SIRCC Online

Resilience and recovery in residential child care

Speaker Bill Kahn

Organisational psychologist

'Falling Apart and Hanging Together: Notes on Resilient Caregiving Organisations'

Recorded webinar

#SIRCC2022

(Lorraine Sillars)
I'm just going to spend a wee bit of time introducing our keynote this afternoon. Bill Kahn, who's Professor of Management in Organisations at Boston University. We, in developing the confidence theme around recovery and resilience, the planning group identified the need to really begin to look forward and develop an understanding about what the development of resilience would look like. And the group were keen not to think purely through the lens of individuals- caregiver resilience, we wanted to think much more widely about what else do we need to be considered and as we go forward. And it was through the lens of attempting to keep The Promise, where we're asking caregivers to bring their whole self to work. And that in order for that to happen, we've got to hold their hand so that they can hold the hands of children. The development of authentic relationships has already come up as a theme this morning, what can we do to make sure that happens, so that those relationships can develop in real time and into adulthood. Bill's interests include organisational change, particularly in and around caregiving organisations, and thinking about trauma and organisations and intergroup dynamics. Bill talks about, in some of his work, the power of meaningful connections. And again, it's a theme we've heard often in SIRCC over the years about what happens when meaning meaningful connections occur. And he is saying that these meaningful connections, these relationships really allow workers to come (adults to come) and give their whole self. And that's something that we clearly want to hear more on from Bill.

(Bill Kahn)
Thank you, I certainly hope you can understand my accent. So I'm going to start with a story. And then as she said, we're going to break you into groups, and I'm going to have you respond to the story. Let me share my screen, I'm going to read it to you. It's not a bedtime story. So it'd be great if you would stay awake for it. Okay, and just so you know, the title is *Falling Apart and Hanging Together*. And sort of, you'll see how that that theme shows up. So let me tell you a story about Ellie Canary, I'm going to read it to you, it's about four or five slides. You're a social worker at a residential treatment centre. This is your fifth year and you generally find the work satisfying, it's difficult at times, when you're working with kids that have so little going for them. And even when you do your best, you know, they're going to have a tough time. But there are also moments when you help kids get second chances. And because of luck and a strong adult in their lives, their lives are much, much the better because of the work that you've done. It is those moments that keep you going along with some of the relationships that you have with co-workers and supervisors. You've also had some bad moments when you're just tired of working so hard with so few resources in so many cases, but you get your work done. That's why it's so hard to understand Ellie Canary. Ellie has been here for just under three years. And you don't know her all that well. She seems pretty high maintenance. You haven't worked with her all that much. But friends have and report that she can be difficult and demanding when the cases get tricky. In the past week, though, you've had more direct experience with her. You overheard her conversation with a supervisor you couldn't help it. Her voice was raised loudly, almost to the point to where she was yelling. And she was angry and upset about not being able to find a placement for a kid who was scheduled to leave the residential centre in a few weeks, without family or guardians and no foster parents. The kid the kid was of course distraught. It's just not right. She said loudly her face threatening. I'm sick and tired of this happening to these kids. Why can't you do something about this? Before the supervisor could respond, Ellie turned around and walked away, brushing past you in the hallway and without even looking up. You could hear her down the hall still muttering about how useless the supervisor was. It turns out later the same day you're asked by the residential director to team a case with Ellie. The case involves working closely with the new domestic violence specialist from the Department of Children Families who needed to get involved in a case at the centre. The director says that Ellie and the previous DV specialists had not worked very well together. And she wants to make sure that the new specialist starts off on the right foot. You have a lot to do. But you also want the new DV specialist to work out well in the area, because it's going to make life a lot easier around DV issues related to kids at the centre. You also have a case of your own, so it might make sense to meet with the new worker about both cases at the same time. So you agree to team the case, Director thanks you and says she'll let Ellie know. Later in the day, you swing by Ellie's desk in order to talk about the case. She's sitting there staring at her computer screen without movement or expression. You wait for her to welcome you. She doesn't. So you finally clear off some papers from a chair and sit down. She looks at you blankly and then blinks into recognition. Finally, registering that you're there. You explain you're there to discuss the DV case, she smiles stiffly close the folder and just hands it to you. It's all yours. She says you explain you're not taking the case over just working with her on it. I don't need to do this with you. Ellie says I need to not be doing this case. So if you really want to help just take it away, you explain you have enough cases of your own, including a domestic violence case. So you can't really take over her case, you tell her it might be useful for the two of you to spend a few minutes talking about both cases, and how to work with the new specialist.

She just looks at you. You're tempted to just stand up and walk away. But you don't. You ask Ellie what she thinks about the idea, I just closed the case, she says you'd think I'd get a break or a thank you. But I just get another case, she looks at the folder and it's a lousy one. You have to get to another meeting, you stand and ask Ellie about a time to talk before meeting with the new specialist. You asked her to let you know when she's available the next few days. So you can set up the meeting. She barely acknowledges you leaving. You're frustrated with her but decide it's not worth confronting her, given all the other work you have to do. She is indeed as difficult with you as you've heard from others, and you're thankful you aren't a supervisor who has to deal with her. Later that day, you're sitting at your desk and realise you haven't heard from Ellie, you walk down the hall to her desk, she's not there, the computer screen is blank, her coat is gone. You turn to walk back and run into her supervisor. You ask if she's seen Ellie no, she says but she doesn't stay late and work late, much. She's a single mom with a couple of kids. You ask her if Ellie is usually pretty responsive about setting up meetings, returning emails and calls, it's hit or miss the supervisor says there are times well, when I'll get an email from her sent at 2 in the morning. And other times I won't get any response at all, the supervisor continued. I'm hearing that Ellie is not returning phone calls lately and is late responding to clients, I do need to talk to her about this. You wonder what you've got yourself into you a lot of your own cases, you don't want to waste time on trying to coordinate with another social worker, who seems not just difficult, but uninterested in working with you. You sigh. You turn towards your computer, and you send the specialist an email about the need to get together to talk in the next day or so. Okay, so that's the case. And what we're going to do is we're going to break you into breakout groups for 10 minutes. And all I want you to talk about is if you were the co-worker in this scenario, right? You're the one who is asked to team with Ellie on this, what would you do at this point? What would you do? And why?

