

GRIT: Helping our community heal

By El Paso County Public Health Office of Communication

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew, a powerful Category 5 storm with sustained wind speeds of up to 165 mph, devastated parts of the Bahamas, Florida and Louisiana.

At the time, Dr. Charles “Chip” Benight, now a professor of psychology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, was starting his post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Miami in Behavioral Medicine. After moving to Miami two days before Andrew hit, he began working on a research team focused on disaster recovery. At the time, Andrew was the costliest and most destructive hurricane to make landfall in the United States, killing 65 people, destroying more than 63,500 homes, and damaging more than 124,000 others. Working on the research team was a formative experience for Dr. Benight.

“I learned a lot from that and really decided to focus my career on disaster and trauma recovery and how people are able to adapt,” he says.

Earlier this year, around the same time that COVID-19 was hitting the United States, Dr. Benight was named the head of the new UCCS National Institute for Human Resilience (nihr.uccs.edu).

With decades of disaster trauma research behind him, Dr. Benight wanted to help his community cope with the pandemic.

It was a unique challenge. In most disasters, Dr. Benight says, the state uses federal funds to stand up a crisis counseling program near the apex of the disaster. And while efforts are underway in that area, COVID-19 is different from other disasters. It has no apex. There aren’t enough professionals to treat everyone who is experiencing trauma and stress. And those who need help may be difficult to reach because everyone has been instructed to stay home as much as possible.

“After 30 years of research and clinical work, I came up with the realization that what we need to do is increase the entire community’s capacity to respond,” Dr. Benight says.

Since 2005, Dr. Benight has been collaboratively building websites tailored to disasters to help people build coping skills. He knew a site like that would be helpful to some people in the COVID crisis — and he did set one up, known as MyResiliencehelp.com. But he felt a complementary effort was needed, because many people require direct support from others to truly thrive. In fact, research has shown that one of the key components of good mental health is solid social connections combined with the strong belief in one’s ability to cope.

GRIT builds on existing relationships

Dr. Benight says a solution to this quagmire came to him in a dream during the early weeks of the pandemic. Instead of relying solely on trained professionals to help those struggling with mental health, he thought, we could train individuals across a community to provide basic wellness and resilience support to their friends, family, coworkers and neighbors. This community-based system would take advantage of the strong relationships that people already have with each other and greatly expand the reach of an overstretched crisis response system. Benight named his program GRIT, or Greater Resilience Intervention Team.

“The GRIT concept really came out of the need to think about the strength of community, and individuals in the community, as potential resources and the need to give them information and

training,” he says. “That allows them to reach out to their own social networks, if you will — their friends, colleagues, people from church and so forth, with whom they can interact and offer support and resources to; hopefully enhancing their capability to cope and thereby empowering the entire community.”

Susan Wheelan, Director of El Paso County Public Health, says she immediately embraced the idea when Dr. Benight brought it up in a video conference meeting in which local leaders were looking for ways to help bolster emotional and mental strength.

“It was such a simple, yet brilliant, idea,” Wheelan says. “I always love it when we can build on existing strengths in our community. Why reinvent the wheel when we can offer support to caring, proactive people in our region who are already serving as confidants for their loved ones in this time of need?”

In order to quickly organize a website and a training program, Dr. Benight reached out to a couple of his longtime collaborators.

Dr. Joe Ruzek, a clinical psychologist, the co-director of Center for m2 Health at Palo Alto University, an adjunct professor at Stanford University and a research professor at UCCS, was a natural choice, as he and Dr. Benight have worked for decades on similar projects, including the precursor to MyResiliencehelp.com. Dr. Ruzek spent the bulk of his career at the National Center for PTSD at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, rising to the position of director of the Dissemination and Training Division. He first became interested in disaster recovery after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake near Santa Cruz killed 63 people and injured another 3,757. (Both he and Dr. Benight were in the area of the quake.)

Over the years, Dr. Ruzek edited and authored widely used manuals and guides related to PTSD and crisis counseling and developed multiple preventative interventions and widely used apps. As a leader in his field, he responded to the Pentagon after 9/11.

Nicole Weis, a clinical therapist, the UCCS Peer Support Program Manager, and a mentee of Dr. Benight’s, was also an easy pick. Weis has been directing the National Institute for Health Research’s peer support program for the Colorado Department of Transportation, as well as programs for a local surgery center and a veterans’ support center. Her experience as a crisis response provider was crucial.

Insight into disaster trauma

Together, the trio created a five-hour training program for GRIT support coaches (grit.uccs.edu). The free program initially was offered as a live video conferencing class and is now being offered as a video course. Participants also use a workbook and finish by taking a quiz and receiving a certificate.

Newly minted coaches are armed with coach support skills and mental health/wellness resources to direct others to, including the MyReiliencehelp.com website, a set of wellness apps, and resources on the GRIT website, which features tailored information for medical providers, mental health providers, first responders, youth and family, veterans, and community.

In the first couple weeks after the website and program went live, over 140 people from all over Colorado as well as three other states signed up to be GRIT support coaches.

“One of the magic pieces about peer support is it’s not therapy, but it does promote wellness,” Weiss says. “It provides a platform to be able to talk about difficult things that are going on in one’s life.”

She notes that there are big differences between what people are feeling in this pandemic compared to the trauma that comes from, say, a car wreck.

“I think the big difference with disaster stress is that the event tends to go on much longer,” she says. “We think of a car accident, you go through that moment, you obviously experience that stress and then you experience the weeks of recovery after. Well, in a disaster, it’s more of this daily prolonged stress that, given our current situation, can last months. So that’s different. It’s not necessarily trauma that you are experiencing, although it might be, but it is a trauma response to an increased level of general stress for weeks and months.”

Dr. Ruzek adds that GRIT is different than other civilian mental health training programs that assume the coach will interact with a stranger, perhaps only once, and generally during a time of crisis. GRIT coaches, he says, interact with friends and family members, and do so often.

Those people are more likely to be dealing with daily stress than a crisis.

Dr. Ruzek says coaches are taught to follow steps in a conversation with their loved ones. One of the most important steps is to find out what is working in their lives.

“We try to draw attention to what the person is already doing that’s really helping, what types of coping are really working for them,” Dr. Ruzek says.

That’s because the program is “strength-based” — coaches are building on the foundations of their existing relationships, and they’re helping their loved ones to improve coping mechanisms that they likely already have.

Weis adds that GRIT coaches are trained to help people find ways to cope with that daily stress, often by asking questions about how the other person is eating, sleeping, exercising and connecting with others. Coaches are given tools, like access to free meditation and fitness apps, that they can share with their contacts. But coaches are also instructed on how to recognize when a problem is beyond their ability to help. At that point, they need to direct their friend or family member to professional caregivers.

“We use the analogy of a sports coach. If you’re playing baseball and you just want to hone your technique, you would turn to your coach,” Weis says. “But if you injure yourself, you twist your ankle, then you would go to a medical doctor.”