

Why Salutogenics is Essential

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September 11, 2024

Executive Summary

Toxic stress and trauma significantly affect mental health, leading to chronic illnesses and mental health symptoms. Mental Health America calls for a societal shift towards wellness and prevention, particularly in environments where many people face mental health challenges. It is incumbent upon parents, teachers, organizational and community leaders, and other influencers to reduce toxic stress prevalence.

According to Aaron Antonovsky's research, the salutogenic model promotes health and well-being through the "sense of coherence" (SOC). Focusing on resilience, SOC gives special attention to stress management, health maintenance, and commitment to life activities. This wellness-oriented approach improves health outcomes, resilience, and life quality.

The salutogenic model benefits people dealing with trauma, improving mental health outcomes and productivity, reducing depression and anxiety symptoms, and managing traumatic stress. It emphasizes strengths over deficits, proving more effective than traditional models. It also improves life quality in children and adolescents with chronic illnesses.

Salutogenic environments enhance people's health by recognizing the interplay of life facets and focusing on individual assets. They encourage ownership, self-efficacy, engagement, resilience, and adaptation, benefiting people recovering from chronic conditions or mental health issues.

Despite its benefits, the salutogenic model faces challenges like resistance to change, lack of awareness, and training needs. Addressing these requires understanding resistance factors, raising model awareness, and providing practical implementation training.

The salutogenic model presents a transformative cultural potential, fostering compassion and care. It empowers parents, teachers, and other leaders to set a tone of understanding and support and to implement policies that encourage positive values. This holistic approach enhances people's lives and infuses their efforts with deeper meaning. The call to action is for all societal levels to embrace this model, envisioning a workplace where well-being and productivity go hand in hand.

Conditions of the Environment

In today's world, traumatic events and toxic stress are all too common in our daily lives. As reported by Mental Health America (2014), a significant portion of the population, 60.7% of men and 51.2% of

women, experience lingering effects on their health and quality of life. These effects are a direct consequence of living under the constant or repetitive strain of toxic stress.

Furthermore, the prevalence of traumatic events or toxic stress exposure is alarmingly high among the adult population. As highlighted in the report, an overwhelming 90% of all adults have had the unfortunate experience of at least one traumatic event or an instance of toxic stress. Even more concerning is that 30% of adults reported having experienced as many as six such events.

The overall health and well-being of the nation are on a concerning decline. A critical contributor to this decline is the pervasive role of toxic stress. This type of stress impacts our mental well-being and critical biological mechanisms, including our neural, endocrine, and immune systems. The adverse effects of toxic stress are far-reaching, compromising our health and leading to the development of chronic illnesses, disabilities, and varied mental health symptoms (Terry L. et al., 2020).

Mental Health America has issued a strong call to action in response to this growing crisis. The organization strongly advocates for a more forthright reduction in stress-inducing factors within our society. It emphasizes the urgent need for a comprehensive societal shift towards focusing on wellness and overall health. This shift would entail prioritizing preventative measures, promoting healthy lifestyles, and implementing policies prioritizing mental health.

Workplace mental health has become a prominent issue during the pandemic and racial justice reckoning. In 2021, a significant study was conducted by Mind Share Partners, a nonprofit organization working with employers to improve workplace mental health. They surveyed 1,500 full-time U.S. adults. Their sample represented various races, ethnicities, genders, LGBTQ+ statuses, generations, and seniority levels. The study revealed that mental health challenges are widespread among employees. Over 75% of respondents reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition (Mental et al.).

In the same study, 84% of participants stated that at least one workplace factor negatively impacted their mental health. This is not surprising, considering that work is a significant source of stress for many. More severe effects were reported by younger workers, such as Gen Z and Millennials, as well as Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ employees. They cited emotionally draining work as a significant stressor. Notably, Black and Hispanic respondents were more likely to leave jobs due to mental health reasons. Women also face additional workplace challenges due to gender stereotypes and the persisting male-dominated structure, which only intensifies anxiety (Greenwood, 2023; Pew, 2023).

Workaholicism, often used to mask other issues, is commonly seen in high-intensity jobs, as Harvard professor Arthur C. Brooks points out that promotions usually reward work addiction (Brooks, 2023).

There is a growing awareness of the impact of work and workplace cultures on the well-being of employees and leaders. Mental health is not solely an individual's responsibility; employers also have a role in fostering a healthy culture and mitigating workplace factors contributing to poor mental health. Everyone faces mental health challenges at some point in their lives, whether it is toxic stress, trauma, grief and loss, compassion fatigue, burnout, anxiety, depression, or exposure to the trauma narratives of others (How to Love).

