CASAT Podcast Network

Welcome to season two of CASAT Conversations, I am your host Heather Haslem.

This season we will explore the timely and complex topic of resilience for healthcare providers.

Within each conversation you will hear from experts, clinicians and providers who will explore and share the latest research, best practices and applications for how to be resilient.

Please enjoy today's conversation.

Dr Anger is the author of 17 books for lay in professional audiences and over 200 peer reviewed papers and book chapters.

These include Change Your Life, the Science of resilience and the True Path to success.

A book for adults experiencing stress and work and home and I still love you.

Nine things troubled teens need for their parents.

His blog nurturing resilience can be read on psychology today's website, I can't think of a better person to kick us off in our second season as we explore the topic of resilience for healthcare providers and so we are just delighted to have you here today.

Welcome Dr. Ungar.

Thanks heather.

Thanks appreciate that.

I appreciate the invitation.

So as we get started, I'd love to hear how did you get into this work?

Um I guess a bit of a combination of personal life experience of having had to grow up very young and emancipate my own self at 16.

That kind of got me interested in people's pathways through life and and how we cope, how people kind of come out of that kind of adversity.

I've written a fair bit about that in a book I published earlier called I still love you.

It's all about raising kids, but I also just by the work I was doing with as a clinical social worker, family therapist, and other sort of roles that I fulfilled in community mental health and just kept meeting people who were doing better than expected.

You know, people you just think, okay, just the burden of life has gotten to wear them, weigh them down and yet they surprise you with that.

What sometimes is referred to as post traumatic growth or that um positive gains from adversity goes by different terms.

But this idea that, you know, these are people often come through great hardship and they still would be inspiring in terms of the choices they were making and how they were coping.

So, you know, the kid who comes out of that and gets on to college, the parent who overcomes, you know, a child's incredible illness as a caregiver and they still kind of move forward.

Um not to mention people who have, you know, as refugees who have come through great, you know, trauma in terms of past war experiences and stuff.

And in every case, you see people who have just sort of beaten the odds.

Now.

It was kind of curious though, because as a social scientist in this field which is dominated by mostly psychological sciences, I began to find myself asking a slightly different set of questions that it was not just about what it took internally for someone to do and thrive despite adversity, where my work began to take me over time was also to um figure out, well what was it about people's environments?

And I'm very memorably had this kid that I was working with when I started this voyage back probably now about two decades ago And I was speculating on all her, she'd just done this amazing thing, came out of a very violent home and managed to stay in school and not use drugs and not get pregnant before 16.

And all the other things are true.

So the risk markers for this kid, and when I said, well you must have incredible perseverance or opportunity or whatever.

You know, she looked at me going you don't get it, do you?

You're not that bright, essentially is what she was saying, and what she was trying to say of course was what she kind of then informed me was no, I just, you know, there was that teacher who believed in me, there was this, I had a certain set of talents and some opportunities to use them.

Um you know, unlike my sister who hasn't done quite so well in life and I think that it was these little moments of of sort of light in the darkness that sort of said, wait, wait, wait, maybe we think too narrowly about what makes us resilient, you know, even during the pandemic or other great crisis, we always have been thinking about, it's about mindset and I began to sort of challenge that idea that maybe it wasn't just mindset or our individual ruggedness that it was also.

And this is what my work really began to show.

It was also about the resources we had around us.

And that resonated with me personally in terms of my own also life experience, the teachers who believed in me some of the opportunities I had when I began to sort of basically have to make my way in life very, very young.

Mm I love this uh that you highlighted little moments of light along the path that have kind of led you to where you are today.

I've experienced that in my own career as well.

And there's certain moments that stick out that are very pivotal for the way that I think about the world and expands my thinking and this young woman who you met so many years ago, hearing how she influenced your work.

Very cool.

Yeah, those little tiny opportunities that sometimes redirect you in different ways, whether it's a friendship, a lover, an opportunity for a job.

I memorably, in fact, I don't think I was on my best game when I guess I was just in my early twenties, I was applying for work in a in a youth shelter in Montreal.

And uh it was definitely not my very I was off a little bit.

I just I had a whole bunch of change in my life and I went for this job interview and needed a job and I went through the job interview and I knew I'd blown it.

Oh my God was awful.

I missed all the scenarios, you know, one of those things you just go, you go, you leave, it was two days later, the boss who interviewed calls me up and he says, you got the job.

