# Just Thriving in a Forensic Workplace

**Ben** [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Ben Swanholm with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. We are recording at the 2023 American Society of Crime Laboratory Director Symposium in Austin, Texas, themed Resilient Leadership. This mini season will tease out what resiliency looks like in the forensic science community with a range of subject matter experts. Today, we'll be discussing a practical guide for employee wellness. Here to guide us in our discussion is Jamilah Dick and Meredith Rosenberg from the New York City office of Chief Medical Examiner. Welcome. Thanks for talking with us today.

**Jamilla** [00:00:39] Thank you.

**Meredith** [00:00:40] Thank you so much.

**Ben** [00:00:41] Can each of you talk a little bit about your professional background and your journey to the New York City office of Chief Medical Examiner?

**Meredith** [00:00:49] Sure. So I have a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in biology. And when I was performing my master's degree research there was a member of our laboratory who was getting his Ph.D. and he was finishing it up. And he would torture me each week by asking me, what do I want to do with the rest of my life? And I said, I, I don't really know. But I do think that I'm interested in this new DNA stuff that's being used in forensics. He actually worked for the agency in the DNA lab, unbeknownst to me, and so he actually wrote a phone number and a name. That's pretty much what led me to the OCME. And that was back in 1998. And so I was actually hired as a consultant for quality control, was promoted. Over the years, I've been there for almost 25 years, and now I'm the one of the deputy directors of the laboratory.

**Jamilla** [00:01:41] So unlike Meredith and most people who are here at this symposium, I don't have a background in forensic science. My undergraduate degree is in environmental science with a minor in chemistry, and I completed my master's degree in marine and atmospheric science. So after grad school, I worked at the New York City Department of Health as an assistant scientist performing environmental investigations. And then I moved on to the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, where I've been for the last sixteen years and I've been a director of health and safety for the past nine years. My interests mainly lie in workplace safety and well-being. So in 2018, I was given the opportunity to help start a wellness committee. And this was perfect because it let me really blend health and safety and wellness in order to ensure that employees at the agency have a healthier mental and physical well-being. I currently chair our agency's wellness committee, which is made up of a group of employees who are also interested in improving our employees experience while at work and while outside.

**Ben** [00:02:42] So you all just presented a little bit ago in front of the whole group. So I'm just going to kind of ask some questions about what you all talked about so we can have more people learn from your experiences in what you guys have all worked hard to build. So the first question I have is can you describe what a resilient workplace is?

**Jamilla** [00:03:00] Sure. First, we should try to define what resilience is, and resilience is basically the ability to adapt, adjust and recover after experiencing some form of adversity, trauma, tragedy, loss or significant stress. At the OCME, and in the city, we believe that five main points when practiced will lead to a resilient workplace. They are one having

leaders who are actively engaged in daily practice of mental resilience. Two, where we have staff have access to resources so that they can address mental health and they're not afraid to use them. Three, our staff and managers have supportive, empathetic relationships. Four, one where conversations about mental well-being are encouraged and supported. And five, one where there are structural inputs in place to support workplace safety, practice and policy. We have been working hard to ensure that we implement these across the agency, and I feel like we've been doing a pretty good job about that so far.

**Ben** [00:03:56] So in your opinion then, what are some of the most important skills or qualities that are necessary to be a resilient forensic scientist? And how do you cultivate those skills and qualities in yourselves?

**Meredith** [00:04:09] So I think in order to maintain resiliency in the field of forensic science, you have to ensure that you're not losing yourself in the work that you're doing every day. And by that, I mean you have to make sure that you've put in place certain boundaries so that you don't become traumatized by the work that you're doing. That can fall to if you're going to crime scenes, you're seeing very jarring scenes in front of you, whether you're performing autopsies. You know, it could be children, it could be, you know, very jarring if you're examining evidence in cases that are particularly heinous. Forensic scientists are often reading police narratives that can be very emotionally trying. And you want to make sure that you are giving yourself to the work that you're doing, but not losing yourself in the work that you're doing. And the way that we're ensuring that we ourselves are remaining resilient is we have to take time for ourself. That's very important. I know Jamila definitely promotes that in our agency. You want to make sure that you're taking time for yourself, that there are certain ways that you're doing that, for example, that you're eating well, that you're sleeping enough, that you're speaking to people who are in your support group, whether that is your family, your friends, your coworkers, your religious leaders, whoever, whoever works for you to talk about what you're seeing and what you're doing at work each day, it's important that you maintain your own resiliency. Otherwise you can't really help those around you.

