



[00:00:00] **Sufna John, PhD:** You can be passionately dedicated to your work and still realize that work is not work done alone.

[00:00:10] **Christina Rouse:** Welcome to the SRCAC Exchange, a podcast series for child abuse professionals seeking to exchange innovative ideas and inspiration within the Children's Advocacy Center movement. I'm your host, Christina Rouse, Program Manager for CAC Development with SRCAC.

[00:00:28] **Christina Rouse:** And I'm excited to kick off Season 3 titled Igniting Your Drive, The Invisible Threads That Sustain CAC Professionals. This season, we'll focus on fostering healthy workplaces that inspire resilience and support the dedicated professionals in children's advocacy centers. In each episode, we'll explore the profound and often overlooked elements that fuel the passion of CAC staff.

[00:00:54] **Christina Rouse:** Our mission is to ignite the drive within these professionals, ensuring they are well equipped for [00:01:00] their crucial work and set up for positive, healthy, and fulfilling experiences within their workplaces. Join us as we embark on this journey to uncover practical strategies And share powerful stories that highlight the importance of a supportive and thriving work environment.

[00:01:17] **Christina Rouse:** Subscribe now and let's ignite the drive together. Children's Advocacy Centers have long been guided by a set of deeply ingrained professional norms and cultural messages. While these mantras highlight collaboration and commitment, They often perpetuate a culture of martyrdom and burnout. By critically examining and evolving these mantras, we can foster a work environment that not only supports the well being of our dedicated professionals, but also enhances the quality of care provided to the families we serve.

[00:01:50] **Christina Rouse:** In this episode, we spend time with Dr. Sufna John, who is a licensed psychologist and associate professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical [00:02:00] Sciences in Little Rock, Arkansas. She leads several statewide cross system collaborative efforts, including serving as co director of the Arkansas Building Effective Services

for Trauma, ARBEST, and clinical director of the Arkansas Trauma Resource Initiative for Schools.

[00:02:17] **Christina Rouse:** Dr. John brings a valuable perspective that will help illuminate our path forward. Let's get started and learn how we can transform our workplace mantras for the better. Dr. John, I think we need to start by recognizing that there are messages that CAC professionals utilize that while intended to highlight dedication and service, Can be somewhat problematic.

[00:02:43] **Christina Rouse:** Some may call them idioms or organizational ideologies, professional credos, but I think for our conversation today, I'd like to call them CAC workplace mantras. Great. So I'm going to set a scene for you [00:03:00] and then I want you to kind of provide some commentary on this because I know this scene has played out.

[00:03:05] **Christina Rouse:** across all the CACs in a lot of different spaces. Let's say you're at a community event, a social hour, and a CAC professional is asked, what do you do for work? Which we know sometimes can be an alarming question to answer. Yeah. And that CAC professional provides their service Job description, let's say their forensic interview and they tell that person that they interview children who've made allegations of sexual abuse and a lot of times the responses we get from folks is.

[00:03:39] **Christina Rouse:** Wow. That must be really difficult. I'm so glad you do that in our community. That job must be very challenging. How do you do it? And inevitably CAC professionals sometimes respond with this sentiment of if I don't, no one will. And [00:04:00] what's your initial reaction when you hear that type of response?

[00:04:05] **Sufna John, PhD:** Yeah, and I agree with you.

[00:04:06] **Sufna John, PhD:** I've heard this play out not only multiple times for CAC folks, but honestly, even for myself being in moments like this and trying to explain what it means to have a job like this to people who are outside of this field. But this sentiment of if I don't No one will. Let's me know maybe a couple things about the person speaking.

[00:04:26] **Sufna John, PhD:** One is that perhaps this job is really, really important to them. Like in that sentence, I hear a level of commitment and a level of personal responsibility, if not professional responsibility to this idea of the work they do. And I also hear this sentiment of, and I've got to be the one to do it. That the sacrifices of this work are what I am built for, what I made for, what I was brought to this world for.