(Bill Kahn)
You guys are all way too understanding. Okay, so I'm going to keep going. And we'll have time to sort of process a little bit. And thank you for the conversations, I just wanted to immerse you in the world again, although some of you are already pretty well immersed in it, of, of what it's like to be Ellie Canary, or this other coworker. And I want to start by exploring the stories that we tell because it turns out, as you all know, the narratives that we have in our head always determine who we are and who other people are and the actions we take. Right. So when we think about Ellie, there are certain stories that we often tell: she had a rough day, it's going to be okay, she's tired and worn down and needs sleep. She has to develop a thicker skin not take the work. So personally, she'll be fine. Just give it some time. She's not getting the right supervision. She's not in the right unit. She doesn't have the right role. She doesn't have the right cases. She's not cut out for the job. She's not strong enough to handle the emotional demands, right? And all of those stories, as you know, locate the issue inside le as an individual, right. And those stories frame how we think about something and therefore frame what we actually do.

And so again, those stories lead to actions, which is fixing the other person. And as I can tell from the notes you posted in the chat, that's, of course not the complete picture, right? But if we think about what Ellie needs based on those narratives, we say, just give her some time and space, and she'll be okay. She needs good mentor advice about how not how to not let the cases get to her personally, she needs her supervisor to say this is your job and hold her accountable. She needs someone else simply to take

some of her work and lighten the load. And she needs to think about is this the right job? Or is she quote unquote, strong enough? I'll come back to those quotes in a few minutes, right? And depending on which story you create about Ellie, you would do one or more of these actions, right? Because if our story is about the individual, our interventions are about the individual, right? And of course, what we're going to do now is we're going to change the frame, right? We're going to change how we think about it, and therefore the kinds of actions we would take, right? What if we shifted away from locating the problem in the individual, and instead, understood the basic premise, the basic premise of residential treatment is that we are always at risk for secondary trauma. So for example, if I was live in front of you right now, and you would just read the case about Elliot talked about it, I would have this dramatic pause. And I would say, what if I told you Ellie was sick, like really sick, and everybody in the room they're facing, you know, their shoulders would relax, and then you feel empathy for her? Right. And the truth is, that the reason I named Ellie the canary is because on some level, she's the canary in the coal mine and that everybody in residential treatment is always at risk for this invisible - you can't smell it, you can't see it - but it's the noxious gas in the coal mine, that affects everybody all the time, it affects some people more or more quickly than others, right? So as you know, secondary trauma, and it has different names. There's secondary traumatic stress, there's compassion fatigue, there's vicarious trauma. And essentially, what they all mean is that when we as humans work closely with those people who have been traumatised, we inevitably, unconsciously, always soak up some of their unconscious experience, or we unconsciously soak up their experience. So when you sit down with a family in distress, when you're working with a kid in distress, when you're working with a co-worker in distress, and you take in their story, you're not just taking in their story, you're taking it in their emotions as well. And that's simply because of the very human organ called empathy, right? It's almost like in the metaphor I'll give you is almost like a tuning fork. Right? And are we have a tuning fork inside us if we're empathetic human beings in caregiving work, and essentially what we're doing is we're resonating on the same frequency that they're communicating to us. This is unconscious, we can't necessarily stop it. And it happens, and it affects us. And so the image I give you is that of a soaking. Think of all of us as sponges that soak up other people's pain and anguish, despair and outrage, sadness and shame. And so I'll just stop there for a second. And then say, and with and as long as we absorb and contain that material, we get affected as human beings, none of us is immune. Okay, so again, I called her the canary. They are clear signs that Ellie is suffering from a disease from a secondary traumatic stress, right? She avoids people that require too much work, meaning she's trying to put on her forehead, a Do Not Disturb sign. Or when you go to a hotel and says there's no rooms available, right? So she's trying to essentially give messages that say she is in shutdown lockdown mode, right? She's routinely frustrated, angry and despairing, meaning she's soaked up some other people's emotions, She's depressed, she doesn't want to go to work or stay there, which is a way of protecting her from more exposure. She avoids supervision. Why? Because she doesn't necessarily feel like she's able to unpack those emotional experiences in there and then be left with them alone. And as I said, She's the canary in the coal mine. So if this is true, then it means that our traditional ways of staying strong that is pushing away the emotion and trauma of the work, are sooner or later not going to work. Which means we have to redefine what it means to stay strong in this work. And whenever I work, I do a lot of research and writing and consulting with caregiving organisations, including residential treatment centres, and the first work I need to do with people is have these conversations about what does it mean to be strong in this work? What does strength mean? And typically, when we think about prevailing ideas about strength, we typically mean we are invulnerable.

The work doesn't get to me, look how strong I am. My friends say, I can't believe you do that work, and it doesn't bother you at all. And I pridefully say, yeah, it doesn't bother me at all right? Or it means the people that we deal with, don't get us emotionally don't affect us. It might mean that the emotions that we feel when we do our work, do not do not sort of impact us. That's typically what strength means - we're like action heroes, superheroes who walk through the chaos, and were unaffected by it and the bullets don't touch us, right? We're not weakened. We're not disabled. It means, of course, that we believe unconsciously, that our armour we have armour that's thick and strong enough to withstand assaults. And you know, and you know, what it's like to be in these organisations, where you look at the brand new residential treatment centre worker, and in their first few cases, they're really struggling, they're sad, they might be crying, they might be upset, they might be mad, and you say to yourself, they'll learn, right, they'll learn to get tougher, and they'll learn to get stronger. Right? And that's a problem. It's a problem if what we believe is that all we need to have is armour that is thick enough and strong enough and then we'll be fine. Because what that means is, if we believe that then people are left to only do these kinds of things to cope, they learn how to compartmentalize. That is to somehow (this is all unconscious, right) to put into some strong box within them, the emotional difficulty and pain of what they're doing. They locate that somewhere in them, and then they're able to go home, and it stays in there shut tight. That's our illusion. That's our fantasy. That's our wish, right? Or we see people who are who find ways to emotionally distant distance while they're in the actual work. So you see them they're sarcastic, they're cynical, they dismiss emotion. When people are sad, they're disgusted, they turn away, they find ways to distance themselves, not just from their own painful emotions, but from the people who are expressing those emotions. They escape, they self-medicate, they do too much. What do they do too much sex, drugs, rock and roll alcohol, reality TV, which I believe by which I believe is on par with all those other things.

