Mass Rehab provides like that space of almost like a community it sounds like of people who really get it. And then, you know, just providing examples that most people's lives are not this linear path, and that is totally okay because like you will figure it out.

**Amanda:** Agreed. Agreed. I'm still trying to figure it out, uh, working at UMass for a decade, working at MRC for several years, Mass Rehab, and being someone in their late 30s with a family and a kid, I feel like I'm still on that journey of, of figuring it out and knowing what I want to do next. And so I think

it, having the support to acknowledge the lifelong journey and people along the way to help you with those steps as they progress is huge.

**Mei:** Yeah. Yeah. And I will say, I think like, maybe this isn't true, but this is my perspective. I think with my parents and like the older generations, [00:13:00] I don't think the, the issue, like, It wasn't at the forefront of their brain of like, figuring out what sparks joy, it was more just like, figure it out so you can like, pay your bills.

Like, it wasn't as much about like, finding happiness and finding what fills your cup, as it was just like, this is what I've been told to do. And at least that's what I've observed in my own parents. Like, I don't think they like their careers at all, but like, that was what they had to do. That was their version of figuring it out.

And so I think it is sort of a newer trend or conversation that's happening of like trying out different careers and figuring out what really sparks joy for you.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I agree. And I think. On top of kind of a different culture and a different time where maybe mental health is being talked about more and has, is still stigmatized, but maybe in a different way from kind of our family and [00:14:00] generational experiences, it's also really wild time to be a young adult during what was a pandemic that we were all experiencing for the first time and the world of work just shifting so dramatically into Dealing with hybrid spaces and how is technology being used and what does it mean to love work, but also feel isolated or what does it mean to love work and work from home and, and how is work different and how do we fit in our, how do we make sense of work in this new world, while also just making sense of ourselves.

So I think young people are experiencing this whole different dynamic where yeah. We're being asked to figure out who we are, where we want to go in our careers and journeys and navigating these world altering changes like a pandemic. It's a lot to take on. And so in the world of work is changing right now.

So having people like career counselors and job [00:15:00] placement specialists who know the world of work, and that is their bread and butter is figuring out what are the fields of work that are doing well in this hybrid remote environment. And how do you think about how hybrid work fits for you and what do you want?

And how do we balance that with this new environment of work? Our families didn't have to experience that. Hybrid work wasn't a thing for many people. Um,

and so I think that's another really cool place is having experts at the table who are, are understanding this new model of work is, is huge and helping us find joy in those spaces and also figure out what do we like and don't like.

I work from home. And I work in person. Um, and I will say I'm one of the few, maybe, but I'll say I like the in person community. I need some of that to thrive. I need that structure. I need that space to collaborate. And so hybrid work has been harder for me for a transition and I think has been harder on my mental health to feel isolated in space, physically.[00:16:00]

Um, And finding a balance of what that looked like for me was like a whole new journey in my own world of work. And I had been in the field of work for over a decade and a half at that point. Um, and so I do think it can be a whole new space for us and folks in, in different generations didn't never necessarily have to navigate that during their career journey, which the beginning of their career journey, which is really hard.

**Emily:** I'm glad that you brought that up, too, because, you know, similar to what you were saying earlier, Mei, like, with our parents generations or, like, with older generations, like, you know, it was just more of, like, overall, it was more just, like, how can we survive? How can we just, like, you know, put our heads down and work and provide and everything.

And, um. I feel like the world of work has shifted so much in the past, like, you know, five, 10 years, and it is the world that we're like entering and so it's very up in the [00:17:00] air and it's very confusing and like shifting so rapidly that it's like on top of everything else that makes it so much harder to figure out what you want to do and like what type of work actually benefits you.

Fits you and your, you know, career goals and your lifestyle and everything. Um, and I think that's very real what you were saying to Amanda about, like, you know, there are a lot of challenges that come with, Remote working or like hybrid working and and I feel like for a while we shifted all the way to like, mostly remote work and now we're kind of shifting back to the like in person or like hybrid and it's interesting to like, be in the workforce while that's happening and like, while everyone around you is figuring it out and it's like, you know, for some of us, it's like, I just don't even know what I want to be doing in general. And like, so many things are changing and shifting and then to have to figure out what you want to do, like as an individual is really difficult too. Um, so yeah, I think [00:18:00] it's really great that The MRC like has those resources.

Um, but I also know that like that's Massachusetts specific. So wondering if there are any other resources that you know of for like listeners who might not be in Massachusetts, like how they can find similar resources to that, because I think that can be very, very beneficial.

