Articles

Functional Families: Functional Teams

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This article highlights the negative effects on professionals who regularly work with very abusive families and seeks to identify what protective factors in the work team and its management mitigate these effects. I compare the behavioural consequences of living in a dysfunctional family with the consequences of working in a dysfunctional team. My hope is to identify practical, realistic things that can be done, especially by team managers, to protect staff from the all too familiar emotional costs of such work.

Working with highly dysfunctional and often, very abusive families, is extremely demanding (MacKinnon, 1998; Bentovim, 1995). From time to time one hears faint whispers of occasional spectacular successes, but I have my doubts. In my more despondent moments I relegate the notion of SSWHDF (Spectacular Successes with Highly Dysfunctional Families) to the category UPF (Urban Professional Mythology), subsection: Chronic Optimism. Never having experienced a SSWHDF myself, it suits me to suspect they are rather like ghosts — everyone knows someone who says they have seen one, but no one has actually seen one. The reality is that most of us do not cease our involvement with such families with any real sense of achievement, let alone having acted out a rescue fantasy. Quite often the outcomes are painful and distressing for both clients and professionals. Yet many professionals in child protection and allied services feel inadequate and even incompetent, because they continue to compare themselves with some imagined standard of 'success' which is largely illusory.

This article results from my attempt to better understand the negative effects on professionals who regularly work with very abusive families and if possible, to identify what protective factors mitigate these effects. The hope was to identify practical, realistic things that can be done to protect us from the all too familiar emotional costs of such work.

I have chosen a developmental–systemic model because I believe the more usual individually oriented models of burnout (Scott & Hawk, 1986; Rippere & Williams, 1985) can invite us to feel responsible and pathologised, because, mostly, they fail to place proper emphasis on the role that systems play in the creation and maintenance of toxic workplaces. They also do not emphasise the means by which systems — as opposed to individuals — can expunge the toxicity. A notable exception would be Sally Young's recent discussion of burnout (2003). Most models of burnout also fail to recognise that it is normal for individual professionals to yearn to be valued, acknowledged and supported at work.

A Developmental Perspective

A central tenet of this article is that the fundamental needs of adult humans in hierarchical work systems differ in few ways from those of children raised in family systems. That the quality of family dynamics provides formative experiences for young humans may seem an embarrassingly obvious statement. However, the correspondingly obvious fact that in adulthood, the quality of the dynamics in other hierarchical systems (workplaces) has an equally profound effect on the internal experiences of employees, and hence upon their professional functioning, seems to have been lost. Again, exceptions would be Lyth (1988) and Stokes (in Obholtzer & Roberts, 1994).

I have not seen or heard much evidence suggesting that most agencies that deal with dysfunctional families regularly reflect in any meaningful way upon how their structures and internal dynamics impact on the work experiences of team members. I have come across some glorious exceptions (Bunston, 1997; Obholtzer & Roberts, 1994), but not many. So on the assumption that this is not such an obvious construct

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as it should be, I will start my description of a developmental–systemic model for adult workplaces with a brief discussion of the needs of infants and children.

Through early exposure to family dynamics, humans gain experience of both good and bad aspects of power differentials. They are also exposed to a variety of strategies for dealing with adversity. Through these formative experiences — and dependent upon their quality — we gain some confidence in our abilities, and some degree of resilience to stressors, as well as learning both our interpersonal and political skills. By 'political', I mean our skills at social survival in hierarchical systems such as those most of us experience at work. It will be helpful at this point to consider what we experience when we have what Winnicott (1958; 1965) describes as 'good-enough' parenting in what I am calling 'good-enough family systems'. However, such an examination requires an acknowledgment that good-enough parents are people who *aspire* to an ideal more frequently than they achieve it.

Good-enough Families

Good-enough family systems have parents who aspire to be child-focused in that they consider the impact of their plans and actions upon their children, try to have realistic expectations of their children and attempt to maintain reasonable internal and external boundaries.

