

Well-Being for Child Welfare Workers

Alyssa Meuwissen ([00:06](#)):

Hello, my name is Alyssa Meuwissen and I'm a research associate at the Center for Early Education and Development. And today I'm delighted to be talking to Kris Johnson and Jess Hoeper, who are both consultants and provide reflective consultation for child welfare workers and child welfare administrators. And combined, they've worked in the child welfare field for decades. And today we're gonna be talking about wellbeing and why that's so important for child welfare workers and what child welfare workers can think about in their own practices to help it be a more sustainable job. So, welcome to the podcast, and I wanna start out with my first question as just how do you define wellbeing when you're thinking about child welfare work? What does that concept mean to you in your work consulting with child welfare workers?

Kris Johnson ([00:57](#)):

This is Kris. I would say for me, when I think about wellbeing, I think about mental, physical and emotional health. So taking care of your body, taking care of your brain, taking care of your heart. It's the capacity to manage challenges. And so it doesn't mean that it's not hard cuz it certainly is hard work, but the capacity, the skills, the practice to take care of yourself through the hard stuff and cope with it so that you can show up the way that you want to show up. It's also about, I think agencies having that care for workers as well and having so helping workers have a reasonable balance in their life so that they can be their whole selves, take care of their life outside of work and take care of it in work.

Jess Hoeper ([01:49](#)):

Yeah, I, this is Jess. I agree with Chris. The thing for me that I really love to think about though is just the word by itself, right? Like wellbeing to me is your being as well. And so then you have to nurture many of the things Kris was saying, all pieces of you both mind, body, and spirit. And so you have to find ways within this work to have your being be well. And like Kris was saying about systems response to wellbeing too, is your systems have to help beings be well in the work <laugh>.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([02:19](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good point that it's, it's really multi-dimensional from, you know, kind of your own, like really personal coping strategies, relationships you have with people in the work all the way up to like, how are the systems providing environments that people can be well in.

Kris Johnson ([02:35](#)):

That's really important to me. Like when we talk about self-care, um, that we are all responsible for taking care of ourselves and having self-care, but it's not fair to say, well, we're gonna throw you in the deep end of tremendously challenging work so you better go to yoga and take care of yourself. You know, it's, it's the, the agency needs to help you with it too and have a climate and a setting that makes it that sets you up to be able to do that self-care.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([03:04](#)):

Yeah, for sure. And so why do you think wellbeing is important, specifically in the child welfare worker field? How does wellbeing affect people's work when they're coming from like a place of, you know, healthy wellbeing versus low wellbeing?

Jess Hoeper ([03:21](#)):

I think for me, when I think child welfare specific, the nature of the work is you will meet people in moments of stress. Nobody enters the system or touches the system. You don't have the honor of working with any family that's going to come in for any other reason than something very stressful is happening in their family. And so simply by nature, you are going to have to nurture your wellbeing through ways of knowing how you manage stress. How does it show up? You know, you have to know all of those things around you because the nature of the work is stressful. And so nurturing your wellbeing in child welfare specific is knowing how to see stress without having to become it in every facet. Like we were talking about all of the dimensions. But it has to be really intentional practice, really intentional system set up for people to be well in child welfare specifically.

Kris Johnson ([04:12](#)):

Yeah. And I think, you know, to add to that, like the work is stressful. You know, somebody's always mad at you. It you either you're doing too much or you're not doing enough. And that's, that resonates with child welfare workers all the time. They always feel like no matter what I do, somebody feels like it's wrong. So just the stress of the work is hard. And I think also you, you are in constant proximity to trauma. You know, that, that, and we know that as child welfare workers, when you go out in the world and you talk to people about what you do, people react and go, Ooh, oh, yuck. That's, that's gotta be so hard. You know, I used to say it's like I can bring conversation to a screeching halt if I tell people what my job is because they just are like, yuck.

[\(04:58\)](#):

That's terrible. And it is y you know, it's things we don't like to think about. We don't wanna, we don't like to think about children getting hurt. It is just, it is an insult to our brains. It's, it's not what we want to have happen in the world. And so there has to be some degree of acceptance that tragic things happen. And when you're close to tragic things happening, you just feel it, it just hurts. And so we've gotta be able to take care of ourselves and have organizations that help us navigate just how just plain sad it is and painful it is to, to know those things and witness those things. So the, the combination of your doing hard stuff and you're doing it fast and you're doing it without enough resources and you're witnessing awfulness. And a lot of goodness too.