**Amanda:** Yeah, no, that's a great question, Emily.

So what's cool about vocational rehabilitation is it's. It's a federally mandated program and organized by the federal government. So if you look up the words, vocational rehabilitation, and then drop your state into there and drop it in Google or another search engine mass rehab is our state's entity of voc rehab.

There is one in every single state. Um, and so they may not be the exact same services because every state works a little bit differently in how they kind of administer their service. But this idea of career exploration, um, is in every state. And, and so that would [00:19:00] be what I'd encourage folks to do. State by state is if you're not in the state of Massachusetts, um, check out the vocational rehabilitation system in your state. And if you look up independent living centers, that's also a national, um, organization. And so there are independent living centers in every state or, uh, I'm maybe most states I might not be correct that it's every single state I would have to actually look that up and confirm, but in a majority of states that talk about the independent living movement and our drop in centers and organizations for and by the disability community, and a lot of what they do is advocacy, talking about independence young adult support groups, talking about careers so that's also a cool resource in most states if not all states that.

People can tap into to connect with other members of the community as well. As a member of the disability community, I feel like some of the most empowering experiences I've had are, are with other peers who can have the unique conversation of how [00:20:00] disability impacts our day to day lives, but also our thinking and doing about work and, and community, um, and safe spaces for us and what that even means.

And so I think that's a really great. Avenue that you can take across the U. S. Um, if you're looking for more information and you can always tap into the Massachusetts Voc Rehab Mass Rehab Commission and we'll help you find what's available in your state because that's part of the work we love to do is make sure people feel connected and well resourced.

So if you can't find it, we'll help you figure it out.



**Emily:** That's great. And that's good to know that, you know, that resource is available.

**Mei:** Yeah, definitely. That's awesome that it's mandated by the federal government. I did not realize that because usually I feel like Massachusetts is ahead of the game when it comes to more of these.

Types of resources in terms of like mental health and disability and even health care in general, I'd say. Yeah. I think, um, [00:21:00] the other question we have is just cause we talked about, you know, navigating this sort of new work climate post COVID and, you know, finding the balance between working from home and whether that's good for your mental health or not, um, and then going in person and whatnot. So I would love to know like any job hunting tips that you have for young adults, especially in this new work climate, like I said.

Um, and like how you get your foot in the door with your resume and cover letter. Like are cover letters even relevant anymore? Do people look at them like, let's be honest, would love to know your thoughts.

**Amanda:** Yeah, no, that's a great question. Um, so I think as someone who hires and works with people a lot looking for careers as well, I think some of the most important pieces I've seen is.

When someone's passion shines through, uh, [00:22:00] it really sets them apart. So I will say maybe it feels surprising to a lot of people, but I do think cover letters can make a major difference. Um, I know a lot of organizations right now in this world of work that feels so competitive where everyone is applying, and you feel like you're going through these automated systems.

That a cover letter has set people apart and sometimes is used by an employer to say whether or not they'll even look at an application is if there's a cover letter attached. So I know sometimes people use that to screen out when they have so many applications. Um, so that's one tip that I've learned is, is the other important piece is with AI in this new world of technology, a lot of organizations use systems to review and do a first review of applications and resumes.

So making sure that you're really reviewing a job application for keywords, um, and language that's in the job description of what they're looking [00:23:00] for and trying your best to utilize similar language and show exactly how your skills relates to that, that role and that duty is really important because a lot of

times these automated systems are looking for these factors of kind of how similar or different you look from what is needed.

Um, and these are just kind of anecdotal pieces of things that I've learned along the way, but I think what's cool about voc rehab is we have a. A department that does a lot of this work and really knows kind of the ins and outs of career. So I would say they are the experts and I'm just sharing a little bit of what I've seen, um, as a higher someone who hires and someone who works with individuals trying to get jobs.

I'd also say. The really cool thing and the unique silver lining of this new world of hybrid work is it's actually opening up careers for the disability community. A lot of people will face accessibility barriers in physical space and also need in [00:24:00] physical space. are having more opportunities because they can thrive in a remote environment.

Um, so I think thinking uniquely about the expertise that you bring and also the unique skills you bring as someone from the disability community and how that fits into a workspace is huge. Um, I hear a lot of my colleagues and peers with physical disabilities talking about the accessibility barriers that have been removed in, in their ability to work remotely and how job spaces have utilized more accessible technology because they have had to.