None of these, of course, are bad in moderation, they help keep us functional. They help keep us "sane". The problem is, if we encase ourself, in heavy armour, if those tendencies - compartmentalization, escapism, emotional distance, sarcasm, if those become habits, if they become us, if they have us, and not just we have them as tools, but they've captured us. Essentially, the metaphor here is the armour gets so heavy that you can't take it off. And they cause damage to people. There are people who are just emotionally affected in ways that really, really cost them. There's cost to their habits of staying strong, right? So what do I mean by the costs? One is, if we cut off our emotions at work, it's not so easy to reconnect them when we're at home. When we're with our friends, when we're there, our family, our loved ones, right? Our partners, right? If we learn at work, how to emotionally distance or "not to care too much", we're disconnecting the wires a little bit, it's hard over time to connect them when we get home, right. And, again, these are the things we soak up from the kids that we work with. We are chronically isolated, we're alienated. We don't feel appreciated, we don't feel loved, right? Again, this is not conscious. But these are some of the costs of the secondary traumatic stress. There's also this notion of our basic trust and human goodness is affected. And so it means it's harder to remain intimate and trusting of others. The example I have is, is how different it is when most of you and I go to a grocery store, a supermarket.

And there's a kid in a cart, like you know, sitting in a cart, a three year old sitting in a cart, crying just wailing. And I walk by and I'm thinking oh, the kid looks pretty sad. Probably didn't get the chocolate milk that he wanted. And I keep walking, I do my shopping you, the people who are embedded in the worker residential treatment centre, walk by and have a very different experience. Where's the mother? Where's the father? Is there abuse going on? What's going on here? Is this kid being abandoned? Is

this kid being abused? Right? There's different ways in which you think about things not so each of you. But people in people in residential treatment centre, who work with abused, ignored, intruded upon, abandoned children routinely. It changes your worldview in very subtle and important ways such that you start to tell different stories about what you see that I am. I think people in this profession as the Coast Guard, as the people who are patrolling the waters, to make sure the world is safe. And I'm just ignorantly, blissfully going on going along my way. I'm a civilian, and you guys are on the frontlines. But that that does something to you as human beings. Relationships with clients suffer as people learn not to care, that is care too much. Distance from others, they don't, as you notice, you know, Ellie didn't go to her supervisor, people stop going to peers and supervisors, partly because they just don't want to. My hypothesis is they don't want to explore what they're carrying emotionally, it's just too painful.

And of course, we struggled to remain compassionate. The root of the word compassion, the Greek, the Greek root is to suffer with, right? That's what compassion is. We're suffering alongside suffering others, it's hard over time to continue to do that, particularly when you're alone. Okay. And by the way, it's not just compassion for others, it's compassion for ourselves. I want to share with you a great quote by somebody called Parker Palmer, who's a wonderful writer is a theologian and a social worker. He says:
“Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering. Sometimes we aim that violence on ourselves as in overwork that leads to burnout or worse, or in the many forms of substance abuse. Sometimes they aim at violence and other people.”

But it's the first sentence that really, for me, is very powerful. That is when treatment centres, when any organisational milieu has violence of the physical or the verbal or abusive kind, or people are brutal to themselves. It's because they're suffering that is unnamed and unmet. Right. And so, as you can tell, I'm setting this up for you, because I'm about to go into, is there a different way to do this, where we meet suffering as a part of the work that we do for ourselves and for others in these treatment centres? Okay. That starts with the redefinition of strength, right? So if the old definition is the operating definition is I'm invulnerable, and the work doesn't get to me, I want to offer a different way of understanding what it means to be strong in the work of caregiving organisations. And my premise here is anyone who absorbs and contains emotions, toxic emotions, - sadness, fear, rage, abandonment, isolation - for too long, will suffer damage, by definition. And that's the extent to which we are routinely sad, or despairing or enraged or bitter, it starts to become who we are, right? We start to become - It's not simply I feel bitter. It's I am bitter. Right. And that shift is a really important shift that we need to intervene in and interrupt. So armour doesn't really protect, protect, right? So the question I've been struggling with is, so what is strength, given the fact that we cannot not feel some of what we import from traumatised and distressed others.
And what I came up with is strength - and ultimately, resilience - is a function of having the capacity to absorb, to contain, to work with and release painful emotions and keep going without lasting damage. So it's an ongoing process of absorption, containing, and by the way, I use the word contain, because the opposite of containers to leak out, right. It's to not contain somebody as you leak your experiences everywhere. Ellie Canary is leaking them everywhere in the relationship to her supervisor or clients are co-worker herself, right? So to contain them is to acknowledge what you're experiencing, to work with, to understand them and release them. None of which we can do by ourselves. Which is why we're

going to move toward the idea of relationships containing relationships. Okay, now, whose - before I get there - the question is whose responsibility is it to help the caregiver, to help the social worker to help the treatment residential treatment centre worker, to actually be able to be strong in that way? Whose responsibility is it? Well, it starts with us, right? It starts with, you know, any of us in the caregiving profession, we have to choose to care for ourselves, exercise therapy, show social support, friendship, healthy habits, intimacy, we have to make that choice, we have to bring ourselves into that. And yet - and here's where we go to a lot of your comments in the chat - to understand what it means to be in a trauma marked organisation. Others in the organisation, particularly those who are in leadership and management roles, have to start thinking of their job as helping to ensure that toxicity is dispersed and absorbed by groups and teams, rather than located in individuals. A few of you wrote in the chat after your breakout conversations, let's not scapegoat Ellie. And that's exactly right. And so the idea is, how do we make sure that it's not Ellie, who's the identified Canary, who's the identified patient or the identified problem, right? Let's help people understand that all of us are affected. And so therefore, all of us need to figure out how to join together to disperse as opposed to be adversely affected by what you're carrying, and what you're absorbing. All right. And that happens, by the way, in the context of supervision. So part of what I really care about when I work with organisations and help them sort of develop an understanding of this in practice is I spend a lot of time training supervisors about what is the role of supervision, it is not simply to disperse cases, it's not simply to count and manage it is also to make sure that they go beyond the boring phrase, which is our workers, our most important asset. Everybody says it, nobody has a clue as to what it actually means. It lives in the relation between the supervisor and the social worker, or their caregiver, and the supervisor helping form peer relations among others. That's part of their job. It's not one that they're rewarded for. It's not one that they're held accountable to. It's not one that's measured, right. But it is crucial in terms of being a really effective supervisor. Okay. And then there's senior leaders, and I think of them as enabling a good enough healing environment. And this comes from Donald Winnicott who talked about the good enough mother, the good enough holding environment. I've shaped a little bit to say, what does it mean for leaders to create good enough healing environments, in which everything I've said becomes discussable, it becomes named, it becomes a source of work as opposed to shame.