Good-enough parents seek to maintain sound *internal boundaries* within the family system through a number of practices. These include modelling the expression and regulation of a range of emotions, naming and validating children's feelings, and praising appropriate emotional regulation. They attempt to overcome the inevitable differences in how they regard their different children and to treat them fairly, celebrating their differences when appropriate. They try to be open to their children's opinions, ideas and complaints, to encourage creativity and mastery and not to compete with them. They try to articulate rules clearly in advance and consistently apply them. Also, whenever possible, good-enough parents seek to explain apparent differences in advance. Children are discouraged from blaming each other and 'telling tales', and are praised for acknowledging their misdemeanours. However, these parents ensure that reasonable consequences still apply, are maintained in the face of strong protest from the child — this being one feature of what has been termed 'good authority' in a parent (Pitt-Aikens & Thomas Ellis, 1989) — and applied without seeking to inflict humiliation or fear.

These parents are willing to adapt the family rules, expectations and consequences to reflect changing developmental milestones. They try to be flexible and open to the possibilities of new ideas. They are also prepared to acknowledge to children when they themselves have behaved unfairly or are mistaken, and coach the children to apologise when appropriate. They encourage their children's exposure to constructive debating and healthy disagreement as well as conflict resolution. They try to model agreeing to disagree. These parents seek to ensure children are not privy to serious marital or other adult disagreements, looking for emotional support only from other adults, and actively discouraging their children from taking sides. They attempt to make clear to children which responsibilities and concerns are legitimately theirs, and which belong to adults. Good-enough parents try to show their children how to have fun. They encourage the proper use of humour (i.e. not at the expense of others) and model how to laugh gently at themselves.

Good-enough parents aspire to maintain sound *external boundaries* around their families. They seek to balance their children's need for developmentally appropriate challenges with a desire to protect them from harm. While encouraging children to explore and experiment, to challenge themselves appropriately and to face their normal fears, these parents also strive to quarantine them from unnecessary knowledge and unduly anxiety-provoking experiences. They try to teach children to recognise and avoid unduly risky situations whenever possible, and encourage them ask for help and reassurance whenever they need it. They encourage children to make safe mistakes and to learn from them. Children raised in such systems, safely 'held' in the respect and goodwill of their parents, have the greatest chance of growing into confident, creative, secure adults with good social and self-protective skills.

The Effects of Not-Good-Enough Family Systems

Children who are raised in families where many or most of these dynamics are absent develop very differently. Their capacity to regulate impulses and emotions is often compromised and their personal and worldviews are often dominated by cynicism and mistrust, with negative consequences for both their interpersonal and broader social skills (James, 1994; Karen, 1998). Depending upon the particular dynamics in their individual families, these children may be cut off from their feelings and therefore have diminished ability to empathise. They may be wary of sympathy, have poor impulse control, and have difficulty regulating emotions. They may doubt the validity of and their entitlement to, their needs, opinions, ideas and complaints. They may assume they will be ridiculed, ignored or punished if

they express their thoughts and feelings — even feeling shame for burdening adults with them. These children may experience themselves as incompetent, fearing to attempt new challenges, assuming that there will be humiliating or frightening consequences for failure. They may be jealously competitive with their siblings, ungracious in success and resentful in failure. They may regard the good fortune of others as unfair and see it as proof of an unjust world, in which the success of peers or siblings has not been fairly earned.

Many of these children have trouble keeping rules and/or have no real understanding of the rationale for rules beyond their punitive consequences. They may be unwilling to acknowledge their misdemeanours, fearing the consequences will include humiliation. Many will expect to be blamed unfairly. Some will expect to be able to change the rules through nagging, pleading, bribery or threats, and find it extremely difficult to accept that they cannot move the boundaries — responding with anger or fear when they find they cannot. By contrast, others may not protest even when the consequences are unjust.