[\(05:52\)](#):

It's not that it's just awful, but it's the, it's the awful stuff that sort of, of weighs can weigh on your heart and make it hard to just, you know, get through the days of another sad thing happened and I watched another sad thing happen. And that's one of the things that can happen just in child welfare is just, you know, your worldview. You start to just think, you know, is everything tragic? Are people always hurting each other? And you forget <laugh>, you know, that we have a, a glimpse on a on a narrow window of the world that's really painful and sad.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([06:24](#)):

Yeah. There's a couple things I really liked what you said, Jess, about how do you see stress without being stress? And I think that's, that's it's, it's like a huge conundrum for, I don't know, the, the world in these helping professions. And then Kris, yeah, I feel like in a lot of these helping professions I guess, but child welfare, it's kind of to the extreme that your everyday work is other people's, like biggest life crisis like that is your daily work is dealing with people who are in like, you know, huge life crises. And so how do you like right, kind of adapt and, and keep perspective with all of that?

Kris Johnson ([07:02](#)):

It reminds me of a, a situation that I dealt with that that made it really real. And it, it's one of those situations that stayed with me for a long time that I was working with a 13 year old boy who was just in massive crisis and his family was in crisis. And it was, it was so tragic. I remember I had spent the whole week working with him. He needed to go to the psych hospital and it was a psych hospital that was kind of stark. It was, you know, it was fluorescent lights and it wasn't a lot of like, you know, it, it wasn't a pretty place to take a 13 year old boy. And then I drove home from that and then my 13 year old son had a birthday party that night and I had these 13 year old boys all over my house playing football and laughing and joyful.

[\(07:53\)](#):

And I just sat there and watched them and it was like, I wanna go back up and pick him up. I just wanna go get that kid and he can just come to the party and he can sleep over and then I'll take him back to the psych hospital, which makes no sense, <laugh>, it is not a thing we get to do. And it was like, it was so hard because it was hard for me to be present for my son's party because it was like, I remember, I remember so clearly standing in the yard and my throat just hurt and it was like, just the weight of the week just hurt. And it was like I couldn't, I wasn't fully present for the party because I was, I was with this boy that I had dealt with all week. And it, and it, I just spent the rest of the weekend just heavy about, about what I had witnessed. And then, and then it's like, you guys want more brownies? You know, I just, it was so hard to, to switch, you know, gears and go back to my life that in that moment was privilege and joy and it's, that can be really crazy making and we're not, not the only field that does that, but that, that's one of those experiences that just sits with, sat with me for a long time about, kind of how crazy making it is to be with the tragedy and then go on with your life.

Jess Hoeper [\(09:10\)](#):

It's like, I don't think there's probably a child welfare worker that doesn't have a situation where they can say, I know when I became the stress because I took it with me into other areas. And I remember living in a very unaware space of being a child protection worker, you know, brand new, wouldn't have picked it as a career, but fell in love with it once I got in it. Right? Like, it is truly an honor to get to meet people in this space and build relationships where they let you in, but it does bring stress into your life. And so you can become the stress that like that. And now for me, it's more of a gauge, like when I become it, I know that my wellness is low. You know, I, I mean I don't always see it in the moment, but that's one of my gauges cuz like Kris, there's times where I became it and I would look at the world differently.

[\(09:56\)](#):

You know, I had a caseload of teenagers for years because that's the population I just loved working with, you know, it was like genuine chaos. Um, but they believed it, it wasn't like manipulative, it was like genuine. But there were times I'd see teenagers and I would, my brain would think every teenager has been sexually abused. Well, no they haven't. But the ones I work with have. And so, you know, it was, I could see myself becoming this view of seeing the world in a certain way. So that was my, I mean, thankfully reflection found me at this moment in my, that was my way to have a gauge. Like when I start seeing the world in a certain way, my wellbeing is being impacted by this work. I have to, you know, get re-centered. But there's not a child welfare worker that doesn't have many, many multiple of those situations where you have become the stress of the work and it has influenced your kids' birthday parties like Kris or bedtime routines or the way you let them go to friends or don't go to friends, or if they get to ride their bike down the street alone or not.

[\(10:55\)](#):

I mean, it, it really does show up everywhere unique to child welfare.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([11:00](#)):

Yeah. And I think it's a really important point to that you guys are both mothers as you're doing this work. And a large portion of the population is kind of women, you know, in the age of having children, that's a lot of the people who do this work. And a lot of people have other caregiving responsibilities at home also for, you know, parents and other things. But a lot of people are doing this work as they're parenting their own young kids or, you know, kids of all ages. Yeah.