Okay, so what does that mean? It means we create regular meeting structures, practices, we create norms in which people are lauded for, as opposed to diminish for, by talking about their experience, it means there's a discourse, you know, which is a type of conversation we have. The discourse here is this work affects all of us, of course, so how can we have been working on this together, that's sort of the language that we're allowed to use. All of those allow for what I call relational bridges between people where difficult emotions can be shared and released. I promise you, I'm going to be more specific about how that actually happens. I promise you, right now, I'm just naming the sort of the theory of it. And it also means defining and approaching this as a collective problem, not an individual problem. Which is not easy, because in some ways, our human brains are wired to hold on to individual stories. We're all so gifted at telling a story about Ellie, or telling a story about that person or that person, right. It's much less easy for us to hold on to complicated stories about the about the group or the organisation or the community. Those are much harder stories for us to hang on to.

So based on all that I'm now going to talk about, so what does this mean, actually about what we do? Right, and I'm going to talk about a few intervention principles. I'm going to give you an example of how I worked with an organisation to help them implement some of these principles. And then I don't remember what else is here, but we'll get there. Okay. So intervention principle one is, we need to

strengthen the social networks among people in the organisation, right? And his social network, think of sort of a, a web, right, or people connecting in forming bridges, right, which allows people to feel held and connected, because what I didn't say, is Ellie Canary and all the other Ellie Canarys around there around in that world, not only do they feel exhausted, or burned out or depleted, they're also looking around, and it seems like everyone else is doing fine. Right? And so it seems that way, and if I'm Ellie, and I'm looking around and feeling everyone's doing fine, and I'm overwhelmed, and I can't do this anymore, I then also have an added layer of shame, as if there's something wrong with me, right? And what a social network does, it offers the possibility of people reframing this from: I have shame because I am less than, to the possibility of, oh, this affecting all of us. What does that mean about how I can connect with others, right? And you start to see other people as affected as well. Okay, so here, it's about social networks become the absorption mechanism, it's all of us start to soak up like a sponge, right? As opposed to any one member has it? Right. So what I write here is: Social workers absorb traumatic experience, by fusing its effects and demonstrating that members' feelings are understood.

So if you can see my hand, right now, there's Ellie Canary, and she's experiencing all of this. But imagine if Ellie was in a tight, like, I mean, emotionally connected social network, say, for example, the team, right or group, and suddenly, her experience becomes diffused, and validated among everybody else, and therefore, it's not all on her as a weight she cannot bear. Instead, it becomes diffuse, such that they can bear this together. That's the intellectual point here, right. And again, I'm going to get to that more specifically. And so what it means is Ellie's not left outside. But instead, she's validated and included as a valuable member of this of the team. Now, that's not easy. The reason it's not easy, because the dirty secret here is if I'm in a group of caregivers, and Ellie is one on my team, but she's struggling, the dirty secret is unconsciously, I get some pleasure out of her being the struggling one, which allows me to believe that I'm fine. Right? And so on some level, it's unconscious, we don't reach out to bring her back in, because she's serving a purpose for me, where I can think of myself as strong and capable, and unaffected, because I see someone who is less than, who's struggling. That's the dirty secret, which we do not ever talk about. But which gets in the way of really developing strong social networks. That's why scapegoats exist. Okay, that's intervention, principle one, intervention, principle two, is this idea of a safe place. So when I think of safety, I think of, can I say, what I think and feel and not suffer formal or informal consequences because of it. So the idea here, the premise here is that staff members who experience secondary traumatic stress, need places in which to tell their stories to others, and in doing so, experience a sense of insight and relief. Okay, so let me say a little bit more about that. There's a book called on my shelf - Trauma and Recovery - by a psychologist named Judith Herman and she was one of the first people who really wrote beautifully about the idea of trauma.What she said is, recovery from trauma requires people to tell their stories over and over in ways that allow them to relive the emotions. It's not just you tell the facts of what happened to me, but you also relive the emotions a little bit. And in doing so, it becomes this step. The profound shift is a story that grips you, that has you, it becomes your identity over time as you tell what happens to you, and what it feels like and what do you think about it what you've been trying to do, when you say that over time, the story recedes from the one that has you, to one of the stories you have, it becomes part of who you are, not all of who you are, because it is one of the stories that you tell about yourself and your experience. And that only happens when we're able to verbalise our experience. Last thing I'll say about this is we cannot help but express our emotions. Emotions demand to be expressed. We either do that well or badly, to express them well is to verbalise them with others who receive them with affirmation and

support and care to express them badly is to act them out. To show people how furious and upset you are by making them furious and upset. And so what this is about is creating a safe place so we can express our emotions well and not badly. So attending in a traumatic incident is the single most important active ingredient required for us to heal, which means we need others who will mostly listen. Just listen and absorb, and nod, and help people feel like they're not alone.