Some of these children regard all imposed negative consequences as inherently unfair and a consequence of bad luck or as confirmation of their low self worth. They may be quick to accuse others — fairly or unfairly — in the hope of attaining parental approval.

Some will regard all positive consequences as the result of weakness on the part of a 'weird' or 'sucker' adult. They will view apologies and flexibility as a sign of weakness and may respond with contempt — which they may not show. Promises of fair treatment may be met with disbelief and distrust. They find actual experiences of fair treatment may be too hard to tolerate and will eventually provoke compassionate carers into behaving in more familiar, i.e. punitive, ways. They may be rigid in their beliefs or be inconsistent; for example, automatically agreeing with whoever has spoken last.

They may view the world beyond their immediate family with suspicion and avoid contact with it. They may be wary of seemingly innocent questions about themselves or their behaviours, regarding them as potential traps or ambushes.

Some will react badly to jokes, which they expect to be at their expense. They will utilise humour as a form of emotional violence, and laugh at the misfortune of others. Many will be unable to initiate fun activities spontaneously, and will be reticent or suspicious about invitations to have fun.

Some will be chronically anxious, expecting sudden calamities, feeling both powerless and responsible for negative events. They may feel responsible for solving other people's problems, especially those of their parents.

Adults in Dysfunctional Professional Systems

How do these dynamics and outcomes translate to adult professional systems? I believe the qualities and skills of the good-enough parents are the same as those of the good-enough team managers and good-enough senior managers.

The need for good-enough care is a human — not simply a childhood — need. It is central to the maintenance of successful, happy functioning at all stages of the life span. It is as relevant to the maintenance of energetic, functional, effective adult work-based systems as it is to family systems.

This is particularly true of adults working in the helping professions. We are, by nature and upbringing, more vulnerable than most to the impulse to help, and more likely to feel a personal obligation to fix other people's problems. We are also less inclined to seek help ourselves. We are the goody-two-shoes of the workforce. We have to be watched to ensure we don't demand too much of ourselves and too little of others. We tend to deny or suppress anger, in the interests of pleasing others and keeping up a cheerful, optimistic appearance.

Adults working at the frontline in highly dysfunctional work systems share with all children the experience of comparative powerlessness in hierarchical systems. If exposed to similarly dysfunctional dynamics, we can come to respond in similar ways to the young people described above. This is one reason why the dynamics of some teams and organisations eventually come to parallel the dynamics of the dysfunctional family systems with which they work.

Low staff morale becomes obvious when staff begin to display some of the following behaviours. They may cut off from their feelings and/or find it increasingly difficult to contain their strong emotions. They may begin to 'lose it' with colleagues or even clients, to behave more callously or cynically towards clients, to become wary of sympathy and support. Some will begin to harbour concealed doubts about their professional skills and to question in secret the validity of their opinions and ideas.

Rightly or wrongly, some will begin to believe that colleagues or management will not take their opinions seriously, and may even secretly fear this is reasonable. Some will assume they will be ridiculed, ignored or punished if they express their opinions.

Many will develop a view of themselves as 'failures' or as 'professional frauds', becoming increasingly

afraid to attempt new challenges, assuming failure and fearing humiliating or frightening consequences. They may begin to avoid any form of competition, because they fear it risks public humiliation, and they doubt their ability to succeed. They may steadfastly refuse to make presentations to colleagues. Others, by contrast, become jealously competitive with their colleagues, responding ungraciously to the success of others, attributing it to favouritism from management, or to clever and unjustified self-promotion.

Some team members may come to resent the organisation's rules and refuse to acknowledge the rationales underpinning them. Even minor regulations may be questioned, often in petty and unconstructive ways. Every opportunity may be taken to challenge or undermine the authority of frontline supervisors and managers. Some colleagues will become unwilling to acknowledge their misdemeanours, assuming that this will involve private or public humiliation. They come to regard all imposed negative consequences as inherently unfair — possibly the result of harassment or discrimination.