Kris Johnson ([11:25](#)):

The other part of that is that we were also all kids. So not only do we carry the, the current stress, but we carry a life history with us. And there's research out there that when people are in the child welfare field, you know, that they don't come in with an ACE score of zero, you know, the ACEs study about the child, the traumas that people have experienced, you know, most of us bring in our own histories as well. Well, well we all bring our own histories in. And so not only, you know, is it my 13 year old son, you know, and my 13 year old client, but I was a 13 year old. And so I can also harken back to those days of, you know, something might trip me with this person. Reminds me of someone I worked with a woman for a long time and I could not figure out why I was reacting to her. And it was finally like, she was a nurse and my mom was a nurse and it was like, she reminds me of my mom and not necessarily in a bad way, but I was just getting activated because it was like, there was something about how she interacted with me that was, that reminded me of my mom. So we've all got those things that we carry with us that if we're not paying attention, it, it plays out for us in, in the work in a variety of ways.

Jess Hoeper ([12:43](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and I would say directly impacts our wellbeing to be low without really any intention of it being low.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([12:52](#)):

Yeah. And so like, kind of going back to big picture, why is it so important for child welfare workers to have good wellbeing for interactions with like their actual clients and families? And how do you see that like relationship between your, the quality of your work and your own wellbeing?

Jess Hoeper ([13:10](#)):

If I can go start up at system level, like you need the only tangible tool that systems have to do this really good work with families is the worker. I mean, there's literally nothing else that can carry out this practice except for the workers in these fields. And so systems must and should invest in wellbeing of their workers because we know that well workers equals well work. Right? You know, when you know how you show up in your work, you're more likely to hear other people's stories accurately instead of through your own perceptions. When you feel it's like, I'm not gonna run a marathon the day that I am sick in bed with the flu. Just they, we have so many obvious metaphors that fit the same meaning of child welfare workers need to be emotionally, physically, and spiritually well to do this work well. And then families are better served. But I wanna, I want people to see wellness needs to be nurtured from top-down, like Kris was saying at the beginning when we talk self-care

Kris Johnson ([14:07](#)):

Yeah. And then, you know, I would add to that too that we know that this work is relational and we teach it to be relational. You know, I like how you said that Jess that like we are, we are the vessel. You know, that, that, and we know that change happens in relationship and at the speed of relationship and there's something called liability that just, that just sort of sits right here next to you. And, and it's, and it whispers in your ear and sometimes it yells in your ear and it makes it hard not to be self-protective, you know? Um, there's the, there's the fear that you're gonna make a mistake. I mean, we, we ha we all live that way. That nobody is comfortable in making mistakes or that fear that even if you don't feel like you made a mistake, someone else might think that you did.

(15:00):

or the fear that you're going to be received in a way that you don't want to be received or per perceived in a way you don't wanna be perceived. Or the fear that you could do everything you could for this family and they're still gonna end with separation or something like that. So the, the pain of all of that the fear that you're gonna screw up or the fear that someone is gonna think you're gonna screw up or be blamed, the fear that it might not be enough. It is so painful to sit in that fear and it without a lot of support around you to say you are not in this by yourself. And that's, that's part of what the system does, that you are not in this by yourself when you make a decision, we are with you in that decision.

(15:46):

The agency's got you in that decision and we'll, and we will back you and support you. And to know that, that if you're struggling, if you're afraid that you're not in that by yourself either, and then to cope through that fear and still be present with the family cuz that, to, to be in relationship with them and to really serve that family, they've gotta be at the center of your work. And how can they be at the center of your work if you're afraid and, and protecting yourself. So somehow, I mean, when you say it out loud, it's like how in the world do we do that <laugh>? It's so hard. I mean, that is why we need so much agency support and, and to be able to take care of ourselves to, to hold onto and manage through really big tough emotions ourself and the, our stress responses, what it does to your body, what it does to your life, your brain, your heart so that you can keep the client centered in your work.

Jess Hoeper (16:46):

Yeah. There's a theme in my head is popping up as Kris is talking cuz she was talking earlier about how, you know, like people will say to you when you tell them what you do, like, oh my gosh, I think if we're ever going to make workers most well in this work, we're going, it's gonna be past agency level, right? It's gonna have to go community collective level and people are gonna also have to know their responsible for child welfare, not just the people in the work in the system. Because that liability, I would say, you know, from experience was that which made the work the heaviest. It wasn't being in somebody's home with their family and struggling crisis that made me feel unwell. It was often that feeling of liability of if I screw up, this is my fault. Cuz there's no collective ownership of families being well. And so that was definitely impactful on wellbeing of workers.

Alyssa Meuwissen (17:37):

Yeah. I never really thought about beyond the welfare system, right? How do we change like that, the whole entire system of how kind of the country and how we support families. All of that like goes down into the wellness of the workforce. Yeah.

