



From the top with feeling: enabling resilience

Dez Holmes

Director, Research in Practice

Strategic Director, National Children's Bureau

Developing resilience: a systemic model

Resilience is:

*The potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal **and external** resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges*

(Pooley and Cohen, 2010)

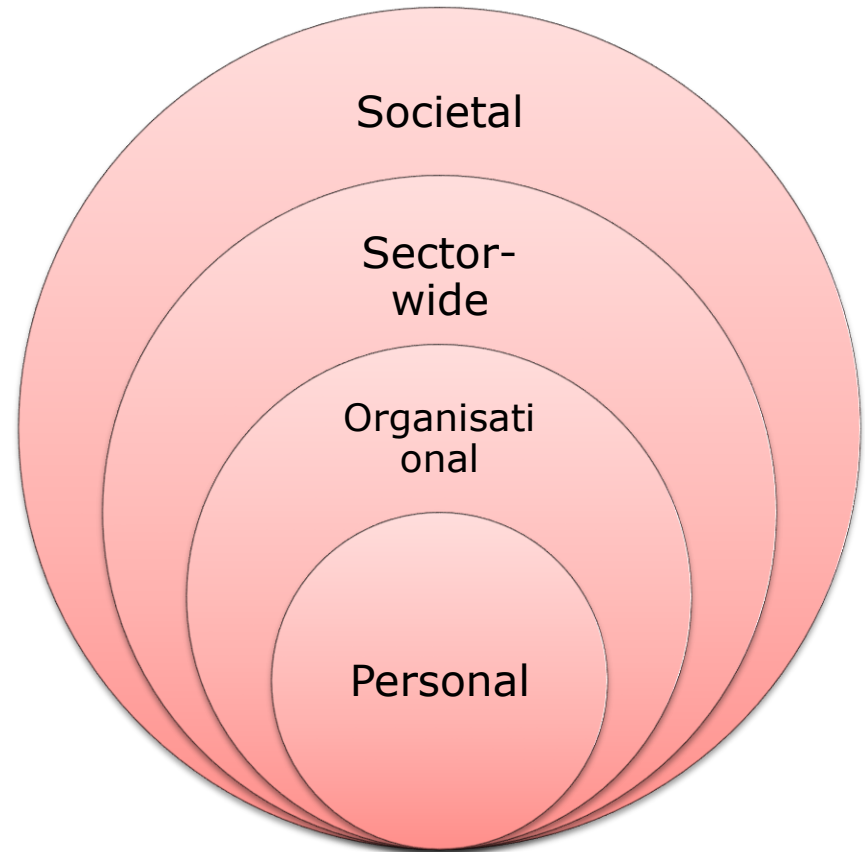


It's not just you, honest

“Walk into any organisation today and you'll hear a familiar refrain: *"Once we get through this reorganization..."* or *"After this system implementation..."* or *"When things settle down..."*”

The uncomfortable truth is that things aren't going to settle down and we can't always predict the next big change around the corner.” (Hudson, 2025)

VUCA - Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous – feels like an understatement... Futurists suggest **BANI** – Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible (Cascio, 2018, 2020, 2025).



