Emily Ladau:

Hello, everyone and welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. I am genuinely so looking forward to getting into today's topic because it's one that I strongly believe we need to focus on, but also, we all too often neglect it, and that's mental health. As always, we are going to connect this to philanthropy, but I think this discussion is really going to be essential listening for everyone because we are all worthy of caring for our minds, even when society is sending us a message that says otherwise. Joining us today is a mental health activist who I have long admired, and I can't wait to talk to you, Dior, Vargas. To kick things off, Dior, I'd really love for you to share a little bit more about yourself and some of the incredible work that you do with our audience.

Dior Vargas:

Well, thanks so much, Emily. I've been so excited for this conversation, so I'm very happy to be here. It's funny, because like share a bit more about yourself, and I think sometimes I want to go straight to not the accomplishments, but more of what I do specifically and less about who I am as an individual. I'm going to try to go more on that than the usual. I'm a New York City girl, born and raised in New York City, and I have an older sister. We're only 14 months apart and we're very close. I am a mental health activist. I am also working in public health. Mental health has always been so important to me as someone who is a suicide attempt survivor, and as someone who has lived with mental health conditions as long as I can remember. In terms of what I do, I have been doing my mental health advocacy since 2013.

Basically, in a short way to describe it, I do keynotes, workshops and panels where I travel or do it virtually, where I meet with different types of groups. It can be college students, it could be employees in various businesses or organizations. Basically, I create a space where people can hear my story, feel a sense of authenticity, feel that they can be vulnerable with what they've experienced in their life, and also to empower people to advocate for themselves and to give them the resources to take better care of themselves and a society and a world that it can be very hard to do so. Try to have that space where people can be open and honest about their experiences and learn from others how they get through it and how to deal.

Emily Ladau:

I think as someone who is very passionate about the power of storytelling, you just exemplify so beautifully in all of your work what it means to connect through sharing stories and how that can really empower people. I want to talk about Mental Health Awareness Month for a moment, not because I think we need to reduce this conversation to an awareness month, but because I think that you might have some valuable insight to share with us around this year's theme, which is more than enough. That's what the theme is. I'd really love to know what does this mean to you and does this resonate with you in a world where people, especially people who hold multiple marginalized identities, are so frequently told the exact opposite of this, exactly the opposite of that they are more than enough.

Dior Vargas:

Yes, that's definitely the case. I think that so much of society and capitalism is focused on your outputs, your productivity, and how that determines one's worth. I think it could cause a lot of pressure on individuals to feel that they have to produce something to prove their worthiness. I even have been doing that a lot in most of my life as a result of society, but also in terms of my own family experiences. I think that it's really important for us to acknowledge that this is something that has impacted our self-esteem, our mental health and how we need to be more supportive of people as who they are, how they come across, just allowing people to be their full selves.

Thinking about that in terms of my work with being their full authentic selves in the workplace, of course, there are some people who have the privilege to do so more than others. I think, yeah, it's important to acknowledge that you who you are is worthy and that you are deserving of support and good mental health. It reminds me of a conversation that I had when I was working on the book version of my photo project that one of the questions I had asked each of the individuals who participated was, what do you love about yourself? I knew that was a question that I wanted to ask because I think in and of itself, it feels a little uncomfortable.

While I don't want to make people feel uncomfortable, I think the end goal was to have them really think about what am I proud of when it comes to who I am or what I cherish about myself when constantly we're told that we are not worthy or there's nothing to love about ourselves. It was an interesting experience. While I interviewed people individually in a room away from everyone else, a lot of the responses came around the same thought, which was what I love about myself is that I'm still here. The fact that you're still here, despite everything that has come across in your life, what you've had to contend with, all of those things, and the fact that they have survived that, I think is a really beautiful example of how we are more than enough.

Emily Ladau:

There is so much power in what you're saying and something that I'm thinking a lot about as we're getting into this conversation more is this is a very vulnerable topic for so many people. This podcast is geared towards a philanthropic audience and towards people who are in workplaces where they are expected to show up and maybe don't often feel room to do so as their whole selves. I'm glad that we're able to lean into this conversation, but I find that what happens so often is the conversation gets reduced to these very surface-level ideas of self-care, and it makes it more challenging for people to show up and be vulnerable and be authentic. I'm hoping we can talk about something that I noticed and I really had to sit with how to articulate this, and I hope that my overarching message comes across.

Essentially, I've noticed that mental illness and mental wellness are often treated as mutually exclusive. That's to say there's so much discussion around self-care, but it seems like that not extend to the disability community to people who identify as having mental health disabilities or mental illness. Disabled people who experience mental illness are often left out of the conversation, people who identify as disabled because they have mental illness or left out of that conversation about how we can care for ourselves. If this makes any sense at all, what I'm saying, have you noticed this and how do you think we ensure that there's a place for everyone in broader self-care conversations and practices?