Okay, third one. And this gets back to the Winnicott idea, which is a holding environment, which is really about a place where we accept the stressors as real and legitimate as opposed to sort of say they're not. We view what's happening as institutional that is, by the by the mere fact that we do this work, we will experience these things, we cannot help it, which means it's not an individual problem. Leaders seek solutions as opposed to assign blame or create scapegoats. There's a high tolerance for individuals struggling well and badly. And people express their support clearly, directly. abundantly. There is praise and commitment and affection, all the things you say all the things we say we need to we need to offer to offer to the kids in our care, we need to offer to one another as well, and be able to take that in. And finally, there are a few sanctions against what can be said, messages are clear and direct. And this is a place where we simply accept, accept what we contain because of the fact that we do this work together. Okay, so those are the three sort of intervention principles. And I want to give you a brief example of what I did in a residential treatment centre. And what happens is, and they were struggling a lot, so I came in and I did was writing about it, I helped them with it. Right? The kind of research I do is called Action Research, which is I believe, you understand that organisation most by having by it's struggling to change - it reveals itself in powerful ways. So that's the work that I love to do. Okay, so what we did is we had groups of residential care workers meet every two weeks for an hour. And I trained peer facilitators to keep the group on task. Right. And the conversation was the whole focus was simply this question. How does our work affect us as human beings? And it's a powerful question, and one that people wanted to avoid. And instead, the conversation - and this is why I had to train peer facilitators to keep it to keep it focus - the conversation often started as a victimisation place, right? So what people wanted to do was they simply wanted to wanted to complain and vent, they wanted to blame. They wanted to blame their leaders and supervisors. They wanted to blame their peers. They wanted to blame the families and the kids. They wanted to blame everyone as a way of helping them stay in this very painful place, right? But if we start to look at how does this work affect us as human beings, we share stories of what happened to us their impact, and what we can learn about ourselves. Because ultimately, that's what keeps us resilient. Because when we simply complain to one another, we feel better in the moment, but truthfully, we feel a lot worse, because there's no hope when all we're doing is complaining. There's very little hope. Right?

I mean, that phrase is misery loves company but the truth is misery loves misery, right? It just creates a cycle of more misery. Okay, so they met every two weeks for an hour, they focused only on how does this work affect us as human beings. People talk about feelings, but the groups are not therapy. And what I mean by that is, somebody would say, I really struggled with that. I really struggled when the mother of that child showed up late again, and berated her child, during a family visit family visitation. Therapy is when I would say to the social worker, or the caregiver, I would say, so. So were you troubled by the mother because of your relationship with your own mother? That's therapy, that's, that's exploring why certain individuals might have certain vulnerabilities or triggers or wounds. That's not the purpose of these of these groups. And that's not what we did. Instead, it's, you know, the facilitator

would help people look at when other people had similar experiences of being really frustrated and let down by the people who were supposed to be watching out for these kids. And how did that affect them as people doing this work? Right. And what I loved about it is an hour every two weeks is nothing, it's nothing at all. But what it is, it's a model for how they can talk with one another at work the rest of the time. That's what I cared about. I cared about them changing their narrative and their discourse with one another, and changing their definition of strength, from invulnerability to thoughtful vulnerability. Okay, now, in order to do those, I had to teach them rules of engagement. Right? So what were the rules by which we actually sort of lead those groups, one is remain focused on the how this work affects us as human beings. Another is, I wanted to honour people being silent. So people were invited to speak, but they were only invited, they could stay quiet, because I wanted people to have a sense of consent and control. Because often in this work, we don't, we don't have a sense of control. People were asked to speak using the word I, of course, and not speak for others, I wanted them to be careful about how much space they took up in the group. Because there are people to talk way too much, right. So we were talking about that, which is don't take more space than you should. I also wanted people to not give advice to others. I said, we're going to resist the impulse to fix, advise, save or set straight. All you do is you share a story that can help others reflect on their experiences, they share their stories and the emotions they had. And that is enough. In fact, it's more than enough. Of course, the men had more trouble with this. That's just a joke, sort of. I asked him to give full attention to the person speaking to avoid side conversations, of course, I wanted them to remind. And I love this phrase. I wanted them to realise that other people are not failed attempts at being you. Right? So think about that. You are not a failed attempt at being me. Because what often is the case is well, that's not how I would do it. And therefore you would demonstrate or share that you were disappointed that others didn't do it the way you would have done it. And instead, I wanted people to be legitimately curious about it. So that's funny, you reacted that way I would have reacted this way - help me understand. So there's a curiosity, which again, is a form of complete and utter respect. Don't text, blah, blah. Okay. And confidentiality was interesting, right? At first, I said, Okay, we never say what happens in this group of people are going to violate that, right, of course. So then I wanted to give them a way to speak about it without violating confidentiality. So what I said is, you can share what you've learned in here, but you may not ever name anyone else in this group. You can't say, Ellie Canary had that experience, right? All you can say is, hey, here's what I learned from that. Here's what I learned from our conversation. Right? And we'll start and end on time, which is really about the management of boundaries and respecting one's boundaries. Okay, and allow people to feel safe to actually ask to do the work. Okay.

So the last part of what I had to say, I think, about five more slides, and then we'll have some time is I wanted to sort of move from the experience of like helping groups, right. And by the way, that intervention is still going five years later, I spent a year with them training and supporting I would, I would meet with the peer facilitators once a month or so talk about what the work of facilitator was doing to them as human beings. So I was modelling for them how to do this group, and it's still going which is really wonderful. Okay. I then wanted to think about sort of resilience and what does it mean to organise a whole organisation around resilience, and so with another organization, residential treatment centre, I created with - I never do this by myself - I did this with the leaders, we created a process called resilience planning in which every member has an action plan for maintaining resilience and an ongoing system in which supervisors check in and monitored plans. This are also of course require me to train

supervisors about what resilience is and how to plan for that, right. So we focused on the nature, symptoms and management of secondary traumatic stress. I led some of these groups for them as well, we did these coping sessions, which were anytime a member was involved in any disturbing event, there was a restraint, there was a kid that ran away, like whatever it was, every week, people whoever had had an event or wanted to join this group, again, talked about what happened, how it had affected them as a human being what they did and got support around that. So we trained them to do that. And again, in this organisation, I also did the same thing as I did in the other, where there's peer groups in which trained peer facilitators meet monthly to talk about what this work does to them, the focus is on what they were absorbing. Right. And again, I love that the focus is on what they absorb, as opposed to what's wrong with you.