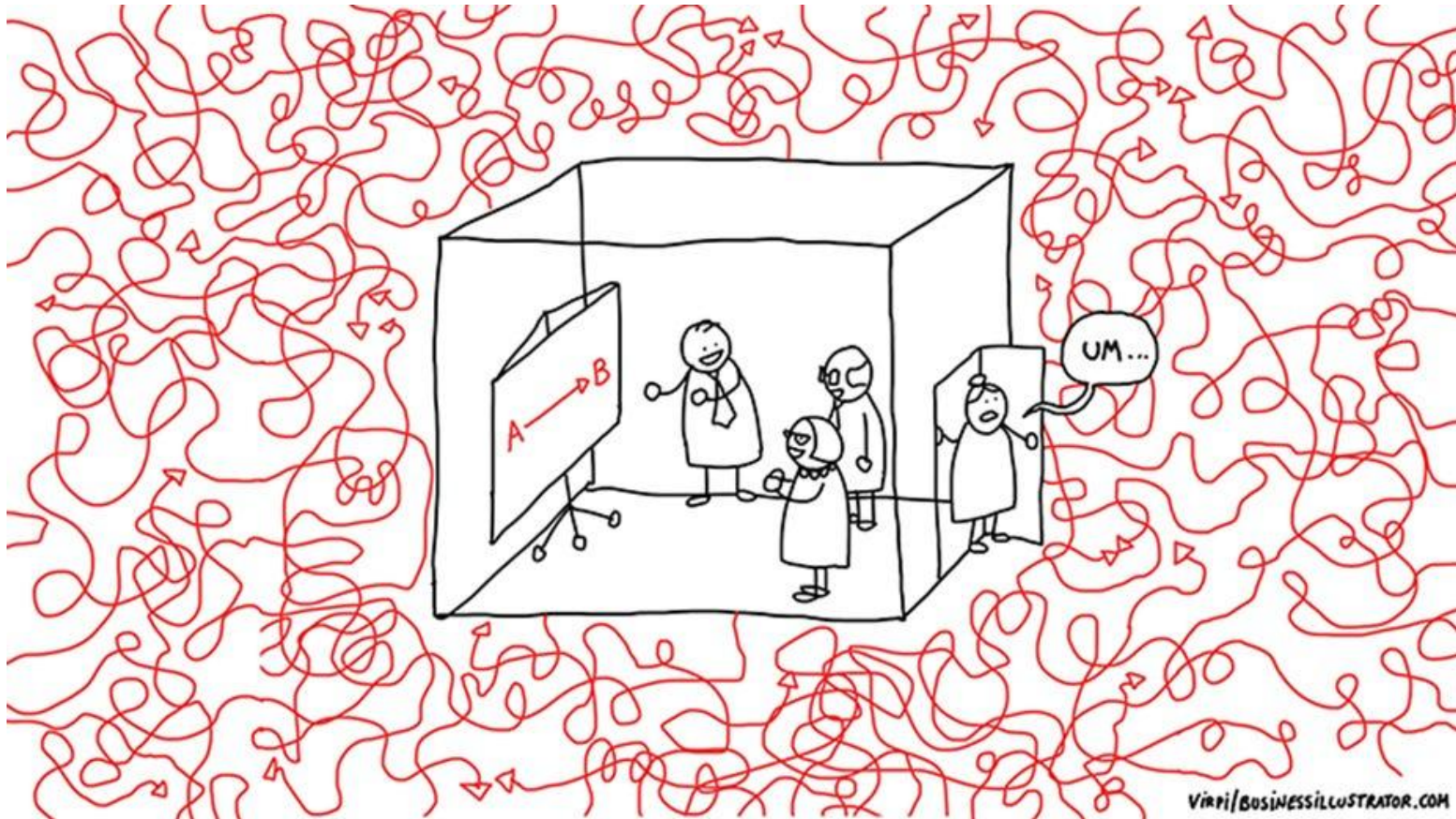
To name but a few challenges and changes we face

- › Funding pressures and uncertainty, compounded by a changing policy landscape, compounded by political volatility, compounded by inequity....
- › Sweeping regulatory and policy changes which will reshape entire sectors.
- › Anti-discriminatory approaches expected to be BAU... and yet....
- › Ever shifting expectations / beliefs re how and where work should be done; generational shifts that question work-life boundaries.
- › Digital transformation and AI that could completely change business models and working practices.
- › Social attitudes, political discourse, global volatility

New normal

- When we apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges, we create lots of activity and apparent progress, but little fundamental transformation.
- *"When leaders treat change as an event, they miss the reality: it's now a permanent feature of work."* (Petrie, 2011)
- An era of "perpetual whitewater" where the rapids never end and the calm water we're paddling toward is a mirage. (Petrie, 2011)
- Turbulence is the new normal... but it doesn't have to mean emotional turmoil...
- *You gotta roll with it...*





Traditional change management models—with their neat linearity and assumed periods of stability between disruptions – doesn't stand up to the complexity we face, and doesn't promote resilience.

