

NHEW 2024: Rutgers School of Public Health Students Reflect on Mental Wellness in Public Health Education and Practice

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October 21 through October 25 is the Society for Public Health Education's (SOPHE's) National Health Education Week (NHEW). Since 1995, SOPHE has led this annual observance to increase awareness of timely public health issues and promote a better understanding of the role of health education and promotion. Rutgers School of Public Health is contributing to this vital endeavor by sharing the experiences and expertise of our community members.

For NHEW's theme, "Nurturing Mental Wellness for a Healthier Tomorrow," Rutgers School of Public Health sat down with two students: Abanoub Armanious, a Master of Science (MS) in Epidemiology student concentrating in Pharmacoepidemiology, and FNU Neha, a Master of Public Health (MPH) student concentrating in Population Mental Health. Both offer unique perspectives on how mental health impacts future public health leaders' education and overall well-being.

Abanoub was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder two weeks before graduating with a joint B.Sc. in Public Health. Growing up in a conservative environment where mental health was not acknowledged, he struggled for years before seeking help through university mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This personal experience shaped his understanding of barriers to mental health care access and fueled his passion for ensuring equitable care in public health.

Neha's interest developed during her undergrad studies in India, where she pursued an Ayurveda degree. While treating patients during a one-year internship, she observed that almost everyone dealing with physical illness also struggled mentally. Despite asking patients directly about their mental health, many hesitated or avoided the discussion, prompting her curiosity about mental health stigma and leading her to pursue her MPH in population mental health.

Abanoub currently works as a student assistant researcher under Assistant Professor Morgan James in the Department of Psychiatry at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. The James Lab investigates the neural basis of psychiatric illnesses, including cocaine use disorder and binge eating disorder. For the past three and a half years, Abanoub has focused on eating disorders using behavioral assays to assess reward-seeking in rats. He notes that "poor mental wellness is associated with an increase in the likelihood of risky behaviors, lower immune response, and the worsening of chronic disease outcomes."

Regarding mental wellness's impact on health outcomes, Abanoub emphasizes that "animal models provide valuable insights into behavior, they cannot communicate their emotional or psychological states," underscoring how mental wellness influences overall health. He advocates for integrating mental wellness into

public health education to create holistic care models addressing both psychological and physical health.

Neha believes mental wellness is crucial for overall quality of life. She observes that individuals with mental health challenges often struggle with managing other areas, such as adhering to treatment plans or handling daily tasks, which can decline their physical health. She envisions mental wellness becoming "an integral part of every health intervention and policy decision" as stigma diminishes.

To maintain his mental wellness while balancing multiple responsibilities, Abanoub employs several strategies. He describes his mind as "sometimes feels like an overloaded internet browser - multiple tabs open, some frozen." To manage this, he writes down tasks and deadlines in his phone's notes app, then organizes them using Google Calendar time blocks. For de-stressing, he listens to music or rewatches favorite shows.

Neha prioritizes daily task planning to stay calm and prevent feeling overwhelmed. She de-stresses through dancing, which serves as both physical activity and mindfulness practice, and through mindful cooking as meditation. She also takes short daily breaks, stays connected with family and friends through calls or chats, and practices reflection focusing on positive aspects of her life.

Regarding how public health professionals can model mental wellness best practices, Abanoub advocates for challenging stigma through active listening and recognizing unique individual challenges. He emphasizes that "we do not know what we do not know" and warns against making assumptions based on generalized experiences. He stresses that professionals must advocate for their own mental wellness, noting that "they cannot help others effectively until they are in a good place."

Neha encourages professionals to openly share their own mental health struggles and coping strategies as examples. She believes it is crucial to help others recognize that "talking about mental health and seeking help when needed is not only okay but necessary." She emphasizes that practicing self-care enables better care for others.

For students and professionals struggling to prioritize mental wellness, Abanoub recommends that individuals foster understanding while advocating for themselves, even when uncomfortable. He advocates for creating "an environment where mental wellness is openly discussed and supported."

Neha's advice is to start small and progress gradually: "Do not stress over not having it all figured out - that can only add to the problem." She recommends beginning with simple practices like taking short breaks, dedicating time to hobbies, or connecting with nature, family, and friends. She views mental wellness as fundamental rather than a luxury, comparing it to brushing teeth.