



## Stressful Environment Impacts Restaurant Workers' Mental Health

**MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FOR RESTAURANT WORKERS ARE COMMON.**

The restaurant business is high stress, long hours, demanding customers, and often lower pay. Work can involve intense, physical labor, irregular schedules, and a fast-paced environment.

“All of these can contribute to stress and mental health issues,” said local restaurant owner Marco Sciortino. “The nature of customer service can sometimes lead to difficult interactions, which may impact employees emotionally,” he said.



The Anti-Stigma Coalition will present a Facebook Live on March 4 at 4pm to discuss the unique challenges of the restaurant industry and how workers and owners can remain mentally healthy. Panelists include Evetta Applewhite, chef, The Oakk Room; Alyssa Summers, Director of Sales & Operations, Osteria 166; and Marco Sciortino, owner, Marco's Italian Restaurant and Marco's Italian Deli.

The National Restaurant Association reports that 15.5 million people work in the food service industry nationwide and projects 500,000 new positions will soon be added in this sector. Locally, almost 46,000 people work in the restaurant/service industry according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

With many individuals working in the industry, stigma is also common.

According to Sciortino, workers may be hesitant to share their struggles due to fear of stigma or concerns about job security.

“Some workers may not have support from management,” he said. “The competitive nature of this industry may discourage employees from prioritizing their mental health or seeking help with needed.”

Recently, Cozymeal surveyed 140 chefs, to learn about stress and how the restaurant culture impacts their mental health.

**44%**

said that working at a restaurant had a negative impact on their mental health

**38%**

of participants said they had experienced depression

**49%**

suffered from sleep disorders

**70%**

said that they'd had anxiety because of working in a restaurant.

*continued on page 3*

Additionally, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found restaurant employees to be the most at risk for substance use disorders including binge drinking and illicit drug use.

“It’s important for us as owners to create a supportive and understanding, work environment so employees feel safe to discuss their struggles,” Sciortino said.

## HELP IS AVAILABLE:

### **SAMHSA’S NATIONAL HELPLINE:**

free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

### **ERIE COUNTY CRISIS HOTLINE:**

716-834-3131

### **SUICIDE AND CRISIS HOTLINE:**

988 – The National Suicide Prevention Hotline fields calls 24/7 for anyone with suicidal thoughts or who are in crisis. It offers help for Spanish-speakers and anyone who is deaf or hard of hearing.

### **CRISIS TEXT LINE:**

Text Hello to 741741

Learn more about resources for restaurant workers at [chefswithissues.com](https://chefswithissues.com).

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“Restaurant work is a high stress, demanding industry. It is NOT for the faint of heart. However, there is no question that additional pressures arise when dealing directly with society (guests and other staff). Everyone is at a different place personally when these interactions occur. We hope that people can learn and practice patience prior to them having challenges...but sometimes it doesn’t work out that way.

The reality is that times are tougher than they have ever been. People are generally scared of their security and being able to maintain their lifestyle. Thus creating more opportunity for mental health issues.”

**Nicholas Pitillo**

**OWNER, OSTERIA 166 AND VILLAGGIO**



## We recently spoke to West Side Community Services (WSCS) about their mission and how they promote mental wellness.

### Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

West Side Community Services (WSCS) recognizes the profound impact of mental health stigma on our community members and the importance of dismantling these barriers to well-being. Joining The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition aligns with our core values of inclusion, empathy, and impact. By being a coalition member, WSCS actively participates in a collective effort to challenge and change societal attitudes towards mental health. We aim to contribute to a stigma-free environment, ensuring that individuals facing mental health challenges feel supported, understood, and encouraged to seek the help they need. As a member, WSCS is committed to being a driving force in fostering a more compassionate and accepting community for all.

### How are individuals with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Individuals with mental health challenges often face social isolation, employment discrimination, limited educational opportunities, delayed or inadequate treatment, negative self-perception, barriers to relationships, and negative impacts on physical health. Stigma can create significant obstacles to seeking help and living a fulfilling life.