There's this long pause on my part on the phone.

Eventually his name was Michael, I said Michael, why are you hiring me?

He says, well, if you want to know the honest truth, you were the best of the worst.

I mean, I hope that I exceeded his expectations once I got on the job and we ended on great terms and and the job was very successful and he did a lot of neat stuff with it and innovative and stuff and you know, it was a launch too many other things in my life, including further education, but there are those serendipitous moments in our lives which are also part of resilience and often they're about opportunity structures around us and you know, um sometimes we, we just cope better with the, you know, the chronic stress of, of a workplace in turmoil or um when there are those, you know, someone remembers our birthday in the job site or you know, there's that barista down at the local coffee shop who just remembers our order every morning and the routine of that, there's these little tiny things.

Um, and Maston talks about the everyday magic that keeps us more resilient.

But let's be real clear, it also means having environments and stable housing and sometimes just someone who's willing to give you a chance even have blown the job interview, you know, that's such a great example of um opportunities and how they just arise in moments that we need them.

Um you mentioned the rugged individual.

Um, and in your book, you mentioned really the difference between a rugged individual and a resource individual.

Can you describe that for us?

Yeah, sure.

So in in change your world, what I really wanted to get at was that so much of this resilience discourse, how we talk about it is focused on mindfulness on mindset and I think sometimes we forget that, you know, even even the buddhist monk sitting in the monastery high atop the mountain who's doing this incredible neural plasticity exercise of rewiring their blank brain and all the stuff that we've been talking about as as foundational to well being.

They are still dependent on a community of supports around them to have Children raise crops, bring groceries up the mountain, feed them, cook for them so they can pursue their spiritual path.

And I'm often amazed that we, we've been so caught up with this notion of individual ruggedness.

I mean, Herbert Hoover 1928 makes this famous speech in the United States, it talks about the American rugged individual.

I mean, you know, and it was the roaring twenties, right?

It was economic, everything perfectly, you know, good jobs as long as you were sort of male, white heterosexual, you know, etcetera, etcetera.

But, you know, the idea here was that basically that, you know, the rugged individual could pursue with total autonomy, their own life course.

Um, and then funny how that kind of 1931 comes along and suddenly where government has to intervene, you need food banks and government projects and other supports because the whole stock market had crashed and suddenly, wow, what happened to rugged individualism?

Oh, that was only good idea when there's lots of money sloshing around in the economy and therefore, and of course only for those who have the privilege because of their social location to access it.

So, you know, it was ideas like this, you know, looking historically, but it was also in the current moment that say, you know, when I meet people working and say healthcare providers and we begin to think about what is it that creates an intrinsic set of motivation to push through a period of change or that your workload is just excessive.

You can't help but think that, you know, when you walk down the street and your neighbors are out hanging outside their windows banging pots and celebration of the healthcare workers in their community who are pushing through a crisis or you begin to think about unions that stand up for workers rights and make sure that you're safe on the job?

Or maybe it's just a colleague who's willing to, you know, to sort of, you know, create an environment in the workplace that's a little bit better.

You know, those kinds of things trigger a better mindset as well.

So I'd like to think of it.

Maybe it's more like a ping pong game, a rugged individual set of qualities, a positive mindset of optimism towards the future hopefulness.

These things tend to make us more likely to take advantage of relationships.

The science on that is pretty clear, but better relationships, fairer treatment also triggers optimism.

So Carson horse begin to sort of play this little dance back and forth that if I for instance, want to make somebody more optimistic or better able to withstand stress in the workplace, I can either change their brain or I can change the circumstances around them or work with them to advocate for changes in the environment as well.

So for instance, you know, if someone is being tasked to do endless, you know, to take on more and more and more at work.

Um, and they're feeling completely overwhelmed by it.

Often what I'll say to them.

Okay, well your boss is giving you all this, have you actually turned around to your boss and said, hey, I know I'm supposed to just adapt and somehow do my self regulation, deep breathing exercises or something like that to cope with your insanity.

But um why Don't we just have the boss say, look, you know, here's my day today.

I have 14 patients that require this amount of care.

Here's the prescriptions that I have to do.

Here is the prescribed protocols I have to obey.

Um I'm really struggling.

I don't see the number of hours in my day to accomplish all this, but you've obviously assigned it to me.

So you must have a pathway forward.

You obviously know how to do this.