[00:04:54] **Sufna John, PhD:** While that sounds great, and there are elements of it, I think, that are really [00:05:00] beautiful and demonstrative of commitment, I think one of the tricky things about it is that it can also represent this idea of martyrdom or self sacrificing, that if I don't do it, no one will, is sometimes a sign of burning.

[00:05:17] **Sufna John, PhD:** This idea that I feel personally responsible and obligated to do this and no one else could do it like me. Can you imagine the pressure that puts on someone? The child advocacy world, the work we do is exceptionally important. It has such high stakes in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

[00:05:40] **Sufna John, PhD:** And I think one of the byproducts of that can be people who find themselves burning out because they think if I don't shoulder this burden. And shoulder it perhaps alone. No one else would hold this with me. And that could be hard.

[00:05:58] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. I want to name two [00:06:00] things that you pointed out. One, the sentiment that you picked up on when someone responds, if I don't know one well, is this level of dedication and passion to the job?

[00:06:12] **Christina Rouse:** No one would say that if they didn't like their work, I think. So I know that. Brian Miller, who we both kind of fangirl over.

[00:06:23] **Sufna John, PhD:** Brian, if you're listening, we love you.

[00:06:25] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. He talks a lot about this as being potentially a trait of. passionately dedicated. And I think you would agree we would want CAC professionals to have that passionately dedicated trait to do the job.

[00:06:44] **Christina Rouse:** Absolutely.

[00:06:45] **Sufna John, PhD:** Absolutely. And I think that you can be passionately dedicated to your work and still realize that work is not work done alone. And that work does not have to be [00:07:00] carried by me alone. And that honestly, there are some Problems that could occur if I think the work can only be done with me.

[00:07:08] **Sufna John, PhD:** Child advocacy centers, a fundamental component of them is multidisciplinary teams, because we realize that there are so many different competencies, goals, ways we can support families. And so if you're going into this with the idea that it's gotta be me. One of the things that makes me question that is, what does that leave your team for then?

[00:07:32] **Sufna John, PhD:** How do you kind of fold into a multidisciplinary environment if you are kind of stuck or predominantly in this martyrdom mode? So I by no means want to say we shouldn't care about our jobs. We should. Right. The families we serve deserve us to be passionately dedicated to them, to be sacrificial consistently in that work.

[00:07:54] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think they also deserve someone who is balanced and in it for the long [00:08:00] haul with them. And those two things might be hard to do when you have high levels of burnout.

[00:08:05] **Christina Rouse:** I think too, just CACs, the nature of that service delivery in a community, there are no other organizations like CACs. So it's almost like they're set up to lean more towards that if I don't, no one will, because there are no other entities that provide the services that CACs do.

[00:08:27] **Sufna John, PhD:** Mm hmm. Yeah, it's a really unique setting, and I think that, again, it could be tempting to say, well, of course we've got to do it, because if we don't do it, nobody will. That pronoun was really important right there, that if we don't do it, maybe nobody can. That's a very different sentiment than if I don't do it, nobody will.

[00:08:49] **Sufna John, PhD:** A we is something that tends to sustain us in our jobs when we feel connected to others. Connection calms us. It

invigorates us. It helps [00:09:00] us feel connected to the work we do in really unique ways. And that plug into the team that we pronoun I think is one of the most career sustaining narratives we can have is this idea that it's not just me.

[00:09:13] **Sufna John, PhD:** That it's us that do this work on behalf of the communities that we reside

[00:09:18] **Christina Rouse:** in. I love that. So that can just be that simple switch of language to maybe move it away from that martyrdom to more of this collective. dedication of the community. Yeah. Yeah. So I want to share a story where I fell into this element of martyrdom.

[00:09:40] **Christina Rouse:** And I think like you mentioned, it's easy for us to kind of put ourselves in the positions where we say things like this and be perceived as this sacrificial suffering is sacrificial and is noble, right? Suffering is noble. So during COVID, it As I'm sure a lot of people experience, [00:10:00] those of us who were parents had to figure out how to stay home with our children who are in school, right?