"A healthy workforce is the foundation for thriving organizations and healthier communities," stated U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy. He emphasizes the need for organizations to support and protect

workers, foster social connections, express confidence, and respect personal lives (Greenwood, 2023; Pew, 2023).

Mental health is a universally recognized issue. In a 2022 Kaiser Family Foundation/CNN survey, 90% of people acknowledged a "mental health crisis" in the U.S. Half of the respondents knew a family member with a severe mental health crisis. When asked who should address the issue, 44% of people named employers, following family and doctors (Lopez et al., 2005; Pew, 2023).

This paper advocates for influencers and decision-makers to foster an environmental culture that acknowledges the harmful effects of toxic stress and actively works to reduce its prevalence and support those affected.

The Salutogenic Model

The salutogenic model is deeply rooted in the comprehensive research of Aaron Antonovsky, a medical sociologist and pioneer in this field. Leaders, caregivers, and service providers with a developed expertise in salutogenics can implement Antonovsky's groundbreaking work and apply it to real-world challenges in the health and wellness of others.

The salutogenic model, which forms the cornerstone of Antonovsky's research, is a revolutionary perspective in healthcare. It is primarily built around the concept of "sense of coherence" (SOC), a term coined by Antonovsky himself. The SOC is not just a concept; it is a worldview that encapsulates the extent to which a person possesses a resilient, enduring, and adaptable feeling of confidence.

This confidence manifests in three distinct ways. (1) It enables individuals to perceive stimuli that emerge from their internal and external environments during their life journey as structured, predictable, and comprehensible. This perspective helps transform the chaos of life into a navigable landscape. (2) Individuals feel assured that they have access to the necessary resources to confront and overcome the demands of these stimuli. This conviction is critical in fostering a sense of self-efficacy and resilience. (3) Demands are framed not as insurmountable obstacles but as challenges worthy of one's investment, time, and engagement (Antonovsky, 1987).

A highly developed SOC is not merely a psychological asset; it is closely associated with improved health outcomes. This is because the SOC directly influences how individuals manage stress, maintain their health, restore their well-being, and stay committed to significant life activities despite facing challenges. It can shape a person's health trajectory and determine how effectively an individual can recover, reevaluate, retool, and regain productive momentum following adversity.

Therefore, the salutogenic approach, underpinned by the empowering concept of SOC, offers a valuable tool for promoting holistic well-being, resilience, and overall quality of life. It reframes how we understand and approach health, shifting the focus from disease and its causes to health and its origins. Doing so offers a pathway towards sustainable health and wellness, a goal that leaders, caregivers, and service providers strive to have in those they serve.

Evidence Supporting a Salutogenic Culture for Improving Wellness and Functionality

Research findings strongly suggest that a salutogenic culture offers significant benefits to people who are dealing with trauma and histories of adversity. These approaches are not just theoretical concepts but have been implemented positively. For instance, several studies have indicated that interventions designed to enhance an individual's sense of coherence (SOC) can improve mental health outcomes and productivity. This includes a marked reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety, two of the most prevalent mental health issues worldwide (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006; Hurley, D. et al., 2020).

In addition to focusing on individuals' sense of coherence, salutogenic strategies emphasize building resilience. This includes resilience training and mindfulness practices, both effective in reducing the impact of traumatic stress, promoting recovery, and a readiness for dealing with future challenges. These practices work by helping individuals improve their life skills, enabling them to better deal with the challenges they face due to their traumatic experiences and exposures (Southwick et al., 2014).

The salutogenic approach is multifaceted and versatile. Beyond enhancing psychological resilience and strengthening coping mechanisms, it also emphasizes building upon the preserved and resourceful parts of the psyche and environment. This unique focus helps to significantly improve the quality of psychosocial help that can be offered to affected populations, providing them with the tools and resources they need to manage their trauma and mental health issues (Lutsenko, 2021).

One of the most notable aspects of salutogenic-oriented interventions is their focus on strengths and resources. Rather than dwelling on the problems and deficits individuals and communities face, these interventions emphasize the available strengths and resources. This asset and strength focus has demonstrated positive effects on mental health, promoting mental well-being more effectively than traditional pathogenic models, which tend to focus on deficits and dysfunction (Frostick, 2020).

Beyond having the confidence to function well and advance in life, people are incredibly stressed by conditions adversely affecting their children at home and school. The salutogenic approach has proven to be highly effective among children and adolescents with chronic illnesses. By enhancing their sense of coherence, these young individuals are better equipped to manage their conditions, improving their quality of life. This is particularly important given the growing number of children and adolescents dealing with chronic illnesses worldwide (Shorey & Ng, 2020).

