

"Unveiling Ruth Simera: A Journey Through an Executive Director's Unique Perspective of Wellness"

The Ohio Program of Campus Safety and Mental Health is pleased to introduce Ruth H. Simera, M.Ed., LSW, Executive Director of the Coordinating Centers of Excellence at Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED). In this interview, she discusses how wellness is crucial to daily life and shares techniques for incorporating wellness into your daily routine. Collegiate Mental Health Assistants Mattison Toth, an undergraduate public health student, and Ren Hackley, a graduate-level social work student, interviewed Simera. Simera has a wealth of experience and knowledge in mental health and community intervention. She uses her expertise to offer valuable insights and practical advice on managing wellness, coping with stress, and effectively managing time.

Wellness is vital for maintaining mental clarity and focus and for leading a fulfilling life while supporting the overall functioning of your body's systems. Throughout our discussion with Simera, we learned new insights that will benefit readers regarding having good mental health management. One important topic we explored was the difference between wellness and self-care, which is often misunderstood. Wellness is centered on achieving goals, while self-care promotes resilience and well-being. For example, wellness is a sense of well-being, like feeling healthy or content. At the same time, self-care comprises the activities you engage in to achieve wellness, like eating nutritiously, exercising, or engaging with loved ones.

Both are important, especially in managing stress effectively, as this management is key to leading a happier and healthier life. Simera emphasized several strategies recommended by medical professionals to enhance wellness. These strategies include keeping the brain active, ensuring proper sleep, and creating a priority system to help you stay organized and productive throughout the week. By keeping the brain active and engaged, you can increase your mental

acuity and help fight or slow the threat of brain diseases like dementia and Alzheimer's disease. While keeping your mind active might initially sound intimidating, some strategies Simera shared are simple: doing a puzzle, incorporating physical movement, and reading. She cites explicitly utilizing brain health strategies from Dr. Sanjay Gupta and Dr. Rangan Chatterjee.

Ensuring proper sleep is something many college students struggle with, but Simera states in her interview the importance of sleep, rest, and recovery in her response. She states that, consistently, many scientists and neuroscientists have found that spending the time you need for sleep and rest significantly improves overall physical and mental wellness. Simera stated that she makes it a goal to carve out at least 7 hours of sleep every night, as adequate sleep is a high priority. This tip is one we have tried to incorporate ourselves into, and it can be highly challenging, especially with the number of screens we look at for hours daily. As college students increasingly struggle with maintaining a sleep-wake balance since the invention of smartphones, educating others on the importance of sleep is vital to improving the mental health of our campus communities.

Creating a priority system to help keep yourself organized can also be helpful, especially as more opportunities for training, learning, and other forms of enrichment enter our lives. It is essential that when balancing all our many obligations, understanding what must be done and what is a top priority is crucial to maintaining success and focus. For example, Simera spoke about an informational meeting she wanted to attend but needed to prioritize an emergency meeting at work. In other words, she needed to prioritize her team and work over extracurricular learning. This is a clear example of setting priorities and boundaries for your time, which everyone should do, as our time is the most valuable currency we can give!

By implementing these strategies, we can enhance our well-being and work toward our personal goals. When discussing barriers students, staff, faculty, and the campus community encounter when accessing wellness resources, Simera shared that a significant barrier is a lack of

culturally competent care. This is particularly true for international students, who may already be hesitant to seek mental health support on college campuses, especially if this mental health care does not necessarily align with values from their culture of origin.

During our interview discussion with Simera, she stated, and we found it noteworthy, that wellness, while often perceived by Generation Z and younger as an exhaustively discussed topic, was not as well supported in the 1990s. Simera discussed working with campuses in the 1990s, but that at this time there was far less structured or comprehensive mental health and wellness assistance for students. This makes mental health initiatives on campuses much younger than we previously thought. In the 1990s, there was the development and rise in Selective Serotonin-Reuptake Inhibitor medication use, causing a revolution in accessibility in the mental health landscape with much safer pharmaceuticals than previously existed. This led more Americans to take medications to improve their mental health symptoms. Yet, college students, one of the highest-risk populations for mental disorders, did not have dedicated mental health initiatives provided directly by their campuses until about 20 years after this rise, the Ohio Program for Campus Safety and Mental Health itself only began in 2011. This shift displays how long a cultural change can take and how hard activist initiatives must push for this support. We must take the mental health of college students seriously, as college students have some of the highest rates of depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicidal ideation. It is important to consider how, through our experiences as students, we can further develop and improve mental health programs on our campuses to improve their support for future generations and ensure that no college student goes without the mental health care they need.

Hearing more from Director Simera about the strategies she utilizes to prioritize self-care, especially with her experience in the mental health field and her personal experience in higher education in the 1980s, was an enriching and helpful experience as busy students in the helping field. We hope other students learn more about self-care and wellness activities they can incorporate into their self-care. We know self-care and wellness are key to protecting our mental

and physical health, especially for college students, who often juggle multiple high-commitment activities. Gaining these skills and knowledge from someone with career experience was enlightening, and we hope other post-secondary students gain a similarly helpful perspective from this article!

Other Recommended Resources, provided by Ruth Simera, M.Ed., LSW

- Mindfulness and Meditation:
 - There are various apps available to support people at all levels of experience and with all levels of available time. The one I have chosen for myself is Insight Timer. It offers guided sessions for as short as a few minutes and more extended opportunities, and people can choose whether to set goals or not. I like the flexibility and options.
 - Mindfulness and Health Institute: they offer a variety of resources, some of which are free to community members, e.g., free live-online Community Mindfulness Sessions each week.
- Science-based wellness information: I referenced two physicians who have done extensive research. They both have books available, but they also appear on many podcasts, which can be easily accessed for free.
 - Dr. Sanjay Gupta: 5 Pillars of Brain Health
 - Dr. Rangan Chatterjee: 4 Pillar Plan for Everyday Health
- Sleep:
 - The American Academy of Sleep Medicine/Foundation has a Sleep Education

website (<https://sleepeducation.org>) with resources and educational information, including a bedtime calculator, sleep diary, and more.

- National Sleep Foundation (www.thensf.org)

- Miscellaneous:
 - Inside Higher Ed (www.insidehighered.com) offers a free Student Success Newsletter - sign up on the website.

 - The College Mental Health Coalition, a newer resource. They have a college student mental health toolkit (www.thementalhealthcoalition.org/college-mental-health-toolkit/) that looks good. There are facts, daily tips, take-action items, and resources.

