

YOUR CARING HEART

RENEWAL FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS AND SYSTEMS

Adapted from the book
of the same name

BY DR. JAIYA JOHN

*All original concepts, conceptual names (i.e. *Mutual Care*),
and pages herein are the copyright property of Jaiya John

jaiya@soulwater.org | soulwater.org | facebook.com/JaiyaJohn | instagram.com/JaiyaJohn



THE NATURE OF TRAUMA

It is important that we understand the true nature of trauma, so that we can effectively prevent, identify, and address it within us, and within others. Although our common conception of trauma is as a pathology, its actual purpose is to protect us. It is a vestige of our primal wiring for survival. When we experience something harmful, our whole being—mind, body, heart, and spirit—records an imprint of that experience. Then, when we encounter that experience again, or even anticipate it, our system sets off an alarm, as if to say, “Don’t go there again!” That alarm, or warning system, exists in the form of fear, anxiety, adrenaline, tension, constriction, defensiveness, increased prejudice, and an array of other psychological and physiological tools. This warning system is effective when it comes to helping us avoid that which is harmful to us. A problem emerges, however, when we are unable to avoid these harmful triggers, and especially when we are exposed to them chronically.

A further jeopardy arrives when our trauma imprint overflows its original stimulus-response sensitivity and becomes generalized to other life stimuli. In this way, trauma is much like a bodyguard we have hired to keep us safe from the stalkers of modern life. And our bodyguard initially does a great job. Unfortunately, our bodyguard has aspirations not only to protect us, but to also become us! And so, with our every encounter with genuinely harmful life elements, our bodyguard is being exercised, growing stronger, more powerful. And more lustful. Let’s say that your bodyguard’s original assignment was to keep you away from physical harm. And it did. It was quick to jump into action when a large tree branch started to fall on you, or when a car was about to drift into your driving lane. But now, your bodyguard is intoxicated with the call to duty. It jumps into action when a tree twig blows toward you in the wind. Or, when you are simply on the road, driving. Just the presence of other cars is now enough to send your bodyguard into egotistic fervor. Trauma is insecure, always trying to prove itself to you. Proving that it is ready and willing to send you into panic at the slightest provocation. Or at no provocation at all.

Trauma rarely stays put in its place. Especially if we do not work to heal it. It is like a forest floor full of mushrooms, continuously growing and multiplying in the optimal conditions of shade and moisture. Inattention to our trauma provides shade and moisture to feed its fungal nature. If we are not culling back its growth, it does not remain static. It grows. Trauma is a hosting of runaway ghosts, all clamoring to let us know just how much we have to fear and avoid in life. It becomes difficult for us to discern our true, healthy voice, from the rambling of all those ghosts. Trauma is a greatly diversified virus. It exists as physiological activity. As physiological alteration. As mental and emotional conditioning. As psychological perception. As behavioral habit. This diversification makes trauma difficult to eradicate. And further, trauma, being habitual, is empowered each time it is activated. It is our personal chaperone run amok, scaring away all our potential dance partners: Joy, Peace, Security, Health, Clarity, Creativity, and the rest.

Trauma within us is like a baby. If we pay it attention, it will calm down. If we ignore it, it will scream piercingly until our every nerve is shot and shattered. And trauma is an off-duty firefighter convinced that the world is burning and needs its help to avoid certain destruction. Because the off-duty firefighter has a nature rooted in compassion, a desire to assist, it springs out of bed, throws on its clothes, and rushes out the door and into the fray. It may be missing a sock, or be unshaven and disheveled, but the firefighter will not be deterred. It shows up at the scene of your real life moment and starts spraying everything down with adrenaline and fear. It takes an axe to your serenity, splintering all your structures that house Peace.

These are just some of the many faces of trauma. Only when we begin to understand trauma’s persona, are we empowered to prevent, manage, and heal it.

HOARDING TRAUMA

Trauma is a habit. As with all habits, we can loathe separation from our trauma, even if it does us harm. Yes, separation anxiety happens with our trauma, too. Identity is a powerful part of our existence, our sense of being. Whatever we tell ourselves we are, we tend to hold tightly onto that, no matter how detrimental that self-concept may be. And this is how our trauma becomes woven into our garment of identity. Trauma starts with an experience. Even an inherited or vicarious one, passed on to us from someone who had the actual experience. This experience then becomes a part of the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Soon, even the worst of traumas becomes, strangely, a badge of pride in the sense that we have a deep need to feel good about ourselves, no matter how low our actual self-regard. And so we tell ourselves, and others, the story of our trauma. That story, with all its strands, becomes our security blanket, our way of affirming and validating our existence, and all the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that come with it. Should anyone or anything come along that might possibly separate us from our trauma, and therefore from our concept of *Self*, we can often react in apparently illogical ways.