Dior Vargas:

Absolutely. I think that when we talk about self-care, we think of it in a very surface level and we don't think about the nuances of what self-care looks like or community care looks like. A lot of times I'll suggest things like going out for a walk in the park or doing some sort of relaxing physical activity, and that isn't the case for everyone. Even for those who may not have apparent disability. Let's say you're in a space where you can get easily upset with a lot of various noises or certain things can cause you anxiety. It doesn't really factor in the differences in people's experiences when they talk about self-care. It's funny, because we all have mental health, we may not all have mental illness or mental health conditions.

There are a lot of things that one can argue with mental illness or mental health conditions in terms of it's a natural reaction to the world that we live in or it's a condition that we have and that's for a longer conversation. I think that there needs to be a more acknowledgement of how there isn't one experience to a condition or an illness where you come from who you are has an impact on that. Some things are not accessible for some, while it may be for others. Making sure that you're thinking of all types of experiences and all types of identities when you are thinking about self-care, community care, or addressing your mental health.

Emily Ladau:

I know that we very much want to go beyond surface level, but I also want to ask if I may, what it is that you like to do for self-care in this increasingly overwhelming world? Maybe that does look like something at the surface level for you, but it could look like anything. I think people need to recognize that self-care looks different for everyone.

Dior Vargas:

It could be therapy, it could be more of a holistic practice. It could be something that's related to your culture. It comes across in many different ways. I think that one of the things that I do for self-care, which I would say it does feel a little surface level, but I guess people might have other thoughts. There is this app that I use, I'm not getting paid for sharing this, but there's an app called the Finch app. I know it works on the iPhone, I'm not sure about Android, but it's similar to a Tamagotchi that used to be very popular in the 90s and maybe early 2000s.

Basically, it's surrounded around your mental health, and so you can decide on different journeys that you can take. I can't think of the particular ones, but one thing that I do is I have a tracker for the amount of water I'm drinking. I don't reach every single cup that I aim for, but it's something that makes me more aware of certain practices or certain habits that I have. There's also an aspect where I can list at the end of the day, what was great about the day or reflect on the good things that happened that day. It's something where I feel the sense of responsibility to the little bird that I take care of and the bird grows as a result of me putting in that information.

It gives me quizzes about my, what is it? It gives me quizzes about my mental health. That's also another interesting aspect of the app. It's something that I try to do every single day. I think it's been nice because it's been a very easy way for me to express gratitude at the end of every day. Because when I look at the app and it says, reflect on what happened, well, today, I automatically think of the negative and I'm like, "No, it's asking for the positive." That's when I start pushing away the negative side of the day and I'm forced to think about what went well. If it's something as simple as I took my medication today, that went well, or I was able to get through a rough meeting or anything like that, I think it gives you that opportunity to express gratitude and end the day on a good note.

Emily Ladau:

I honestly love that, and think very fondly of my Tamagotchi days. There's something to be said for the gamification of taking care of ourselves because it can be motivating. I think that sounds like a really, really great resource, and I'm glad that you shared it. I know that we have been focusing on more of the individual conversation. If we can go a bit bigger here or much bigger, I know that I am stating the obvious by saying that we have a really deeply flawed mental health care system in the United States. While there are things that we can do for our own self-care, there are supports and services that we also need access to that are sorely lacking. Big question to be sure, but what does accessible and equitable mental health care actually look like from your perspective?

Dior Vargas:

Well, it would definitely not involve submitting claims, paying copays, having to check in with your insurance. If someone is in network out of network, is that covered? PPOs, HMOs, they would not involve any of that. I think that it would be something much more simpler for people to navigate, something that is more accessible for people. Being met where they are. Where it would be more community-based. Where it wouldn't be in these sterile environments. Where it would be less of that medical model and more of that social model and acknowledging the intersectionalities of individuals and how these specific identities do oppress others more than, or sorry, how there are certain identities oppress some over others.

I think that making sure that care is not punitive, that care isn't involving police or any sort of law enforcement, that it's something where people feel supported and acknowledged and seen and where there isn't this idea that there's anything wrong with seeking therapy or taking medication or doing neither. I want people to feel more empowered and less constricted by what has been the infrastructure for such a long time. It's just extremely overwhelming. Making sure that this is trauma informed that you aren't putting in so many obstacles to access care. That's something that I would love to see. Different languages, sign language, just so many things to make so that no one would feel that whatever care they need is not possible or if they have to save for anything. If it was just free and safe and accessible, that would be amazing.

Emily Ladau:

Philanthropy, for better or worse, has a key role to play in this in making healthcare more equitable and accessible and in providing that funding to dismantle these inequities and access to mental health care. What would you say philanthropic organization should be paying attention to right now in terms of where to direct their funds and their overall support for mental health and mental health care?