They've been forced to think differently about technology when everyone in their employee base had to work from home. And so it's actually opening up a lot of doors. Um, and I know a lot of folks like myself who struggle with mental health, having structure, but also having Less maybe overstimulating environments can be really beneficial.

Um, and so I think on the job hunt, also looking for kind of the environment [00:25:00] of the work and what that means for you can set you up well for success. Um, I think for young people, especially not feeling bad trying things. And going out of your comfort zone, and if it doesn't work, not looking at it as a failure, and instead looking at it as a lesson or development.

I don't know the exact stat, maybe you guys can find it and tell your listeners at a different point. But it's a crazy number, a really high number of jobs that most young people will go through and try before they end up in a long term career. And I think most of us feel like a failure if we try something and it doesn't work.

We look at it as something lost. Right. Like I went into this job. It wasn't the right fit, but I think my biggest tip for young people is to explore to try

something different to go out of your comfort zone to follow the things that feel exciting to you because you get something out of it from every job that works and every job that doesn't work.

Um, I worked in a bakery for a short stint [00:26:00] when I was young, trying to figure out my career path. And I loved it and absolutely hated it all at the same time. And I learned a lot about kind of multitasking and customer service and navigating people, but I also learned it was a very overstimulating environment for me, the fast-paced nature of the work and being alone and not having other people to work with.

Because it was a very small bakery, it was usually one or two people, didn't work well for me and really exacerbated my anxiety. Um, versus working in a space for me was successful with something like CVS for my young adulthood where there was a lot more people, there was community, there was options to try different things, to work in the pharmacy, to work in the front, to work in kind of receiving, and so I stayed at jobs like that for much longer and kind of learned how to navigate the workspace.

Um, And I also learned I need community at work. I need people. I need to work on a team and I need collaboration. I don't [00:27:00] do well alone. And I have my spouse who's the exact opposite. She works very much independently. She has a team. They do calls like once or twice a week, but her work is very much more remote in, in her role and her responsibilities.

And she's kind of doing that her own thing day to day. She thrives in that. So I think also as young people navigating kind of what fits us. Um, is really important because It's a lot easier to show an employer how valuable you are when you already know what are the values that mean something to you in the workspace and how do you bring those skills?

And where do you thrive because I'm not going to go sign up for my next career for a job where I'm kind of working by myself. That's just never going to work for me that's not where I do well, um, but I had to learn that the hard way and get into some spaces where I I did not thrive. Um, and so I think for me a lot of what I would say are the tips and tricks is utilize that [00:28:00] technology when you're applying and thinking about jobs.

Utilize language in a way that really highlights your alignment with the role. and your passion and don't be afraid to try something new and acknowledge that they're not failures, but maybe opportunities to figure out what fits and what doesn't fit.

**Mei:** Yeah, no, those are great tips. And I do want to acknowledge food service is no joke.

Emily and I have experience in food service. It is exhausting. So yeah, I, but I do think that like, If you can, you should experience it like once in your life. I think you learn so much, um, about just like how to be a better person in general, I think.

**Amanda:** Yes, and I feel like I have so much more respect for people in those high stress, high demand environments because I've lived in and been like, I know how emotionally, physically, and mentally taxing that can be and people are also not always so [00:29:00] kind when, when they're in their rush and they need you to meet their needs quickly, that you are in this environment that can be really mentally taxing. So yes, I agree. Absolutely no joke.

**Emily:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think, too, like, even in, like, the more, what you would consider, like, the more, like, entry level types of jobs, like food service and, like, retail, like, even in those jobs, like, there are so many things that you learn about what you do and you don't, like, you know, like, Mei said, like, I, you know, both of us, we've worked in food service, I worked in food service for many years, and there are a lot of things that I really didn't like about it, but there were also a lot of things that I learned that I need in a career, and then, like, on the, Like, flip side, like, I worked in a library for, like, several years, and, like, I loved so many aspects about that, but then there were also, like, some things that felt like they were missing, you know, and so, like, even though those weren't, like, my career, and I knew that those were never jobs I was going to stay at forever, like, I [00:30:00] still, I feel like I took so many things, and, like, I, you know, obviously, like, you get skills from every job, you just have to How you actually like present those in like an interview or like a resume, like you're, you're getting a skill like no matter what job you're doing.

And yeah, Amanda, you had mentioned earlier, like the statistic, like, I think it's like most young adults now go through, I want to say like four or five different career paths.