Think of the so-called *Bag Lady*. She is physically homeless, materially indigent, carrying with her all of the things that she considers her possessions. These may be kept in a shopping cart or in bags, and the items may have no real value to those who do not share her life condition. But the key is, these things are *hers*. In her mind, in her perception, these things are a part of her. They define her. They are her adapted mode of self-valuation. She can say to herself, *These things are mine. Therefore I am a worthy person, for I have worked hard to have these things. I take care of them.* If we come along, hoping to help her with her circumstance, one of our thoughts may be to help her release her *baggage*, so that she can focus on achieving *more valuable* things in life. And so, we attempt to help. But for her, we are now a danger. *We have come for her stuff.* So, she defends her stuff, her *Self*, with all her might. She may even grow violent. She believes that we are a threat her survival.

We can react in very similar ways to any external presence that we believe seeks to separate us from our trauma. That presence may be a person, a program or policy, a book or article, a leadership or culture change, or even an idea. Being ever so creative, we swiftly come up with many ways of resisting this separation from our trauma. When faced with ideas that threaten our trauma bond, we say things like, "That idea sounds good in theory, but..." This is one of the hallmark signs of resistance to releasing our trauma. We devalue any idea as simply an idea, missing out on the reality that the idea may also exist and have been validated *in practice*. We attack the source of the idea, saying, "I am dealing with stress and trauma that you cannot comprehend. No one understands the work we do. This idea may apply to others. Not to me. Not to my reality." Notice the tribal assertion of boundaries between *me* and *us*, and *you* and *them*. This drawing of lines is a classic way of shutting down any process that might result in separating us from our trauma or the trauma involved in our work. *Someone is trying to steal my stash! I've worked too hard for this! How can anyone or any idea reduce my trauma to something that can be taken from me?* It is as though we feel someone is distilling our own blood and siphoning it away from us. Loss of identity, and even transition of identity, can be this painful.

And so we horde our trauma. We believe it is more comfortable to endure the suffering created by our trauma and vicarious trauma, than to risk the unknown of learning new ways of being. Even if those new ways of thinking, interpreting, feeling, and acting allow us to heal, renew our optimal wellness, and empower our capacity to serve other lives. We horde our trauma with subtle mind games, and slick avoidance tactics. We horde until our trauma piles so high within our being that we cannot breathe, cannot see clearly, cannot function. We horde ourselves all the way to burnout, fatigue, disillusion, depression, ill health, and even death. This is how dearly we can hold on to our trauma. Understanding this is a first step on the road to knowing how to more productively use trauma, and when to let our old friend go.

BUILDING RELATIONAL SPACES

Chronic stress can easily lead us into an attitude orientation in which we believe that most of our work experience is out of our control; that the stress and suffering and chaos are simply a fact of the work. This false narrative is a powerful factor in the progression of the trauma and dysfunction that damage our capacity to operate at an optimal level. A potent dynamic exists as a tonic for this defeatist attitude: Relationships. Relationships are one of our most empowering commodities. Our capacity to foster them exists within us, independent of our work conditions. **A relationship requires no fiscal funding, no permission from external authority, no policy directive or strategic initiative, and in many ways is not dependent upon the availability of time.** This is because the essence of relationship lies in the mind, heart, and spirit; those perceptual spaces that are ours alone. Relational spaces do not only exist between people. Music is a relational space. The question is, do you practice fortifying that space? Art, good books, dancing, singing, crying, laughing, bonsai, meditation, smiling, hiking, traveling; all are relational spaces. Healthy relational spaces open us. To ourselves. So that both the beauty and pain inside can flow out. And so that what is externally nutritional can flow in.

Just as relationships hold so much promise as a nurturing, healing, resolving, enlightening, and comforting resource, they also require a home. A space in which the relationship can grow and thrive. This is what is meant by the term *RELATIONAL SPACE*. We are reassured knowing that someone cares about us, thinks about us, and wishes us well. A relational space can be in full effect even when we are not physically interacting with that person. It is a sense of knowing. A harboring of shared experience, memory, values, stories, hopes, and intentions. Human beings are intensely social animals. Relational spaces are our territory. But they must be maintained. The most dysfunctional workplaces are drought stricken. Relational fluidity has dried up. Workers and their vital caring spirit have shriveled.