**Ben** [00:05:42] So it seemed that you could put those like in simple boxes, like stress or stressors. Would that be accurate?

**Meredith** [00:05:48] Yes.

**Ben** [00:05:49] So what are like some of the common stressors or most frequent stressors that you all have seen affecting your team members.

**Meredith** [00:05:57] Besides what they would call secondary traumatic stress of what you're physically seeing at work every day. There's also burnout. Burnout is a big problem right now, especially in the forensic field, where the legal system is relying so heavily on the forensic community to aid in investigations. Law enforcement and the courts they want results faster, they want them better, they want them in greater volume. And so it's difficult to maintain the amount of work that is needed to be produced with the staffing that you have. People need breaks, you need time off. And it's difficult because you're invested in the work that you're doing. So you don't always want to take that work time off necessarily, or the time that it takes to make sure that you're dealing with your burnout. There's always going to be more cases coming in the door. There's going to be more crime scenes that need to be investigated, more evidence to be examined, more autopsies to be performed.

**Ben** [00:06:53] It's kind of interesting, I was, I teach in the leadership academy and I was actually telling a story of a relation for people to connect what I was trying to teach. Right? And then I finished like, well, that's my stress story for the day. That's how I equate a lot of what's happening is that it's stress.

**Meredith** [00:07:09] Yes.

**Ben** [00:07:09] So what are some tools or strategies that you've found people can use to address the mental and physical tolls of that workplace stress?

**Jamilla** [00:07:18] So they have varieties of personal strategies which work and don't cost much. So if people get more active, eat a healthy diet, avoid unhealthy habits like smoking, eating too much, or drinking alcohol, practicing meditation so you focus more, practicing mindful breathing, getting more sleep and sleep should be the quantity and quality as well. Journaling so you can write down some of the issues you're experiencing and by writing them down you get to focus on them and probably help to alleviate a lot of the stress doing that. Also, connecting with others is Meredith says you connect with others in the field. You all experiencing something similar so you can actually commiserate and actually help reduce your stress as well. Being more assertive by actually saying, you know, I can't take on this amount of work right now. I need to just work on something else until that's finished and do that. That helps reduce stress. And lastly, seek counseling when necessary. A counselor is there to listen and they can actually guide you through whatever issues you experiencing. That's personal, but an organization level, I think leaders can help reduce stress by encouraging open communication between the employees and themselves, also providing access to mental health and physical health benefits. So like in city environments, you know, you have good health insurance, discounts to gyms, access to therapists, meditation classes. We don't find that employees participate a lot in onsite meditation, but if you create a unique environment for them to meditate, they will. So we have like meditation busses coming on site. Also, we provide access to virtual resources like recording meditations or platforms like Calm and Headspace, so they can access them on your own time. And also encouraging employees to take breaks throughout the day. You get stressed, you know, you do something else. It definitely reduces your stress level and also, if possible, offering flexible work schedules. If employees feel comfortable where they are working, they tend to be more productive and less stressed and also be an example. Once you lead by example, employees will follow.

**Meredith** [00:09:17] I just also wanted to add, but no matter what programs you put in place in the workplace, you won't get 100% participation. That's just because it doesn't always fit into people's time schedules. But sometimes just knowing that those programs are in place for you can be comforting. And even if they're not taking part in all of the different programs, maybe if it's just some of them, at least there's something available to help people. So I myself don't get to take part in all of them. But, like, I participated in a sleep wellness seminar and I found it, you know, beneficial and not necessarily so much information that I didn't already know. But the fact that you sit in a room and you see that there are other people who are dealing with the same issue. And so you get to learn from others what's working for them and what's not.

**Ben** [00:10:07] So have you found or do you track the percentage of team members that may use different services or not? And which ones have you found to implement? Some organizations may not have all the resources to implement all of those, you know, ideas that you have. So maybe like what's your top ones or ones you've seen to be the most effective for your team members.