Others will expect to be able to talk or argue their way out of onerous tasks or out of consequences for rule breaking, and respond with resentment or anger, when they cannot move the boundaries. Tale telling may become commonplace as colleagues 'dob in' their workmates, sometimes due to envy, or in the hope of attaining management approval.

If morale has been poor for a long time, some team members may find the experience of fair treatment hard to trust or tolerate. Some may respond by attempting to provoke the fairest managers into behaving in more familiar, that is, punitive ways, because this is what they have come to expect. Some will begin to regard all positive consequences as the result of weakness, and contemptuously view as 'weak' managers who are flexible, and prepared to apologise.

Many will become rigid in their beliefs, especially in the face of change. In team meetings, they may be inconsistent, or afraid to state a belief. Some will simply agree with whichever colleague has just put a strong view forward.

Many will be suspicious about invitations to relax and have some fun in the workplace, assuming that they will be in trouble even when the invitation is issued by people in authority. Alternatively, some may think that having fun at work is too self-indulgent, feeling guilty if they are not working hard for their clients every moment and responsible for clients' — or colleagues' — unresolved problems. They may begin to stay longer at work, unpaid. Some may blur professional and personal boundaries even further and become friends with clients.

For some, an apparent lack of success may begin to feel like a significant personal failure, leading to secret feelings of inadequacy and shame. Unreasonable self-expectations can take the form of guilt for what they perceive as burdening their colleagues, managers or friends with their concerns. They may decline to discuss them or to seek reassurance or support from anyone.

Some will begin to feel responsible for the failures of the organisation itself. They may become embarrassed to acknowledge where they work. They may begin to worry excessively about agency-related events and issues that are beyond their power to change.

Alternatively, this may take the form of viewing other agencies with suspicion or contempt. Some will feel their organisation is under siege from outsiders, whom they regard as hostile or jealous. Sometimes the suspicion and disrespect becomes focused on other professions rather than other agencies. They may resist making contact with these agencies or professions, feeling that their organisation is better able to function without them.

The Contribution of the Individual to Team Dynamics

It makes sense that colleagues who were raised in highly dysfunctional families will have been more vulnerable to developing the kinds of self-beliefs and worldviews I have been discussing, since many of them originally evolved as strategies for surviving hostile environments. It is also inevitable that, for some, these survival strategies, which have long ago outgrown their usefulness, have remained intact and have now become a hindrance to the development of nurturing, safe adult relationships. Unless these colleagues have had an opportunity to address whatever issues have arisen for them, they are more likely than those of us exposed to good-enough parenting, to bring these dynamics with them into their workplaces. This is not inevitable, however, and even when it does occur, it is not a statement of blame. It is merely recognition that prior exposure to a toxic family environment may well increase a person's capacity to tolerate other toxic environments including in the workplace (Crago, 1988).

Put another way, these colleagues may find it harder to recognise when they are in a toxic environment, or even contributing to the toxicity, and harder to retain a conviction that they are entitled to a more mutually respectful, caring and rewarding workplace. External professional supervisors have a responsibility to draw to their colleagues' attention to their innate

vulnerabilities and to urge them to seek personal therapy to strengthen their self-protective capacities and/or interpersonal skills.

Most commonly, when team dynamics go 'pear shaped', workers with good-enough self-esteem and good professional functioning become gradually entrapped in toxic systems. This can be because the dynamics at the workplace deteriorate gradually, so that the deterioration in psychological working conditions goes unnoticed. Alternatively, new employees are made aware by management of the 'difficult' or 'challenging' work environment and are told — implicitly or explicitly — that as well trained and experienced professionals, they should be able to rise above the toxic aspects of the culture and not let it get to them. This is another situation where good external supervision is vital.

Dysfunctional teams are not an inevitable consequence of exposure to highly dysfunctional families. They are created by managerial omission, just as functional, successful teams are created by deliberate effort.