The vast majority of helping professionals succumb not to the realities of their work, but to the contraction and constriction of their own hearts under duress. Relational spaces are dilation valves. They keep us open. Breathing. Flowing. Rivers deliver rich sediment that feed estuaries and oceans. Relational spaces deliver to us the fertility of being cared for. Of being recognized, acknowledged, heard, validated, celebrated, and honored. To minimize all of this as triviality is a culturally blind attitude at the root of our system and societal disintegration. We are falling apart. Not because of human suffering. That has always been with us. **We fall apart because of the erosion of our relational spaces and the way in which we give ourselves to them.** These are matters of physics, chemistry, biology, and physiology, just as much as they are matters of psychology and emotionality. We are designed and wired to be open and to flow; to pour out and to be poured into.

The prime ingredient of a relational space is caring. We don't have to know each other well, or even to like each other. But we must care. And that caring must be mutual. It must extend in both directions across authority lines. A caseworker is responsible for caring for the needs and wellness of her supervisor, and vice versa. The same is true between supervisors and managers. Between Associate directors and directors. In other words, relational spaces are nonhierarchical in nature. No caste systems apply.

Caring is motivational. It requires a sincere motive to support the needs and wellness of another. **Caring is attentional.** The motive to support should naturally manifest as genuine attention to the signs and signals that another is communicating, and to the circumstances and conditions in which that other person exists, even if those conditions are beyond that person's awareness. **Caring is active.** Motive and attention should lead to action on behalf of the other person's needs and wellness. **And caring is receptive.** It is more motivated to receive from another (insight, sincerity, story, perspective, expression) than it is to dictate. When these qualities are present, then hurt, stress, fear, and dysfunction can be dissolved to a significant degree. Growing professionally requires technical skill. Relational skill is the best practice that gives technique its wings.

COMPASSIONATE LISTENING

One of the greatest healing powers we have is simply to listen compassionately when another person chooses to share with us. This healing, primarily, is not theirs. It is our own. Each time we activate our own compassionate nature as we intentionally receive what another shares, we are exercising and stretching our own capacity for compassion, and for receiving suffering in a way that transforms suffering itself. Compassion is a muscle. Picture it as the mouth and throat of a large baleen whale. As a calf, the whale practices what it sees its mother doing: opening her mouth wide, stretching her jaws, and dilating her throat to its limit. All so that she can take in the maximum amount of sea water, and therefore the maximum amount of phytoplankton food that is her sustenance. The whale calf learns this behavior, even beyond its innate nature. As it grows, it repeatedly opens its mouth and throat to full extension, taking in larger amounts of water and food, becoming more capable of feeding and sustaining itself by virtue of repeated opening.

Compassion works like this in a human being. The more we practice opening our caring heart, the more our dilation muscle grows and is strengthened. This also leaves us vulnerable in a world where we are often surrounded by the apparent opposite of caring. Without role models to inspire our practicing of compassion, we can grow negligent. Our compassion muscle atrophies. We starve, for compassion is our own food, not just food we provide to others. For many of us, this atrophy occurs as a function of our journey from childhood to adulthood. Where once we may have cared intensely and without judgment for the smallest flower or insect, or for a suffering soul, now perhaps our compassion valve is clogged and crusted from the endless layers of stress, damage, and delusions that can come from the world around us. And the world within us.

This withering of our compassion muscle can directly impact our ability to support and serve the lives of others. In most human encounters, what others need most from us, regardless of our training, titles, or experience, is our compassion. Our caring, without judgment, for their reality and their rightful existence within the unique conditions of their own life. When supporting others professionally, we struggle with our urge to provide information. To dictate. After all, how else are we to validate our job and paycheck than by contributing knowledge and insight? Compassion though, operates according to another dynamic: *Receiving*. Receiving in a manner that elicits the healing capacity in the one who is sharing. Receiving in a way that creates a relational space that feels safe to the sharer. Compassionate listening is not fixated on gathering information. Compassionate listening instead is invested in summoning its own potential for caring. Caring, free of judgment, that taps our innate sensitivity, understanding, and empathy. Compassionate listening is not sympathetic or pitying. It is not territorial or strategic. Not manipulative or dishonest. Compassionate listening is a human characteristic arrived at through diligent work, until it is a professional skill and asset. It requires devoted work at learning to honor others by *feeling* their lives. And like the baleen whale, with each healthy feeling, we are able to take in more feeling.