Can you just show me what I'm supposed to do to accomplish this task in the time that you've given me because obviously you've given it to me, you must know.

And then the supervisor can go, I haven't a freaking clue or they can actually go, yeah, that's not actually realistic.

Or maybe they actually do know how to do that job and this is, you know, to do all 14 patient tasks etcetera etcetera in that time allotment, in which case you'd be getting the mentorship of the support and the coaching that you would require to then survive it.

So I often say to people there's a bit of um with resilience you're often too focused on adaptation and if I might, we're not focused enough on transformation, which is changing the circumstances around us rather than adapting ourselves to what can sometimes be very toxic environments.

I love this reframe of really what we think resilience is, I think there's a very different perception in our society uh that really speaks that rugged individualism and people who have dealt with really difficult situations in their life and have bounced back.

Um, but really when you look underneath the surface, there are resources around them that have built them up.

And this is um analogy of the ping pong makes so much sense to me.

And it is interesting if you actually, you know, take the moment to ask people who have come through those great Adversities, you know, one in 1000 1 in 100 will basically have a story that's all about them, they have the right personality certain, You know, they are the people who can, you know, the the Nelson Mandela's who can be in prison for 27 years and still find it in there in their souls to forgive their their jailers.

It is, you know, it is the people who have come through Auschwitz without their spirits being completely squashed.

It is those kinds of individuals, the refugees you meet, who, you know, still, you know, work in very low paying jobs though they had much higher qualifications before they, you know, there are spirits that that did you endure.

But the problem with that focusing only on those few exemplars is that we we miss sometimes The conditions that make the other 99 people out of the '00 actually do well.

And it's sometimes, so, you know, I, I share a stage often as a scientist, I often share a stage with motivational speakers who bring their own personal story and I am inspired by their stories as well.

But I do struggle sometimes to say what has this got to do with the other people in your audience because what you've implied is unless you show the same strength as me and are every bit as motivated and together and inspiring as me, then you won't succeed.

And for me that is a terrible message.

I think that I'd rather bank myself and saying, Hey, what if I could come up with a formula that actually gave the other 99 people in the room the chance to actually be successful.

So if I told you for instance, rather than just focusing on going off to the meditation studio or the yoga studio and buying your, you lululemon yoga mat is my little pitch for lululemon Canadian company, thank you very much.

Uh if I, if I, I'm actually not sponsored by them, but it would be kind of cool if I was thanks they, but I mean, okay, so you go to, you're gonna go to that yoga studio, but what we actually understand is that if you're stressed, you know, in your morning routines with your kids, you know, so you have a family and you have to get the kids to daycare and, and, and, and, and then you're gonna rush through your morning and then rush to this yoga studio and sit there and debrief for 45 minutes and stretchers and then you're going to return to your chaos of your job.

And then the chaos of after school activities with your kids and meals and special whatever the chances we know scientifically by the way that the chances of that little moment of deep breathing and stretching will have almost no impact on your long term health outcomes because it's sandwiched between so much other chaos.

But if before you sign up for the yoga studio, you ask your spouse, your father in law, your neighbor to help you with your child care responsibilities twice a week.

So your day is a little bit more calmer and you've increased your social network, you may just actually see much more of a long term sustainable benefit from that particular, more introspective, physically focused individual exercise.

So what we're beginning to understand is that, and, and I'm not completely out of out of whack with where medical sciences are going.

You may have heard the phrase social prescriptions.

No, this is a catching trend where um, what they're actually, you know, you go to your doctor and say, I have a headache all night, I'm really stressed, I'm feeling lonely, I'm feeling depressed, whatever.

And they say, well here I'm gonna write your script and the script is go to a movie with a friend and here's the movie passes.

I'm gonna have you go for a walk in the park or I'm gonna have you routinely go to the same coffee shop every day or I'm gonna have you, you know, do something, you know, celebrate someone else's birthday, think about that, you know, I'm gonna give you a script of social connections rather than a medication, a psycho pharmacological intervention.

And what they're beginning to find is that there's the efficacy of these treatments is actually quite high in terms of changing people's experiences.

So again, we can work just on ourselves or we can work a bit on the environment around us.

And what we're beginning to understand is that those adaptations are sometimes um help us move us along or is Richard Taylor, who is an economist and Nobel prize winning economist has talked about that.