### What is your organization doing to address stigma and enhance mental wellness for the people you serve as well as families and volunteers?

At WSCS, our commitment to fostering stability, security, and well-being extends to addressing the mental health challenges faced by individuals and families within our vibrant community. Our inclusive programs for youth in grades K-12 and older adults age 55+ focus on fostering a safe and supportive environment for all participants.

Our youth programs employ strategic partnerships with other local organizations to expose kids and teens to a wide variety

of sports and fitness modalities, arts and culture media, and other less commonly accessible activities such as Dungeons & Dragons and virtual reality development. With this wide range of offerings, we are helping youth discover new interests that can support their mental wellness now and into their adulthood. In addition to these fun activities, we also prepare youth for life after high school by practicing “adulting” skills such as resume building, job interviewing, budgeting, and saving, cooking, and understanding and navigating health insurance. By practicing these skills with hands-on adult support now, teens will be able to tackle post-graduation challenges confidently.

Our prevention program works with kids and teens in our youth programs, as well as in local schools. Staff incorporate drug and alcohol resistance training with prosocial behavior development to encourage youth to make positive choices.

In both our youth and prevention programs, we work to increase resiliency through cooperative play with peers and relationships with supportive adults.

Our older adult program emphasizes socialization and interaction to combat the loneliness epidemic that especially affects seniors. Program leadership also utilizes partnerships to bring in additional activities such as lectures, hands-on arts projects, yoga, tai chi, dance, and more. Program staff work diligently to connect with each participant to understand their physical and emotional needs and work to address them.

In instances where we may be unable to address specific individual needs, we connect individuals with the appropriate services and partners that can offer the necessary support.

Finally, we participate in Child and Family Services' Employee Assistance Program, which provides our staff with access to free mental health resources including counseling, referrals, and trainings.

# Overcoming Stigma for Serenity

By Nicole Shields, Youth Peer Advocate Program Manager, Mental Health Advocates

Growing up I felt like something was off. I never felt right or like I fit in. I was quiet & easily blended in. When I began drinking alcohol & using substances as an early teen, it made me feel like I could talk to anyone. It made me feel good because it numbed the negative feelings within. I could be anyone or anything I wanted to without a care.

At 25 while in an inpatient facility, I was diagnosed with Bipolar, Depression, and Anxiety. My recovery journey also began that year. A few years ago, after being able to be open and honest with my journey, C-PTSD (Complex post-traumatic stress disorder) would be added to the list. I did a dance with medication from young adulthood until I truly accepted just a couple years ago. I did a dance with medication from young adulthood. I can look back at my journey and see patterns and insanity cycles. I didn't understand, accept, or want to deal with my issues because I never learned how to be kind and loving to myself.

I learned more recently that I also struggle with Imposter Syndrome & perfectionism. On the outside I seemingly have it all together—happy, motivated, peaceful, free. But on the inside, I can struggle with accepting myself as is. I've always strived for something that isn't obtainable and beat myself up for falling short. My natural instinct in those moments is to isolate, self-medicate, self-sabotage and self-harm. I have self-harmed to various degrees. From biting my nails to cutting to trying to end my life. It wasn't until I fully understood and therefore was able to accept my diagnoses that I began to free myself from my own self-induced personal hell.

I have taken the time to learn about myself to understand and better help meet my needs. By taking moments to pause, breath, connect and communicate, I am much better suited to handle my strong emotions. I have no problem seeking and asking for help now because I know I can't do this alone. I believe humans aren't meant to be alone. We are meant to identify with each other and support one another. The opposite of addiction is connection. The support team I have today is truly amazing. They help me fulfil my purpose of helping others while helping myself. I am forever grateful.



“I believe humans aren't meant to be alone. We are meant to identify with each other and support one another.”