As part of as part of that, organising for resilience, I needed to work with the leaders to change their discourses to change how they spoke about the work itself. Because I believe that resilience is not simply what we do, but how we talk about it. And so one discourse I work with them on is we need to create strong work relationships, that's a language we use. And so all of what I'm going to say on this, and I have three discourses, right? And so this one is about the notion - the basic premise is that resilience is about interactions that actually embed people in a web of caring, available relationships. And the notion is we are we can find shelter and strength when you move toward one another, not away from one another at work. And so what does that mean? It means we have to be very clear about communication, we share information, we meet and clarify structures, rather than rush to respond. We listen to one another, we approach problems together, where we diagnose what's happening together, and therefore commit to create solutions together. And we're able to respectfully disagree, right? And so, again, discourses are what I think of as foundational anchors that then allow people to create the right structures, processes, etc. I just wanted them to understand the basic discourses or premises of what resilience is in organisations, right? And at the heart. And so the other part of the discourse is at the heart of resilience is this sense of we're in this together, that we do not have to face what we're facing by ourselves and therefore be left isolated with shame and a sense of diminishment. Okay, so the first discourse that that grounds resilience is relationships. The second is the importance of the fact that we are emotional creatures, and our emotions matter, right? That is, emotions offer valuable information. And, when we focus on emotions, we're then able to create the right relationships, right? And so what does that mean? It means we engage in relatively open emotional expression of sadness, and joy. We tolerate and don't turn away from difficult emotions, we check in with one another. During the course of our meetings and interactions. We actually believe emotions are valuable, they're not weakness, and the extent to which we're able to acknowledge our emotions, and what they mean to us, it means we can actually move together. And when we do these kinds of things, we create what I call decompression stops. I don't know if any of you are scuba, scuba divers, essentially, when you scuba dive, you go down a number of feet. And when you come up, if you come up too quickly, right, something bad happens, which is really bad. But so essentially, compressed air, if you're not stopping and breathing the air out, the air releases in other ways, like through your stomach, which is not what you want, right? So what these activities do is they help us decompress, stop, breathe, understand what we're containing, release it and then sort of move up, right? And that's because without the relief of these emotional pressures, without the importance of understanding these emotions matter to us, we need to understand them. We will, as I said, express them badly. And so the discourse here is emotions are central. They're not peripheral, they're not absent, and they help us understand what our

work means to us and how to connect with one another. This is the reason this this course is important. The reason this is, like I mean for me it's obvious, because in too many organisations, the fantasy is you walk into an organisation you take your emotions off like a coat, you put it on the coat rack, you walk in and you do your work. And hopefully you remember you're putting on your coat on the way out. Right. But it's that's just not the way that's not the way we're wired. Okay, the last discourse is, it's really about hope. Right? It's really about hope and optimism. That is, what leaders do in resilient organisations is they help people understand the world is manageable. We maintain the belief that that we can understand and comprehend what's happening, and that we can overcome adversity. And when that belief matters to people. It's like, again, the work we do with our kids, in these organisations is provide them with the tools and the sense that you can do this, that that that you can overcome adversity, right? When people believe that what they do will make a difference, that their influence is real and predictable, they're actually able to actually try and shape what's happening positively as opposed to negatively. And so what does this mean in terms of how we approach our work, we approach really difficult situations as opportunities to learn and grow. We appreciate difficulty, but assume we're going to have the resources and abilities among us, I don't have to have them all myself among us to manage our work in ways that that get our work done and leave us intact, right. And and the other thing we do is we tell stories and retell stories of meeting challenges, overcoming adversity, and getting stronger because of it. And so resilience, as a capability, grows, right? Resilience evolves, as we realise that we can actually survive and learn from stuff as we examine and solve problems.

Okay, so those are….. okay, I like this, too. When we believe that we can handle observed adversity, it becomes so, right, and we strengthen like, the more we do, the more we cope together, we strengthen our belief that our world is manageable. Okay. And the reason sort of I go through those discourses is because I believe that how we talk is how we work. Right talk is really important. That is the discourse we have, right? And so all I'm trying to do is normalise what we can be. In fact, everything I'm really talking about today is how do we normalise painful, difficult situations? How do we normalise it such that it becomes something that we can do together. So what I want us to normalise what the work does to us what it feels like to do this work, how we try to take care of ourselves in ways good and bad. How we can reach out to one another instead of turn away from one another. Right? And so these new conversations are marked by what I think of as an integration of emotions into our work, not splitting them off. So in every meeting, not every meeting, but a lot of meetings you can say what happened? What's going on? So tell me what's going on with the situation, the case, the situation, the client, and what are you going to do? And how are you? What was it like for you? What are you feeling? What are you feeling now? What do you need, right? This is at the heart of supervisory training, right? And what leaders ought to be doing what peers ought to be doing, just acknowledging that what's happening inside the human worker is really important and valuable. And so when we take seriously that this work always affects care workers. And we pay attention to the selves of the members, and not just to the work, we actually strengthen one another. Okay, last slide. I promise. There's something I call compassion cascades. Because we're not gifted at these conversations, right? Years of defining strength in terms of toughness means that agency leaders and members tend to tend to focus on the what, and not focus on the how are you? How are you doing? Right? Who are you right now in this work? Right? We tend to focus on the cases, as opposed to the people working these cases. Okay, so here's the narrative. The narrative is there's no time. There's just no time, right? Everywhere I everywhere I go in these organisations, people say we don't have time to sit around and talk about

feelings, right? If I had a nickel for every time someone said that were touchy, feely to me, I don't know if they say that in Scotland, but they say it here, touchy feely, I would have retired years ago on some private island. And so what they say is there's just too much real work to do. But the truth is, if I followed people in a residential care centre, if I followed them around and marked what they were doing and not doing, you would find that they would waste more time by not talking about this than by talking about this. Right. So the issue of time is both true but it's also a total defence, right? It's a defence mechanism. It takes more time to not adress secondary traumatic stress. Because of all the costs that I named before. When people hold on to their difficult situations, and emotions too long, everything suffers, which means work is not going to get done efficiently or effectively. And there will be casualties of the kids and of the staff members themselves. Right? And so for me, it's all about, it's all about can we ask questions in these organisations, in which we actually care about people understanding that this work, of course, affects them as human beings. And if we change those conversations, people can be can be made safe and strong together.

