CASAT Podcast Network

Welcome Amanda.

It's great to have you here today.

Amanda is an ICU nurse and she is married to a police officer.

And so we are delighted to have her here today to share her experiences um so that we can learn from what it's like to be a family member of a first responder and really a frontline worker yourself.

So welcome.

Thank you so much for having me.

So as we get started, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and your family?

Yes, so I'm 44 years old.

I an icu nurse, as you mentioned, I've been in the icu for 19 of my 20 years in nursing um married to my husband who is a police officer.

He's been an officer for about five years now.

So I was there for his um academy and also, you know, starting out in in that career and for the events that have happened during his career so far, we do have 2 17 year old boy and a 10 year old girl Who have been navigating distance learning for the last 12 months during this pandemic.

So uh we've both, you know, been on the front lines uh for the last year and have had some unique challenges as a result of that.

Yeah, so how I'm curious how has Covid really affected you all as frontline workers in this past year and your family life?

It's been life changing.

Um it's been career changing for myself personally.

Uh it's forever changed my practice and my focus and it's um carried over in a, in a major way to our family life, it's hard not to bring work home when we're dealing with such a huge um global issue and something that directly affects health care as it does and me being in the ICU where we dealt with the sickest of the sick Covid's and I exclusively cared for Covid for about 11.5 months.

So that was all I was dealing with and then, you know, managing worrying about the kids being at home, distance learning and our shift work.

And um at the same time during the pandemic, we had a major event in Minneapolis, you know, with George Floyd's murder and um the subsequent fallout for police officers.

So during a time when we really needed to rely on our public safety officers and our health care workers, it was the time of a lot of questioning and a lot of um a lot of mixed feelings.

Yeah, I mean when you take a moment to reflect and pause on this past year, I mean, I think you said it so well right, like it's life changing, but for those who have been on the front lines, like for me, you know, I have not, I've been working here at home in my office.

Um so what has it been like for you to be on the front line, um I am someone who went into it with a lot of great coping skills um that had built up over the years and it really challenged me even with those healthy coping skills that I had to pull from and even with a strong face that I had to pull from, I did find myself paralyzed often by anxiety and by fear and especially in the beginning with the uncertainties of you know, not having the knowledge and the, and the, the, the time to really pull together how, how to combat this, how this was spreading it.

It was um very overwhelming.

I would say the feeling was overwhelming and then to try to educate my family home, not only my Children, but my extended family about the risks without spreading the fear that I was feeling, you know, without, without giving that to them, but but also informing them so they can make the right decisions and do the right things to protect themselves and their community.

That was a unique challenge to try to balance, I need to tell them, but I need to not make them overwhelmed Also, I can't imagine kind of walking through this year in in your shoes, the way that the kind of heather said it, but also just, I can't, I don't remember a year that we've had in the world, but especially in a country that was as difficult as this one was so much going on, especially in regards to first responders, um folks in, in the hospital, in the health industry, um policeman, police people who work on the police force stuff like that, right?

And and the fact that everything got so politicized.

So it didn't just affect like occupational like it had an effect on our personal relationships with everybody, you know, like you didn't know what people were believing, what they were thinking.

So it's almost like and I so I I got to imagine.

And did did it feel difficult to have a safe person to really talk to about what was going on?

Or it seems like it would almost feel like you had to just carry it all yourself in a in a sense just because of everything that was happening at once, right?

Yeah.

It really did um show me people's natures that I maybe didn't realize for that and maybe casual acquaintances with and didn't really know where they stood on issues or how much education they had.

It really clarified for me.

There were there were people who told me I was lying about what I was sharing, you know that it wasn't real that it was a hoax and that um that it was, you know, a man made thing and that it was a very political thing.

It didn't feel very political as I was caring for these people in the I.C.U.

You know, it felt like a human issue.

Um and I did lose some people and I did have to for my own sanity for my own well being emotionally stopped contact with some people during this time.

It felt better safer for me and I really had to be careful.

Um also who I expressed my feelings with and my frustrations with uh some were very willing to listen and checked in on me that I didn't expect.

And others just kind of couldn't handle it in the, in in in their own stress and their own experience, it was too much to hear what was going on with me.