**Nicole will serve as a distinguished speaker for Save the Michaels teleconference on Monday, March 25.**

# Restaurant Owner Seeks to Stop Stigma

**Nicholas Pitillo, owner, Osteria 166 and Villaggio shares his efforts to encourage his employees to get help for mental health challenges.**

As a leadership group, we realized that mental health problems were WAY more prevalent than we thought. Pre-pandemic we were experiencing some challenges related to mental health and increased alcohol and drug use. We have experienced everything from family struggles to staff members dying...we then decided that we could not sit idly by any more. We were part of initial meetings at Black Sheep to address this issue and began working with the Family Meal Hospitality Trust. Getting a group of industry leaders together to talk about our challenges, and those of our people.

From there we began sharing information from Crisis Services WNY with EVERY to-go package we sell. This peaked during the stockthefreezer.com days, but continues to this day. We also have wonderful contacts at Horizon Services, which has allowed us to offer additional assistance to our team members in distress. This has proven invaluable, and has helped many of our team members. However, it continues to concern me about how many of our staff has refused this additional assistance.

Additionally, around two years ago we learned about an amazing app through our membership in the New York State Restaurant Association. The App is called Heathiest You...and is a revolutionary app that provides online medical and mental health services through their phone. The program is low cost and the service is fantastic. We introduced it to our staff and have seen some take advantage. However, we continue to have fewer than 20% of our team signed up. We realized that part of the problem was people's fear of being perceived as "weak" for using the app...or seeking mental health assistance. It was then that we realized it was our obligation to help remove that stigma. We now open EVERY weekly management meeting with a discussion on Mental Health and Heathiest You. The app

is completely confidential, however we still saw hesitation...so myself and a couple of our managers (who use the app) started having more dialog about our experiences and the benefits it can provide. It seems to soften the "stigma" when their direct supervisor is open about our own mental health experience.

I am proud to say that Heathiest You has had a VERY positive impact on my personal life and work life, and I am able to speak freely about how the program works. We hope to continue to increase the number of our team that utilize the program, but we need to find easier ways to get them access. Currently they need to notify an owner if they want in...which, I believe causes increased hesitation in some.

We continue to look for new ways to address this ongoing problem.



**"I am proud to say that Heathiest You has had a VERY positive impact on my personal life and work life, and I am able to speak freely about how the program works."**

**NICHOLAS PITILLO**

## SHARE THE CONVERSATION

1

### SHARE EMAIL NEWSLETTERS

Share the monthly newsletter to your team via email or print the PDF.

2

### SHARE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Share posts to your professional and personal networks and help promote Facebook Live events.

@talkstigma

3

### REQUEST MATERIALS TO DISTRIBUTE

Brochures, Conversation Starter Cards, Counter Displays, Pop-up Banners, Add logos and graphics to your website or other collateral.

✉ [karen@LetsTalkStigma.org](mailto:karen@LetsTalkStigma.org)



## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Family-to-Family Class

**Mondays, January 22- March 11 | 6:00-8:30pm**

**NAMI | Zoom**

This 8-week class is offered for free to family and caregivers of a loved one who has mental illness.

### Endeavor Health presets Mental Health First Aid

**Contact: [equinn@ehsny.org](mailto:equinn@ehsny.org) | call (716)560-1452**

Teaches how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges and teaches how to recognize the warning signs of suicide crisis and how to question, persuade, and refer someone to help.

### Mindful Music airing weekly on WBFO

**Saturdays: 4 PM - Sundays: 8 PM**

**Buffalo Toronto Public Media**

Mindful Music explores the intersection of music and mental health by providing a backdrop for conversations with guests who share how they use music to express their inner nature and manage their emotional wellbeing. Hosted by Karl Shallowhorn

### NAMI Programs

NAMI offers facilitated, confidential support groups for adult family members and caregivers concerned about and/or caring for a person with mental illness. Click here for full calendar and registration information.

Visit [namibuffalony.org/programs/calendar](http://namibuffalony.org/programs/calendar).

Visit [letstalkstigma.org/events](http://letstalkstigma.org/events) for more.

ERIE COUNTY  
**ANTI-STIGMA**  
COALITION

### ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION FOUNDING MEMBERS

BryLin Hospital • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.  
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County  
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities  
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County  
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation  
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation