

Think Tank:

Creating a culture of belonging

Speakers:

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Amy Hopkins: Everyone is talking about diversity and inclusion today and learning to not only accept our differences, but celebrate them. Diversity and our ability to understand and appreciate it is critical to the wellbeing of our world. Today, I'm going to talk to my wonderful friend and colleague and discuss how we can create a culture of belonging. How do we embrace diversity and inclusion? That's what we're talking about today. Welcome to The Think Tank Podcast.

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining me today on the podcast. This is Amy Hopkins. As you know, I'm a licensed clinical social worker, and I'm here with Darah Smith, who is primarily my friend, but she is also a licensed professional counselor. So we're in the same business of taking care of your mental health. Darah, you know that you are one of my favorite people in the world, and I want to thank you for being here with me today.

Darah Smith: Thank you, Amy. It's good to be here with you and have this discussion with you.

Amy Hopkins: And Darah, the reason I wanted to talk to you about diversity and inclusion was because I heard you speak once and you were talking about your life and different things that you had gone through, and there is no one better to talk about this subject. And you really moved me and you know you did, I outreached you right after, but you and I grew up very differently and we look very different from each other. We grew up in different parts of the country, but the first time I met you, I just loved you. We totally hit it off. And I think some of that has to do with that we didn't focus on what made us different. We sat there and talked and got to know each other, and we learned about

each other and we had fun with what makes us different. And then we also found out that we had so much in common.

Darah Smith: Definitely, we definitely did. I think that in the beginning, when we initially met one another, Amy, there were things that were just obvious between the two of us. We're both women, we're both in the mental health field. We're both clinical supervisors and sharing the same role at our jobs, but there were other things that we were able to discover that gave us a deeper connection, things such as both of us being married and mothers of two. We were able to talk more about our spirituality and things that we enjoy doing, from our music, our love of music, as well as the food that we enjoy or what we enjoy doing for fun, and how we spend time with our family. So we were just able to really make a deeper connection that I feel like we've made a commitment to nurture as well.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. So, Darah, let's just level set here and talk about what diversity means. And diversity is simply anything that makes us different. So you and I both know that there has been research that says that kids by the age of three start to believe that what is normal, quote unquote normal, is what is the same as them. So anything different is then perceived to be as not normal or different, or maybe not as good. So from an early age, we begin to identify differences as less than, unless we're taught the differences just mean different, right?

Darah Smith: Right. Definitely.

Amy Hopkins: So diversity can include a million little things, but really it comes down to, can be personality and experiences. It can be levels of expertise or your level of education. It can be abilities or disabilities. It can be your gender, or it can be your gender identity.

Darah Smith: Also, your religion, your spiritual beliefs, Amy, race and ethnicity, family structure, sexual orientation, and even the language you speak.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. And it can be your age, young or old. It can be veteran status. It can be your occupation or your income or your social status. And it can even just be your geographic location, just where you are in the world.

Darah Smith: Exactly.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. And Darah, think the big ones right now that when we think about diversity, we think a lot about race and ethnicity and I think maybe even abilities and disabilities and gender and sexual orientation, those kind of be the big ones that we're talking about or that we hear about most right now. But really all of these things create diversity because there are differences.

Darah Smith: Definitely. Diversity is basically everything that makes us who we are. It's our beliefs, it's our values. It's things that internally and things that you can see, your outer core, whether it's someone's skin or eye color, what they're wearing, the food that they eat, their dialect, their tone. It's so much more. Diversity is just so inclusive of who we are and what makes us unique.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. So Darah, when you hear the word inclusion and diversity inclusion, what does that mean to you?

Darah Smith: For me, Amy, inclusion just means everyone feels respected and valued. It's a culture where we can all find opportunities to reach our full potential. It's where members of society operate in a spirit of fairness and extend a sense of belonging to all, where everyone is embraced and accepted and appreciated.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. Because we know that really all we want is to have a feeling of belonging. We want to be loved. We want to feel included. We want to find our place in the world. We want to feel safe and we want to be treated fairly. So tell me what you think can help people move beyond just tolerating differences and move toward appreciating our differences.