So I had to, you know, sort of um feel it out with people a lot of times.

Mm hmm.

You you mentioned having to rely on coping skills that you had had, you know, developed in the 20 years in the field.

Can you share what were some of those coping skills that you used to get through this?

I think mentioning, you know, setting boundaries with people was really important this year, probably more than it's been.

And I think people learned that a lot of people learn like, oh, that's actually a good coping skill that we need, right?

But what are some other ones that you had that you had to rely on to help get you through a year like this?

Um thankfully I had been practicing meditation for a few years prior to this and even um and this started, I did have a harder time having that sort of moment where I could meditate, where I could slow my heart enough and my breathing enough to really be in the moment to be present with it.

Um so it was a skill, I was so grateful that I had been practicing and I didn't beat myself up if I got distracted during it, you know I just sort of that was the whole idea I could refocus and that helped me when I was dealing with you know a very stressful thing and on the job I could have that moment if I'm going to take a deep parents center myself.

So meditation was huge for me, I have a strong faith in God, so I pulled from my faith often times um exercises is a an outlet for me and a physical release for me and I had to lean on exercise.

Now my happy place used to be in the gym and so I didn't have the gym to go to anymore, I didn't feel that I was safe to go to a gym and expose other people potentially or to be exposed.

So I had to build up my own home gym and gym and get creative and you know you two different workout routines and like um but it helped to have that physical outlet and also any time I could spend in nature, so we like many people started a little quarantine garden and you know did some did some planting and we definitely didn't do a great garden but um we learned and that process of watching things grow and life renewing during the spring as it was when this started um was helpful just to watch those sort of cycles of nature, like it was winter things were dead, but now things are coming back and just like stressful events they cycle in and out.

I know it won't last forever, so I'm gonna hold on for that spring that's coming.

So having having those connections with nature and sort of that cycle of things helped me as well.

And also to be able to talk about it share about it.

And that was frequently with other people experiencing the same things.

Um there were certain ah there's a certain culture in nursing that you don't let it get to you and that you're you've got to be tough as nails and let things bounce off of you.

So those weren't the people I you know, sought out to talk to, it was the people that I saw struggling that I knew were ready to share about it and those were the people I would seek out and talk to and I would listen to and then you know, share with them that I was feeling the same things because it felt so much less isolating to have someone that would share how they really felt how it was really affecting them.

So much of what we've been talking about on this podcast with Trudy really has been on awareness right, which you're building in your meditation practice.

Um and so you know it makes sense that you know, coming back to the moment how supportive and helpful that's been for you.

There's a great neuroscientist dr judson brewer and he talks about how fear plus uncertainty equals anxiety.

So when you think about this past year and you know what we've been living in, it's really a recipe for anxiety and so he talks about how when we don't have enough information to plan, but how how difficult that is on our brain and so it's like coming back to the moment and taking it one moment at a time, one day at a time, whatever, you know, period of time we can plan for how helpful that is.

Um for decreasing our anxiety and that's really what I what I heard you articulate their um I am curious as you've navigated distance learning and shift work really?

How do you how do you manage your day to day life with your family and your kids, what does that look like for you all?

Oh we have we're very routine, you know, we have set bedtimes, get up times, you know, times when we know school's in session um after school, you know and we set aside for homework, we keep a routine going um my schedules, I keep the same, so I try to work the same set of days in a row each week so that it's less disruptive to like try to figure out when I'm going to be available and not available.

Um And um my husband unfortunately doesn't have that ability so his shifts can change, his days can change and so that's a little less, you know, certain and and stable, but I'm kind of that stable one in the home where you know, I'm going to be there certain days and times and available.

And and we try to also have like a whenever we can have a dinner where we sit together and talk and sort of talk about the day.

And what I started um early in the pandemic was gratitude is another coping mechanism for me.

It's a big one and I started asking everyone at the table name five things today that you're grateful for.

And so that kind of like helped shift their focus and you know what really worked well that day, even if it was something little like, oh, I didn't have much homework or I got to um see this video that it was really interesting or you know, we would, we would share and have sort of that family time.

So that's been helpful and they kind of, I knew I tried not to talk about uh work uh so much when it was kind of us time.

We we started a little book club.