Approaches underpinning systems leadership

(Miller, 2020)

Approach	Underlying principles
Adaptive leadership (eg Heifetz et al., 2009)	Leadership generates new solutions in response to changing needs of organisation. Problem solving through encouraging experimentation, enabling new discoveries, and facilitating diverse voices and perspectives.
Integrative / collaborative leadership (eg Crosby & Bryson, 2010)	Leaders bring together people, groups and organisations across boundaries to collaboratively address complex problems and achieve a common outcome.
Collective / distributed leadership (eg Gronn, 2002)	Leaders distribute and allocate leadership power wherever expertise, capability and motivation sit to best respond to challenge or opportunity. Leaders treat all with respect, care and compassion, and show a willingness to follow as well as lead.
Lateral /boundary spanning leadership (eg Williams, 2011)	Leadership connects across organisational /sector boundaries to engage others who want change. Achieving change through networking, reflection and shared action to disrupt the status quo.

What can we do?

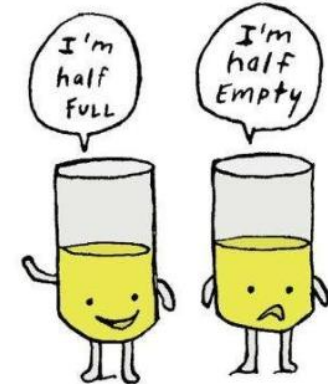
- The good news is, we are not static. Adult development theory (Kegan, 1994) argues that we can develop greater capacity for complexity under the right conditions, with the right support and consciousness.
- Rather than seek to reduce complexity the solution is to increase capacity for functioning in a context of uncertainty and complexity.
- *Focus on your core, not controlling the waves*
- “Change fitness” emerges when we create conditions for what "transformational learning." That means more than acquiring new skills, but fundamentally expanding how people make sense of their (work) world. (Hudson, 2025)