Dior Vargas:

I think providing support in terms of peers. I think that very often, there is this emphasis on mental health professionals who have certain credentials. While those people do provide a lot of support, I think having that community-based peer support is extremely important. It's people who have that lived experience to be able to provide that support. I think it also creates more job opportunities for those who maybe in the regular corporate or nonprofit space may not have an easy way in. I think that peer support can be very beneficial to invest in where people can get support from people who understand the experience or at least have a better idea than others.

Just making sure that there's more trauma-informed care involved, and making sure that it's more diverse. A lot of times, people don't see or can't find people who look like them. Just working with government or working with whoever to create a new infrastructure where people can get that support. There's so many things that I would love to change, and even in terms of pharmaceuticals and things like that, even though I'm someone who does take medication and it does help. I think that's the dichotomy or that's the struggle with being someone who takes medication but also sees the issues behind that. That's very complicated, and I feel like I digress very often when I'm having these sorts of conversations. I think to answer the question very succinctly, peer support.

Emily Ladau:

I think that it's okay to acknowledge that this can be a complex and messy conversation and that there's not necessarily going to be one right answer for everyone. When you're raising the importance of peer support, that to my mind is so crucial in terms of what philanthropy can fund. Because it comes down to that conversation that activists are always having about how all of our work needs to center around nothing about us without us, and we need to have people with lived experience at the table and supporting each other because who knows it better than people who have experienced it firsthand.

I think that brings me to my last big question, which is that we always try to recognize on this podcast that disability is obviously not a niche issue, and every issue including mental health is a disability issue because it impacts disabled people. I like to ask the people who join me in conversation for their call to action toward equity and inclusion. What do you think needs to happen across the philanthropic sector to ensure that we're moving in the right direction towards being more inclusive? What is the call to action that you would want to leave our listeners with?

Dior Vargas:

I would say making sure that people who are representative of the community that you're trying to serve are at the table, on the Zoom, more Teams call. Making sure that you create spaces where they can be involved, where they can participate, and that not only do they participate, but that they see that their input is actually placed within the work that you're trying to achieve. That they can see an obvious point where a program or whatever looked like this and that after you provided input that because of that input, now it's an entirely different thing, or even a simple change makes a huge difference. A lot of times people can say, "Oh, we had this representation." It feels like a quota, but being more authentic in involving others who have a better understanding than you might have if it's something that's related to their disability or the intersection of race and their disability. Just making sure that people are paid for their time.

This should not be volunteer work. You have to acknowledge the physical, emotional, mental labor that's involved, and then also giving them that opportunity to see the results of their time spent. I think that's really important. I think what Rebecca Cokley has done at the Ford Foundation is a really good example, and I absolutely adore Rebecca. I think that if more, what is it? If philanthropy were to do that more often, that that would be very beneficial for a lot of people. In terms of a call to action for listeners, I would say that it's funny, I think I'm going to go back to the initial question of more than enough, that you are more than enough, that advocating for yourself is extremely important. It can look a variety of different ways, but as long as you feel that you have the agency and that you are empowered to do so, I think you should definitely go ahead and do it.

It's better to maybe not say it in the most perfect way, maybe it's not as thought out as you would like it to be. As long as you create that space and express your needs, I think that makes a huge point. It might take years for you to feel fully comfortable with having that agency and doing something with it. You're more than enough, and I just think we're all struggling, so also acknowledging that we're all struggling. We're definitely not the only ones, even though often it might feel that way. Relying on community is also another thing that I think is important, and that also is a form of advocacy, connecting with people who can be of support for you or also just be someone that will be there for you to vent or to express any of those feelings and that those feelings are valid.

Emily Ladau:

Thank you for bringing it full circle and for all of these reminders. I really love wrapping it up with that idea that we are all more than enough. I just want to say thank you again so much for joining me in conversation for this episode of Disability Inclusion Required. I would love for you to share where people can find you on social media or online because you're doing such vital work, and I want to make sure that people are looped in on that.

Dior Vargas:

Thank you so much. It was such a great time to chat with you, and I'm looking forward to other opportunities to do so. You could find me on my website, diorvargas.com. I'm also on Instagram, @dior\_vargas. Someone was able to get that name before I could, so I added the underscore. Just in terms of spelling, it's D-I-O-R, and the last name is Vargas, V as in Victor, A-R-G-A-S, just in terms of spelling. I'm on Twitter. I'm not as active on social media, but if you send me a message via on my website, I'll definitely respond. I'm just really appreciative of the time you've took to talk to me, and I really appreciate this conversation.

Emily Ladau:

Thank you again, so, so much, and I really do encourage everyone who's tuned in to check out Dior's work. It's incredible. If you would like to keep your learning journey going, you can visit the Disability and Philanthropy Forum at disabilityphilanthropy.org. I'm Emily Ladau, this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. Thanks so much for tuning in and join us again next time.