

Providing

PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Since 2016 and throughout the pandemic, ATs Care has been there for members

BY BETH SITZLER

After providing emergency care to a baseball player who sustained a life-threatening head injury, Laura Tarnay, MS, ATC, CSCS, said her emotions were high, even as EMS took over care of the athlete and transported him to the hospital.

As she carried on and continued to provide care during the game, Tarnay said she didn't know if the injured player was going to make it. The same thoughts ran through her head, questioning whether or not the care she provided was enough.

"The whole situation was on a continuous loop in my head, and the best way to describe it was it felt heavy and overwhelming, making it hard to focus both personally and professionally," she said.

Tarnay later discussed the situation with a close AT friend, who suggested that she speak to someone about what happened. This led her to the ATs Care Program, which provides peer-to-peer support during critical incidents.

"It is invaluable to have access to this resource for any AT who has experienced a critical incident," Tarnay said of the program, which is overseen by the NATA ATs Care Commission. "There are so many emotions and possible self-doubt you experience, so to have someone listen, be able to relate, validate and give you tools to process goes a long way to addressing the mental health of a health care professional."

Since its inception in 2016, ATs Care has supported the athletic training community, providing services to more than 22,700 athletic trainers and athletic training students – approximately 47% of the NATA membership.

Joseph Gonzalez, MA, ATC, CSCS, is another one of those ATs, having reached out to ATs Care for support when he and his athletic training staff were struggling with the loss of a student athlete.

"This took a toll on us ATs individually and as a staff, and so I asked Kelsey Bains, [MA, ATC,] to come in with ATs Care to provide some much needed support," he said, adding that Bains and fellow ATs Care Commission Rep. Pat Karns, LAT, ATC, met with them to conduct group crisis intervention.

"Everything about the process was professional and fantastic. Yes, it was tough for me and my staff to turn the focus on ourselves, and it was an emotional experience. But we needed it. We needed the time and the space to take care of ourselves. Kelsey and Pat did a wonderful job of leading that process for us. The empathy and care with which they interacted with us was welcomed and appreciated. It meant so much to have other ATs connect with us in that way, and to truly understand what it means to be an AT dealing with a crisis."

In 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was business as usual for the ATs Care Commission – athletic trainers helping athletic trainers.

"Then, the pandemic hit, and we regrouped and came together to figure out what it was that athletic trainers might need and how we could support them from our bubbles," said Donita Valentine, DAT, LAT, ATC, an ATs Care Commission representative. "This was at a time when

Read the Mental Health Month Blog Series

During Mental Health Month in May, the NATA Now blog will feature a series of articles that explore mental health from both the patient and AT perspectives. Read the entire series, including insights from the ATs Care Commission, at www.nata.org/blog.

Reach Out to ATs Care

If you or someone you know is in need of support after a critical incident, contact ATs Care at atscare@nata.org. You can also visit www.nata.org/membership/about-membership/member-resources/ats-care for additional information and resources.

everyone was on lockdown, and so when we got together, we really put a lot of thought and effort into discovering what athletic trainers needed at that time and how we could best serve them."

Searching for a way to connect with ATs and athletic training students around the country, ATs Care turned to Zoom, utilizing the virtual platform to host a variety of call-in nights for members. The commission hosted district call-in nights with the 10 districts.

"The COVID-19 call-in nights had a lot to do with uncertainty, like people not knowing

what was next,” Valentine said. “So we had to be there as athletic trainers and understand as athletic trainers what other athletic trainers were going through.”

ATs Care also hosted a call-in night specifically for athletic training students and teamed up with the NATA Ethnic Diversity Advisory Committee on a series of call-in nights open to the membership at large.

“During these call-in nights, ATs had the ability to talk not only about the pandemic, but about the other things that were coming forward within people’s communities and what was really at the forefront of their brain and really needed attention,” Bains said.

At the end of each call-in night, attendees were sent a mental wellness packet from ATs Care that included infographic handouts on self-care, information on hotlines and where to get help, if needed, as well as additional resources.