We create environmental nudges to push us in the direction in which we want people to actually and ourselves as well to actually um to actually go this idea of social prescriptions makes so much sense to me as we look at long term well being and health outcomes and the impact of social isolation.

Um I'm delighted to know the term for it.

Thank you.

Thanks.

Yeah.

Um so you mentioned the formula, I'd love to hear kind of your thoughts on the formula for resilience, what does that look like?

Well, I guess I would boil down to a couple of key concepts that that the research we've been doing globally has been sort of repeating over and over and that is this idea of first of all, we're more resilient when we're able to navigate to the resources we need.

So that does take a certain amount of motivation, but it also means that the resources we need are within proximity to us.

So that means about finding, you know, a workplace that's a little more accommodating a transportation system that will get you there, uh good food, a safe place to sleep, that's relatively quiet, um uh a place to exercise or to move.

You know, these kinds of things relationships that will keep you supported and safe and energized um fulfilling work and all these things.

So this is all about navigating to the resources we need.

But the other second concept that's come out of my work has been this idea of negotiating so that what you asked for and are given is what's meaningful to you.

The problem is sometimes what happens.

And and we often see this say with our workplaces, um you know, our work, our employers will provide us with something, maybe a monetary incentive.

And what we've actually seen is that people don't always respond well to monetary incentives.

What they sometimes want is simply a more flexible work schedule, They might want more training opportunities, opportunities for promotion or maybe just the opportunity to connect with their fellow employees and create a sense of community, a community of practice or something like this.

Um so it's, it's, it's often about negotiating.

So if I need, you know, supports for something, the question always is am I getting the right resource that matches my needs?

So there's always a game of back and forth with my environment to say this is actually what I need for this particular situation.

And um and for that reason you often see, so if someone comes to me and they say, you know, I'm just feeling awful, I'm depressed or whatever, I'm disconnected.

I usually start with, first of all, what does, what does that actually mean?

Or if they say they want connections, I would never make the assumption that I understand that such a, even a word like relationships, I would never estimate that.

I understand that.

Are we talking about one solid friend?

Are we talking about?

You want to walk down the street and have people high five?

You, you know, many times are you talking about, you know, a level of intimacy or just a sense of general general acknowledgement, um all of those factors are going to shape what a relationship actually looks like for you.

And as a consequence, you, you know, if you're gonna try and help someone, you're going to really need to get engaged in this dance of meaning systems so that you don't get it.

Um you don't get it wrong and culturally I think I I haven't really, you know, I think in the background to everything we've just talked about here heather, but culture really plays a huge um sort of fly in the ointment here a little bit because it determines what you do find meaningful.

If I say family to, you know, someone, I don't know, a typical, you know, family person has moved away to another part of the country is just with their own little spouse and maybe a child or something like that, family is going to mean something quite different than if I'm in a more traditional extended family network in Greece, in a village, in Greece or for that matter, and an indigenous community in the arctic of Canada or something like that.

So even a concept like family is highly flexible and culturally determined as are often indicators of success, what is it to be successful?

Um what is it to, you know, to to to feel respected by your community doesn't matter.

These are all really determined by other things.

So, you know, I can imagine as healthcare professionals, people often like, you know, where do you, what is it that actually brings a sense of respect and meaning, you know, how does your house, your job perceived by others and that identity carries us through a tough time.

I mean, you know, if I'm if I'm perceived by others as somebody who's very successful in my community and my family think of what I'm doing is really meaningful then when I'm in a tough period of time, I'm more likely to push through, I'm more likely to have the intrinsic motivators to say this job is meaningful, this is important to other people.

And I get acknowledgment for that.

That's what's going to push me through.

If you're in a job description, maybe maybe I'm not picking on any profession, but say, I don't know, maybe your occupational therapist and your parents don't even understand what that is, right?

You're not a doctor, you're not a nurse and you're not a, excuse me, I don't, what is this o.

T.

Thing?

I'm totally thinking, I have no reason to do that at all.

I love whatever.

But um, but you know, if you're outside of the zone, right, if you're outside of a recognition of another, um, and you know, in the same way, you can even get the other ways.

I've heard sometimes medical doctors who sometimes have a certain elevated status because of perceptions of others will will actually get the reverse.

Is that sometimes like their families, they'll come back and say, I'm really exhausted.

The work is really stressful.

I don't know if I want to continue with this profession or whatever and the family goes, why would you ever quit that?

It's a perfect job.

How could it be anything else but perfect.