The Benefits of a Salutogenic Culture

Salutogenic cultures provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary perspective on people's health and well-being. They acknowledge the intricate interplay between various facets of human life, including physical, emotional, behavioral, social, occupational, and spiritual factors (Bhattacharya et al., 2020). Such an understanding helps parents, teachers, and organizational and community leaders realize that health is not the absence of disease or a problem but incremental improvements along a continuum.

Moreover, salutogenic cultures actively empower individuals by focusing on their assets and resources. Instead of adopting a passive role in the recovery process, individuals are encouraged to actively engage and participate in their journey toward better health (Shorey et al.; E., 2020). This

approach fosters a sense of ownership and growing mastery, significantly improving people's ability to self-improve and self-efficacy.

Additionally, salutogenic environments are particularly effective in enhancing relationships and engagement. They create a nurturing and supportive environment that encourages not just personal growth but also relational growth. This feature becomes particularly beneficial for people exposed to others living with chronic conditions or psychiatric disorders (Aci & Kutlu, 2021). Such an environment aids in breaking down barriers and building stronger bonds between patients and healthcare providers.

Another critical aspect of salutogenic environments is the emphasis on resilience and adaptation. These are critical factors in long-term recovery from trauma and histories of adversity (Chow et al., 2022). Salutogenic cultures promote sustainable recovery and improved mental health by strengthening the individual's ability to build toward resiliency and adapt to new realities.

A salutogenic approach to how people are recruited, trained, and retained provides a comprehensive, empowering, and supportive framework for understanding and promoting health and well-being. It is particularly beneficial for people navigating the complex journey of recovery from chronic conditions or mental health issues.

Implementing a Salutogenic Culture: Challenges and Recommendations

The salutogenic model offers substantial benefits to a community's health and welfare. Despite these advantages, integrating this culture into current social models can encounter several challenges.

Among these challenges is resistance to change. It is common for systems, organizations, and individuals to resist shifts in practice, primarily when the new approaches represent a significant departure from traditional methods. This resistance can be due to various factors, such as comfort with the perceived status quo, fear of the unknown, fear of risk-taking, or even lack of resources for implementation.

Another hurdle is a need for more awareness. Many decision-makers may need to be made aware of the salutogenic model and its benefits, making them less likely to adopt these strategies. This lack of knowledge can stem from gaps in understanding neurobiology and recent research within the mental health field.

Moreover, parents, teachers, and organizational and community leaders need more training. Even with awareness of the salutogenic model, proper training is crucial for effective implementation. With adequate training, caregivers and service providers may feel confident and equipped to apply a salutogenic approach, resulting in consistent and effective use.

To overcome these considerable challenges, the following strategies are suggested:

- Establish processes, procedures, and presumptions for dealing with risky and challenging situations.

- Provide each person opportunities to actualize themselves so that any group or collective can have fortitude and favorable outcomes in achieving their goals.
- Give recognition and show appreciation for people's strengths, competencies, creative ideas, personal contributions, and growth.
- Create a culture that views wellness, personal growth, and productivity as a continuum where everyone can improve and increase incrementally.
- Build relationships based on safety, trust, and transparency, the primary means for facing fear, reducing stress, and optimizing resiliency.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Imagine people collaborating, expressing care and kindness toward each other daily. They safeguard each other's feelings, showing sensitivity and compassion when things go awry. Parents, teachers, and organizational and community leaders actively seek ways to create and reinforce strong relationships within the family, classroom, and community. It is a culture where warmth, compassion, care, and consideration for others are the norm.

People emotionally connect to their obligations and life's expectations in a salutogenic environment, finding their groups and collectives positive and satisfying. The understanding of culture becomes broader. Focusing solely on the cognitive aspect of culture limits attention to outcomes, results, efficiencies, and bottom-line initiatives. However, emphasizing the emotional aspect raises awareness of human values such as joy, pride, and positive regard for others.

Salutogenic parents, teachers, and other leaders pay close attention to the influence and impact of their emotions. A parent's mood sets the cultural tone for the family; just as the teacher's sets the tone for the classroom; and the judge's for the courtroom. These influencers are continually evaluating how policies and practices foster compassion, warmth, care, and sensitivity among everyone.

Day after day, month after month, everyone is building on small moments, like warm smiles, kind notes, and empathetic listening.

It is time to adopt a more holistic, empowering, and effective social culture. We must urge the board of directors, C-suite, directors and supervisors, grant funders, governmental systems and agencies, academia, and parents to acknowledge the transformative potential of salutogenic models. Let us strive together to incorporate these life-affirming methods into societal practices. Let us focus on enhancing the lives of people who make the community alive and vibrant. Join this vital movement, and let us create communities where people value themselves and others and find meaning in their efforts.

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