Kris Johnson (17:54):

Well, and there's some, there's lessons in that too about a sense of where kids are safest. You know, that sometimes because we worry about kids, we sometimes feel like, get that kid out of there. Like you've gotta get them out of there because we, you know, they deserve better than that or something like that. And, and that there's a sense of judgment that that can come from the outside and you know, workers feel that judgment, families feel that judgment. But there's so much research that shows that kids have the best outcomes when they're with their families as long as those families are safe or safe enough. And so that that feeling of all of us wrapping around not just the kids but the families and saying, what do, what do these kids need? What do these parents need to be safe? You know?

[\(18:46\)](#):

And that goes all the way to that foundational stuff about do they have a place to live? Do they have their basic needs met and that kind of thing. And I know we're talking about worker wellbeing, but that is a piece of it is that feeling of, you know, someone comes to you and they don't have a place to live and you know, that impossible unsolvable problem of what are we gonna do? You know, and that's, you know, us as a society wrapping around kids and families and saying, you know, we want you all to be well

Jess Hoeper [\(19:19\)](#):

When you take care of the people you care about. So collectively you just need to shift that you care about everybody. Not I care about you but not you or, yeah, which trickles down to the worker.

[\(19:19\)](#):

Alyssa Meuwissen [\(19:32\)](#):

Yeah. And I feel like we know from research that especially children activate a like really evolutionary response, you know, that like we are biologically programmed to like, that's not okay, right? We have to keep kids safe. It, it's really emotionally activating for all kind of humans. And you guys have done a lot of training, both of you. And when you think about this sort of like, you know, severe activation and all these stressful situations that child welfare workers are in, what do you think are the really kind of important building blocks of emotional wellbeing or like concepts and principles that you rely on when you're trying to get people to understand emotion in this type of work?

Kris Johnson [\(20:15\)](#):

To me one of the game changers for me was the book, the Body Keeps the Score because it, it illustrated so well that trauma lives in the body, stress lives in the body, emotions live in the body. And we also have an intellectual component to these things. But, you know, we've learned so much about the brain and how the brain works and, and what happens when we're in a stressor, a trauma response. That it's the, it's the, the body that needs care too. That example that I use all the time when we're talking to people about stress, stress and stressors. So like driving in bad weather, when you drive in bad weather, you know, you might have sweaty palms, you know, you can barely see past the tip of your car because snow or rain or whatever, you're sliding all over the road and you know, your heart is racing and your palms are sweating and your stomach hurts and your head hurts, and then you get home.

[\(21:12\)](#):

It's not done. It's not over. You know, your body is still in stress and you, I mean you are safe, it's done. But intellectually that doesn't matter because your body is not over the stress response. And so when you think about the chronic stress of this work, your body doesn't know when it's done. And so, you

know, in some ways that's been a hard lesson to learn myself. And it's been a hard lesson to teach other people that not only are you intellectually processing through this or emotionally processing through this, there is an element where you need to physically process through this. You have got to take care of your body. Breathing is the most fundamental. If, if what I say to people is, if you hear nothing else, take time to breathe. Real deep breathing, belly breathing, three to five minutes can change your wellbeing drastically.

[\(22:11\)](#):

It really can. And there's good research behind that if you do nothing else, breathe. I started doing yoga and I thought, I never, I never thought I'd be a yoga person. I mean it's, it, it felt out there for me to be a yoga person. And I'm not saying I'm a great, a great at it, but it doesn't matter because I'm, I am taking care of my body and it's like, I honestly felt like there were days I felt like decades of work stress were like leaking out my fingers. Like I could just feel like come outta my body and um, my blood pressure is lower, my wellbeing is better because I'm taking care of myself physically. So that when we think of self-care, as I always, we always think of in my agency, it's bringing in treats or getting a pedicure or going out to lunch and there's a place for all of that. There's, there's a place for all of that, but well-rounded self-care is also body care. It has to be

Jess Hoeper [\(23:09\)](#):

Sort of in this space. There's a power within supervision that I see too in, um, just the, a awareness of all of the things Kris is talking about, but also the awareness of, you know, the hyped up term of emotional intelligence, but really knowing how it's embodied in yourself and then helping the workforce you support also embody, you know, awareness of emotion space for them and then knowing what they are and knowing how to manage 'em. And then as you know, kind of a group collective, because it shows up in your workers. You know, like I think about sitting in a virtual meeting with a big group and somebody was snacking every single meeting and then I was doing individual and the person I was meeting with individually was just pissed that this person was eating the whole time. And I said, I'm more wondering, you know, based on the person who was snacking their recent stressful experiences, if it's a stress response, you know, could we look at it that way?