[00:10:06] **Christina Rouse:** And do the whole homeschool thing. So I had to take six weeks of FMLA and at that time I was the CAC program director. And I was like, I don't know how this is going to work. If I leave, what will happen? Kind of those things that run through your head of like, if I'm not here, things are going to burn to the ground.

[00:10:27] **Christina Rouse:** And so I inevitably took the six weeks FMLA and guess what, Sufna, nothing burned to the ground. Go figure. It was really like, I almost needed this to happen for me to make that switch in my mind isn't about me needing to be everything to the center, and it's not about If I don't do it, no one will, because clearly I wasn't there for six weeks and everyone did it.

[00:10:58] **Christina Rouse:** Ah, [00:11:00] there's the Stacey Abrams

[00:11:01] **Sufna John, PhD:** quote that I really love, where she talks about leadership. And you're talking about this from a leadership perspective, too, with your position. It's this idea of a good leader is not always at the front,

but is always at the ready. And I think one of the things to think about is the sentiment of if I don't do it, no one will.

[00:11:20] **Sufna John, PhD:** Could be rephrased to I don't let anyone else do it that I'm the one who always does it. And when I think about a C. A. C. I imagine that many team members deserve to build similar competencies and overlapping competencies. What happens, Christina, if you're the only one who can have a specific conversation with a family and you're out sick, you're having a hard day, you're caught up in another meeting that you can't.

[00:11:47] **Sufna John, PhD:** Miss, right? When we don't have staff that are able to kind of fill in for each other, we also dampen our ability to serve families. And so some of the problematic things about this idea [00:12:00] of if I don't, no one will is sometimes you have to get out of the way. And I think that can be a really hard thing to do when you feel passionately dedicated to your job because those worry thoughts of what happens if they don't do it right?

[00:12:14] **Sufna John, PhD:** What happens if it goes wrong? And that makes me laugh because you didn't do it right the first time. You didn't either. That's wrong. And so I think that your story really made me think about that idea of not only is this a martyrdom statement, but it also might be depriving your colleagues of opportunities to help them grow.

[00:12:37] **Christina Rouse:** Let's kind of dive into why do CAC professionals do this? Why do we lean towards more of this martyrdom sentiment? And I think. It's one has to be this element of those of us who are passionately dedicated, identify our work as part of who we are as individuals, right? And so it feels good [00:13:00] when we feel like if I can't do it, no one will like that makes me feel important, right?

[00:13:04] **Christina Rouse:** I feel important that I have this piece of a larger puzzle or a larger team dynamic. that is needed, is wanted, is crucial to the outcome of investigations. So it does feel good that in itself can be problematic.

[00:13:24] **Sufna John, PhD:** I agree with that. I think that clearly we would not be choosing a job that I think inarguably contains elements of suffering.

[00:13:34] **Sufna John, PhD:** It's inarguable that when working at a child advocacy center, one of the things you are signing up for is to be confronted with terrible things with awful parts about our world. And so I don't think anybody's picking this job because it's the easiest way to make a living. Most of the time they're picking this job because in some ways it's personally meaningful to them.

[00:13:57] **Sufna John, PhD:** It's a part of the identity that they [00:14:00] have, like you said. Christina. And to reiterate that idea, that's a lot of pressure. It's a lot of pressure you're putting on your job to satisfy elements of yourself. But it's also a lot of pressure to put on families and your colleagues too. This is a way you refill and recharge your battery.

[00:14:20] **Sufna John, PhD:** That's wonderful. We all need ways to refill and recharge our battery. But if you're the whole primary way that you say sustained in your work is through the validation it brings you, that puts families in a position where they're having to give you something you need in order for you to continue. And that can really mock up things for us.

[00:14:41] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so I hope it's clear as I'm saying this, I think it's wonderful that people have personal connections to this work. Many people, it's either. It might be a religious connection to it, but I feel like this is something I'm called to or was made for. It might have a personal life connection to it. Maybe I want to be the adult I wish I [00:15:00] had as a kid.