We are each ocean harbors into which suffering souls seek to sail, so that they can find respite, restoration, and renewal. If we as harbors are filled with the silt of self-importance, condescension, and prejudice, then no matter how wonderful our bag of *best practices*, we are among the impeding factors that keep the suffering from reaching the port of wellness and stability to which they are indelibly entitled. So, how do we keep our harbor clear of silt and sediment? Continuous work at qualities such as gratitude, quietude, grace, humility, reverence, and honor. These qualities are not easily measured empirically, causing our system and society cultures to devalue them in the arenas of supporting children, families, and communities. These qualities also cannot be faked, and so someone who shares with us knows quickly the degree of our sincerity. They either feel that they are safe sharing with us, that we care; or they feel that we are another one of caring's imposters, only pretending to listen so that we will know how to judge, label, categorize, corral, and track them.

We are often insecure as we listen. We believe the moment is for us to prove our qualifications, to respond with colonial imposition. Compassionate listening cures our own insecurity by allowing us to discover the infinite volume of our ability to listen with care, such that healing is inspired in us, and in the one to whom we listen. Compassionate listening then, is ultimate transformative tonic. And well worth the practice.

MUTUAL CARE

The popular term *self-care* tends to evoke ideas of self-centered, individualistic, and even selfish focus. Organizations that serve vulnerable human lives are spaces far too intimate for us to care for ourselves as though we exist in an isolated vacuum. This is not a book of self-care. It is a book of mutual care. *Mutual care* is a term and concept I have been working with in recent years as I support professionals and their systems. Mutual care is not just a process. It is a cultural spirit that systems can cultivate that leads to more fruitful processes. *We are responsible for each other's wellness, regardless of position.* This is the principle at the heart of mutual care.

Mutuality... The more we peer into the depths of true wellness, the more we see relationship staring back at us. Especially when our work is relational work: being there for others in need. So let us proceed with an understanding that to care for one another is, in a very real sense, to care for ourselves. And that mutual care is ultimately a way to activate and empower our personal promise. This book is the story of our ongoing journey into mutual care. As we weave each thread of this blanket of reciprocity, we see that we are not nearly as impoverished as we may think. And that each day something hopeful rises within our collective labor that is even greater than the sun.

Mutual care is a parallel, simultaneous process. It invests in the duality present in the nature of every relationship. In doing so, it maximizes the wealth of promise existent in each relationship. It envisions staff not as powerless but powerful in their duty to support and care for themselves and their leadership. Management is held accountable for caring for itself, and for its staff. All are committed to being a relational example to the community, and to serving the community in the spirit of what is being practiced internally in the agency. However a workforce is treating itself, this is how it is liable to treat the community. Whatever we are practicing, we will administer. Service capacity is an outcome of investment in workforce wellness. Mutual care is a preparatory school for learning how to be in fruitful relationship with those we serve.

Mutual care is a fundamental foundation for wellness in an organization or group. Regardless of titles and authority positions, we are each responsible for how we care for and treat each other. It is imperative that we must develop, maintain, and protect a culture of mutual care. This value pertains to all partners in the work: communities, staff, and leadership. Each is human and need consistent, reliable care to feel safe in the circle. This is all about paying closer attention to ourselves and to each other. We can keep looking for a magic potion or wand to change our reality, or we can simply take better care.

BENEFITS OF MUTUAL CARE

The reality is, many staff will ask a fundamental question: “Why should I care to invest in a culture of mutual care?” Ultimately, for better and for worse, human beings are primarily self-serving. This is a tendency that can be used in achieving buy-in on any system change. In this case, it is important to clearly spell out the benefits, to individuals and staff as a whole, of a culture of mutual care. Here are just some of the benefits. You are encouraged to identify more on your own, as part of your message to staff.

- Staff feel safer, and more relaxed
- Staff operate at a higher level
- Staff are healthier and happier
- Staff are freed into applying their giftedness
- Less days lost to unwellness
- Greater productivity and efficiency
- Higher morale
- More trust
- More effective communication and understanding
- Less misunderstanding and conflict
- Staff and leadership feel more empowered, validated, and supported
- Stronger teams and teamwork
- Healthier work environment
- Improved sensitivity to families and each other
- Minimized impact of stress and trauma
- Maximized “tribal” strengths, bonds, and wellness
- Better outcomes for families
- Less staff and leadership turnover
- Stronger culture and continuity of values

COMPASSION

is not kindness, sweetness, softness.

It is a professional capacity arrived at through daily hard work. A determination to *feel* another's life, and out of that feeling to harvest understanding, perspective, insight, and something world changing that we might call...

relationship.

AND THEN THERE IS KINDNESS...

Kindness does not take time. It saves time.

Kindness and Correction can exist in the same breath.

People who look for excuses not to be kind, are simply determined to be unkind.

Kindness is a determination, too.

