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St. Louis

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25 THINGS YOU
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ROOM FOR EMOTION

DR. JESSI GOLD SPEAKS OUT ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS IN THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC.

BY JEN ROBERTS

Before attending medical school at Yale University, Dr. Jessi Gold, a physician and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine, earned bachelor's and master's degrees in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. It's this background that has her asking questions others don't. "I've always been interested in how we train doctors and why don't we have enough space to have feelings," says Gold. "We basically train the emotions out of us." Gold's interest in the well-being and mental health of physicians has fueled most of her work, especially during the pandemic.

When did you begin to pivot your work in response to COVID-19? Because I'm pretty active on social media, I was reading what some of the health care workers on the East Coast were saying and was like, *This is not going to be good—we're not cut out to handle this sort of thing.* I wrote to the person who runs our outpatient clinic and asked what we were thinking about doing to support the mental health of health care workers. At that time, hospitals around the country were focused on having refrigerator trucks and ventilators, but I don't think anybody was thinking enough about having an emotional emergency plan.

What measures were put into place? We decided to have a hotline where people could call to check in. We asked our faculty if they would volunteer, and every person stepped up. So many people were willing to do it on top of their jobs. We created drop-in groups and extra mindfulness groups. I had more appointments so that faculty, staff, their spouses, and kids could get in quicker. Everyone really came together. It's interesting how trauma does that—the pandemic brought people together.

Can you talk about your use of social media in advocating for mental health awareness and acceptance during the pandemic? As health professionals, we're taught that advocacy is central to what we do, but I think there's some fear that being an advocate is political. I see everything I do as being apolitical and entirely focused on helping my patients live better lives. I've always tried to center mental health in every conversation. If people are talking about vaccines, there's a mental health side to that. If people are talking about changes in the government, there's a mental health side to that. Mental health needs to be in these conversations.

What advice do you have as we emerge from the pandemic? I think we assume or really want things to go back to normal the second that you get a vaccine, and that's just not how it works. Often you feel worse because you get time, and one of the things that health care workers especially haven't had is time to take a vacation, to breathe, to actually process what has been going on. I think when they do that, they're going to feel better

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There is this belief that we can all just go back to life, as if everything is ‘normal’ and the same as pre-2020, and that is impossible. We are not the same people, work/school is not the same environment, and the people we interact with are not the same, either. It is important that we allow ourselves to feel whatever we need to feel and do not judge ourselves for it. I know we wish it was all joy and happiness, but a lot happened in the in-between time that we still haven’t talked about or processed and we might only be able to start once we feel physically safe and can take a breath. Take baby steps and don’t throw yourself into the deep end right away. Figure out what coping skills work for you and try to incorporate them into your day—even if those were things you figured out you liked to do because of COVID-19, you don’t need to lose them. That computer game or Zoom happy hour with your friends across the country can totally stick around.

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eventually, but I think it’s more likely that they will feel worse before they feel better. Sometimes people experience reactions from traumatic experiences much later, and that doesn’t make them weak or a lesser physician or nurse. Our jobs have been really abnormal. Even if your workday was the same, your day-to-day life is not the same. So you just have to give yourself a little bit of grace and time, and if you need help, don’t be afraid to get help. It’s a strong thing to need help and ask for it. We have to take care of ourselves as much as we take care of other people.

COMMUNITY CARE

MERCY CLINIC FERGUSON IS SET TO OPEN THIS SUMMER AS PART OF THE HEALTH & HOMES WESTFLO DISTRICT PLAN.

BY MIKE MILLER

Development of the new Mercy Clinic Ferguson began with a question posed to Ferguson residents: *What kind of services do you want this place to provide?* The answers were wide-ranging. Residents didn’t merely want a clinic where they could see a doctor. They wanted a place that could offer accessible women’s health services, assist with mental health needs, provide substance abuse resources, educate area residents about healthy lifestyle choices, connect people with dedicated social workers, and help with job training. Mercy has offered services like these at other clinic locations but never under the same roof—and with such direct input.

“We wanted to purposefully engage the community,” says Takisha Lovelace, Mercy’s executive director of community health operations. “We’re offering more than just the physical side of health care.”

The 5,500-square-foot clinic is part of the WestFlo District in southeast Ferguson, where Missouri-based nonprofit Health & Homes is working to revitalize the commercial corridor along West Florissant Avenue. A Boys & Girls Club location opened on the block in 2019, and street and sidewalk enhancements are in the works. Soon, the health care facility will focus on helping the Ferguson community take another step toward health equity. “I’ve never seen anything like it, in terms of how much interest and enthusiasm there is for this,” Lovelace says. “We’re just here to address the needs that have been presented to us, and we hope to be good neighbors.”



IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

URGENT CARE AND OUTPATIENT CENTERS CONTINUE TO OPEN ACROSS ST. LOUIS.

Care with convenience—if not necessarily an appointment—continues to be a trend as urgent care and outpatient centers expand. Mercy has continued to grow its reach to patients through Mercy-GoHealth Urgent Care centers and 22 Dierbergs pharmacies, with another on the way in Lake Saint Louis. St. Luke’s opened an Urgent Care Center in Arnold in August 2020, its first in Jefferson County. In October, SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children’s Hospital opened a second After Hours Urgent Care in its South County specialty clinic. SSM Health will also soon be opening an urgent care clinic for mental health at DePaul Hospital. BJC HealthCare opened two new outpatient centers, in Ellisville and Wentzville, that offer services from imaging and lab work to primary care and family medicine. Another center is slated to open in Edwardsville this summer. And SLUCare Center for Specialized Medicine, an outpatient hub next to the new SSM Health Saint Louis University Hospital on Grand Boulevard, opened last September. —K.P.