

Inspiring Women

Episode 47: Alexis Degaso

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Thank you for tuning in to Inspiring Women. Today we're speaking with Dr. Alexis Degaso, who is a postdoctoral fellow, a psychologist who currently is at Providence Behavioral Health. Alexis received her master's and doctorate degree from William James College in Newton, Massachusetts. She completed her APA American Psychological Association accredited doctoral and psychology and her internship at Astor Services for Children & Families in New York. Now, Dr. Degaso has worked in a range of settings that includes diagnosing and treating children, adolescents, young adults and families. And she's worked in a number of the behavioral health competencies in terms of both trauma as well as other types of items. She has worked abroad, which has influenced some of her work. And she's also tried out and started to develop some different therapies, which she uses in her practice. And I am really looking forward to this conversation, Dr. Degaso thank you for being on Inspiring Women.

Alexis Degaso:

Thank you. Yeah. Thank you so much for having me Laurie. I'm glad to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Terrific. Well, I always start these conversations, I always find these career journeys, how did you pick? Where you are now? But why don't you just tell us, what are you doing right now? What are you doing in your day to day profession?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. So right now I'm currently working as I'm completing my post-doctoral fellowship in clinical psychology at Behavioral Health Associates in Providence. And in my role here, I'm working towards licensure, that's the part of my journey that I'm at right now. So it's the final year where I've had my doctorate degree, but need to take my licensing exam to become fully licensed and work independently on my own. But I'm seeing clients in individual and family therapy for part of my time and then the other half of my time, this year, I am the project manager of a quality improvement study with the goal of increasing the use of clinical outcome

measures, so that way we can track treatment progress and have those quality measures inform the care that we're delivering and tailored treatment to meet the needs of the clients.

Laurie McGraw:

So how many years of schooling before you become fully licensed?

Alexis Degaso:

So it was especially five years of schooling and then this is kind of my... End of my sixth year going into my seventh year of being... Starting all of this process back in 2015.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. Well, great. So you have done a lot of studying, but in that you've also done a lot of practical work along the way, in terms of all the different settings that you've already worked in. So Alexis, as you've done that, what drew you to mental health, behavioral health as something that you wanted to become licensed in?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. So you might find this interesting Laurie, but I actually wanted to be a dentist growing up.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. That's interesting.

Alexis Degaso:

So as a kid, I just loved teeth, loved just going to the dentist. Like, so my dream for years-

Laurie McGraw:

What? You loved going to the dentist? Okay, keep going.

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. And then I worked in an orthodontic office in high school and in college, like I was very involved and invested in this. And then it got to a point during my undergraduate time at Boston College where I kind of sat back and I reflected a little bit more on why? Questioning that path, why did I pick that? Why was I still on this path? Is this what I wanted to do? And that really led me to my volunteer year of service that I did after college, because at that point I was like, well, I don't know if I want, if this is the right path for me or what I want to do. So in that year off, even though it was really like a year on, I worked at an Early Head Start in West Baltimore and really was exposed to a completely different type of community.

Alexis Degaso:

And working with these young children, like I love working with kids, I've always loved working with kids. But seeing things through their eyes and both of us experiencing some things at the same time. So experiencing and witnessing police in their communities arresting people right in front of them and having them on the ground, and I'm like, this is my first time experiencing this. And the two year olds that I was taking on a walk, like they were also

experiencing this at the same time. And it was in that role, I really saw the impact of trauma at a very young age. And thinking about like, what that then could do in terms of development, to be exposed to these things at such a young age as they grow older, what's going to happen? Are they going to experience after effects of trauma, also seeing like lack of access to resources, like having young children where I'm like this child it looks like has autism, from my limited understanding at that time, right?

Alexis Degaso:

Because this was before I even went to grad school, but not knowing where we could get this child evaluated or get them the services that they need. And so that really inspired me and kind of confirmed for me, like I think the path that's best is for me to go into mental health and pursue my degree in psychology instead. And so at that time, then applied and joined... Started my doctoral program at William James College where I've just now kind of continued to grow and change my path as I moved along through the program.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is very interesting in terms of just a volunteer experience, really shaping and reshaping things that became of interest to you. So when you were a volunteer, were you able to do things that were helpful? Did you see a direct connection to how just being a volunteer in an untrained scenario could be beneficial in some way that got you hooked?