Well, hang on, No, it's actually kind of, you know, incredibly repetitive.

And if you're a family doctor, you don't get to see your patients much more than 3 to 5 minutes on a visit and you don't build sustaining relationships and you know, like, like there is this kind of um we sometimes forget that a lot of what we experience is in part related to how others in our cultural space define us.

Um uh and what what we consider meaningful and indeed what keeps us going.

I'm aware of our, in our first season, we interviewed first responder family members and we talked with firefight.

So this is frontline workers and we interviewed firefighter families and police families and the difference in the cultural perception between fire and police in our current world is very different.

And so to hear about the stressors that police families experience was fascinating and there are some real challenges.

When we look at those cultural perceptions to resilience.

I'm curious if you have any insights or thoughts about that.

Well, yes, because each, each of our jobs is going to bring us a different set of stressors.

It's an interesting idea that sometimes we forget when we're talking about resilience.

We're actually talking about the simplest way I explained this is sort of three columns to make it simple.

You need to know what, what is the danger or what is the threat that you're experiencing?

What is the risk that you're being experiencing.

So I guess the family of a firefighter, he's probably experiencing a slightly different stress than the family of a police officer, especially depending on the community you're in and how much gun violence there is and that type of thing.

The other one you always want is the third column is the outcomes.

What are you trying to achieve?

Are you trying to achieve a certain sense of safety, security, peace of mind, or is it just that sense of contribution to the welfare of others?

Like is that your goal?

And then in the middle between these two columns, this kind of risk exposures and these outcomes, we're always thinking about what is the right protective factor that's going to get us there.

So, you know, I kind of understand why, you know, police and firefighters are organized themselves and their, you know, a very solid cohesive kind of workplace community because they need each other and chances are the families will need each other?

Should a crisis occur?

I mean, I don't really think of I.

T.

Professionals working on developing the latest gaming system going, you know, we really got to have our families meet on the weekends together because it's super important that we all pull together, I don't know, maybe I.

T.

Specialists do it, I you know, maybe maybe uh but I'm going to go on a limb and probably say no.

Um now now, but but the point is is that different risk profiles, different, threats to us require different responses to achieve different outcomes and I think that, you know, so, you know, I think you're really thinking about this from your own point of view.

I mean if your healthcare professional, I'm a healthcare professional, the kinds of people that I'm working with will change the kinds of peace of mind I want as well as of course the kinds of supports I need along the way.

I've been in trade for instance, if I might by colleagues of mine working on this concept of vicarious resilience, you know, more people are almost much more familiar with vicarious trauma.

I sort of sit in a room with people who have been badly traumatized, sexually abused etcetera, etcetera tortured.

And I'm gonna get velcro is to me, I carry home that stress and I need ways of shedding that stress of sort of, you know, another party party myself from those experiences and and remind and and as a as a as someone trained in psychotherapy is I do have my own techniques, I was trained in how you at the end of the day, you know, you make certain gratitude statements or you make certain statements of self efficacy such as did I do everything I could do today as efficiently as I possibly could to help the most people.

And if I did then I fulfilled my mandate and I can go home sort of thing.

Um but when we're also talking about, you know, listening to stories of people who have gone through incredible hardship and coped and eliciting those from folks and paying attention to those has been found to have a really positive impact on our belief in humanity, our sense of what's possible in the world.

So, again, we're talking about, like, do do we take advantage of, you know, do we only ask people will tell me what your illness and tell me what medications you're on, and tell us what your problems are, and how did you, you know, what do you, what kind of accommodation do you need in your home to go home?

Or do you, do you also spend a few minutes to talk to people about?

Well, how have you gotten this far when, who supported you to get this far as you did?

And and what kinds of supports?

And how do you cope daily with such a debilitating illness or whatever?

I mean, to tune into some of those stories, might also just give us at the end of the day, this vicarious resilience, a sense of, wow, the human spirit is endlessly creative, there's so much possibility and our communities are endlessly supportive, but there's there's more love and cohesion out there than I would have ever thought possible.

And imagine, you know, getting on the bus at the end of a shift with with that in your head rather than thinking, oh my God, the human race, what a waste of time.

You know, you get on the bus with that attitude, right?

It's two very different um perspectives and as a consequence you're going to see the world and you're gonna experience um every people as they react to you, you're going to experience them and what they do very differently as well.

Yeah, absolutely.