(Lorraine Sillars)
Bill, it's Lorraine Bill. Thank you so much. I will rewatch this slowing you down. I understood every word, but there were so many important things I wanted to stop and go. Could you say a bit more about that? Could you say a bit more about that. But it feels that what you've brought to life for me is the conversation we've been trying to have, even over the course of today is what is it really going to take to allow that ask you have made of us about that emotions are central to the work and that they're not taken off and left at the door, given with children and young people in Scotland have told us what they want from us. And some of the things in the chat that have come up about your ideas about the idea that folk of Coast Guards, Scape Goating and the idea about what happens in teams has come over really strongly. And so what I'm going to ask as if that are and I'm conscious that Laura is on the line as well and is going to help a bit with this. Is if folk have got some questions they'd like to ask Bill, If you want to drop them in the chat. I'm still chewing over this idea of building a point where people feel the world is manageable and how important that is just now in so many different ways. So take a minute write some questions in the chat if you can, and we'll take comments too.

(Laura Steckley)
So Phil has a question that is addressed to you, I'm pretty sure Bill. He wants to know if it's difficult to get started with teams who think that they have no problems?

(Bill Kahn)
So, of course it is right. I mean, ideally, I tend to work with organisations, because I'm a psychologist, of course that approach me. I'd rather work with people who already acknowledge that they're in some pain, right? They're losing workers, they're losing …, like there's some pain or loss that they that they're unable to sort of work through and that really is sort of why they approached me and it's wonderful, right? But you're asking a question of - probably not me approaching them - but if a leader is finding a team that just doesn't understand they're not doing well, I would say that's a failure of leadership. For me, the job of a leader, one of the jobs of a leader is to really help teams understand that they are failing in some fashion, either or not living up to, not meeting their goals, not living up to their potential, whatever language you want to use. The job of a leader is to point out the gap between where people are and where they need to be. Now, where they need to be is not simply about productivity and

numbers, right. It could also be you're losing people, people are burning out, right? They're not supporting one another. There's lots of ways to understand what it means to fail or not do well. The job of a leader is to help people understand that reality, right? And then give them a choice. And the choice is, is this work that you want to do. If not here's the consequences, right? I mean, for me, leaders are like really good parents without the whole without the whole... It's not a great metaphor, but what really good for leaders and parents do similarly is they offer the right balances of support and accountability. And if a team doesn't I understand they're not doing well, it may be they're getting too much support, not enough accountability. Hope that answers a little bit.

(Laura Steckley)
Great, I think so.

The next question is from Judy Furnival. And she asks whether you think it's helpful to have external consultancy, to be able to achieve this organisational resilience?

(Bill Kahn)
That's a great, that's a great question, I would say. So the phrase is helpful, I would say it's helpful, but not always necessary. I mean, I'm aware that when I go into an organisation, and help them around resilience, or a lot of the things I've been talking about, I very rarely tell them something they don't already know. All I do is help them name and discuss the things that have been difficult for them to name or for them to name discuss. And I help them realise that they've been making certain choices that are not in line with what they say they want. Right? That's all I do. I mean, I have some expertise, for example, around the intervention principles or around how to set up peer groups, or around sort of the discourses they ought to be starting to use, and I'll share that with them. But the truth is, bad consultations is when a consultant comes in with the answer that may have nothing to do with the problems people are having. So mostly what I do is I help them articulate the problems they're having. And I worked with them to discover the solutions, occasionally offering them some ideas around that. So yes, is an outsider, helpful? But only if people are stuck, right? If the organisation is stuck, then it's useful to have an external third party at least for a while. And when I say at least for a while, I mean, I mean, to train them, and help them develop their own capabilities such that I can leave, because if they get dependent on me, that's actually worse than anything else.

(Laura Steckley)
Okay, great. Thanks. Marie's iPad has said, she wanted you to know, she thought it was superb, but she also wondered about the best first steps in creating a containing environment.

(Bill Kahn)
You know, the first step is always to name who we are and what we're doing, and whether it's working or whether it's not. So the first step is to name that we are not a containing environment. The first step is naming it is the first important thing, once we name it, then we can work. So I would first step for me, it's for people, for leaders to convene. I think the power of the leader is to convene right at the supervisory level, it's at the middle manager level, it's the senior leadership level, it's to convene and name, name the open secrets, right? The open secret is, we are struggling as a group or a team or organisation, because some of this work is overwhelming. And we're not pulling together the way we

could, that for me is the very first step just to name it, and start to articulate it and give people the space to join in that conversation. Because I guarantee it, when you give people the space, they will know so much more than any leader about what the problems are and what some potential solutions are. Always. So the job of a leader is to convene them, and to end to open up the space for people to truly help in figuring out who we are and who we could be.

(Laura Steckley)
The next question actually is of a similar kind. And you may have just answered it around convening, making space and naming things and maybe giving permission as well was in there. Gary had just asked how can we implement these strategies that Bill has spoken about? Do you want to add anything to that? Or do you feel like that was really,

(Bill Kahn)
I would just re emphasise…In fact, John Ryan answered it. So right after Gary, John says something right. And for me, the best way to implement is to really join and partner and be alongside them and be and, model with and for them what it means to live out those discourses.

(Laura Steckley)
So Hannah's just mentioned how your presentation has made her think about how we advocate for what residential childcare, the sector needs, workers need, et cetera, in the light of looming public sector cuts, and so there isn't really a question there, but just kind of what you're talking about is speaking beyond the organisation to sector wide concerns as well. And then Craig McCreadie talks about this touchy feely language and the recognition of that here in Scotland, how can we pivot? He asks people from avoiding the principles you talked about towards embracing them.

(Bill Kahn)
Hell if I know. Sorry, did I say that out loud?

I mean, the only thing I can do is offer this and then see if other people have better ideas. I think the most profound thing you can say to someone is, so you say you want this some outcome, some type of organisation, some type of culture, and you've chosen to do this, how's that working for you? Like, for me, the most profound you can say, like a teenager is, so you say you want this and you're choosing to like throw tantrums or do this, how's that working for you? Because it grounds people in their goals and intentions and helps them to recognise they're making choices, and that they could make other choices. For me, that's probably the way to start and go from there.

(Laura Steckley)
Okay, super. Michelle Howard is asking if you could say more about the peer facilitators and the impact of that, the work that you mentioned in one of the services. In her experience, it's often been managers who facilitate, and she's keen to hear about the benefits of peer facilitation.