Alexis Degaso:

Definitely. So we had a psychologist who was able to come into our classroom like once a month and we would be able to ask her questions at that time and really learn from her about developmental milestone, social emotional learning of children, warning signs and things to look out for, for certain developmental delays. And so just in talking with her and I mean it was such a brief interaction that we had together, but I saw the value then of mental health and what role she was providing, even though we needed that so much more frequently, it was still something. And from meeting with her but also doing some of my own work there, like I was incorporating different social, emotional training and like teaching objectives in the classroom with all the two and three-year-olds that I was working with.

Alexis Degaso:

So able to work with them, talk with them about feelings like at a very, very basic level, right? These are kids that are just developing how to talk and use their fine motor skills and all these other developmental skills that I could play a part and form these connections too. I mean with people like the mothers and the children and I say mothers because it was all mothers that year that I worked with. But that were very, very different from me in terms of how we were raised, in terms of where we grew up in the country and I was still able to form a connection with them.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. And so Alexis, you also did some of your learning abroad. So in terms of some of the work and the exposure that you've had, you've had opportunity to work with young children, young adults, and a range of different types of issues, very acute ones, suicide prevention, which is a very challenging issue to emotional behavioral type of thing. Maybe give us a sense of the

types of things and I'm interested in how it might vary if it does from work that you did in different countries then work that you're doing in the United States.

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. And so I've always been interested in working internationally and traveling in my own personal life. And there's a lot of... There's mental health and there's how we see it in the US in a really US centric view to mental health problems. But you go to other countries and I was interested in learning about this. So one thing about my program at William James College is that I have a double concentration, so I have a concentration in children and families of adversity and resilience, and then also a concentration in global mental health. And so my coursework really prepared me to have these opportunities, right? To work in other countries. So what Laurie is referencing is that I was able to do two different immersion trips in my graduate career and then also some in my undergraduate career, right? To different countries, teaching healthcare education when I was an undergrad, but then in graduate school working... Most specifically I'll talk about this in Guyana which is a country in South America, for those of you who are not familiar with the country of Guyana.

Alexis Degaso:

And they at one point in like 2015, 2016 had the highest suicide rate per capita of any country in the world. And my school, like we worked as part of one of my classes, I helped create a plan to examine why that was? Why is this country have the highest suicide rate? What cultural factors may be playing a part of this? What social and economic factors may be playing a part? And in the class I'm really working on looking at all of the multitude of factors that could be impacting this rate. And then what do we do about it? And so going and diving into research on suicide prevention efforts in other countries of similar socioeconomic status like Guyana, but also looking into their history and learning more. I mean, now I can tell you so much about this country. I've done a lot of research on it about the history of colonialism and indentured servitude that was there and how all of that has now played a part in their suicide crisis that they had.

Laurie McGraw:

So that speaks to issues that certainly are coming to the surface more and more in the public health arena in the United States where the social determinants of health and the more upstream as well as historical factors that have led to social issues such as structural racism and things like that, that are becoming more familiar terms to many in the United States. Those kinds of issues have dramatic impact on people's health, not necessarily mental health or behavioral health that I'm speaking to, but just chronic conditions and things of that nature. So I think what you're saying is that Guyana, that those long-term historical factors also are contributing factors to that horrifying statistic of a highest suicide rate. I mean, that's a terrible thing to be having to examine. And I'm sure that while you're looking at all those factors, it also comes with the degree of just sadness in terms of what a large challenge to try and work with and try and reverse that trend.

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah, exactly. And I do think, like you're saying too, like it's all of these factors that play a part in mental health. And just like in physical health too, not just [inaudible 00:12:27] but environmental factors and also generational factors.