Darah Smith: Yeah. I think we all have to be committed to really exploring, learning and embracing other cultures. Addressing diversity and inclusion requires definitely a level of vulnerability. And in some cases, discomfort to explore and understand and embrace what's seen as unfamiliar. Myself, I was fortunate enough to be born into a very diverse family, and subsequently, I was raised by open-minded parents. And when I say a diverse family, my aunt married a man from Italy and I had another older cousin who married a woman from Germany. So my first cousins and people in my immediate family, my holidays were all spent sharing and taking part in different cultures and having that exposure.

One of the things that I really appreciate from my parents and my parents being so open-minded is that we were exposed to all religions. We were not just segmented and we didn't follow the religion that was customary to my family. And that was one thing that my mom wanted to give us, a lot of freedom of choice and choosing what we see as our beliefs, but also allowing us to see that there are a lot of commonalities in different religions. It all boils down to that a lot of religions really believe some of the same basis and same practices, but it's just some of the things that are about the religions can be segmented to be different. But having that exposure and spending time around different cultures, it definitely gives you a sense of appreciation.

One thing that really makes me proud is the fact that I have been in various homes and various cultures, and I've also welcomed people of various cultures into my home. And I think that spending time in a non-professional or informal setting definitely makes the difference and allows those connections to be formed and as well as those differences to be appreciated and respected.

Amy Hopkins:

Yeah. I didn't think that I grew up in a very diverse area or anything like that, but I had similar experiences in that I had family from Peru and Samoa. And so we got little pieces of different cultures, but I think that's one of the things that I loved about my work was that I got to go all over the country and meet people who were different than me. And I think that's it right there. It's that you've got to be open. You've got to be willing to sit down with someone and get to know them and learn about their differences and appreciate their differences and find the commonalities that you have with each other. Darah, I mean it, I cannot imagine my world without you in it. And had I not been open to sitting there and connecting with you, that'd be a huge piece of my life that would be missing.

But I mean, Darah, you've had lots of experiences in your life where things weren't great as far as diversity and being included. And you've talked to me a little bit about your son and the things that he's gone through.

Darah Smith:

Absolutely.

Amy Hopkins:

And I think that one of the things that I appreciate about you is that I can ask you questions. I have come to you and I've said, "How can I be better? What can I do?" And one of the things you said to me, you

said, "Just ask me how I am." And I thought that was so profound because when there was issues, things going on in the news, social injustice, different things like that, I think sometimes we don't know what to do. We don't know what to say. We don't know where to go. And I appreciate you so much that I can go to you and say, "How can I help?" And you're always just the epitome of kindness and empathy and understanding, and you've taught me so much. So I just, again, I think the world of you, and I appreciate that you share your stories with me.

Darah Smith: Thank you, Amy. But I want to acknowledge you at the same time because I think it takes a level of strength, vulnerability, and a commitment from you to acknowledge opportunities, and whether it's opportunities for growth or change or to embrace more and be more inclusive, there's always opportunities there. And I think the world of you, I really appreciate you. And I'm grateful for the friend you are to me as well as my colleague and the role that you've played because it does allow us to forge a connection and have these discussions that are helpful.

Amy Hopkins: Darah, thank you. And I think what I got out of our conversation today is that really it's about learning about differences, understanding differences, and appreciating those differences. And I also heard the importance of being an advocate, of being an ally, and speaking up. And when we learn things, share what we learn and it's up to us to speak up against anything that doesn't support inclusion. Again, it's what we all want. We all want to be included. We all want to be safe and loved and feel like we belong. So whether that be hurtful slurs or jokes, or negative language or other behaviors, it's up to us to stand up against that. And then it's up to us to teach our children that differences are awesome, that they make the world better. And just, again, teach kindness and acceptance.

People can feel divided when they focus on their differences. Diversity is vital in our world. Appreciating diversity is how we grow, learn, and evolve. We must be willing to work and live with people who are different, and not just be willing, but be excited to work with people who are different. Our culture is ever-changing. We need to reflect the very cultures, beliefs, and perspectives of our world. Until next time, thanks for joining me on The Think Tank Podcast. Bye.

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