I had not heard of vicarious resilience.

I love that um phrase.

Thank you.

Um so with the research you've done on systems, I'm curious how does the health care system impact a provider's resilience?

Well, that's a great question because it it does exactly what we're talking about here, which is shift the conversation from just the rugged qualities of the health care provider to the more systemic responses.

I actually just put out an edited volume with the Oxford University Press called multi systemic resilience.

And the good news is an open access.

So anybody around the world can can can read the chapters now, they're a bit, they're very academic to be fair, but the sum total of them because they're from all these different everything from literally computer specialists who talk about resilience to architects, who talked about resilience, psychologists, epigenetic assists.

Um you know, just this concept of resilience cuts across many different fields.

But the core message is that all of these systems are tied together.

And if you think of it almost like dominoes in a circle.

If you knock over one, it tends to have a, you know, a cascade of effects around the circle and all the other dominoes and it doesn't really matter where you start.

So a system like the health care system that then, you know pays and organizes the workload of a health care provider is by definition then one of the systems which itself has to be resilient, it has to have the capacity to withstand stress.

And as we saw during the pandemic, when those systems were either underfunded, overstressed or dysfunctional, they could not support their workers well enough.

Now, unfortunately, workers themselves are systems as too and they had their own capacities to cope.

But the idea is that the more of these systems that are working well, the more likely you are to have that sort of domino effect or cascade of influences so that the resilience of one system influences the resilience of other, what would I say, co occurring systems.

But basically what I'm just trying to get at is is imagine those healthcare systems had anticipated after SARS and other pandemics potential.

They had actually stockpiled PPE that they had understood that resilience is what is the process of preparing for that next crisis.

Those moments if we all had N- 95 masks and plenty back in the storage room, Anticipating the next major crisis if if in my country, in Canada of course we had, we had uh we didn't have any capacity national capacity to produce vaccines.

Why is an absolute mind boggle.

But that is not a political, it wasn't attributable to any one political party in power, it was just something that happened periodically.

Over time, there was always a sense that we would be served by other countries.

And of course, that very quickly became apparent was not going to be the case that, you know, in a, in a crisis that everyone jump into their own lifeboat and start paddling.

So, what, what you began to um, you know, these systems are nested inside other systems, but the more that they are functioning well, um, prior to a crisis, the better we get through a crisis, which really does mean that, you know, I do wish we'd, you know, we'd we'd even out some of the conflict between the this, you know, the the government systems and the unions, I wish we'd give, you know, we'd get people into healthier workplaces, I wish we had, we would not be so stressed on the number of people that we are always employing or that we would rationalize some of the services and having people who could do some of the tasks that we now, in a sense, you know, we require people with more maybe too many quality, more qualifications that are necessary for those particular jobs I'm thinking of, for instance, the classic one here is the nurse practitioners that really come on, do if I if I if my kid has a, you know, the flu or whatever, you know, do I really need to see a family physician or do I just need a nurse practitioner, could we create more complementarity if there's certain medications, surely my pharmacist could prescribe those?

Like, really, do we really need to go and bother my physician, especially when there's such shortages of family physicians and people are using, relying on on the drop in clinics in the study, in other words, the power to with to change these things are within our capacity, but we have to begin to think about these resilient systems and prior to the next crisis.

So before, you know, tens of thousands of people don't have family physicians, why weren't the medical professionals talking about diversifying, you know, what's, you know, who's doing what across all the different disciplines that would have been resilience otherwise, which I think is just a reactive sort of with just quickly change, you know, and and this unfortunately is case I get and I, and by the way, let's not pick on health care professionals.

It's the same in education Where I live in Nova Scotia province of approximately a million people, about 7% of our kids didn't have access to to the internet.

No, I live in one of the most modern countries on earth, one of the wealthiest people on earth ever to exist.

And we had about one in 13 of our kids in our, in our, in our cities, in our communities couldn't access the internet, like this is a solvable problem, very relatively easy to solve problem in terms of you know.

Um So when when the pandemic kids suddenly it was like oh no we have money for you know whether it's internet connections or hotspots or indeed chromebooks or to you know to give kids access to technology and everything else.

But why wasn't that done before?

Why did we have to wait until the crisis of that magnitude before we understood?

And so I guess what I'm I'm sort of a bit of always sort of looking at these how we how we create robust systems to respond.

And I learned that by the way.