How Can We Recognise Good Enough Management?

> … by creating environments in which the needs of individuals, as well as those of the organization, are met. It is hard to be too basic about what those needs are. They are for affection, esteem, belonging, security, identity and competence. There is no point in teaching workers the refinements of advanced skills if these fundamental needs are unmet (Morrison, 1990, in Bunston, 1997).

It is important to acknowledge that the generic role of frontline managers is to reflect to staff and clients the policies and philosophies that have been developed by their senior management. Their role is also to reflect to middle and senior management the concerns of staff and clients. The extent to which it is safe for the frontline manager to perform the second aspect of this role varies with each organisation. Frontline managers usually have very little power in reality, and the extent to which they are able to function as described below may reflect more upon the quality of middle and senior management than it does on them. A good-enough executive runs an agency that:

- Is equally client- and staff-focused. It recognises that its employees are the organisation's most important assets.
- Has developed a clear mission statement with achievable and relevant goals. The goals reflect the understanding that the maintenance of high employee morale is essential for achieving the mission.
- Has clearly communicated the relationship between the goals and the mission statement to all staff.
- Has ensured that these goals include a clear and functional definition of the minimum acceptable level of staff morale, with clear indicators of how to measure its quality.
- Ensures that job descriptions reflect the mission statement and the relevant goals, and is committed to ensuring that sufficient and suitably qualified staff is employed to achieve the goals.
- Is committed to providing a working environment which enhances staff's professional development *and* their personal wellbeing. Has committed realistic funding to training and ongoing internal and external clinical supervision for frontline staff and managers. Has realistically assessed the impacts of the agency's goals upon their employees.
- Has developed a realistic disciplinary policy, which clearly articulates minimum levels of skills required for each job, together with a transparent procedure for addressing inadequate performances.
- Has developed a transparent procedure for addressing grievances, which ensures that staff do not suffer negative consequences for making complaints. Has developed a model of conflict resolution.
- Has developed a practical and realistic occupational health and safety policy that takes into account the sometimes potentially dangerous dynamics in client families.
- Has ensured that these principles are reflected in the employment criteria of frontline managers and that the criteria include a commitment to the creation and maintenance of high staff morale by maintaining sound internal and external boundaries for the agency.

In practical terms, what can frontline managers do to implement these policies? A good-enough frontline manager can aspire to achieving *sound internal boundaries* by attempting to regard her/his senior (i.e. more powerful) position in the organisation as a badge of responsibility to clients and colleagues, rather than a badge of superiority. For example, s/he does not refer to 'my team' or 'my staff' but to 'the team' or 'my colleagues'.

A good enough frontline manager exercises good 'gate-keeping' through the development of clear, consistent and transparent referral criteria, including guiding principles for prioritisation. S/he also ensures that colleagues and referral agencies are equally well informed about these criteria. S/he takes charge of the process of case allocation, ensuring that colleagues are aware of the

rationale. The good-enough frontline manager allocates cases on the basis of workloads (see below), variety of cases in individual's workloads, and the need for particular competencies. When practicable, he/she encourages joint casework and interdisciplinary case allocation as a way of building mutual respect among team members.

The good-enough frontline manager develops transparent measures of clinical workloads in consultation with colleagues. Agencies vary considerably in the amount of case management and paperwork (case notes, assessment summaries, closure summaries, formal and informal reports, and so on) associated with direct client contact. These demands should be factored into estimates of hours needed to meet the agency's expectations. Because a sudden increase in face-to-face sessions with a client may have significant flow-on effects for case management and/or documentation, workloads should be regularly monitored in consultation with colleagues to ensure sufficient time is allocated for them to complete all aspects of their work. Information about all workloads should be available for all colleagues to see and compare without having to ask.

A good-enough manager encourages respect and appreciation of the unique contribution of different professional disciplines, and promotes cross-discipline discourse, education and cooperation. Information about potential colleagues' attitudes to other disciplines should be sought at job interviews.