Laurie McGraw:

Did you find things in that research and what you learned? I don't know what an immersion program is, but I have to imagine it's a concentrated time that you only begin to just understand how big these issues are and how much more you can learn. Are there things that can be done? Did you find opportunities of things to work on in a positive nature?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. So during the immersion part of it... So I did a lot of work prior to the actual immersion experience in the country, but so doing like the research on the front end and creating presentations and collaborating with partners in that country as well, local NGOs, but then for the actual immersion part, it was going to the country with a group of us and delivering suicide prevention trainings to different groups of people. And this was using the research that we had found about other suicide prevention trainings, but really what we wanted to do was learn from them right? Hear their experiences. Here we're coming in with all of this research, I feel like I know this country before, I've gotten there, but in reality I don't know the intricacies of what they are experiencing as a people.

Alexis Degaso:

And so to hear from them, get their feedback while also being able to provide education on ways that they could prevent suicide as a community. So we met with local community leaders and did a train the trainer program. So the idea is that with going into any country and doing any sort of work, it's making sure that we're not once again imposing a kind of colonialistic framework onto them, right? Of like, we are the saviors, we were here to come save you. It's like, no, we're here to work with you, but we have some areas of expertise that we can offer, we can train you. And then you can go on to continue this work, right? Because at the end of the day, we're going to leave and we're going to go back to the US. So working with the local leaders to say here, here's education on suicides.

Alexis Degaso:

Like it does not make someone suicidal to ask them if they are having thoughts about hurting or telling themselves. That is not what makes someone then have that thought come in their head. And that's like a basic disbelief and stigma that people have all over the world, right? And even in the US where I'm constantly correcting that when I'm teaching parents about asking their children if they're feeling suicidal. And so it was that same sort of education that we were doing there, but getting their feedback, getting their input and encouraging them to then create their own initiatives and projects in the community to change this horrible statistic that they all knew was there, but they didn't really know how bad that it was on a grander scheme.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Well, let me ask you about your work bringing it back to the United States and things like stigma certainly are out there as it relates to mental health and behavioral health types of issues.

However, also as we are still in, not quite out of this pandemic, mental health is on the mind so to speak, no pun intended, of many people. A lot of people are feeling both burnt out and there are a lot of new organizations as well as innovative organizations in the mental health space. What are you seeing? Are there enough programs out there? Are people getting the help that they need? Do you think all people who need help are getting the services? What are you seeing?

Alexis Degaso:

So as someone who focuses mostly on children and adolescents, we are seeing skyrocketing numbers of increased emergency room visits and just increasing mental health struggles on children. And what's scary too is that... I was at Grand Rounds recently where we were presented with research about suicide rates and how suicide rates among children under the age of eight are increasing and how [inaudible 00:16:32] used to be a protective factor for children against suicide. And so the needs arising and our infrastructure that we currently have in the US to meet those needs is not there. There's a lack of programs, partial hospitalization programs, inpatient unit for psychiatric reasons for children and adolescents. So we're kind of struggling right now to try to meet this needs. And I would say any child psychologist you talk to right now, their caseload is going to be full and they're going to be... Trying to juggle a lot of clients at the same time, because there's a high need.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, when you do this work, is there one singular approach to how you work with whether it's parents or adolescents or children? Or do you try a variety of approaches? Are some more effective than others? Are there approaches evolving rapidly? What happening there?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah, I'd say definitely my training, my background was more based in cognitive behavior therapy, which is a therapy that looks specifically at thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, and like how they're all interconnected. And there's a lot of evidence to support that specific type of framework. But I would say also that a lot of different [inaudible 00:17:56] use different orientations, right? And you have to kind of match what the presenting problem is. Who is this family you have in front of you, this child, this young adult and what is their need right now and matching your intervention to meet their needs.

