

**Lauren 00:11**

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. Today, we sat down with Sharona Sommer, a certified professional coach and director of learning for the college internship program national about strategies that help with executive function.

**Kristina Scott 00:34**

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Sharona Sommer, who is a certified professional coach and director of learning and development for the College Internship Program National. She has an expertise in working with young adults to support them through life, in the university and in the job force setting. She provides learning and development opportunities for families and others as she educates them about executive functioning and other skills to participate in life fully. Thank you for joining us Sharona.

**Sharona Sommer 01:01**

My pleasure.

**Kristina Scott 01:02**

Great. So in recent years in education, we hear a lot about the term executive functioning, what exactly does executive functioning in a capsule?

**Sharona Sommer 01:11**

A lot. That's kind of a buzzword right now. But really what executive functions are, it's a way to manage yourself to sustain a goal. So we need our executive functions to reach any goal that we have. And it's really talking about our managing system. So some people refer to it as your CEO, some people call it the conductor of an orchestra. So you need the conductor to be able to manage all the musicians, same thing that you need your executive functions to be able to manage all the different processes that you need to execute in order to be able to be successful and to be able to get through your day.

**Kristina Scott 01:53**

So you see a lot of individuals that need some help with some executive functioning skills, what are you seeing when parents or individuals themselves come to you?

**Sharona Sommer 02:02**

So we see a lot of students that have experienced a lot of frustration over their life. And I've experienced a lot of failure as a result of that. And what ends up happening is that students really have very low self esteem that come to us when they're young adults. So they've been off to college, or they've been taking a year off, they're 18 to 26, typically in our program, and they've haven't experienced success because they haven't been aware of what their executive functions are and where their deficits are. So part of what we try to do is we try to help students to become more aware of their executive functions and where it is that they need to work on. So for example, a big one is even being able to get up in the morning, they don't have that skill to be able to get up in the morning to be able to start the day, they don't know how to self manage, they don't have the self management skills. So they are not eating when they're hungry. They're not aware of that they're not aware that they may be lonely or tired. So it's really about staying in tune with yourself and having that level of self awareness. So that

you can be able to self manage yourself. So I'd say that the first thing that we see is a lack of awareness of what it is that they need in order to get through the day successfully.

**Kristina Scott** 03:10

So how do you begin to even teach self awareness to students?

**Sharona Sommer** 03:14

So the main thing that we do is we have a class called reframing, and reframing is a checking point in the morning, where we teach them how to check in with themselves. So we do a chart called HALT, which is something people do which is hungry, angry, lonely, tired, and it's a checklist 1 to 10, rate yourself from 1 to 10. And you just check off how hungry you are, how angry you are. And it's a way for them to be able to self monitor themselves, to see what they need to manage the day. So for example, they come in, we do that together. And they may realize, like, oh, you know what, I didn't even have time to eat breakfast this morning, I just ran out of the house because I woke up late. And they're able to check themselves and be able to adapt and adjust so that they can be able to go through the day. Because if they don't, what ends up happening is just this cycle of getting harder and harder throughout the day that by the end of the day, they just burn out and are shut down, which is very common.

**Kristina Scott** 04:10

So are students with you, or individuals with you for an entire day, or they do check in and then they go off to the job force, they go off to...I don't know additional coursework. What's a typical day like?

**Sharona Sommer** 04:23

Right, so our program is residential. So we have apartments and houses and we have life skill staff that assist our students and coach our students to be able to manage their day. So the typical day, let's say they wake up, if they're college students, then they might come into the center for a check in. They might do an EF group, which is where they check in for the day, see what they have to do for the day, and go over their agenda for the day. And then they go off to their class. They access resources at the campus. We teach them how to access those resources and coaching, they come back to the center, they might have a class on, oh, for example, they have a class on executive functioning. So what they do is they learn what the executive functions are and how it affects them. And where it is that they have to put in some accommodations for that. So that might be a class that they have. And then they might have some study hall. So then they do their study hall together, they might go back to their apartments for lunch, they might have an EF session in their apartment or home to teach them the steps needed to make lunch, for example, their EF skills are involved in making lunch as well. And then they'll go back to their class or back to the center for another class. And then they go through their day, like that, right. And then they have dinner, they cook dinner for their roommates, or their roommates cook dinner for them. And then in the evening, they might do some homework, they might do some quick 10, which is cleaning in 10 minutes, we take one area and they clean one area, so we break it down into smaller tasks. And then we make sure that they get into bed at a decent time. Of course, they're adults. So we don't say you have to go to bed, we're not their parents. But we try to encourage them to see how it benefits them to have a regular sleep time, and to get off electronics at a decent time so that they're able to wake up the next morning. So it's a lot of educating them as to what their needs are and what accommodations they need in order to be successful.

**Kristina Scott** 06:18

So it sounds like it's a Post Secondary Transition type program. And you said 18 to 20?