CREATING OPENNESS TO CHANGE

We as human beings are notoriously resistant to change. We will often work harder at not changing than we would have had to work to change! Part of this is fear of the unknown. But an underestimated factor is that we simply dislike letting go of old habits and familiarities, even if they are harmful for us. To help open staff to change, they need to have fears and stresses addressed and managed (by themselves most of all), and they need to be shown clearly how they and the group will benefit from the proposed changes. Here are just some ideas for supporting and lubricating the change process. As always, invite yourself to come up with your own ideas to add to the mix.

- Clarify the personal and group benefits of the proposed change
- Encourage personal ownership of the change
- Consistently and in a timely fashion celebrate and reward change efforts (personal and group)
- Provide personal and group time and space for reflection on change
- Allow safe space for expression of change-related questions and stresses
- Invite and welcome feedback in an inclusive fashion
- Regularly status check on personal and group level, and course correct when necessary
- Identify and promote superordinate goals (group goals that can only be reached via the contribution of each individual)
- Work together to create conditions in which each person feels she or he has equal social power within the change process
- Promote positive stories related to the change process
- Collectively douse fires of negative storytelling rooted in the past
- Minimize general stress. People open to change the more they are relaxed
- Utilize small support teams to encourage each other through the change process
- Allow for healthy grieving of lost habits, processes, and traditions
- Celebrate the birth of new habits, processes, and traditions

TIME FACTORS

One of the classic rationales that people use when they are resistant to change, or to a new idea, is to claim that they “don’t have time for this.” They will say things like, “Sounds good in theory, but we don’t have time for this.” The reality is that people will drown in their chaos, dysfunction, and trauma before ever grabbing ahold of a change, even a small one that could keep them afloat, or better yet, get them on solid ground. Such is human nature!

Another reality is that there is no such thing as change without investing in time. At least in the time necessary to reflect on the change. And further, no tool or strategy exists that doesn’t take time to implement on an organizational level. So the idea that a person or group doesn’t “have time” to make change, is the equivalent of saying, “We refuse to change, no matter how helpful it will be!”

One of the things that people often fail to account for, in their devoted resistance to change, is the time that is lost by willfully holding onto ways and attitudes that aren’t working. As you work with staff on the importance of making these changes around trauma-informed mutual care, here are just a few time loss factors you can share with them as they determine what they do and don’t have time for (smile):

- Time lost to disempowered staff
- Time lost to unaddressed stress, anxiety, fear, and trauma
- Time lost attending to staff in crisis or conflict
- Time lost to low morale (maple syrup pace of work, negativity, errors, etc.)
- Time lost to staff exhaustion, burnout, and disillusionment
- Time lost to poor task completion that needs to be revisited
- Time lost to mediocre work ethic
- Time lost to poorly served families
- Time lost to miscommunication and misunderstanding
- Time lost to insufficient teambuilding
- Time lost to poor self-care and unwellness (whether staff are present or not)
- Time lost to rushed and faulty case management

Filling out forms and completing tasks
is not the work.

Staying vulnerable, humble, open,
attentive, curious, caring, and present
DESPITE the conditions...

**this is
the work.**

**POWER AND CONTROL
DO NOT BUILD TRUST.**

VULNERABILITY DOES.

- Share your stories
- Acknowledge needs, fears, hopes
 - Admit mistakes and growth
 - Openly ask for support
 - Bow down and look up
 - Express admiration
 - Reveal your heart
 - Listen, listen, listen...

STRESS MANAGEMENT

If you are a supervisor or a manager, in many ways what you are supervising and managing is stress. Your staff's and your own. It is an intangible element in your team climate that shows up in very tangible ways. Staff and leadership have a great need to work together in learning how to minimize this ever-present factor in the work.

- **IDENTIFY THE SOURCE.** It is best practice for staff to learn how to track the root of their stress. Causes are often multiple. Regular, brief, mindful time spent reflecting on these causes can create an ability to quickly identify them.
- **IDENTIFY THE EXPRESSION.** Helping staff to be conscious and aware of how they express their stress is a powerful life and work skill. Every person expresses stress differently. Freaking out is not good! It is contagious. But so is remaining calm. A team in tune with each other's expressions can be more supportive.
- **IDENTIFY THE IMPACT.** It is very beneficial to staff learn to be aware of how their stress expression affects those around them, impacts the work, and results in a self-damaging loop. Communication on this should be done in a caring manner.
- **REMOVE STRESS FACTORS.** Some stress factors are unavoidable within the work. Others can be removed. Have staff spend time thinking critically and creatively about even subtle changes they can make that will lessen the influx of stress.
- **INSTALL STRESS BUSTERS.** As a team, and personally, identify practices that break up stress. Think of stress as an invisible cloud that infiltrates a person, office, or building. Simple things like humor, deep breathing, brief meditation or reflection, storytelling, walking, music, and even a smile can all effectively dissipate clouds of stress. Stress clouds are always building. Stress busters blow those clouds away.
- **ROLE MODEL.** Show your staff by your attitude, actions, and presentation how you are practicing stress management. Make it a supportive team commitment.
- **TAKE ATTENDANCE.** Together as a team, learn to take attendance on how stress is showing up in the work. No judging or criticism, just supportive testimony.
- **CELEBRATE PROGRESS.** Make sure to highlight calmness, peace, and positivity!