[\(24:05\)](#):

And then they're like, oh no, I feel like the worst person. That's what it is. So it's sort of like this kind of compassionate curiosity also can, is one of the things I think helps build people's space as a tool for sure in supervision, but also just within the workforce, within each other. That kind of breeds wellbeing and, you know, or at least pockets of awareness of others wellbeing might be low or might be high. And it was just one of those things that would've appeared otherwise. Very annoying to many people, but also was just a clear sign of emotional wellbeing being low. So it shows everywhere, but supervision to me is one of the places I think if you know the people that you work with and supervise, you can see some of these things differently than if you were to not invest in knowing them too.

Kris Johnson [\(24:56\)](#):

I really like that cuz the other part of of supervision is being able to talk through what is going on with you right now. You know, having reflective capacity. I mean, you know, we're all champions of reflective consultation, but, it's so important, you know, that that ability to take a step back and go, what is going on with me right now? You know, the person that I reacted to who was reminding me of my mom or the, the 13 year old boy and, and you know, the, that I was reacting to myself were just like the, the awareness, you know, the mindfulness of I am stressed right now. And so that reflective capacity, just

time and space to think about what is going on with you right now. I came to that late in my career. I used to come home from work and it was like I would come home and I would change outta my work clothes.

[\(25:53\)](#):

And then it was just like, all of a sudden it was like my head hurts and then it was like my stomach hurts and I'd feel myself, my shoulders would just kind of drop and it's like, well, my shoulders up all day or like, am I clenching my jaw? And it, I was not attuned to it until I got out of the setting. And so having that attunement, so like the, the mindfulness of just awareness, what is happening to me right now in this moment and what do I need? And, you know, supervisors can do that with you. Coworkers can do that with you. How are you managing what's happening to you right now? When I think about building blocks too, you know, we talk about reflective consultation, but also just reflection. Like in the reflective consultation space, but just even reflection in the daily work.

[\(26:47\)](#):

You know, we got into a practice when I was a supervisor of trying to stop for a second, just pause for a minute. There's so much power in the pause, you know, pausing when a really intense report came in and I remember you know, like for example, a baby has an injury. Well, the human reaction to a baby being injured is to just feel it to be upset. You know, like it makes your knees weak. Sometimes it's like, you know, you can say baby has a skull fracture and you just kind of shutter and to just leave five minutes of space when you're in your consultation to go, you guys, this is a hard case. So we're gonna talk through the report and then I don't know about you, but I need a minute to just go, oof, this is really hard, this is really sad.

[\(27:39\)](#):

And you can see it in the room. You know, the more we did that with the staff I supervised, you know, the more we made room for emotion, the more they could say, yeah, this is really tough. You know, we had, we had several people who had little kids and they would just sort of hurt, you know, you could see it in their faces. And then there's this thing that happens where you sort of help each other regulate and process through it and you kind of do this, this breath and this sigh. And I remember one time in consult we had had a case with a baby and we had a mom who was just back from maternity leave and she was definitely teary when she read it. And she was like, you guys, I'm okay. I just, I'm a crier.

[\(28:25\)](#):

I just need to get it out. And she ended up taking the case and did really well, but she was super mindful of where she was reacting. And every time after she had an interaction in person with this baby, she would say, I drove for 15 minutes before I came back. Or she'd come sit in my office and just kind of need to let it out and breathe it out a little bit. And couple times she was teary and um, but she was also mindful of it, got through it and was, did great work with this family. So part of the building block to me is making space for reflection and making space for emotion cuz it's real. And if we don't make space for it, it's not like it's not there.

Alyssa Meuwissen [\(29:14\)](#):

Yeah. That was some really good examples of opportunities for something I've heard called co-regulation. So in the western culture, like we so think that like, you know, little kids need help regulating, but then, you know, by, you should develop self-regulation and then you're like on your own and you can do it yourself. Um, but that really isn't how humans work very well, that adults use co-regulation all the time. That to have those connections with people who are able to just like, be with you, you, and, and feel with you, and whether that's people at your work or at home, I think it's worth

naming that, all humans regulate using relationships and it's a really important resource for us to manage our own emotions.

