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Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO

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Describe the site where you work.

I work as a school psychologist for Denver Public Schools at West Early College, a 6th through 12th grade innovation school. My school is in a large old high school building that shares the campus with two other schools, another 6th through 12th grade program and a program for 17–21-year-old students who are behind on credits.

What are your areas of expertise at this point in your career?

At this point in my career, I feel confident explaining assessment results in parent-friendly language, teaching mindfulness to students in a classroom setting, and using culturally responsive interventions and assessments for families and students.

What challenges have you faced in your early career, and how have you handled them?

A challenge that I faced during my first year of practice, and am still working on, is managing anxiety. During my graduate program, my professors touched on self-care and mentioned the need for leaving work at work, but it wasn't something that we discussed in depth. During my internship, I felt confident in my abilities as an independent practitioner. Looking back, I wish I had spent more time with my supervisor and relied on her more as I think it may have eased some of the anxiety I experienced during my first year.

The anxiety started right before the school year when I experienced my first panic attack. I became cold, but sweaty, and my heart raced while a feeling of complete dread washed over me. For the next 2 months I struggled to sleep at night as I would catastrophize every negative outcome that could

happen to my students. I worked in an urban, Title I school with students who had experienced trauma and the effects of poverty. My school also had a center for students with serious emotional disabilities, so I had students who were behaviorally challenging, some with severe case histories, along with all of my other students, many of whom had high levels of social–emotional needs, as well. I would be fine during the day; I did my job effectively and managed student needs with confidence. However, I would go home and question everything I had done, what I could have missed, if I was an imposter, etc. The panic attack that I had experienced in the summer became an almost nightly ritual and I was exhausted physically and emotionally before we made it to Thanksgiving break.

As the year went on, I began to reach out to my colleagues and friends more, exercise regularly, and tried therapy. While the anxiety would still flare up, whether from a hard day or from the fear that since I wasn't currently anxious I must have missed something, I had fewer of the sleepless nights and all-consuming feelings of dread.

What advice do you have for other early career school psychologists?

My advice for other early career school psychologists is to lean in to your support networks. You are not alone with the weight of your work. Personally, I have school counselors and a school social worker who I work closely with. Debriefing, sharing tasks, and sometimes just venting with them has made me a better practitioner along with decreasing my anxiety about being solely responsible for anything that happens to our students. During that first year, I wish I had felt more comfortable opening up to my friends from graduate school about how I was feeling, but I was ashamed of my inability to control my own emotions when my entire job focused on helping students learn to control theirs. In my second year, I have opened up to my friends and we use each other as sound boards around interventions, assessments, and more. I now realize that many of them had the same worries and experiences I did, and I had nothing to feel ashamed about.

Something else that has helped me this year is reminding myself that, although my job is important and I am a necessary part of my student's school day, if I have advocated for their needs, reported safety concerns, and addressed any immediate issues presented to me, I have to be okay with the job I have done for the day. It is unfair to my fiancé, who is also a school psychologist, and myself to go home and catastrophize about every student I interacted with that day. I am responsible for supporting them during the school day and making sure they are safe, but I cannot feel responsible for everything that happens in their lives outside of my sphere of influence with them. I still have a hard time convincing myself of this fact, but it has increased my ability to sleep at night and function during the weekends exponentially.

I am great at promoting coping skills and self-care to my colleagues and families. Learning to use those skills myself has been challenging, but I know I am getting better and becoming a more effective school psychologist through this practice.

How has your NASP membership benefited you?

My NASP membership has benefitted me by allowing me access to more resources for my students and my practice. I appreciate the early career emails, the member exchange digest, and the reduced prices offered on conventions, conferences, and many other resources available for purchase. I know that NASP recognizes me as an early career school psychologist and understands the financial strains that we may face, and offering a reduced-price membership has made it possible for me to keep my membership current.