**Jamilla** [00:10:27] Ones that allow the employees to be more active and engaged. So, like, they're doing something that's more creative, they're making something or one where it's new, it's different from the usual. So a good example is that we had a plant workshop, so not only able to pot your own plant you were able to take it with you as well. So just trying to find unique things really work. Also how we track it after we do programs, we tend to send out a survey so we know what worked and what doesn't and based on what the employee responses are.

**Ben** [00:10:57] And so you're just finding those events or opportunities through your own research of what's available in your community? Or do you have people trying to approach the city of New York with these programs or a little of both?

**Jamilla** [00:11:11] So for us, we're very blessed in New York City because we have access to a workplace wellness program called Work Well NYC, and they provide a lot of prepackaged programs for us, so they create them and help us actually implement them on site as well. Sometimes we also take ideas from the employees. They may say like, you know, I want a self-defense class, and then we will just try to work with Work Well NYC or our executive leadership to try to find the vendors or the resources to actually implement them as well. So we do try to be creative by developing new things, but most of what we have are actually prepackaged for us from Work Well NYC.

**Ben** [00:11:51] So just on a, I guess, personal note we just had our own concern come through our staff team of like that personal defense class. Did you find a lot of people are interested or a little bit?

**Jamilla** [00:12:03] Meredith was actually the one that reached out and asked if we could have a self-defense class on site. So I started looking at vendors that we could use. Then I reached out to Work Well NYC and they actually were starting something similar.

**Ben** [00:12:14] Okay.

**Jamilla** [00:12:14] So once they developed that, we decided to of course use their resources and we had amazing response from the employees. We sent out a survey, so I wanted to make sure that we could provide it to all employees and we had over 200 people respond to the survey, which is absolutely amazing. And from that we have in general, we started the program about two weeks ago, and we have like 50 to 80 people participating at any one time. So that's just shows the interest is there. And also, once you listen to the employees and respond to what they really want, you can really improve participation as well.

**Meredith** [00:12:51] I would say, though, you don't necessarily have to go through formal programs. Not every agency will have access to them. So just from a lab perspective, things that we've done to help with mental health and resiliency, we have one day a month where we kind of pause from actual day to day work, and that gives people time to catch up on any continuing education requirements that they have, to, to straighten up their desks because sometimes, you know, it just gets a little crazy while you're just trying to get things done throughout the week.

**Ben** [00:13:23] I'm definitely guilty of that one.

**Meredith** [00:13:24] It also gives them time to just kind of recalibrate where they are and what they're doing and then get ready for the rest of the month. Food is always a welcome change of pace. So I find that if we just buy pizza for everyone, that really has an impact on people understanding that they are appreciated, they are valued, and that management does want to do something for them.

**Ben** [00:13:48] So what do you think would be the best piece of advice for members of our forensic community that are looking to start or improve their resiliency and adaptability in their organizations?

**Meredith** [00:13:59] I would say look to any local programs in your area that you could draw upon. Definitely things that could be free. For example, not everybody has the ability to bring in mental health care providers for their staff to talk to, but you may have local hospitals near you where you can draw upon their staff. They might donate their time to come in and talk to your staff. So I think it's important to, yes, make resources available to your staff, but also bring the resources to your staff. That does help. They may think I don't have time to go after work to seek out mental health with a professional, but if you bring one on site that may make them more likely to accept the help.

**Ben** [00:14:48] So one of the questions I thought of when thinking about this topic is generations. Have you guys seen differences in generations and their use of the programs that you guys provide and or the success of different programs.

**Meredith** [00:15:04] So I definitely differences in younger professionals coming into the field and how they're looking at the work that they're doing versus older staff. Older staff are more practice hands at this point and so they've actually, they've already developed tools in ways to deal with things, trauma that they're experiencing from just day to day work life. Younger staff are still trying to figure out their boundaries for dealing with the work. In my experience, I have noticed that younger staff are taking part more in a lot of the programs that's being offered from the wellness program at The OCME. When we have laboratory events occurring, it's always the newer staff, the younger staff who want to help plan, help carry out because they're excited about it and they're excited to do something that's sort of team building. It fosters great energy for the lab and so they're definitely more interested in it.