It's something like that. I could be wrong too, but I learned about that in one of my classes that I took in my, in my grad program. And I also thought that was really interesting how, like, It is a lot different nowadays where people can like job hop or like career hop like that's more normalized and I think that's a good thing because you don't want to necessarily get stuck in a job in a career for 40 years that you're miserable and you know, like, I feel like it's better to go ahead and try out a bunch of different things now, like, when we're younger and when

we're still like, figuring out [00:31:00] ourselves in the world, and then, like, later on down the road, you know, once you do find something that, that fits well, then it'll be like so much more rewarding because then it's like, you know, I've tried so many different things.

I've figured out what I like and what I need in a job. And now I have it. And I feel like that's a lot more rewarding down the line, even though it's like really stressful upfront.

**Amanda:** Absolutely. And I think the other piece too that's been important for me with my mental health is finding an employer that can acknowledge and find balance with me for my needs.

So for example, I think working at UMass was the first time that I felt really validated in my mental health and found flexibility and an ability to adapt what I needed into a workspace successfully. So I, I struggled. Um, with severe depression and suicidal ideation a lot of my life. I still do from time to time.

I don't think that will ever [00:32:00] fully go away for me, but it's just something I've figured out tools for more effectively with time. It took a lot of time, but when I was struggling, I had supervisors who would allow me to take a mental health day unexpectedly and help me figure out how to do that and not completely derail my own workspace too.

So how do I take a day and come back and feel okay to kind of reset? How do I communicate effectively with people if I'm going to be out and make sure that I felt good about my job space when I returned and had the mental space to kind of take a break because sometimes I just hit a wall and I needed reset.

Um, I also have flexible schedule where I was able to move my schedule as needed for mental health appointments. I had to do intensive therapy first. And when I was working at UMass and. Allowing a flexible schedule for me to go to therapy. It's really hard to find a therapist, let alone a therapist who can work weekends or after five.

It, I [00:33:00] swear it rarely exists for us right now. Um, and so it was possible for me to still get the treatment and support I needed while also still maintaining a full time work space and help me kind of build my own. I wanted to go back to school because when I failed out of school, when I was really struggling with my mental health, my goal was to get back there.

So once I had some more stability in my recovery, I ended up working full time and going to school part time at night. And UMass really supported me like they were, they were like my cheerleaders pushing me to do it even when I felt like all this might not work and finding a balance and allowing for that flexibility and thinking with me about how to kind of prioritize.

And so having that workspace that really encouraged me to, to be me. Also allow me to kind of. show up more when I was at work. Um, what I love about younger people right now too is there's this movement of what's your five to [00:34:00] nine after your nine to five or like the five to nine before work and the five to nine after work.

So like we typically work these nine to five schedules. So what are you doing before and after work to fill your cup and figure out that like personal joy too. And I think Mei, when you said that, like people aren't, we're always looking at joy in life and now. I love that young adults are saying like, hold up, how does work bring me joy?

And how do I take care of my joy in the hours where I'm not at work? So I can show up well in my personal and professional life. Um, and so I feel like that's such a cool movement that I would say the best tip I also have for work is to like figure out what you love outside of work. Mental health recovery felt like a full time job for me in itself.

So for many years of my life, I didn't feel like I had time to devote to just finding things that brought me joy, but wow, how I wish I kind of figured out a way to make space for that, because I'm trying out photography now, I love writing [00:35:00] poetry, I love spending time with my friends, I have a child now, one year old, who I'm trying to devote time and activities with, so I'm doing that now, and I wish I figured that out a little bit sooner.

And would encourage folks to think about what are the other things that kind of fill your cup and how do you bring them into work communities and also balance that time outside of work, because I feel most fulfilled at work to when I feel most fulfilled in my general life because. If I'm burning the candles at both ends, my mental health is suffering and it impacts everything.

I can't show up to work. I can't show up for a podcast like this and record when I am just depleted. Um, I don't have any spoons left, right? As they say in like the, the chronic health spaces, we suffer, we suffer from losing many of our spoons just to do our daily activities when our mental health is at its worst.

Um, and so finding those other moments of kind of joy throughout the [00:36:00] day and pausing. To kind of recognize that where you can to it's huge and it makes a difference I think in being able to devote that energy to figuring out your career because it is it's work it's work to figure out what works for you.

And especially in a career journey which can feel so impactful to many of us who need careers to survive as well.

**Mei:** Yeah, fully. I think too, to your point, I think a lot of the younger generation is realizing, like, work doesn't have to be everything. Like, a career can be very fulfilling, but so can other things outside of work.