In total, 26 call-in nights were hosted in 2020. The ATs Care Commission continued its efforts to highlight mental wellness with articles posted on the NATA Now blog, www.nata.org, during Mental Health Month in May 2020 and 2021. The commission also shared this information with members on social media, ensuring all ATs knew about the support offered through the program.

“We wanted to let our AT community know we’re here and available for them,” Bains said.

While the pandemic brought needed attention to mental health and self-care, as the world has begun to reopen, and life has transitioned back to a sense of normalcy, the ATs Care Commission has noticed new struggles with members as well as their students, athletes and patients.

Valentine said that many are still feeling uncertainty and anxiety, as well as fear, about what has been missed or lost during the last two years of the pandemic.

“It’s like, ‘Well, I missed out on X, Y and Z, so what’s going to happen because of this? How do I recover? How do I get back to where I was before 2020?’” she said.

Many athletic trainers have also been asked to take on more responsibility in the past few years, creating a situation of being overloaded and overworked.

“That not only increased anxiety, but also overwhelmed ATs,” Bains said. “So mental

health has been impacted not just by the general effects of the pandemic, but also workload. . . . Another piece we’re seeing is just athletic trainers who feel ‘done,’ so to speak, like, ‘Wow, this is intense. I didn’t expect this – this isn’t how I thought my career would look.’”

To help ATs address these issues, Valentine and Bains encourage members to revisit the information, resources and lessons learned during the pandemic, available at www.nata.org/membership/about-membership/member-resources/ats-care.

“It’s almost like, as we try to move past the pandemic, it’s like, ‘OK, well that was then, and I want to forget everything about then, and get back to normal and catch up and make up for what I lost during that time,’” Valentine said.

“Now things are ramping back up, this is the time when you need to look at your schedule. Don’t forget to schedule time for yourself; don’t forget the little things. Hold tight to all of those things that we spoke about during that time because as we get back up to pace, and some of us, we’re above pace because of all the extra things that we have on our plate, now is the time to try to restore some of that balance in some kind of way.”

ATs and athletic training students are also encouraged to reach out to ATs Care if they or someone they know is in crisis.

“Having peers who are in it with you in a lot of ways, and maybe even have experienced some of the shifts and changes and restrictions that you have, can really honor your feelings and give you that space to express your feelings,” Bains said. “Then, we have the opportunity to provide tools.”

To further address the needs of ATs in all setting and career stages, ATs Care is working with various NATA committees to better understand the specific needs of the ATs they represent. These collaborative efforts will lead to the creation of resources and programs to provide additional support to all ATs.

“If there’s anything that I’ve had the opportunity to learn through this experience and through working with ATs Care is that community is everything,” Bains said. “I hope that our community really sees that if they reach out for help, support is there and support can make a world of difference in their ability to move through something big.” §

Tips For Success From ATs Care

ATs Care Commission Reps. Kelsey Bains, MA, ATC, and Donita Valentine, DAT, LAT, ATC, offer two tips for success:

1. Chunk it Down: “We’re so used to, especially as athletic trainers, taking on however many hats we can put on, often taking on more and more, and before we know it, our buckets are full and we’re overloaded and we’re not taking care of the simple things, like sleep, hydration, eating, peeing,” Bains said. “So we need to chunk it down, so we can really give the appropriate attention to our basic needs. Because if we’re not taking care of ourselves, then we don’t have the energy to give to others in the way that they deserve.”

2. Remember To Laugh: “When I say that, it means keeping those people around you who once you start laughing, they start laughing,” Valentine said. “Don’t forget about those people who you can just have a good belly laugh with or laugh so hard, tears come out, and do that often.”

ATs Care Offers Training at NATA 2022

Prior to the 73rd NATA Clinical Symposia & AT Expo in Philadelphia, the ATs Care Commission will hold the ATs Care/ICISF Assisting Individuals in Crisis/Group Crisis Intervention Pre-Conference Workshop. Completion and receipt of a certification indicating full attendance qualifies as a class in ICISF’s Certificate of Specialized Training Program. Registration limited to 50 attendees. Pre-requisite work required prior to the in-person class. Learn more at convention.nata.org/other-preconference-events.