Jess Hoeper ([29:55](#)):

It's curious to me with that, how quickly teenagers get overlooked in by the world. You know, maybe not maybe specifically about welfare, but their need for co-regulation shows up in such a way that is so hard for people. Even workers, you know, their wellbeing can be impacted by how a teenager shows up needing co-regulation, but their brains aren't that far removed from a baby. You know, really in the scheme of a life expectancy, it's closer to a 2 year old. A 13 year old's closer to a two year old than a 35 year old, you know, where they, so it's super curious how we know it. Like when we think about it, we know co-regulation is needed in for every person, but there's these pockets of people that sort of get overlooked because of how they need it.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([30:37](#)):

mm-hmm. <affirmative> mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Kris Johnson ([30:39](#)):

Yeah. The bigness of it. You know, that teenagers, you know, if they're dramatic somehow that they, you know, that the response can be, oh, settle down. It's not that big a deal where it's like it is in that, for that person in that moment. It is a big deal. I, we have a, a worker in our, in my agency who used to say, you know, she used to take, do intake and she was so good about, for this person, for this caller in this moment, this is huge. And I can, in my chair, it doesn't sound that huge, but for them it's huge. And so I need to validate for them what that is and how big it is. But I also think about what does it look like if we're not co-regulating and instead we are escalating together.

([31:30](#)):

And that is also very real in a room, you know, that you know, that sense of anger when you see that kids are hurt or that feeling of a worker gets kind of, picked on in court or really picked apart in court and, and the impulse is to rally around that worker and you sort of get righteous anger on their behalf and then everybody gets more and more mad and then we're all mad together and nobody's regulating in that moment. And so like that climate can happen and it can be really well intentioned that you wanna rally on behalf of the worker or rally on behalf of that kid, but when we're amped up, we're not thinking at our best. And so that's another way that wellbeing, that there's a place for that emotion. There is. But then there's also a place for, okay, I gotta let this go.

([32:30](#)):

I need to practice some acceptance or I need to acknowledge my grief about this. And that was really back to the 13 year year old, that was really what it was for me was grief. I was just so sad that that had happened and I had to, you know, it wasn't gonna be productive for me to be perpetually angry about it. I needed to just sort of mourn and be sad for him and making room for those emotions so then we can move on. I know a supervisor who talks a lot about acceptance, you know, and acceptance that sad and tragic things happen in the world and if we're fighting against it, we're stuck in fight and we're not moving on to figure out, okay, what's, what's next after the anger or the sadness or frustration about that.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([33:18](#)):

Yeah. So that's a really good point about just sort of like the whole agency or, you know, group of colleagues can have a culture of being regulating or being angry or like, you know, and, and we know that child welfare workers have a really high rate of burnout and turnover. And so tying that back to this piece of what do you think agencies can do to build a culture that is more sustainable and promotes wellbeing for these child welfare workers? Um, dealing with all these things we've just been talking about.

Jess Hoeper (33:51):

I think for me it's, you know, I, and I don't know how this is done, but it's the, just like Kris was talking about, it's agencies systems have to have space for being, if you can't be in whatever you are in, then you can't be well, right? Like, if you don't have space to actually be, you can't actually have wellbeing. I mean truly like upon on words, but you can't. And so our brains by nature are anticipating what's next and child protection is a never ending system of next never goes away. There's, they just keep coming and coming and coming. And so if there isn't being space built in to the system for people to slow down with skilled, you know, leaders that know how to model and practice and build it around the workers, um, I mean that's what's needed is that has to happen within the systems for people to be most, well, I mean for me that's what I see the need of.

Kris Johnson (34:47):

And I would add to that, yeah, I like how you said all that just, just about space in the work. And that is a intentional agency practice because the pace is so fast that if we don't pause, we're not gonna, we're not gonna make time for it unless it's gotta come from top down, you know that we can, we can talk to workers about their self-care and, and that is a piece of it, but without really explicit permission for that self-care, there's not gonna be room for it to happen or it's unlikely to have room for it to happen. The other thing I think about is agencies that care for their staff as people, you know, policies in place that I don't know anybody who's not, you know, taking care of family members, kids, pets, farms, businesses and themselves, <laugh>, you know, that there is a, we all have lives outside of work and we need to be seen as whole people with whole lives around work.

(35:56):

So really strong policies about leave, about sick time, about, care for yourself, a culture that that builds in you. You know, we talk about employee assistance, we need employee assistance. We also need time and space to go for a walk at lunchtime. And, the culture that says, you know, that we don't wanna have a culture that's like rewards, never taking breaks or never taking vacation, or I worked late and I worked all weekend. And then if we are, you know, giving pats on the back for perpetually doing that we're not supporting wellbeing. I mean, we all know that in child welfare, you, there are days that you're gonna work more hours or you're gonna work those off hours or nights or weekends, but nobody is made to do that long term. Nobody. And so if we don't have a culture that says, Nope, turn it off, or I'm taking the on-call phone from you or, I got your caseload right now.