And what's neat about when you start working with architects and I.

T.

Specialists and everything else you begin to sort of introduce into your language words like redundancies.

You know when you build a computer system you build in multiple redundancies so that if one part of the system fails the other systems don't completely catastrophically go down.

Um When you know when you begin to you know you you think of what tolerances you have for for for for you know major screw ups and this type of thing.

Um And and I guess you begin if you can kind of begin to introduce those feedback loops and those redundancies and other things you begin to get more robust systems that are able to withstand more stress.

You can do that as an individual.

So if I can't pick up my kids after school because I have to work an extra shift here at the hospital with my mother is my backup.

She's my redundancy, right?

But it works kind of the other way.

Is that what, you know, do you have redundancies built into systems so that if suddenly you have a lot of staff that go on stress leave or something like that, do you have enough kind of capacity in the back, are you training enough people in the medical schools and the nursing schools and the other health care professionals?

And of you flexed your laws enough?

And are you allowing immigrants to come to this company company and re credentialing them and that type of thing.

Are you doing all these things so that your system is actually going to be overall stronger and able to withstand the stress and when we begin to think like that, ultimately what we're doing is we're creating robust systems that have a cascade effect to the people in those systems.

Even if they're not individually strong, they're able to withstand stress much more because the system around them is built for them to kind of hold them while they're getting, you know, whatever they need to cope as well.

Mhm.

I'm really aware of my hope that, you know, as we are coming out of the pandemic, I think we can sort of say that I don't know if we can, but um as we continue to be in the pandemic and move through it, I'll say it's my hope that this time has um really shined a light on some of these cracks in the system.

And we have people like you who can um help strengthen the systems and change the way we think about them.

I mean the good news is that I've been working with at the federal level policy horizons sometimes with U.

N.

Bodies, lots of different government institutions.

There is a real conversation now.

Finally I think about resilience and about community resilience and institutional resilience as well as individual resilience.

We probably hear most about the individual one, but there is a strong push by governments and institutions and you know, to actually make the systems much more resilient as well so that the next time there's a crisis um we we just do a lot better um whether it's a wildfire, this type of thing, there's just you know, and people are beginning to think like that.

Like I was amazed when there was a wild fires outside of Uh in northern Alberta Fort McMurray this back a couple of years ago now through the wildfires forced the evacuation of 85,000 people from the community, 2500 structures were burned to the ground etc.

People were massively displaced.

But what caught my attention was that the insurance companies had actually learned from that experience before and other natural disasters and what they actually learned was that they needed to respond quicker to get people's insurance claims settled and people rebuilding and that had a profound impact on people's experiences of trauma because of course, if you're rebuilding your back in your community, your reconnected, you have a hope for the future, You sense your sense of control in your life.

All these intrinsic qualities which we know are associated with resilience.

So what the insurance companies did was they put their insurance adjusters onto those busses that the rock bands use, that you can sleep on.

And they began to go around all the shelters where people have been displaced to and they actually started people's insurance claims.

One, the busses meant that the people on the busses weren't a burden on the local infrastructure.

So they weren't relying on, you know, the local restaurants and the local sleeping quarters and everything else.

But it also meant that they could very quickly initiate people's insurance claims or the banks did it as well in terms of getting people money and everything.

And that kind of quick response is as or more important, given again, going back to my three columns, the risk exposure, the kind of outcome you want.

What is the right protective mechanism?

Well, if you've just had your house burned to the ground in a community that is evacuated, you don't need a psychologist, no offense to the mental health professionals like myself out there.

We're needed.

We're just not needed at that particular moment, you need your insurance adjuster first, then the mental health professional afterwards with a clinical social worker or otherwise.

So it's a bit of that kind of again, thinking about this, this connection between the protective factors at and whether you've been hinting at this, but not just at the individual level, but rugged qualities, but this idea of of also changing our world is changing the world of the whole thing.

I'm trying to get it in that book.

Is that that idea that, you know, these these changes at the systemic level of the insurance adjuster getting on a bus is likely to have a dramatic effect on your mental well being as you feel back in control of your life and you begin to rebuild your house.

What a great example of systems that have learned from the past and then implementing it to make our lives better.

Starting to starting to Yeah, I'm I'm curious, you know, resilience seems like a really hot topic right now.

And so I'm curious if you you know, you've been in this world for many years, have you?

What is the shift that you've seen?