S/he treats all colleagues as of equal worth, at the same time as their different skills, qualities and professional knowledge bases are acknowledged, celebrated and utilised. While good-enough managers inevitably regard some colleagues more favourably than others, they strive to avoid acts of overt or covert favouritism.

The manager encourages colleagues to improve their less well-developed skills and to explore and experiment with evidence-based models of intervention, supporting them when they move out of their comfort zones. This can be done by:

- Developing a training policy, which identifies the core skills needed to achieve the agency goals, and ensuring that all colleagues are provided with practically based training in these skills at the agency's time and expense, because it is for the agency's benefit.
- Giving clear and honest feedback about the extent to which colleagues have demonstrated the development of the core skills and what further training or effort they may require to reach a satisfactory standard.
- Encouraging each colleague to develop a personal professional three-to-five year plan. Helping them to compile a professional development program designed to assist each of them to reach their professional goals. Providing time for colleagues to attend relevant training courses. Where these are not relevant to the agency, attendance should be at workers' own expense.

The good-enough frontline manager ensures that the rules, policies and procedures of the organisation are clearly articulated in advance and consistently applies them whenever possible. Apparent inconsistencies, when possible, are explained in advance. The team is aware of the potential consequences of rule infringements as well as the procedures for disciplinary action. All staff have equitable ways of measuring whether they are performing to minimum acceptable standards. The manager addresses continuing substandard performances promptly and fairly. This involves:

- Discussing frankly and respectfully any areas of weakness and limitation, and encouraging colleagues to consider what they can do to address them.
- Being honest about the implications of these weaknesses for both the agency and the staff member's future development.
- Establishing agreement about what the colleague needs to do to achieve acceptable change and how the agency may be able to assist such efforts.

A good-enough frontline manager is willing to hear and genuinely consider the opinions, ideas and complaints of colleagues, ensuring that favouritism and 'splitting' of colleagues is strictly avoided. S/he challenges colleagues who attempt to create 'splits' among work mates. The manager monitors the pre-defined indicators of staff morale to ensure a reasonable level is maintained, and takes immediate action if standards begin to fall.

The manager keeps managerial disagreements and conflicts confidential, and keeps conflicts with external agencies confidential whenever practicable. S/he seeks confidential emotional and tactical support only from other managers or from appropriate colleagues outside the organisation, and should insist on having regular external supervision at the agency's expense.

The good-enough manager closely monitors and actively regulates the working hours of colleagues and self. He/she strongly discourages working extended hours without prior permission, requiring colleagues to justify the need to work extra unpaid hours, and only granting permission when the colleague has agreed to take commensurate time-in-lieu at a designated time, as soon as possible, and usually within five working days. This approach serves two purposes. First, it assists colleagues to protect themselves from over-involvement at work. Second, it protects other team members from the unspoken pressure to join the over-workers. The front-line manager encourages

random acts of fun — with or without him/her. For example, suggesting that the team go for a coffee break — preferably out of the office.

The manager unequivocally supports colleagues in situations where they are being treated unreasonably. He/she requires them to take responsibility for initial attempts to resolve minor conflicts with other colleagues, and discusses with them any ways in which they could improve their conflict resolution skills. When necessary, the manager takes more direct measures to defend colleagues from unreasonable treatment.

The good-enough frontline manager monitors adherence to the agency's occupational health and safety policy, identifies gaps in the policy, and proceeds to address them. The manager develops a policy for dealing with potentially violent clients that prioritises the safety of colleagues, while insisting that staff prioritise their own safety and praising them when they do so.

A good-enough frontline manager can strive to achieve *sound external boundaries* by developing transparent criteria for prioritising cases on the waiting list and identifying her/himself to outside agencies as the person responsible for them. S/he ensures that colleagues at other agencies are familiar with the criteria and effectively communicates their rationale, taking responsibility for dealing with persistent complaints about the criteria.