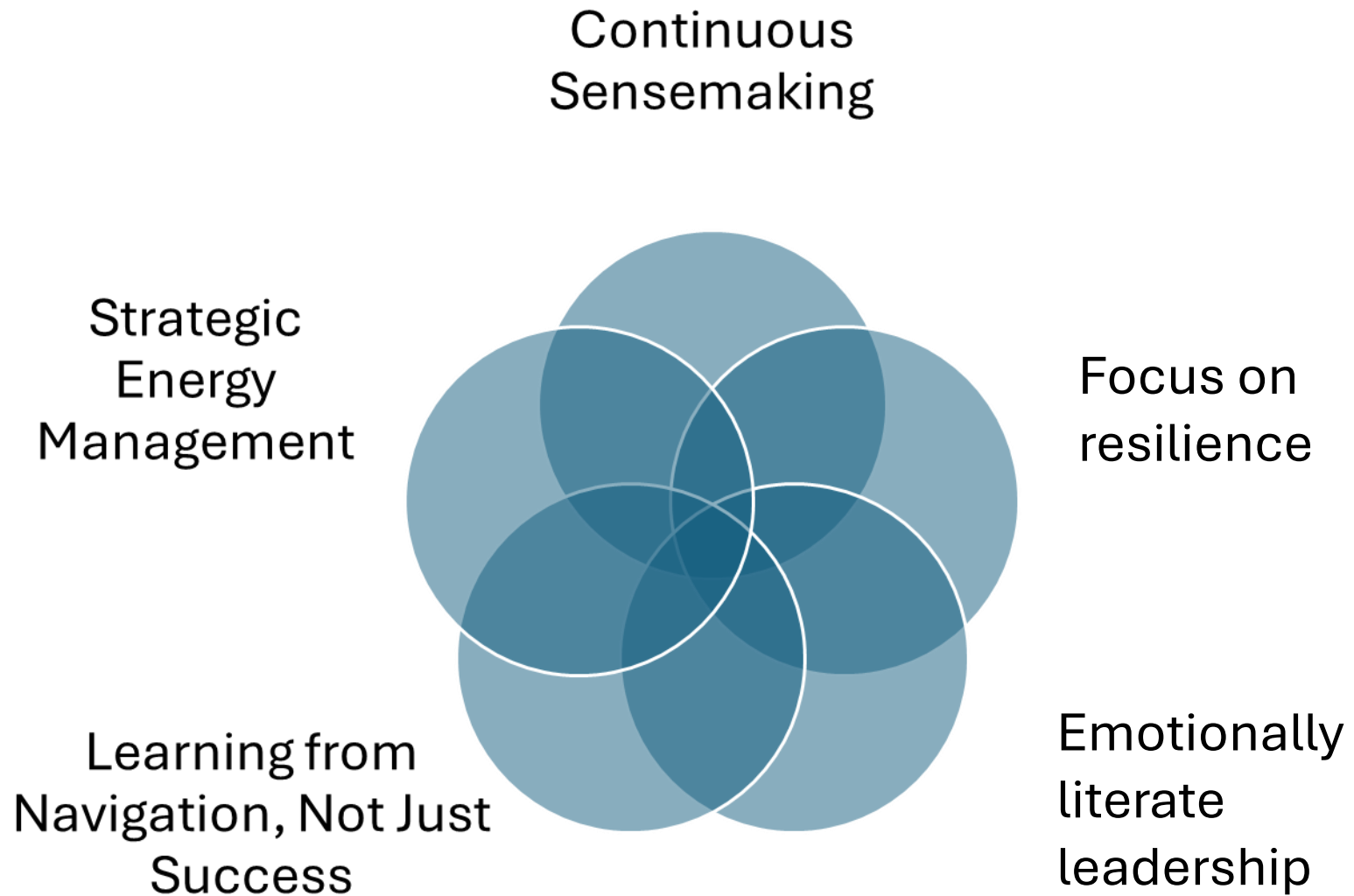
7 learnable skills of resilience

1. Emotional awareness or regulation
2. Impulse control
3. Optimism
4. Causal analysis
5. Empathy
6. Self-efficacy
7. Reaching out (taking appropriate risk)

- Which ones come most easily?
- Which ones are hardest?
- What helps?



Adapted from Reivich and Shatté (2002); Jackson and Watkins (2004) in Earl et al., 2017



Continuous Sensemaking

(Hudson, 2025)

- Instead of waiting for clarity that never comes, we engage in ongoing sensemaking. We regularly ask:
 - What's actually changing, and what's not?
 - What feels uncertain? What feels stable?
 - What patterns are we seeing across different changes?
- Eg incorporating five minutes of sensemaking into existing routines. A team check-in might start with: *"What's one thing that's different this week from last week? What is staying the same?"*
- Over time, this practice builds what researchers call "complexity capacity" and the ability to hold onto multiple, sometimes contradictory realities without becoming petrified.

Strategic Energy Management

(Hudson, 2025)

- Change fitness requires treating human energy as a finite resource that must be deliberately managed. This means:
 - Identifying where teams are genuinely stretched thin versus where they're operating on autopilot.
 - Making explicit decisions about what to stop doing to create capacity for what matters.
 - Building in recovery practices that don't wait for the mythical "calm period."
- eg: Before taking on any new initiative, teams must identify what they'll stop doing, do less of / do in a less resource-intensive way. When
- *"Is the way I am working depleting people's energy?"*

Learning from Navigation, Not Just Success

(Hudson, 2025)

- Change-fit organisations celebrate successful navigation of uncertainty. They regularly ask:
 - When have we successfully navigated uncertainty before?
 - What did we learn about our capacity to adapt?
 - What's one small experiment we could try to build our “adaptation muscles”?
- This shift from outcome-focus to process-focus builds what Heifetz calls "adaptive capacity" and the ability to thrive in situations where the path forward is unclear.

- **Self-efficacy** – giving people some sense of control / mastery.
- Being done to (however well-intended) undermines our resilience and our trust in managers, and families' trust in professionals
- Being clear what is in our control and influence and what is not, and why
- **Hope** (when it is authentic) matters – not Pollyanna positivity
- *What are the tangible ways we build people's sense of self-efficacy and hope? (each others, our staff)*

Key Domains of Organisational Resilience

Secure base

Sense of
appreciation

Learning
organisation

Mission and
vision

Wellbeing

Golden threads

- › Strong commitment to values and building trust
- › Manages change and uncertainty
- › Involves employees in decision making and change
- › Effective communication structures
- › Emotional literacy
- › Cultural humility