Laurie McGraw:

Well it's a very difficult topic. And just hearing how you are talking about it with the intention to not have things as awful as suicide, that is wonderful for anything that you can prevent and to provide options for people in terms of whether it's just talking about if that can be one step that is helpful to avoid something as traumatic and awful as a suicide. I'm glad to know that you're thinking about that as well as how to expand programs like that. Alexis, I also wanted to ask you about some of your work. You're on something called a social justice committee in your current role. Can you tell us what that is? And I understand that the point of this is to infuse anti-racist and social justice practices into client care. So what does that mean and what are you doing?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah, so this is a committee that was formed prior to me joining here, but when I heard about it I joined immediately because it kind of aligns with a lot of my prior work and a lot of my interests in working as a psychologist. And so what we're doing as part of our committee is really trying to examine whether our organization here is paying attention to this stuff. Are we meeting the needs of our clients? Are we ensuring equal access to care for example? Are we looking at where our referrals are coming from and making sure that we accept everyone's insurance, right? Are we providing a safe and open space to talk with our clients about racism and prejudice? So I think those are parts of it. The other part is like how we as providers are, self-reflecting, how we are uncovering maybe our own biases and stereotypes or blind spots, so that we understand how racism or prejudice might've affected us in providing like ongoing learning opportunities for all of the clinicians at our practice.

Laurie McGraw:

And as a young person, as somebody who has international experience, do you think... Do you bring something into this conversation that you find is helpful in a larger organization?

Alexis Degaso:

Yeah. So I think it's interesting you bring up that part. I think I've reflected on that a lot this year, of my youth and being the person here who's like the most recently out of graduate school and how there's differences in the training that I received and more recently graduating than a lot of my co-workers here. And so providing education to them about things that I've learned, different trainings I've been to, the classwork and coursework that I've covered, so I think there is something that I bring definitely to the table which helps me feel like valued to in an organization where I am, one of the... Well, the youngest probably member of the team.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. I think that in so many initiatives like this across organization, there's always talk about bringing a wide variety of voices to the table. But I think bringing young voices to the table is also just so important. Just those types of perspectives, which come with a lot of information. Alexis, I want to close out on a couple of just questions for you about how you think about... You're at the beginning stages of a lot of schooling and beginning your career journey. How do you think about your career journey? You are not a dentist, you're a psychologist, that's your profession. Do you have a vision for yourself years from now or is it just sort of like one day at a time and you know, what the next one or two years looks like?

Alexis Degaso:

Well, considering that I had my whole life planned out when I was very young, I am always thinking about my future and where I want to go and how I want to get there. And I right now would love to one day, like be this global mental health consultant. And I don't exactly know what that looks like yet, but I would envision it being working kind of as part of some sort of international agency where we are helping improve access to mental health resources and improving mental health infrastructure around the world, but also in the US and taking on more of a policy framework as well.

Alexis Degaso:

Because even though I love doing the individual clinical work and I think there will always be room for me to be doing that work. I think that's important for me, but also, reaching out to a wider group of people like through policy and program interventions as well. So ideally in the future, it's going to look like a lot of things and not just doing one set thing, but I see my kind of career as a psychologist being lifelong.

Laurie McGraw:

So taking the interest in travel and what you've learned from international, bringing that passion into a more global impact is how I'm hearing that. It sounds like a fantastic vision for yourself, Alexis. I love it. So just in terms of closing out here as it's been such a great conversation. I've really learned a lot. I think the work that you're doing is important and I love the passion that you're bringing to the work, that's just wonderful to hear. Alexis, as we close out today on Inspiring Women, I just love to hear from you, best advice you've ever received that you might want to give to listeners as we close out today.

Alexis Degaso:

I've been thinking about this and thinking about like advice from others. And I had one teacher in high school and now you know a little bit about me and I've been on a line, on a path, and she told me that the only thing that you can count on in life is change and to not get so caught up necessarily on all the plans. And that is something that I've come back to several times along my journey even this far. And it's something I try to keep in the forefront of my mind, even though it slips to the back a lot, but that things are always changing and evolving and to keep an open mind so that I can see the opportunities that might be right in front of me, maybe things that I had never considered doing.

Laurie McGraw:

That is... I think that's really sound advice and that's particularly wonderful things to keep front of mind, particularly at the beginning stages and all stages actually of a career progression. This has been such a great discussion. I really appreciate our time today. On Inspiring Women, we've been speaking to Dr. Alexis Degaso and Alexis thank you so much.

Alexis Degaso:

Well, thank you so much for this opportunity to reflect on my career so far.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of inspiring women with Laurie McGraw, please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.