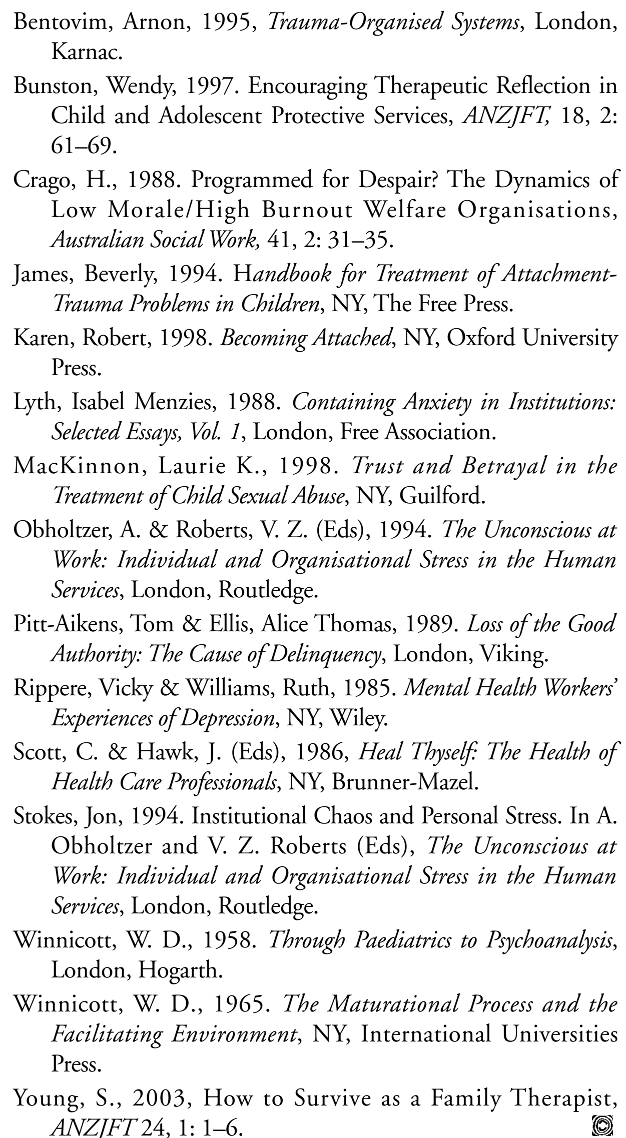
The manager personally maintains the waiting list and avoids burdening colleagues with knowledge about its content or length. Knowledge of the length of the 'queue' for service can have a debilitating effect on morale, and serves no useful purpose. The manager deals with higher level inter-agency conflicts without unnecessarily involving colleagues or making them aware of what is going on. At the same time, the manager creates a culture in which colleagues are confident that they can approach management if they are concerned about issues relating to other agencies.

Conclusion

The use of a developmental–systemic model enables us to see with greater clarity the parallel between the inevitable harm of dysfunctional families and the inevitable vulnerability of professionals who are left to flounder in dysfunctional teams. It also assists us to identify more quickly the presence or absence of protective factors. Finally, it enables us to harness our existing skills and knowledge base in identifying practical strategies to establish more nurturant work environments.

I have presented a far from definitive list of protective interventions, but my hope is that it highlights some of the many practical means by which our needs for safety and nurturance at work can be met. I am tempted at this stage to argue that by looking after ourselves more effectively, we are looking after our clients too. But I shall resist that temptation, because our need for cultural change in the workplace can and should be self-evident, and require no further justification. We are human beings after all.

Mentoring of future managers has often been a hit-and-miss process in the caring professions, probably because many 'natural' and 'intuitive' managers have not reflected on what has worked for them — perhaps because they have not had a model for explaining why their techniques work. I hope this paper goes some way towards providing a model and a language for doing this.



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