(Bill Kahn)
Yeah. And for me, that decision was grounded in the idea of safety, I wanted people to feel like they could say what they thought and felt, without any sense that they were going to be diminished because

of it or punished for it. And the more you have hierarchy in the room, the less safe it is, no matter how wonderful and caring and loving the manager is, it doesn't matter, because people will project onto them, their own stuff around authority and hierarchy that always gets in the way of the safety. So that's why I always train peer facilitators in these kinds of organisations, and also, frankly, I think, I think peers love the idea of being authorised in that way. Right? I think, you know, at every level, people really enjoy being authorised. And I always switch around, like I trained a lot of peers. And at any point, any of them could, could facilitate that Tuesday, and on Thursday a different a different pair of facilitators will do it. And I usually have a pair facilitate the teams. And so that's really why I do it.

(Laura Steckley)
Do you have literature that you either drew on or that you've written that she might reach for in trying to replicate that kind of approach in her service?

(Bill Kahn)
I really don't. Did I write about it somewhere? I need to think about that. Okay.

(Laura Steckley)
All right. Sarah Deeley is asking whether if by asking the right questions, Bill, you are holding the hands of the organisation, who then holds the hands of those who holds the hands of the child, which is a key phrase from the promise.

(Bill Kahn)
So Sarah, I can't tell from that question. I can't tell from the language, whether holding their hands is a paternalistic, materialistic thing that's negative, or whether it's simply your alongside Sarah, how did you mean that?

(Laura Steckley)
So that was more a comment in response to when you were talking about external facilitators coming in. And are they helpful or not helpful. So that comment was in relation to the external facilitators

(Bill Kahn)
Got it. So I think the answer is absolutely. And I try to be as explicit about that as possible. I try to essentially say, I don't try to do it obnoxiously, but I essentially say I am working with you in such a way that I hope models the way in which you can work with others. So it's at cascade of compassion, or a cascade of, as John Ryan said, being alongside being beside, I try to explicitly model that as much as possible. Which means I try to make available for them… that my relation with them is a place where they can, where it's sort of like a laboratory where they can ask questions about it. Right? They can say, Bill, you did that? Why'd you do that? It made me feel this, and then we explore that.

It also seems that it might be containing and that it makes things feel more manageable to them so that then they can convey the manageability of the world is cascading down as well. Yeah, absolutely.

And the other thing is I want particularly senior leaders I want to give them because they can't do this for other people in that organisation right, they can do with me or I say, tell me how this work is affecting you as a human being. No one else is going to ask them that question and they wouldn't answer it honestly, anyway. So I ask them that and then I say okay, so you and I just had an interaction. Tell me what that was like for you. Which then we'll get them to legitimise that and normalise that conversation across your organisation, but they first have to have the experience and often that's an outsider they'll have that with me.

(Laura Steckley)
John Ryan has asked how you skill supervisors to dance I like the use of dance here. Thing, individuals without necessarily becoming a counsellor or a therapist, like real clarity really, isn't it?

(Bill Kahn)
It's really tricky, and they will mess up, right. And so we roleplay the hell out of it like, like, part of that part of the training is me just role playing with him. And at one point, I'll instruct one of the people in the group to cry. Right? And then I'll work with a peer facilitators, which is how are you going to manage that right. And John, what I tend to do, like the, the messy rule of thumb here is, is when you feel pulled as a facilitator or supervisor in, in sort of entering their personal life, I want you to be aware of that pull, and say, in my role of supervisor, this is what I can offer you. And if that's not enough for you, I suggest you reach out to a therapist or … So I try to really get them to start to manage their own pulls and recognise them.

(Laura Steckley)
I'm going to sneak there's one more question in the chat, but I'm going to sneak one in that just goes right along with John's and I was thinking about the fear that leaders and managers often have about if you open up this Pandora's Box, especially if they're used to then feeling like if their response, their habitual response and habit of mind is to then have to fix it somehow. But this is unfixable? And, how, what little kernel, or what thing could people carry in their pocket to remind themselves of the power of that release, just by telling the story or just by listening kind of thing? Because I think that's one of the biggest obstacles,

(Bill Kahn)
You know, and I have to say, well, first of all, Pandora's box, right? So you know, the, you know, Pandora's Box, which is, all the evils in the world flew out, and hope is the only thing that remained in the box. It's my favourite part of that story. Right. Sorry. That's a total tangent.

It is so relevant, actually,right. And so, I mean, my sense is, is that people that's a narrative people often use the narrative is, if I, if I start to talk about this, it'll never stop. And the truth is, I just have to get people just to try it because it's not true. People are really good about learning when to stop crying. Like they're really good at it. Right? It doesn't go on that long, right? It may feel like forever, but it's really not. And so the so I still are, I can't really convince them without helping them try it. It's the only thing I can do. They need to have the experience of opening up. I'll say, start with that person, not that person, right? Because that person doesn't trigger you as much right? Start with that person. And let's just see how it goes. So it's an ongoing process of just learning.

Nice. And Judy's asked, how would you suggest leaders and workers managed to avoid slipping back into defensive habits when they face overwhelming stress?

(Bill Kahn)
So the best way I know how to do it, is by posing that question. Like in every organisation, before I leave, we pose that question. Exactly. And I say, you like, the things we've been working on for six months doesn't counteract the things you've been doing for 20 years, right? Not a chance. You will slip. Absolutely, you will go back into a defensive crouch as opposed to a developmental process. Absolutely. The question is, let's learn how to recognise the signs. And then let's figure out what to do about it. I'll check in with you every three months, let's identify someone in a peer organisation, or someone else who can check in with you as well. But the first thing is me telling them this will happen. Absolutely. Let's figure out how to recognise it and what to do about it.

(Lorraine Sillars)
You have left me with an amazing image and we will come back to you because this conversation resonates so much with what we are trying to wrestle with at the moment around residential child care and thinking properly about getting in and around looking after each other. You have left me with a brilliant image of diffusing and it just really, really struck me that that connection, emotionally, mentally and physically as well just allows that stress, that pain to be shared across teams, groups, settings, and it feels like the argument for this is the right thing to do and leaning into how we really start it. And we know too that there are people out there in Scotland who have been testing things like this over a number of years about how do we create reflective spaces? But what you have given us is some really strong ideas and strong principles, and lets start thinking about developing our compassion cascades.

So thank you so much.

(Bill Kahn)
Thank you everyone, it was a pleasure to meet you even virtually.