

Episode 3 Transcript

Leo

Hi everyone. Thanks for joining and welcome back to the Trans Pulse Canada COVID-19 podcast miniseries. I'm Leo Rutherford. Last episode, my guest and I discussed the pandemic's, impact on finances, employment and housing for transit, nonbinary people. Today we will focus on the way COVID strained social networks made it challenging to connect to the trans community and the impact of virtual communication as the only option to connect. Today, I am joined by Shadi - over to you.

Shadi

Thanks, Leo. Yes, I'm Shadi. I use they/them pronouns. I'm AFAB nonbinary and of South Asian descent and I work as a counselor at a queer collective, so I am also serving our communities and supporting their mental health for my work as well.

Leo

Thanks so much Shadi. It's really great to have you here today. And as I mentioned in this episode, today we're talking about one of these themes related to results from a thematic analysis of freeform responses in our survey about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on trans and nonbinary people. We're talking about strained social networks in an era of physical distancing and virtual communication, this can be a little bit hard to talk about sometimes. So folks who are listening, you know, check in with yourself, take breaks, do what you need to do. They'll be links to mental health resources through all of these episodes if you need. First, I'm going to share two quotes that come from our paper where we published findings of this thematic analysis. These are from two different individuals who wrote these in open text boxes. "My social circles are gone. I'm able to touch or be intimate with only one person. Attempts to maintain social contact of any kind are almost entirely blocked. Being trans and nonbinary means that social circles are very small and now they're mostly gone". Another participant said "the greatest loss is the loss of in person LGBTQ groups. There are very few online groups still going, but I'm not comfortable meeting people online. Furthermore, some of the people I bonded with just don't have social media or aren't on it". So Shadi, the first question I have to you is kind of broad, I just want to talk about the ways in which the pandemic has impacted socializing, connecting with peers. What are some of the changes that you experienced?

Shadi

Sure. Yeah. Well, I also have a lot of chronic health conditions and I really resonate with what both of those folks have said because I think that in our communities and in the trans community especially, we often seek safety in each other. And, you know, certain cis(gender) spaces or straight spaces are not necessarily places where we're going to feel safe and comfortable to be ourselves. But with COVID there has been this added layer. I think, especially for folks who are chronically ill, disabled, or immunocompromised, where even within those spaces which we have cultivated, an expectation of being safe and being welcome, we sometimes no longer feel like we can occupy those spaces if folks aren't taking the kinds of precautions that will protect. You know, those of us in the community who are more vulnerable, and I imagine that this survey was done closer to the beginning of the pandemic here we are almost 3 1/2 years in and for some of us it still feels as fresh as if it were still the beginning of

2020 because other people behavior has transformed, but a lot of us are still having to stay pretty close to home because we're not out of the woods yet in terms of our risk.

Leo

I think a lot of trans and nonbinary people share your experience and have chronic health conditions and felt like the pandemic ended for other people and it didn't for them and everyone's going on as if the pandemic has ended. But that's not really the case for a lot of people. So what were some specific challenges that you faced in maintaining social connections? During COVID.

Shadi

Like a lot of members of our community, I'm also polyamorous. I live with one of my partners and I don't live with another one of my partners, and especially for the first couple years of the pandemic, the partner that I wasn't living with their living situation had a lot of people who were, you know, doing socializing. That meant that there was increased risk to me and so on a really direct level, being separated from one of my partners, sometimes at length, while COVID was just, you know, moving through the household where they lived. And in terms of friends, I mean again I think what is so hard about being chronically ill is that it tends to shrink your world as it stands, and so then to have that really be magnified has been really difficult, but it, I do think that, yeah, it really bears emphasizing that one of the things and I don't want to be a huge downer about it. But I think that especially in spaces where social justice is supposed to be really upheld and everybody is saying all the right things it can really be a proverbial slap in the face to see that people who talk about safety and inclusion and really, you know trumpet that to the world are then the people who aren't necessarily making space for you, and so there's this really profound type of loneliness that isn't just about not being able to be with people. But it has a tinge of betrayal when there are people whom you thought you could trust and you find. You know that in this particular way you can't. That's really heartbreaking.

Leo

Yeah, it really is. And I mean, as a researcher, we see plenty of research that tells us about how important social support is for trans people. I mean, it's important for everyone and how much of an impact loneliness can have on people's mental health. For trans people, you know, research tells us that people who don't feel alone, and people who have more social support have better health. They just feel better overall. This lack of social connection, how do you think it has impacted trans people's health and well-being and what do you think some of the longer lasting impacts of this social isolation might be?

Shadi

Yeah. And I mean, it's interesting, you know that this isn't just conjecture as a mental health professional who specifically serves queer and trans people, I often am the person that's hearing first-hand how it is impacting people. We also know that we have a lot of trauma in our community from oppression, rejection, transphobia, and so people are already carrying these really heavy things on top of, you know, just the difficulties of daily living in late stage capitalism. And as someone with a trauma background, you know, we're always supporting people to look for resources, look for the things that are, you know, healing or restorative to them. But a lot of those external resources, like you know, perhaps going to a dance class or yoga or social connection like those, aren't just important on a fundamental human level,

but in terms of being therapeutic or healing to folks who are going through things. You know, we found that not only was there this real magnified stress that everybody was under, but their access to the things that would normally support them was completely eliminated as well. And yeah, the things I hear over and over again are the profound and also you know there may be opportunities to socialize in certain spaces for people. But again, like if it's predominantly straight people or predominantly cis people that that isn't necessarily like a preferred space to be in and so, yeah. Folks have just found that it's really limited in terms of friendships, in terms of like romantic and intimate connections, and that definitely is impacting their coping overall.