And are you just getting busier and busier, definitely busier and busier.

I would say that the shift was This more social kind of idea of resilience that I'm explaining has become much much more popular when I began this work back in the 90s, late 80s 90's contemporaries at that time are people who are sort of generations in front of me who have figured out a lot of stuff.

We're all very focused on the individual, psychological, maybe some relational ideas like, you know, who's in your family.

And I remember when I started first started trying to get some of my work published.

You know, it was it was a bit of a tough slog because people would say, well, you know, it's really more individual than social, but over time, what's actually happened is that there's been this huge shift in the people who are propagating that sort of message around the individual.

Now they're talking about social justice issues, they're talking about access to fair access to good healthcare.

They're talking that there's a, you know, that these aspects of our communities results, there was the Rockefeller 100 community experiments etc.

We have large foundations of people suddenly saying no, no, no.

Our individual resilience is tied up with our community's resilience, our social services resilience, our government's resilience.

And those messages are no longer a tough sell.

I like to think that maybe I had a small contribution to that change of conversation, but it is now not such a reach to hear governments talk about, we need to create, you know, a resilience plan for our government with the hope that then, you know, the more resilient we are, the better we'll be able to serve the needs of our citizens and those citizens, then we'll be able to cope with more stress and hopefully get through and continue to thrive.

So that's been for sure.

The policy forms.

Um you know, people are just beginning to think about this kind of strengthening and and the nice thing is we're getting better at the indicators.

So this idea of social justice, can you really have resilience without social justice?

one of the problems back in the late 80s, early 90s, even coming into the new millennium was that people, there were certain groups that really hated the term resilience.

Um I quite often got pushed back from say indigenous communities because there was always the implied ah tone of Colin so out of this colonizing language or other kinds of this blaming the victim kind of talk, right?

That oh well, you know, so and so.

Well this kid got to university, therefore why isn't everybody in this community doing well?

Well, it's kind of a crappy argument to say, you know, so you're not gonna resource enough people and then you're gonna say just because one person gets through everybody else should and somehow really the messages blaming everybody else for their failures, quote unquote and that failure in quotation marks because of course people don't perceive it that way.

Um so there was a push back, like, stop blaming us, look at the systems around us, what's stacked against us, right?

That we can't succeed.

Um there was a, there was a really kitschy movie called the Pursuit of Happiness Will smith plays this kind of a father of a boy and they end up sleeping in the toilets in the subway system in new york and he can solve a Rubik's cube really quickly and eventually he and chances way and through great grit and determination, everything else.

He manages to become a stockbroker or some sort of thing like that, right?

What bothers me?

The movie is good, but what bothers me about that movie is there's there's not a nod in there anywhere.

The fact that Will smith is black and he's about to go and get a job on Wall Street and the odds of him that story probably could not have been told 30 20 years earlier because even with all that grit and determination and the brilliance of this man has, I don't think those doors would have been opened the same way because of the racism that would have occurred in that particular situation.

Now, I'm just, you know, I'm I'm white.

I don't want to speak outside of my own social location on this.

But my understanding of the stories I've told the people I've met said that there would be an incredible barriers to the will smith character in that movie succeeding.

So can we really have a conversation about resilience if we're not also talking about social justice and opportunity structures, can we really talk about, you know, you know, if you're a nurse practitioner or whatever and you don't have you know union representation or maybe doesn't mean but at least a fair practices that you don't have sort of you know, safety protocols in your workplace.

I mean can we really talk about you know individual coping without also talking about social and other factors that make it possible for us to become our best and boldest selves and and that you know these other kinds of things.

They are part of this conversation as well.

Mm hmm.

Resilience is such a complex topic.

Um and one that we're excited to explore this season.

I want to thank you.

Uh Michael for joining us today.

It's been a delight.

You were just a wealth of information.

I feel like I could ask you questions for hours but I'm aware of our time.

So again just thank you for sharing all of your knowledge and expertise and thank you for helping to change the world all the best to you heather.

Thanks thank you.

Thank you for listening to CASAT Conversations.

Your resource for exploring behavioral health topics.

We hope you found today's conversation timely and meaningful.

Please share this podcast with your friends and colleagues.

If you want to learn more visit us at our blog at casatondemand.org.

This podcast has been brought to you by the CASAT Podcast Network.

Located within the Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies at the University of Nevada, Reno.

For more podcasts, information and resources visit CASAT.org.