Like, you mentioned hobbies, photography, like, you do spend a good percentage of your life doing your work, but it's still really important to find the things outside of work that make you a human being that can function. Um, and I don't know if this kind of goes into, quiet quitting, which is a little bit of a controversial [00:37:00] subject, but I think like the reason our generation has sort of employed this idea of quiet quitting is because of this mindset shift that like work doesn't necessarily have to be your priority.

And that's okay. Like it should be okay to just work the nine to five. Like that should be enough. That is what you were getting compensated for. I think like for me personally, moving on from, from undergrad into my career has been just sort of finding my footing of like that work life balance, how much can I give to work so that I can give to the rest of my life outside of work, my friends, my family, my hobbies, finding my hobbies.

Like, I don't want to deplete all of my energy during the workday. So that afterwards I don't want to go and do my art and arts and crafts. Like I want energy to do that still, but I can't do that if I'm like burning myself out at work. [00:38:00] So I think that's, that's a pretty common sentiment. I feel like amongst young, young adults right now.

**Amanda:** Absolutely. I think it's so important to fuel passion, both inside and outside of the workplace. Um, And I think in my younger years, trying to just keep myself afloat didn't always feel like that was something I could do. But even finding small moments where I could bring kind of that joy back into my life really mattered and kept me going.

And for me, work was. Absolutely necessary to survive. Financially, I had to have a full time job. Working part time wasn't an option for me and I don't think

it is for a lot of people who are trying to sustain. And so I had to resort to finding work that was full time that I could still do even when I was struggling.

Um, for my mental health journey, working helped keep my mental health [00:39:00] more stable. Having that place to go, having that structure, having some type of community and people, um, and some type of what felt like a purpose for me and aligned more with my values because I was able to do human services work, which really felt like a value alignment for what I wanted to do in this world, that allowed me just enough.

To keep going even when things felt hard, but also having kind of a backup plan for my own workspaces like knowing FMLA was a possibility, just like you said Mei feeling like I could ask for leave and empower myself to take the time when I needed. I think encouraging that more in young adults to know what their needs are and to find a balance with how to still meet their financial.

duties, right? And, and survive in this world, which is expensive and find spaces like a leave or a week off or using your sick time and thinking about medical coverage and thinking about resources makes work feel more possible.

Um, and full time work [00:40:00] isn't for everyone. For me, it was a necessity for everyone that may not be possible.

And so thinking about what benefits and can help you find work that fits. Um, it's huge. And I think that's. Another piece of mass rehab and other community services is helping people figure out how to balance work with the rest of their lives.

Um, and what supports could help them kind of mitigate that.

**Mei:** Yeah, like to your point about FMLA I think so of my friend group I'm, the only person that works in the mental health space all of them have like really kind of scary uh jobs in uh corporate America and um there is the culture is just so different, like, like you said, right, right now, if I need to go have therapy in the middle of my workday, I go hop off of, you know, teams and I go to therapy, like, there's so much flexibility and so much felt support [00:41:00] on like taking care of your health first before this job.

I feel really fortunate to work in a place like this, but also like, for, a lot of people, I think, the thought of taking FMLA, even though that is their legal right, there are, like, unspoken barriers to taking that time off and prioritizing their health.



And so, in your opinion, like, how would you navigate that?

**Amanda:** Yeah, I think it's a really hard question, and I don't know that I have all the answers for. I wish I did. I think, while we've come a long way in the world of mental health, I still can acknowledge there's a lot at a national and especially international level that's still stigmatized about mental health.

Um, and I think the privilege to work in a space with flexibility, acknowledgement of the needs of mental health and the general disability community [00:42:00] is not always an opportunity everyone has. And so when you're navigating those places that aren't as accessible and supportive, I think it's a balance of finding the right fit for you and the reality of your needs in the immediate moment.

So I would say, to me, some of the things that I would offer, but I will never fully understand someone's individual situation, because every place is so unique, is to look at the process for requesting formal accommodations through an employer. It's required by the ADA to allow for accommodations, um, if you can prove disability.

And for many of us, maybe a flexible schedule might not be a formal accommodation that can be offered in a workspace, but some type of scheduling alteration or some type of communication shift in the way that folks communicate about priorities. Some type of physical need could maybe be met. There are ways to get [00:43:00] accommodations at work in the Job Accommodations Network, or AskJan.org is a huge resource to help people think about what are your legal rights for accommodations, how to ask for them, what types of accommodations exist, so I think that's a formal process that people in a more formalized way. In a space where they feel like formality and legal rights has to be utilized.