So the kids and I were reading a series of books together and that was something positive we could do together.

That was completely off um completely in our imaginations and off topic of the pandemic and everything we were going through.

So that distraction helped a lot.

Mhm mm hmm.

Mhm.

You know, as you talk about the self care and coping strategies, it sounds like you're really a pillar of strength for your family.

And so I'm curious how you're coping strategies and self care strategies help you to show up for your family right?

In in really big ways.

Um that that resilience that I've built over the years, it was really tested this, this last year.

It was really tested when my husband had, you know, traumatic events happened at work is really tested around the Black Lives Matter movement of sort of the fallout of it um for police officers and it was tested with, with my career.

Um and I, I had really just hoped that I could be an example.

You know, mom's working out again.

Mom's meditating again, Moms, you know, talking about things and and focusing on gratitude and like I wanted to be that example to them, Hey, this has helped me, you could maybe help you if you give it a try, you know, try to have that positive influence and like and, and the way I was raised my mom was sort of that pillar of strength and stability, you know, around in the chaos.

And so I think the example was shown to me and hopefully I then passed that along to my kids.

I love that, especially talking about that idea of modeling resiliency and reinforcing the practices, like getting your family to talk about what they're grateful for.

You know, we we don't I don't think we place enough importance as as a culture or society on the importance of kind of our mindset, especially in a year like this, to where you couldn't look anywhere without seeing, you know, really terrible things happening and so it was really hard to find some positive things and I I we forget sometimes because our goal is just to like make it through it and get back to normal, but those I, you know, the muscle, the gratitude muscle from working out, you know, those things in a year like this, how helpful it's going to be, not just for folks who have have made it through that way, but also for kids who have have seen that and I just think that's such a huge advantage given your kids that ability to kind of shift their mindset in a year like this, it's phenomenal how how does that work with, you know, we've, we've talked about your husband having a job that's just as there's, we've talked about to another spouse of a police officer and even just kind of the stigma of it, you know, and how, when talking about your kids, how do you teach them to or have you guys had that conversation, has that come into the conversation of how to be okay with what dad's role is or um how to navigate when people are saying some of the things they're saying and and putting you know there there um parental figure into this, this light or whatever.

Have you guys had to process that with your kids about how to navigate those kind of conversations with people outside?

Well thankfully it hasn't really, they haven't been approached about it.

Um they have a small circle of friends that you know, but we have talked about it and um we've been very open and willing to answer questions about it.

So say for instance when George Floyd was murdered, it was a conversation we had like, wow that really shouldn't have happened and that police officer didn't do the right thing, you know that accountability and that like acknowledging that that wasn't an okay thing that happened and these some of these other incidents have been happening that aren't okay and we, we don't have all or nothing approach like we're not going to say all police are good and all police are bad where we want to be very honest and open that people make mistakes and people in power often make mistakes and that things need to change.

And so we did talk a little bit about um you know how my husband handles were and how what their policies they have in place to help avoid something like that from happening and the training that they go through so that our kids can like honor, honor what he does, but also not not blanket it as well.

The police officer was doing their job like really looking at both sides and really trying to understand and um and not be, you know, all uh back the blue and all black lives matter like finding some middle ground, finding that that place where we all hopefully should be where we're seeking to understand and to learn and to grow.

That's good.

That's I think that's such a good point too because it's, we're so disconnected and not to make it all about political and the culture.

We can get back to the things that are really important too.

But just I mean just that reality of it has become so disconnected that you're either either or and so teaching kind of that positive side and and how to navigate that I think is such a valuable, valuable tool, especially kids well and I don't think it's even off topic really because it's so much of, you know, I would imagine it's having an impact on your family in this past year as well.

Um because of the stress, the heightened stress that it brings to your family, right?

For me, especially worrying about my own physical safety health wise.

Um my Children's safety health wise and then our physical safety as a potential target for people who are upset with the police and who may want to seek out, you know, where they live and you know, and harm them.

We we saw something happened this year and we've seen that happen in our town several years ago where Police officers were targeted and and killed.

We've we lost two officers several years ago in that way.

And um and in 2019 my husband was involved in a traumatic event where someone lost their life as a as a result of uh um lethal force.