**Sharona Sommer** 06:22

Exactly, right, exactly. So it is a Post Secondary Transition Program. It's for students that need additional support, either in college, or if they're trying to figure out what they want to do for their careers, if they have some social deficits or communication challenges as well. We help with that, where we have social skills, modules, we teach the peers curriculum, and we work with our students to be able to navigate friendships, work with their bosses, and be able to communicate with the professors, and how do you communicate with your professors. So we found that a lot of students are extremely bright, but being smart isn't enough. They need to know what surrounds that, and what do they need to be successful. And some of that is as simple as self advocating, teaching our students to be self advocates. And once they can do that, and go through that continuum of growth of having the self awareness at the start of that. But the end of that, that continuum is really self advocacy and self determination, we want our students to be able to be self determined to know what they want, and to be able to go after it and to be able to seek the support, to be interdependent, and are completely independent, because none of us are, to be interdependent and to know that that's okay. Because I think that there's this myth that you have to be able to do it all on your own. And we help students to really embrace themselves for who they are, and really be able to be proud of everything that they're able to do, but also accept that all of us have some limitations, and what do you need to do to compensate for that?

**Kristina Scott** 07:49

Great. So when students have graduated high school in order to be in this program, where do you work with high schools to provide that transition piece for them?

**Sharona Sommer** 07:58

So that's a great question. So we do work with post high school. So students do have to have graduated high school, but we have had students that have completed their GEDs with us. So there have been circumstances that we can do that. But typically, students have either just graduated high school, they've either gone to college and have not been able to be successful at college so they come to us afterwards. Typically, our students are between 18 and 26. But most, I guess the average is about probably like 20 to 22. But we do accept them right out of high school.

**Kristina Scott** 08:33

Great. So you've probably seen some students mature in the program and then not need the program anymore. What are some great success stories that you can share?

**Sharona Sommer** 08:41

Yes, that's a great question. So we have many success stories. We had a student that was not able to be successful in college, went away to college, very bright, and just ended up isolating in their apartment or dorm and never coming out. And they failed out that first semester and came to us. And it took time to build that self confidence and the self worth and through time, start taking one class at the

college to build that confidence. Again, this student had a lot of sensory issues that he was not aware of. So once he learned about what he needed in terms of his sensory differences, and also knowing that it was okay to accept help, he was very resistant. So he started to accept help. He became more involved. He was part of the student council at our program. And he took some leadership positions within our program. And that enabled him to start to venture out and take risks in college, which was wonderful. So we ended up taking a couple of more classes. He stayed with us for about three years. And he finished his associate's degree. That was another thing that we discovered is that the community college was a much safer environment for him than the university campus. So for him, being in community college and being able to have that time to mature really was very helpful. So we ended up getting his AA in three years, and he ended up leaving our program and transferring to university, and he was able to finish off there. And that's another thing I tell parents as well is that we have to let go of the timeline that, you know, it's not always going to happen in four years. And it doesn't matter really how long it takes as long as they're moving forward. And that's what I tried to help parents understand that it's really about just being able to enable our students to get that self confidence and to know that they can do it in their own time. And there's no race to get there. Because in 10 years from now, they'll be in a job just like the other person that graduated in four years. Right? So it's really about the end result, and not how fast you get there.

**Kristina Scott** 10:40

Yeah, we've spoken a lot about the 18 to 26 year old individual, what wraparound services do you give to parents?

**Sharona Sommer** 10:48

So parents definitely get updates from their advisors, each student is assigned an advisor and the student advisor works with the students almost as a coach to help them reach their goals and to set milestones and to help them get through the program. They're very aware of everything that is going on with the student, it's almost like a case manager. And they provide at least twice a month updates to parents, parents know that they have a point of contact that they can speak to, they get regular updates in terms of their progress with the university or with college and all of that as well. And also we provide services like webinars and workshops, and we help our families to learn more about different areas that their students may have challenges in, for example, you know, having a webinar on self advocacy, or having a workshop on EF challenges, for example. So really helping parents to understand also what their students are going through and to understand the language that they may be learning. So for example, we do peers and social skills. So we may have a workshop for our parents to understand the peer's language, and for them to continue that when their students go home for breaks.

**Kristina Scott** 11:56

Great, it sounds like your program does a lot. Again, that program is the College Internship Program. If people want to find out more information, where could they go? What other resources can they access?

**Sharona Sommer** 12:09

Alright, thank you for asking. So the college internship program, our website is [www.CIPworldwide.org](http://www.CIPworldwide.org). If you'd like to know about more events, specifically our webinars that we hold every month, it's CIP worldwide slash events. And if they need to contact me personally, it's [ssommer@CIP.worldwide.org](mailto:ssommer@CIP.worldwide.org).

Great. And also I wanted to mention because you have students that may be younger and may not be ready for our full year program, we also offer a summer program. And the summer program is for younger teenagers for 15 to 18. And that's also offered at all our five centers nationally, and our centers are in Berkeley, California, Long Beach, Bloomington, Indiana, Lee, Massachusetts, and Melbourne, Florida. And they can contact us as well.

**Kristina Scott** 13:00

Oh great. That gives them the experience before they...

13:03

Exactly. Because it's a little scary to send your students off. Yes. So it's a great tester, and it's kind of like a mini CIP. But it includes a lot of fun because it is a summer camp. And it's a two week camp. And it's a lot of fun for students that go there. And also they make friendships a lot of times for the first time, so it's really a nice opportunity.

**Kristina Scott** 13:23

Thank you, Sharon. I appreciate the conversation we just had.

**Sharona Sommer** 13:26

Thank you very much.

**Lauren** 13:33

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. This series was made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Our theme music is the little idea by scaffolds. In our next episode, we sit down with Dr. Beverly Johns, and behavior consultant in the current president elect of Ida, Illinois, to talk about the strategies for helping students with anxiety in the classroom. For more resources from Ida, visit [Idaamerica.org](http://Idaamerica.org)