And I will say I've requested formal accommodations at jobs with even with flexible employers because you have the right to do that and it protects you legally. It's important. Um, I also think for many years, I was in employees, employer spaces that I didn't have benefits because they weren't full time.

So for example, when I talked about working customer service, these are part time jobs, there were no benefits, there was no sick time. And so it was harder for me to navigate finding a balance of meeting my needs with my mental health. and finding time for appointments and scheduling, um, and it took a lot of creative problem solving.

It did [00:44:00] take me finding a therapist who can kind of shift hours on the fly when my work schedule shifted. Um, it took me relying on, uh, other support systems like drop in centers and young adult peer groups and support groups where I could kind of get stuff done. have conversations with people who are dealing with it live and problem solve.

Um, and I do think the reality is workspaces still have a ways to go in being accommodating and meeting the needs of the mental health community and the broader disability community. But the more we can advocate, share our experiences and acknowledge needs, the more we You know, you vote with your feet.

The more we ask for, advocate for, and push legislation for meeting the needs of young folks and older adults, um, The more change we can help make, it doesn't make change in the moment. So it's not going to change someone's immediate future. But I think what I've [00:45:00] learned in this work is my job is also personally to continue to speak out about the needs of the community and to continue to speak out about accommodations and to host.

Um, webinars and go to spaces with legislators and talk about the needs of the community because that's how real broader systemic change happens. Um, and so I think it's multi pronged. It's about finding creative ways to meet your needs where you are in this moment, because maybe this employer isn't as accommodating, flexible, um, and benefited as other spaces.

Advocating for the continued larger systemic change where you feel like you have the resource and desire to so we can help change this and have a different conversation in five years, just like we're having now, which we couldn't have had 10 years ago. Um, and to work towards a career path that aligns with your values and your needs. [00:46:00] You don't always have to stay in workspaces long term that can't be accommodating and maybe it means an adjustment in your journey and your path and working with someone like Mass Rehab to figure out what that would look like. Um, If, if that's possible for you. Um, so I think exploration is a huge part of this journey.

Um, never feeling like you have to stay stuck. And that small movement equals big movement long term like we're in a marathon. This is no sprint. This is the rest of our lives that we're talking about and mental health journey to me is forever. Um, And so thinking about I need to change the now, but also what do I want this to look like five years from now?

Um, and how do I make small movements in that direction has been lifesaving for me because had I not done that, I think where I'd be right now, uh, would look very different and not feel very good for my mental health. [00:47:00] Yeah,

**Emily:** well, thank you for for speaking out on it and for prioritizing that. Um, and yeah, it is important to remember that sort of parallel process of, yes, you're, you're figuring out your own individual journey and your own, you know, the rest of your own life, but there are also these.

broader scale, more systemic changes that need to happen alongside that. And that also can take a long time. Um, but I think that's important to acknowledge too, because it's not just on, you know, the individual, like the real systemic Barriers at play here. And like, there are a lot of things that still need to change in order for everyone to have the, you know, career that is the most accommodating and the most, like, the most fulfilling for them.

Um, so I think that's important to acknowledge too, that it's not just like the weight isn't just on your shoulders like this. a collaborative effort for everybody.

**Amanda:** [00:48:00] Yeah. And this conversation all assumes that people's basic needs are being met, which isn't always the case. People don't always have enough funds, resources, and supports, and they need to focus on survival and getting their most basic needs met.

And they can't be having these conversations because they're just trying to figure out what life is going to look like tomorrow. And that's also absolutely okay. And I would encourage folks to keep tapping into their community resources wherever they can. And we have lists of those at Mass Rehab. I know the Transition Center has those as well, um, because survival and meeting your basic needs comes first, always, before any of this can happen.

And it took me a while to even meet my basic needs. And so acknowledging people who are in that space and providing as much community care as we can for people who are just trying to meet their basic needs. day to day survival is huge. So that way people can be. A little bit further along in the path to be able to think [00:49:00] more about, okay, how do I find joy?

My basic needs are met. I'm safe. I have a place to live. I have finances to survive. Now what comes next? How do I, how do I build a little more joy in there?

**Emily:** Well, thank you, Amanda. This was a really great conversation and thank you for joining us today. And if you would like to contact us, you can email us at [staytuned@umsmed.edu](mailto:staytuned@umsmed.edu) and check out the TransitionsACR website at [umsmed.edu/transitionsACR](http://umsmed.edu/transitionsACR). Thanks for being here and be sure to stay tuned for next time.