

Ann Brantmeier Interview
Kaltag Wellness Team
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My name is Ann Brantmeier. I am presently the Education/Disabilities/Mental Health Coordinator for Tanana Chiefs Conference Early Head Start/Head Start. I have lived in Alaskan villages along the coast and in the interior for the last 33 years. I have worked as a service provider in various capacities, through the church, for suicide prevention programs, the Kaltag Wellness Team, and Head Start/Early Head Start program. Mostly I am an active member of my village, raising a beautiful daughter, and participating in and supporting a healthy, simple, traditional lifestyle.

Was it hard to establish boundaries keeping work and family/home life separate? How did you do it?

Living in a small village makes determining boundaries pretty difficult. Your home life and work are all happening within a small radius of each other. Leaving one or the other at the door may mean just a few feet especially if one works out of their home office. I think that establishing boundaries is really important. We need to have some separation in order to be present totally to either. For me, establishing boundaries had mostly to do with knowing when I had done what I could and when I no longer had control of what would happen next. Letting go of control is not my strong point but let me give an example. If I am called to be with a person who is depressed and talking about suicide I might go to them, get them to talk about what is going on, explore alternatives, solicit support from family members, make sure the environment is free of potential dangers and make a plan. I have to know that I can't be with that person 24/7. I have to establish a relationship with the person, with the family or their support system that allows the person to make good decision for him/herself and move forward. If I don't leave the responsibility of his/her future in their hands then I set myself up for failure or in many cases blame and guilt if something goes wrong. I can't carry the burden of controlling a person's actions. If we multiply that by even 3 more people it can easily lead to burnout. The Wellness Team saw a pattern over the years that when a new person came into the village as a service provider for the church, city, or tribe, there were some people who were drawn to them immediately. Their relationship with the provider started from square one because they had reached a point with other providers where they didn't want to take responsibility for their own direction in life. The pattern started with constant contact, dependence on the provider, the person going away from a previous helper because he/she was getting lots of attention from the new provider but not moving forward. Soon the new provider was finding him/herself burnout and the responsibility of that person's actions on their shoulders. This was when we set up a protocol of how we dealt with people who came to us. If they had a medical problem we sent them to the clinic, a mental health issue to the mental health counselor. We established an order so people were not circling and going through the same patterns with another provider causing burnout and leaving the person in the same place in their lives.

Do either the village/city or tribal council have any role in your work? What has your relationship with the council(s) been?

The councils have provided support to us in our work by providing resources such as a place to hold meetings and workshops. They helped in locating people who could respond to some of the issues we had where we needed to bring in experts from outside the village. They also support those within the village with expertise or wisdom in traditional ways. We found that using people from among ourselves gave credibility to our work because people knew we were there not just for a day or a week but we were there for the long run. After professionals from outside came in we had to take ownership of it and mold it into something that worked for us. The councils supported that follow-up and creating of programs that fit our people. Having the support of the local councils is also important because we all wear different hats in the village and being a member of the Wellness Team might also mean being a member of one of the councils so our concerns and ideas can be shared directly and discuss at the meetings.

Anything you would like to say to Healthy Healer course participants?

I think the most important thing I want to say to all of you is-do your job to the best of your ability but always remember that you are part of a whole team of service providers within a community and you have to work together for the good of the people. It doesn't matter who is able to reach a person and get them on the road to a healthy future. What is important is that we recognize each other gifts to the community so we have no need for jealousy or pride. We do what we do to make our communities strong and interdependent, working toward a healthy, strong way of life and living. Being in control is never an option. When we try to control people we only make them more dependent on us and if we are helping lots of people it doesn't take long and we are burned out and losing control of our own lives. Encouraging people to be self-determining and watching them blossom into their own beautiful flower is so much more rewarding. In the last 20 years working with littlest people in our communities I have learned a lot about letting go of what is in my mind of how a project should turn out and instead watching the unfolding of unique and beautiful creations of their own. When we teach them to walk we don't want them to always follow us around nor do we teach them to talk so they can mimic our words and never have any of their own. Provide services that are freely given and allow what you give grow in each person in their own unique and wonderful way.