So he, that was his traumatic event that triggered a lot of his PTSD and we were and that happened to be a person of color as well, that died.

And so, um there was a lot of fear over, you know, will this, how will this be portrayed to the media?

How investigation go, will there be any fault found, you know, will we then be targets of harm?

You know?

So there's been a lot of that fear going into it and then exacerbated by the large movement that I that I'm so on the fence with because I so feel the Black Lives Matter movement and sort of this awareness needs to happen.

It's a valuable, important thing, but I also am a person who believes in p protest and believes that um we we all need to be a part of the change, but I don't necessarily see how violence helps that or how targeting someone who wasn't involved in this situation can help that.

And so I really try to find the balance like something needs to happen and it needs to be big and it needs to make a statement, but but I also want to feel safe.

Like it's going to be like it's being handled in a way that protects us as a community.

Mm hmm.

I'm curious.

Just um you know, with everything that you've shared today, what do you think is a way forward?

Um for really understanding the end, right?

We have either or but how do we move forward with the and from your perspective, since you're sitting at the front line listening to understand informing ourselves, arming ourselves with facts and information and really turning off the rumor mill and turning off the panic that gets spread on social media and and seeking to listen to the other side.

So like um talking with that have had experiences or even our friends of color, um you know, and kind of understanding where they're coming from and and really listening, seeking to understand and having an open mind.

Okay, maybe I don't have the right view of this.

Maybe I do.

But I'm going to seek more information to really make an informed decision about this.

You know, I feel like that is so vital once we have form an opinion and we sort of turn off everyone's voice.

You know, then we're not we're not helping ourselves to understand and we're not part of the solution.

Mhm thank you.

Um you know, it strikes me your family, you've been through a tremendous amount and we talk a lot about resilience on this podcast, so I'm curious would you categorize your family as resilient?

And in what ways?

Right.

So I was thinking about this and I was very surprised that the resilience of my Children, you know, having both of us on the front line worrying about my husband's safety when he goes to work, worrying about my safety and you know, whether I'm going to get sick or one of them will get sick and navigating um distance learning and not being around their social circles and I especially did not allow them around the social circles and I didn't feel that was a responsible way to handle it.

So they were really kind of isolated.

So I found that they thrived with distance education, their grades were better than they had been.

They were, they seemed to be even more responsible as far as like getting themselves up and ready for school, logging on on time.

I didn't have to hover, I did hover for the first couple of weeks just to be sure that things were gonna go smoothly, but I found I didn't even need to do that.

They were they they they picked right up and and got going now, they weren't doing meditation and they weren't, you know hitting the my little garage gym with me and doing those things, but they really seemed to have that resilience and that adaptability, you know they were like okay well this is how it's going now, so I'm gonna jump into this but I have to say that's not been the experience that I've heard from my colleagues and um in the community they've really struggled and their kids have really struggled and so I don't know um I don't know to what extent my influence has had on that resilience, that adaptability but I hope it helped um because they really have done a fantastic job husband, I don't feel as as resilient.

Um He didn't come into our family with those sort of healthy coping mechanisms and strategies and I find that he resists them a little bit.

So like he he kind of probably knows things that might keep him on a more balanced but doesn't practice them and so I try not to push those things on him but still sort of um exemplify it for him.

Um But he's he's he's at least going to counseling.

That's been a large one that I used for my my son especially I put you know he's been in and out of counseling and when the pandemic started I made sure he had an appointment and was able to talk to a third person, someone outside of our our family about it um virtually.

And my husband's been going to counseling which is a huge step for him so that helps that he has that outside person to kind of talk to as well.

Um yeah, so those those things have helped and our resilience, it always it always amazes me at how helpful these, you know, these coping skills are for resiliency and how important they are, but how mhm.

Almost I don't want to I'm not trying to think of the right word, but they're almost stigmatized and there's almost a view towards them.

So they're not as like normal, it's more it's more normal whatever that means are typical to not use any coping skills because that's kind of our, you know, pick yourself up by your bootstraps mentality.

And it's and it's just just hearing you talk about, you know, how how helpful they were even even though things were really difficult, right?

And things were still difficult.

But these kind of helped keep it at a manageable level, right?

And it's it just always amazes me how as as a society, but especially in, you know, we've we've talked to um folks in the fire, you know, Fire Department and Police Department how almost stigmatizing it is to use some of these really helpful things very and I was one of those people that really didn't want to seek help, that was a sign of weakness.

I was raised to keep it to myself and like you you pull yourself up by your bootstraps and you you don't ask for help.

And these New agey things like meditation always seems so foreign to me and like that doesn't really help and that's not going to help me.

A lot of nurses have that same mentality to and police officers first responders, like I just got to be tough, I just gotta, you know, keep going, this is this is my job, you know, I'm just gonna, so when I I got into a lot of trouble with that, I didn't have healthy coping, I got into a lot of unhealthy things that I was leaning on, especially, you know, in the first decade.

Uh and a half of my practice, like I was leaning on things that were killing me that we're making my life unmanageable.

And so once I really started to practice it and do it now, I just shouted from the rooftops, you know, if I see someone struggling, I'm like, hey, this helps me, you know, why don't you try this?

And like, you know, I try to share that and I try to talk about it and I try to um you know, help with that stigma at work by saying that is really hard on me too.

I know how, you know, I know how you're feeling like really acknowledging it in other people and my husband um has sought out, you know, people in the police force who have had similar experiences as the shooting he was in on that, that, you know, they actually had experience in this area and he would go to coffee with them and talk to them about you know how it was for them and what's helping them and what, you know and I had to tell him to avoid those people that wanted to insert their opinion that sort of didn't have that background of like understanding.

And the same with me at work, avoiding those people that sort of don't help that culture that we're trying to you know, encourage of sharing of being honest about how we really feel.

Um You know you you see a lot of police officers lost to suicide and that's you know they just they're not they're they're they're not comfortable asking for help.

They're not comfortable saying that they've got a problem and they're really struggling and I lost a nurse colleague um about three months ago to suicide.

Um and it was someone that wasn't sharing about how difficult things were and we didn't know how they were struggling And that that's really hard when there is help out there and there is a network of of kind of people that you know that can help you um process and and will you know make it valid for you.

You know like just listening to other people shares even if I didn't speak with them about the pandemic if I'd watch an interview with the nurse and and what they shared it was it was so helpful to me.

It felt less isolating and it felt like, wow, I'm not alone in this.

You know, other people are struggling and that's okay that we're struggling.

This is hard, you know, and giving ourselves that grace that yeah, that's really hard.

I'm probably going to need some help with this and some time with this.

Yeah.

The importance of acknowledging things as they are yet.

It's so challenging.

Um for us to do, especially in this culture where it is, you know, like pull yourself up, everything's fine and then what that does to us, um, on the inside, it just rips people apart.

I'm struck by also the importance of connection and the ability to um, you know, have these important social connections where it sounds like you can really just be real.

That's what you're looking for.

Like how can I be real and be met without judgment of others.

Uh, and how that how supportive that's been for you.

Right.

I did have a lot of people have reached out with during my husband's incident.

People, you know, reached out to him and like offered, hey, let's go talk.

Let's let's hang out.

And for me, I had people sending me cards, just checking in, you know, just hi, how are you doing?

I was thinking about you today and I'm praying for you and I have a wonderful friend, um who taught me something really important.

She she wants to ask me, how can I best love you through this?

How can I best support you through this?

And just asking that question.

It's like, oh yeah, I can tell you how I feel most supported and and if you're willing to do that, that's such an amazing gift, you know?

So, um I try to do that with people when I see them going through something tough.

Now, I I do that as well.

I asked them, how can I best support you?

What feels like support to you and I do that with my kids to what do you need right now?

What would help you?

And this is so interesting to me and I have so many questions, we could do another couple hours if you have time.

We won't.

I'm just teasing, you know what I'm really curious because you've seen, I mean, experienced multiple sides of this of not necessarily the way you talked about using the best coping mechanisms and developing those and relying on those, but how those were really challenged this year.

And then also have seen people who um didn't have that support and and kind of suffered silently.

What would if you could give some advice to folks that are listening, whether their family members or first responders, um what's some things that you would tell them if if they are struggling or if they are having a difficult time finding that support right?