Leo

You mentioned resources that are available to people or what people use as resources to sort of help them cope or connect socially, and also one of the participants whose quotes I shared mentioned like LGBTQ support groups the importance of that in in their life. And as far as I can recall, I I don't think that there were many resources that came out for people's mental health during the pandemic. What do you think people sort of did to cope and what resources did you see people using in the community, if any?

Shadi

I think that's a 2-sided coin. I really do want to, you know like shine a light on the fact that we're a very resilient and resourceful community, and often we do really know how to take care of ourselves and each other. And so, you know, I did see a lot of creativity and resiliency, you know, people turning towards perhaps like making art, crafting, working with their hands, learning a new skill and you know the recognition that, you know, maybe that's a privilege because that takes time and money, and there were some people who were able to, like, be off and be on serve, and then other people who were like working and just grinding and these really risky experiences. But the flip side is that the lack of access to resources also means that for some people their mental health didn't do so well. They may have turned to substances, you know, maybe some of them were doing a really good job prior to the pandemic you know, with respect to not engaging in like addictive behaviors or substances, but then relapse can happen when you know those other things aren't available to you. I'd say it was a really mixed bag and you know, I want to say that like, people do find their ways to survive and get through, and it isn't always pretty. So. Yeah, I don't really know how to say it without sounding really pessimistic because I do want to hold as well that the, the one thing that I do know about the people that I serve is they at least kept coming back to see me, right. And so I think that that is an important point that access to affordable or free mental health services needs to be a thing and it isn't right? It's sometimes a privilege just to be able to access.

Leo

I would hope a lesson that we learned from the pandemic is this, that people need access to mental health care services, especially when we're going through challenging times. Are there other things that you can think of that are specific to the experience of being trans or nonbinary related to this social isolation or lack of connection that you'd like to share?

Shadi

Yeah, I think that a lot of the phenomena just tend to be magnified. So you know, like, yes, you know, cis and straight folks are also being impacted by the pandemic. But on balance, you know, when you look at

what systemic oppression does to people, we as a population overall tend to, you know, be like less financially resource maybe overall have less access to education, good jobs, stable housing. Right, so there are all of these things that compound to make people vulnerable in in these ways right as a population that I think that we're a lot more prone to. And then when you have something like a pandemic where access to material resources, you know, maybe the most of which is stable housing can be a difference maker. You know the kind of job that you have to go out and do, you know, affects your level of exposure like we are going to be one of those communities where people are going to probably be in more higher risk situations out of necessity. And so just as a vulnerable population, I think that everything just gets magnified, not just the harm, but then, you know, compounded with that is perhaps the lack of access to resources for any number of reasons that might be available more to cis or straight people, it's just like, you know, take what's happening in the general population and multiply it by 100, let us say.

Leo

So for those who are listening, who work in public health or policy, what are some things you think shady that can be takeaways for them? So in what ways can the trans and nonbinary community be supported in the future through public health or policy interventions?

Shadi

Of course, right. Like funding needs to be made available and I think that it does make a lot of sense to look at targeting funding to certain populations. I don't think that it is just enough to say, OK, we're going to dump a bunch of funding into mental health in general because there may be no oversight or vetting that the services that are receiving that funding are going to be competent, right, like, safe, welcoming, and competent to serve trans people. And so there really does need to be funding allocated to organizations that like really do the work and walk the talk and are comprised of queer and trans mental health providers as well. Often people specifically seek me and my colleagues out because they want to be working with a professional that has shared identities and you know, trans counselors are so few and far between. But we also need the, like, you know, the funding and the resources to get more of us out to the other side, to be able to provide those services. And so that might be subsidizing education, like making sure that more trans people actually get the requisite credentials to be able to provide these services. The flip side, though, is that community support and community care is so valuable, and some of the stock that we put in credentials, you know, sometimes ends up being counterproductive because we could have. So more so many more people in community maybe being resourced to support and help each other without a piece of paper, but we have to have pathways to make that like, viable and yeah, just like possible and sustainable. So it's like a number of things, but a lot of it involves kind of smashing the system as it currently exists and maybe doing like, a complete overhaul in a lot of ways.

Leo

I think in both health care policy public health research, we can really see that there's not enough funding directed to anything for trans and nonbinary people. So yeah, I hope that those are those who are listening take this as a call to action to try to get some more funds down the line to folks. The last question I have is just is there anything else that you would like to say about the pandemics, impact on trends and nonbinary people in terms of social networks, feelings of isolation or anything else?

Shadi

Yeah, I just kind of want to say to everyone out there that like there are people who care and you're not alone. I don't know if that sounds trite, but I do mean it from the bottom of my heart because I know how alone I have felt sometimes and you know, specifically speaking to fellow chronically ill, disabled and immunocompromised folks from our community, don't worry, someone's out there thinking the same things you're thinking, feeling the same things they're feeling and. I got you.

Leo

I love that sentiment. Thanks so much.