(36:58):

I remember a time that I was in real burnout and I was in, I, it was about five years after I started the job and you know, burnout has some real specific hallmarks of like that emotional exhaustion and cynicism and that sense that nothing you do works. And I remember so clearly standing in my supervisor's doorway going, nothing ever helps. Nobody ever gets better. It, this doesn't work. I don't know why we think this works. This doesn't work. And she said, you need to go home. I want you to go home. I want you to get your schedule to me and I want you to put, this was back when we had paper files. You know,

get me your files that are gonna need care this week and I want you to go home and I want you to put your feet up and relax and not think about this.

[\(37:50\)](#):

Because if you're feeling that overwhelmed that nothing ever works, you're pretty fried right now and let's get you through this. And so I remember going home and it was like, what am I supposed to do? I had two little kids and so they were at daycare cuz I thought I was working that day. I remember just walking around my house like, I don't even know what I'm supposed to do right now. And then I was like, I finally was like, I went to the Y and I went for a walk and it took a couple days for me to recognize how like just said before I was the stress at that point I could not see past just sort of drowning in the work. And then I, when it got better and better through the weekend, it was like a Thursday and it's like, I remember this really clearly, this was a long time ago, but it was a Thursday.

[\(38:35\)](#):

I went home on Thursday, stayed home on Friday, all weekend. I went in on Monday and she was like, okay, I think we needed to pass a couple of these cases off. And, and that was a time I moved from investigation to ongoing case management because I realized the unpredictability of the schedule did not work with my personality or with my life. I had two little kids and every time I couldn't pick them up on time from daycare, I was just in knots. And so ongoing case management has a more predictable schedule, not always, but it allowed me to make some changes and it allowed me to come back and, and process through that period of pretty intense burnout. And that was a supervisor being available, seeing what that was and then making changes so that the work fit better in my life. And if I wouldn't have had that, I would've been out. I was, you know, that was 20 years ago <laugh> and I wouldn't have lasted in the field if I didn't have that outside help getting me through what that was at that time.

Jess Hoeper [\(39:40\)](#):

Yeah, it's the strong policies, but strong practice like it is. You have to, your supervisors need to know this of your, you have to see here and know your workers. I mean you have to invest in that. You know, I hear from supervisors a lot and they'll say, I'm not their therapist. And I will often challenge that like you are right, you are not their therapist, but you can provide therapeutic settings for somebody you supervise. I'm not telling you to tell them if they have a diagnosis and I'm not telling you to provide CBT, but you can sit with them in feelings if they're getting divorced or their mom died. They are worthy of you sitting in that space with them and feel letting them feel it cuz it's coming into the work. And so you have to have practices built where that is there.

[\(40:24\)](#):

Cuz you know, when they say I'm not their therapist, I will say you're not their doctor either if somebody has a cancer diagnosis, but you will sit with them and help heavy that feels with a person. You don't have to be their therapist. My best friend doesn't have to be my therapist, but she provides experiences just by simply being together. And so it has to be you know, like wellbeing based practices and policies have to be system built and then like we were talking about earlier, culturally held, I mean it is much bigger.

Kris Johnson [\(40:55\)](#):

And a culture where emotion is acceptable. Like we are allowed to have emotion and I worry about child protection settings and it's not everybody, but there's, there can be this belief within child protection that if you're having emotion that you're either like too close to it, too connected or you don't have good boundaries. And it's like so that the emotion happens in therapy or you take your emotion to

emergency or employee assistance and then come back without it. And it's like, that is just not the way humans are. We have emotion and if we don't make space for it, it'll find its way out, <laugh> one way or another or it'll burrow its way into us and then we burn out.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([41:40](#)):

Yeah. So permission to be a whole human while you're at work, who has a whole life and who has a history and you know Right. All the things that you're coming with and for that whole person to be welcome at work and seen at work, that does seem like really foundational to the whole wellbeing thing that we've been talking about. And this is kinda opening the floodgates and Covid. So Covid has happened and Covid happened and it just kept happening and it's been so long and so you guys have continued, you know, kind of doing your work through all this. So yeah, we can't get into this for too long, but just kind of generally, how do you see Covid impacting this and more important maybe as where we are now, how can we move forward? How can we move forward with hope and, and, and make sure that we're not kind of stuck in this Covid rut of, of everyone being less? Well all the time

Jess Hoeper ([42:32](#)):

For me, I see we need the radical acceptance that we have disconnected our collective. We, you know, we as a group, as a team, as a system, Covid has disconnected us simply by physically disconnecting us. And we are, we need to belong in group spaces and we can build this in hybrid, but you have to see that you have disconnected that we by the nature of the world and you have to intentionally facilitate reconnecting as a collective. We, if there are new people that started during Covid, you do not know them the same that you knew people that physically started in your building. And so there's not a luxury to not go figure out who they are and make time to get to know them. And then they weren't part of your team that has physically shared space. So you're gonna have to bridge all of these gaps with awareness that they were ruptured because of Covid. And so now intentionally rebuilding this collective nature of these child welfare teams, cuz workers aren't well when they're disconnected from each other. And if they're not well, their work isn't well. So, I mean, there's lots of reasons why you need to radically accept that we have become disconnected due to this pandemic and now invest in reconnection