CELEBRATING

In the mainstream culture of the United States, the concept of celebrating is often associated with superficial, surface-level, and trivial activity. Though throughout human history, more deeply rooted celebration was understood as a primary method of maintaining the strength, wellness, bonds, traditions, and values of a community. Here are some thoughts you may add to your own creativity as you go forward, creating a culture of effective celebration:

- Consistency (celebration is most effective when it is regular, not rare)
- Celebrate loudly (not in terms of volume, but by letting the agency and community know what you are celebrating. This can role model for them the value of celebration)
- Quietly (not in terms of volume, but by permitting yourselves to celebrate in small ways, and by celebrating even the smallest of things)
- Clearly identify the reasons for your celebration
- Celebrate verbally in the way you communicate with each other
- Celebrate in writing, even as a part of broader communication with each other
- Celebrate redundantly (too much celebration is generally better than too little when it comes to morale, teambuilding, stress release, and many other benefits)
- Widely promote the story of the celebration itself, not just the reason behind it
- Celebrate organically and creatively (it doesn't always have to be so bureaucratic)
- Celebrate spontaneously, and with caring planning (both are good!)
- Celebrate inclusively (use it as an opportunity to invite those from outside the group)
- Continuously remind each other of the value of celebration (until it becomes cultural)
- Use celebration as a reminder of the change-initiative values and goals
- Recruit peer celebrators (condition everyone to be empowered to kick-off a celebration, large or small)

ALWAYS BE CELEBRATING

Healthy social and human service organizations must be passionate, devoted, and continuous in celebrating their work.

Stress, anxiety, trauma, and crisis are ever present...

Celebration is the hydraulic system purging all of this away. Stories, memories, shared laughter and tears, values, wisdom, lessons, grieving, honoring, dreaming, conspiring beautifully... this is how celebration does what it does!

A healthy cardiovascular system is openly flowing, delivering nutrition, healing, and growth factors directly to where the body needs.

For a social service system, celebration is that flow.

Celebration is not trivial.

It is THE primary tonic for wellness!

BUILDING A TEAM

Strong, vital, resilient teams possess certain qualities. Building such a team is not as much about the personalities involved, as it is a commitment to creating safety, harmony, and role fit.

- **SAFETY.** A primary need for human beings is to feel safe. Our time in the womb is often our template for ultimate safety. Anything less causes us to freak out! Freaking out is not good. It causes us to close and hide, rather than open and shine our light. Safety factors are unique for each person. This calls for caring, non-judgmental conversation and exploration of these factors, so that collective safety can be worked toward. Safety isn't the absolute impossibility of harm, but the likelihood and expectation of consideration, sensitivity, protection, and support.
- **HARMONY.** To counteract cultural pressures toward competition, individualism, and conflict, harmony needs to actually be practiced, until it becomes cultural. Harmony is not perfect peace. It is a devoted attitude of mutual support, care, relationship investment, and movement in the same direction toward overarching goals.
- **SUPERPOWERS.** We each have natural superpowers that likely haven't been tapped, nurtured, or celebrated throughout life. No one wrote a comic book about our superpowers. Our work together, and the stories told, must be that comic book. It is critical to identify each person's superpowers so that staff can be placed into roles that fit, independent of their formal job title. Role fit is a key aspect of a strong team.
- **RELATIONSHIP.** A healthy, vibrant, fruitful team values relationship over task.
- **BEARING WITNESS.** In order to feel safe, people need to feel as though when they express or testify to their experience, no matter how small or insignificant, they can trust that their team will somehow bear witness: Listen, empathize, relate, support.
- **TAMING FEAR.** This is an important aspect of creating a sense of safety. Fear must be freely acknowledged, talked about, and addressed in order for people to learn that they have power over their fear. Practice doesn't make fearless. It makes fearsome.
- **REPRESENTING.** Place staff in opportunities to represent the team, within the agency and within the community and watch pride, morale, and appreciation for the work blossom. Representing, in presentations, written communications, and creative projects, causes a person to have to learn more about their team, taps appreciation for the team, and exposes the person to the insights and perspectives of other teams.

EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

Just as staff need to be empowered by leadership to be at their best, in a mutually caring, healthy organization, leadership need to be empowered by staff.

- **TRAUMA TRAVELS UPWARD.** Think of how the toxic element mercury concentrates in the ocean's food chain: micro plankton feed on the mercury, which then concentrates in their body. Small fish feed on the plankton. Large fish feed on the small fish. On and on up the ladder, the mercury gets passed, becoming more concentrated along the way. Trauma and stress from a community enters the hierarchy of an agency in the same way, traveling up the ladder from staff to leadership. The more responsibility a leader has, the more vulnerable that person is to internalizing concentrated levels of trauma and stress. The reason for this is exponential responsibility: the more staff for which you are responsible, the more vulnerable you become. For this reason, leaders need to be very conscious and aware of how vicarious trauma and stress might be affecting their wellness. And most importantly, staff need to realize their mutual care responsibility to leadership: Committing to bringing leadership positive energy and expression, regardless of the crisis or conflict.
- **TAKE THE BATON.** In a relay race, team members must practice handing off the baton to each other without losing momentum, and without dropping the baton. In an organization this translates into staff acting from a place of capability and giftedness and not fear, insecurity, or incapability. When the latter happens, the momentum of serving lives gets lost. When staff drop the baton of fulfilling their role, beyond their job title, in the full spirit of devoted servitude, the impact ripples upward through leadership, creating sometimes crippling burden on leaders who are having to run their segment of the race as well as that of staff. Taking the baton involves staff committing to **CRITICAL THINKING, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND CREATIVE RESOLUTION.** These are life and professional skills (muscles to be exercised) necessary for anyone who wishes to grow, blossom, and fulfill her or his potential. Staff possess intelligence, brilliance, creativity, and resourcefulness. When these gifts are tapped and flowing regularly, leaders are freed and empowered to fulfill their own roles.
- **VENTING VS. RELEASING.** Venting is an act of practicing trauma. It deepens despair and fills people and the environment with toxicity. *Releasing* is an act of healing trauma. Teams can work together to learn the distinction and practice *releasing*, which involves constructive communication and self-nurturing skills.

EMPOWERING STAFF

Staff, regardless of skills and experience, can often exist in a state of disempowerment, simply as a result of the ways they have been related to through childhood, school, work, and various family and social relationships. One of the powerful opportunities of leadership is to work with staff to light the intrinsic ember within them of empowerment. A spark that says, “I can do this. I have the right to do this. The responsibility. I give myself permission.” Without empowerment, staff cannot grow or develop, and no group or organization can reach its potential. Here are some ideas to inspire some of your own:

- Work together with staff to identify personal and group gifts (natural strengths)
- Explore together (one-on-one and group) staff roles based upon their gifts
- Minimize punitive approaches to leadership
- Role model for staff self-leadership and self-empowerment
- Consistently message (personal and group) how and why the group depends on each person’s complete contribution
- Storytell (verbally, in writing, through graphic display, creatively) what empowerment looks, acts, and feels like
- Acknowledge and address fears, uncertainties, and insecurities
- Get to know each other. Intimacy of relationship reveals and manifests giftedness
- Consistently message the importance and benefits of empowerment
- Support movement from dependence to independence (from passive student mode to active teacher mode)
- Create time and space for “tribal” gathering, sharing, and connectedness
- Celebrate and identify empowerment examples or exemplars
- Associate accountability with opportunity and not with potential punishment
- Honestly examine fear-based group/organizational history and culture
- Encourage and role model productive, caring voice, communication, and feedback.
- Highlight opportunities to practice empowerment

FRUITFULNESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

Imagine a thriving orchard that bears sweet, succulent fruit season after season, year after year, no matter the conditions. An orchard so healthy, with all of its elements in harmony... that it virtually sings with vitality. Now imagine an orchard that produces fruit, but only because its workers labor so hard to get anything out of the poor soil, polluted water, decayed roots, and damaged trees that they themselves grow unwell, burnout, and leave. Now, as soon as the workers are gone, workers who had to apply every ounce of their effort, skill, and giftedness just to harvest a few stunted fruits, the orchard immediately becomes barren. It produces no fruit.

There are key differences between a productive organization and a FRUITFUL one:

Productive organizations often depend heavily upon current conditions, workers, and leaders in order to achieve positive outcomes.

Fruitful organizations can withstand changes in conditions, workforce, and leadership and still achieve positive outcomes.

Productive organizations may have low morale, negative conditions, and unhealthy habits, but are able to overcome this to a degree and for a period by leadership based on fear, intimidation, punishment, and social sanctioning. Burnout eventually occurs on all levels.