15

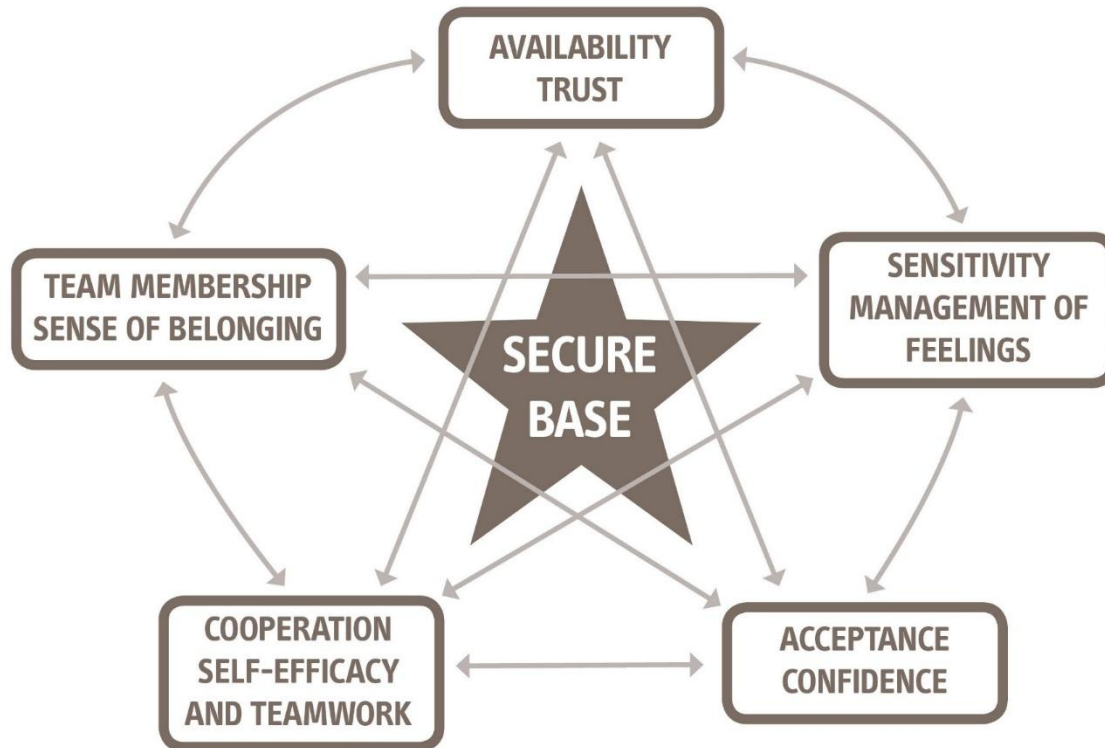
Secure Base 	Sense of Appreciation 	Learning Organisation 	Mission and Vision 	Well-being 
> Self-efficacy and self-confidence > Self-aware > Understands duty of care > Knows about job demands and stress > Leads by example > Tackles difficult issues > Personalised approach > Personally resilient	> Trusting and empowering > Knows their staff > Builds effective teams > Knows about job demands and stress > Warm and approachable > Inspiring	> Knows their staff > Can tackle difficult issues > Aware of support strategies > Appreciates the need for life-long learning > Building effective teams > Recognises and celebrates achievements but recognises areas for improvement > Interested in the experience and opinions of others	> Leads by example > Warm and approachable > Inspiring > Optimistic > Understands duty of care	> Role-models self-care > Promotes resilience training > Committed to work-life balance practices

The golden threads

Delegation and talent management

Approach	Underlying principles
Adaptive leadership (eg Heifetz et al., 2009)	Leadership generates new solutions in response to changing needs of organisation. Problem solving through encouraging experimentation, enabling new discoveries, and facilitating diverse voices and perspectives.
Integrative / collaborative leadership (eg Crosby & Bryson, 2010)	Leaders bring together people, groups and organisations across boundaries to collaboratively address complex problems and achieve a common outcome.
Collective / distributed leadership (eg Gronn, 2002)	Leaders distribute and allocate leadership power wherever expertise, capability and motivation sit to best respond to challenge or opportunity. Leaders treat all with respect, care and compassion, and show a willingness to follow as well as lead.
Lateral /boundary spanning leadership (eg Williams, 2011)	Leadership connects across organisational /sector boundaries to engage others who want change. Achieving change through networking, reflection and shared action to disrupt the status quo.