Kris Johnson ([43:41](#)):

And, and when you're in a telecommuting environment or a hybrid or environment or something like that, most of us haven't done that before. There are some workplaces that have existed that way, but most of us haven't done that before in the long term. And you know the pandemic required separation, but human beings require connection. Like social connection is a protective factor a lot across almost every social issue there is. Social connection reduces you know, juvenile delinquency, mental health, child abuse, you know, increases school success. Like social connection is the thing. You, people who have more social connections live longer. And if you, if you talk to people about why they stay in jobs, one of the main reasons they stay in jobs is cuz of their coworkers. And so we have a new way of being. If you're in an agency that has hybrid work or that you don't, you no longer have the meeting room and staff meetings the way they used to look, you no longer have casual conversation that happens at other people's offices or cubes.

[\(44:46\)](#):

You don't have the natural things that happen at lunch or, or that kind of thing. Then there is a, that rupture of relationship will continue. And so that is an agency intentionally planfully figuring out how we exist in connection to each other. It won't happen without intentionality. And people are building, like I

keep seeing like virtual water coolers, you know, I don't know what that is, <laugh>, but it's like a platform where people chat with each other and some people can get really fed by that works for them. Some people it's gotta be in person. Some people it's gotta be phone calls. Our work is so relational that my bias on this is that even telecommuting work environments must have in-person connections sometimes what that looks like, how they do it. We, I personally don't see that we can continue to be relational in our work if we're not relational with each other.

[\(45:50\)](#):

And part of being relational with each other, a piece of that is in-person connection that, I heard a, there's a Mayo researcher who talks about who, does research on longevity and he talked about our brains release different chemicals when we're in the room together, you know, that that handshakes release oxytocin. And I don't know if we're gonna ever ha shake hands again the same way we used to, but being in in proximity to each to each other is not the same as a screen. So lots of benefits about, you know, having more work-life balance. Great, you know, less commuting, great, better options for childcare and that kind of thing. Great. The loss of relationship is a huge cost that we have got to figure out how to put together in a new environment really planfully and intentionally or our work. I really believe our work is going to suffer.

Alyssa Meuwissen [\(46:47\)](#):

Yeah. Every time I talk to you guys, I feel like I get so energized around this of like, you know, worker, like these people are doing work that is so crucial for health of children and families and they deserve to be seen as emotional humans and you know, how can we really make systems that lift that up and make a space for this work that can be done in a healthy, well sustainable way so that these children and families who are in crisis have a support that they can that is supportive, you know, that right? That we build a whole system of support where everyone is more supported and that would really change I think some of the really hard struggles of, of this work.

Jess Hoeper [\(47:33\)](#):

Agreed.

Alyssa Meuwissen [\(47:33\)](#):

So, yeah. Do either of you have anything else you wanna share or just kind of main takeaways, like what do you want people in the child welfare field to know about wellbeing? And we've talked about this systematically and so I also think that we can think about, you know, and administrators and child welfare workers, like across the system, like what do we think is really important for people to understand about wellbeing in the child welfare field?

Jess Hoeper [\(47:57\)](#):

I'm gonna say something super simple, but I mean it with like a lot behind it to any child welfare worker you deserve and are worthy to be well. So you deserve to be a wellbeing and have your wellbeing nurtured within your work, outside of your work that you deserve and are worthy of being well.

Kris Johnson [\(48:20\)](#):

Yeah. And I think take care of your body, take care of your brain, take care of your heart, and at every level in the organization do the same that your board, your directors, your administrators, your supervisors, your staff, and then your clients. You know, that parallel process is real. The way we treat

our, our staff and our administration is how they treat the supervisors is how they treat the staff is how they treat the families. And so giving care, you know, having true, genuine care for people as people at every level of the system. And that starts with true and genuine care for ourselves, compassion for ourselves, time and space for ourselves to be well at every level of the system, I think will help us do better work.

Alyssa Meuwissen ([49:10](#)):

Thank you so much for talking with me today and I hope that people can hear this conversation and just bring a little bit with them, you know, into their work, into their, into their agencies of let's support each other in being more. Well

Jess Hoeper ([49:24](#)):

Thanks Alyssa.

Kris Johnson ([49:25](#)):

Yeah, thanks.

Speaker 4 ([49:30](#)):

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