**Jamilla** [00:15:59] I also think that the older staff just know that it's work. They don't try to think about, Oh, I need I need to have some support to actually get the job done. So they, they're very hesitant to participate some time because they may think it's just something that we're doing for fun as opposed to something that's really improving their resilience. Also, older staff tend to be a little bit more limited technology wise, so we have to really diversify how we delivering the programs. Sometimes we have to do virtual things to make sure we can include as many people as possible. But then when we do that, you know that many older staff might not be participating. So what we do to actually help that is maybe have a supervisor encourage them to participate by pulling up the program on the computer in their office and having the staff come in and participate, also asking them what they want. If you ask them, you know, would you prefer to have this virtual program or do you want to have this onsite meditation? Yes, but and you'll need to participate. So just doing things to really encourage them as well is very helpful.

**Ben** [00:16:58] So continuing our conversation on generations and the younger team members finding their way. Do you have any assistance within the individuals that have been there, done that or programs that you've put in place to mentor or anything like that?

**Meredith** [00:17:15] So for the Department of Forensic Biology, because we are so large and it is a long training program and it's a pretty intense training program as required by DNA guidelines, we have a very robust mentoring program that we have been modifying over the years to make it more robust when new staff enter the agency for the DNA laboratory, we pair them up with a mentor. Mentor can be an analyst who's been there for many years. It could be an analyst who's been there for one year but knows the ropes, knows what's going on, can help guide the person through personnel issues, human resource issues. Additionally, the mentors help our younger staff gain a wider perspective of how the laboratory works and case working in general beyond what even they would be picking up in just the formal training program that we have. The formal training program is just going to focus on what's the technical knowledge that you need to get through your day to day work to ensure that we can allow you to work in casework. However, your mentor is going to give you a bigger picture as you're going through your training so that you can get a better perspective of what it is that you're doing and what's the end goal. So that hopefully what we have are people who are invested in the work, are knowledgeable in the work, and are comfortable with the work.

**Ben** [00:18:39] Do you have any last minute thoughts for our listeners before we close out this episode?

**Meredith** [00:18:44] I think it's just important to understand that there are stresses in any workplace and certainly in the field of forensics those stresses are only now really starting to be sussed out with data. I know that there's a lot of data out there for the traumatic impact on first responders, not so much with forensic scientists. And so that's only now being sussed out. Just workplaces need to keep that in mind. Management needs to keep that in mind and to make resources available for staff. Ensure that the staff knows that management is aware that these things are out there and that they should be aware so that you can recognize if somebody needs help. You can't obviously diagnose anybody, but you can certainly notice if somebody's patterns have changed. If they were extroverted before. Now they're becoming introverted. Patterns like that can sort of trigger that they might need a little help and to be able to offer them some sort of help with whatever local resources you have.

**Jamilla** [00:19:43] I also want to say that, you know, we need to learn or practice measuring the effectiveness of the program as well. So for us, it's very difficult as a small agency to do and perform traditional return on investment analyzes. So what we do is use surveys. So performing surveys after the program has been delivered is a great way to collect data. It should always include questions that gauge satisfaction of the program and also capture recommendations, which you will use after you refine the programs that you're delivering. It's also important to know that no matter how important the programs are, it's very difficult to get all employees to participate unless it's mandated. So to understand how effective the efforts are tracking program participation, as well as metrics like how many people participated, how many people registered, and then how many people actually participated are also important. For us, we will be working with the New York Academy of Medicine under a program that was coordinated by Work Well NYC to actually measure the effectiveness of our resiliency project that was called Stigma Free Workplace Initiative. So we're working with them to actually measure that as well. So try to find resources if you don't have them yourself.

**Ben** [00:20:53] Jamilla and Meredith, I've really enjoyed our conversation today. Thank you for your time and willingness to discuss your programs.

**Meredith** [00:21:00] Thank you for having us.

**Jamilla** [00:21:01] Thank you so much.

**Ben** [00:21:02] If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensics field, visit forensicCOE.org. I'm Ben Swanholm, and this has been another episode of Just Science.