Team as a Secure Base Model (Biggart et al, 2016)



- > **Availability:** Someone is physically and emotionally available to provide support



- > **Sensitivity:** Opportunity to express a range of feelings, someone to help us 'make sense' of their feelings

- > **Acceptance:** Individual contributions are recognised; we enjoy shared successes and we learn from setbacks to improve



- > **Team belonging:** A recognisable culture and identity; sense of solidarity and support for each other; we belong here

- > **Cooperation:** Team members can exercise choice and agency, especially during change; we can develop complementary skills; shared goals



Thinking about the Secure Base model in the context of your setting / organisation / team:

- > What elements do we do well?
- > What elements need some additional effort?



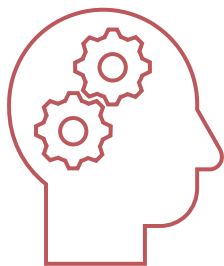
Emotionally literate leadership

- Notice and name the feeling, provide containment (Bion, 1962)
- Power-conscious, intentionally anti-oppressive, inclusive
- Tap into motivation and values – remember why we do the work
- Tenacity, skills, hope, joy
- Role-modelling. Always.

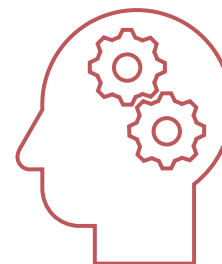
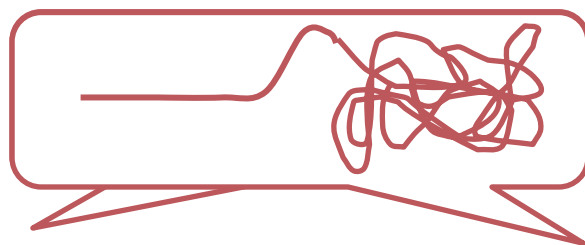


What is the process of containment?

Containment: A process of transformation. Emotional material is made more 'digestible' and tolerable.



Container:
Person receiving the
emotional communication



Contained:
The turbulent feelings and
state of mind

When we act as a container, we are emotionally receptive and attuned to another person's troubled, turbulent and anxious feelings or states of mind

When containment isn't happening as well as we'd like...

- › Individuals, teams and even the whole organisation can fall into behaviours that are counterproductive (e.g. can mask or contribute to anxiety, rather than managing it)
- › Examples can include:
 - emotional numbing / dissociation
 - over-proceduralism
 - unhealthy habits
 - chronic hyperarousal (everything becomes a crisis)
 - hypervigilance (heightened mistrust / suspicion).

(Tehrani, 2010)

Table 1 - Trauma and stress in the workforce (adapted from Trauma Informed Oregon, 2018)

Burnout	The cumulative psychological strain of working with many different stressors. It often manifests as a gradual wearing down over time.
Vicarious trauma	The cumulative effect of working with children and families who have experienced trauma.
Secondary traumatic stress	Professionals' subclinical or clinical signs and symptoms of PTSD that mirror those experienced by trauma clients, friends, or family.
Compassion stress/fatigue	The stress of helping or wanting to help someone who has experienced trauma.

Experiencing secondary trauma in a non-supportive environment can affect individuals and undermine team working environments, leading to:

- > increased absenteeism
- > impaired judgment
- > low motivation and poor quality of work
- > **reduced critical thinking skills**
- > greater staff friction
- > high levels of staff turnover.

(Osofsky, 2012; Quinn et al., 2018)

Becoming a trauma-informed organisation

- › The following underpinning principles and values (the 4 Rs) are key to becoming trauma-informed:
- › **Realises** the widespread impact of trauma, stress and adversity and understands potential pathways for recovery.
- › **Recognises** the signs and impact of trauma in staff, and children and families.
- › **Resists** re-traumatisation. (*think EEDI*)
- › **Responds** by embedding knowledge about trauma into policies and procedures, language, culture and practices.

(SAMSHA, 2014)

...there is no 'magic bullet', no one-day training, and no neat fix...it is a 'skin not a jacket'

Dysregulation *and*
containment
travel up and
down the layers...

What helps you
pass on the latter,
not the former?



research
in practice

**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**
Part of the family



www.researchinpractice.org.uk



ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

DHolmes@ncb.org.uk

Thank you