First know that you're not alone in this and that there's other people out there, maybe their circumstances are different than yours, but there's a common thread there, of that suffering, of that anxiety, of that feeling, like it's not going to get better, you know, that overwhelming feeling, the hopeless feeling, you're definitely not alone, it's it's a season in your life.

I've seen a lot of really difficult seasons come and go and so I always know to to hang on to the positive and to know that it's gonna get better and know that the bad can't last forever.

And I would I would share with them that gratitude has shifted my focus to um focusing on the things that are going right in my life and the little joys that I can find in each and every situation and I would tell them to find their people.

And so there are people are those that support them, encourage them listen to them, I want to understand um uh you know, can sometimes just sit in silence and and listening can sometimes be the biggest gift to the fact that there willing to just take in what you have to share and what you need to vent about.

You don't need a huge network of people, you just need a few in your circle that are your people that you that you can lean on and don't be afraid to ask for help.

I I found that, you know, I didn't need to lean on those unhealthy coping mechanisms that I had leant on.

You know, I didn't need drugs or alcohol or other destructive things in my life, I could reach out and say I don't know how to handle this.

Do you have any suggestions?

You know, go to going to counseling and and if if your counselor that you tried that one time didn't work out, keep trying to find a different one, you know change change your counselor until you find one that you feel like it's benefiting you and helping you with.

It's not a try meditation one time and if it doesn't feel great then you don't do it anymore.

You know it's a practice as they say.

So these these coping mechanisms, they feel awkward and unnatural at first and practicing them over and over.

You get to the point where you feel more comfortable and then you feel more open and the more you talk to people, the more open you feel and the less stigma you even care about because you're like this is authentically me and how I feel and I can be myself whether whether people accept it or not, I accept me and I feel more comfortable that I'm that I'm that I'm being true to myself.

That's so helpful I think for people as their going through and navigating um these really stressful waters of being a family of a first responder and then to have to in the same family, so thank you for sharing all of your insights from your journey.

Um and I would imagine you would agree it's a journey to.

Um and it's not just like okay we do this and now it's fixed.

It's really a process that happens over time and a practice as you said yes.

Yeah it is a practice and it and it's a muscle that does get stronger and so then we learn that we can navigate whatever is coming next.

Uh you know, as we begin to wrap up here, we often talk with um folks about resources.

And so I'm curious have there been any resources that you found?

I mean you've talked about these coping strategies and these practices but any resources um that has been available to you that you've just found super helpful, counseling is a resource that I found have found helpful um also uh following a community of people dealing with the same kind of thing.

So in my nursing practice there was a community of nurses that was focused on the covid epidemic.

And we had a thread going on social media where people would put inspirational things or this is how this worked for me or you know, this is what we're doing at work that seems to help this situation um you know aligning yourself with other people that might be experiencing this thing and um there are you know, groups of spouses of police officers.

I haven't found that as helpful for me uh me because of my career and what I do and that I sort of like, I kind of feel like I need my own little support, you know, uh, I haven't really meshed with any of those sort of spouse support groups, they just haven't worked for me.

But there are, there are those out there for firefighters and for police officer's spouses to sort of, you know, kind of gel with other people that are having similar maybe home life experiences and work life balance or imbalance issues.

Um, and then I think, you know, educating yourself is huge.

Like I'm going to look into pTSD and trauma and like what were people and what resources are out there and what methods are out there, you know, opening our minds to other things and seeking out those resources.

I love those, those strategies and the resources and I think to just to reiterate for those that are listening and if you're struggling and it's really dark or difficult, you know, it's okay to reach out.

I think that's what we hear over and over again is is making it okay to reach out and to find something and to try it until you find something that works for you.

Um, but we shouldn't, you know, don't settle for suffering silently.

And so I think there's there's help out there Amanda thank you so much for your story for sharing with us.

Um, there's so much in this, I can't wait to hear the final.

Um and if just kind of I I really think the stories were sharing and the journeys that people are sharing, I I really do believe that there's going to be a lot of people that are affected in a positive way.

So hopefully that gets back to us and we can get that to you as well.

But we do appreciate you today.

Thank you for your time and your story.

Thank you so much.

Amanda thank you so much CASAT Podcast Network.

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