Fruitful organizations thrive through high morale, positive conditions, and healthy habits, and enjoy leadership based upon relationship building, positivity, staff empowerment, and staff ownership of the organizational culture.

Productive organizations often work within crisis but do not attend to crisis.

Fruitful organizations exist in such a way as to prevent, heal, and learn from crisis.

Productive organizations may have climates in which staff identify rigidly with their title.

Fruitful organizations have climates in which staff identify passionately with their gifts.

Productive organizations may be uninspired, uncreative, and consumed with existing processes and habits.

Fruitful organizations are constantly creating, envisioning, imagining, daring, and striving.

Productive organizations may serve the community but rarely transform the community.

Fruitful organizations create social fertility and inspire transformation in their community.

HUMANIZING STAFF

Staff in a high-stress, high-pace environment are vulnerable to becoming dehumanized, just like customers from the community. Staff dehumanize themselves. They dehumanize each other. And they can be dehumanized by their leadership and agency culture. Here are some starter ideas for how you can work together with staff to ensure that the way in which they relate to themselves, and are related to, is humanizing (compassionate, caring, respectful, sensitive, and honoring). You will see that this list is nearly identical to the handout for Humanizing Customers. This is because, on the human level, there is no difference.

- Learn each other's (personal and group) story (care to be present, pay attention, and read between the lines)
- Listen to each other's story (people in their struggles are always speaking to us)
- Honor each other's story (the care we take in relationship is how we honor)
- Celebrate each other's story (literally celebrate, in way you choose which stories. Find creative ways)
- Find kinship (look for ways that your team shares things in common: mutual states of vulnerability, struggle, instability, "poverty", fear, etc. Use that internally and privately to motivate your sense of kinship, and caring)
- Avoid judging, resenting, projecting, assuming, or punishing. Correction, discipline, guidance, and support require none of those prior attitudes
- Practice compassion (not pity, but understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity)
- See and teach the connection between "seeing" each other and caring for each other
- Care for yourself (the more wellness you have, the more humanely you will relate to and treat your peers and teammates)
- Examine your own triggers and trauma (these are stones in the way of your caring relationship with yourself and with each other)

HUMANIZING CUSTOMERS

The community's children, youth, and adults who receive agency services are customers. They are part of a tax-paying citizenship that have the right, like all of us, to being treated with dignity, respect, compassion, and care. It can be a great challenge for some staff to retain a warm, caring human idea of these customers when staff themselves are suffering with stress, unwellness, instability, insecurity, and feelings of being unheard, devalued, not seen, not cared for, and not served or supported. The simple answer to this is, of course, to work together with staff to create conditions in which they do feel heard, valued, seen, cared for, served and supported. Here are a few ideas for staff that you can consider working into your own approach in supporting staff relationships with customers:

- Learn their story (care to be present, pay attention, and read between the lines, even if you only have a sheet of paper or a form from which to gather insight)
- Listen to their story (people in their struggles are always speaking to us)
- Honor their story (the care we take in service is the honor we give)
- Celebrate their story (literally celebrate, with customers and about customers in the storytelling that gets **chosen**. Find creative ways)
- Find kinship (look for ways as staff that you share things in common with your customers: mutual states of vulnerability, struggle, instability, "poverty", fear, etc. Use that internally and privately to motivate your sense of kinship, and caring)
- Avoid judging, resenting, projecting, assuming, or punishing. Correction, discipline, guidance, and support require none of the prior attitudes
- Practice compassion (not pity, but understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity)
- See the connection between "seeing" customers and serving them caringly
- Care for yourself (the more wellness you have, the more humanely you will relate to and treat customers)
- Examine your own triggers and trauma (these are stones in the way of your caring relationship with customers)

SUSTAINING CHANGE

It is always a challenge to sustain and perpetuate any change once the initial process or initiative has been completed. In order to develop roots for lasting personal, group, and system cultural change, here are some strategies to complement your continuously evolving personal and organizational approaches:

- Build the identified change principles into your personal and group traditions, habits, rituals, and processes
- Create new traditions, habits, rituals, and processes that will internalize the changes and help to withstand personnel and leadership turnover and other unpredictable variables
- Continuously promote and celebrate the values relevant to your change initiative
- Create sustaining processes to ensure the incorporation, integration, and perpetuation of your change principles (recruitment, hiring, orientation, ongoing development, cultural maintenance)
- Identify torch bearers for the change principles (role models)
- Have torch bearers regularly mentor promising new torch bearers
- Create and preserve storytelling modes and traditions that will promote, celebrate, and generationally extend change-related practices, values, and visions