[00:15:01] **Sufna John, PhD:** Or I want to honor the adults I did have as a kid. Because universally children, I would argue really anyone, deserves to be safe. They deserve to be protected. And so it is a noble thing that we are doing. But nobility, when it becomes self validating in nature, can get a little bit messy.

[00:15:23] **Christina Rouse:** Mm hmm. We've talked about maybe why folks use it.

[00:15:26] **Christina Rouse:** What can be problematic about that workplace mantra of, if not me, then no one, or if not I, then no one? How can that kind of fold out into the workplace culture or just the dynamic with the teams that we work with? Mm hmm.

[00:15:43] **Sufna John, PhD:** Yeah, I think there's a few things that could go wrong with this. One is you might be setting up a culture in which everybody thinks they're the only one.

[00:15:52] **Sufna John, PhD:** We've all heard that phrase, there's no I in team. If the focus a lot is on me in my unique and only [00:16:00] ability to serve this capacity might make it more challenging for you to stay reflective and balanced within the course of your MDT work. Because I will tell you, there are times where MDT members have very different goals.

[00:16:14] **Sufna John, PhD:** very different responsibilities and very different ideas of what would be best outcomes. If your identity is wrapped up in you being the only one, compromise might be challenging. It might be hard to find middle grounds that feel good to both parties if both parties are stuck in this type of perfectionistic, it's only me type of thinking.

[00:16:35] **Sufna John, PhD:** So it can really get in the way of MDT healthy functioning. And there's a part of my brain that goes, you know what, even if it didn't affect the workplace. It affects you so much and we cannot pretend like who we are and our emotional health does not impact the work we do. I'm trained as a therapist and one of the lines that I was taught really early in my career was to check yourself at [00:17:00] the door.

[00:17:00] **Sufna John, PhD:** It's not about, I think that's such a problematic thing to say for a few reasons. One, it's impossible. How do you turn off who you are? That's a great idea. Look, we can't do that. We can't turn off elements of who we are. But more than that, why would you want to? Because who I am is important to the work I do.

[00:17:19] **Sufna John, PhD:** Christina, you mentioned being a parent. So am I. My love for my children is an important part of who I am and extends to the love I have for the work I do. And so not only do I not want to turn off

who I am because it's impossible, I don't want to because it connects me to my work. And so I think that.

[00:17:41] **Sufna John, PhD:** It's not great for a team environment to be on this solo mission of martyrdom, but honestly, it's not healthy for you either in being the best person, mom, friend, community member that you can be. I care about the work. I also really care about the people doing it.

[00:17:59] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, [00:18:00] that's great. And I think those are things that if you're not hearing those messages or having those conversations inside your CAC workplace setting, you might not know that that's an okay way to think, right?

[00:18:16] **Christina Rouse:** Especially if it's so ingrained in the culture of the organization. So we're going to dive into How leadership can focus on maybe shifting some of these ideations and workplace mantras. But I want to talk about one more that I know you and I have talked about a lot. Have you ever heard of CC staff or maybe even MDT partners in the work that you've done in Arkansas?

[00:18:40] **Christina Rouse:** Say things along the lines of, Oh, Sarah's the first to arrive at the office and she's the last to leave or team members saying, you can call me 24, seven, three 65. I'm always available. Or maybe they've named someone on our team. That's the go to person for anything you need. What [00:19:00] kind of CEC workplace mantra do we want to name those types of sayings?

[00:19:07] **Sufna John, PhD:** This idea that like, I think we have built a culture in the workplace that. over busyness is a badge of honor that if you're not overworked, you're not caring about your work, you're not doing enough. And so we've now set up a system where doing your job is not enough, that you have to be even more above and beyond what your job is.

[00:19:31] **Sufna John, PhD:** And certainly we all know there are times where our work demands more of us. And times when our work demands less of us, but this idea that it's noble to be overworked is something that I think we really need to be thoughtful of because turnover and staff. is a really difficult part of being in the helping professions.

[00:19:53] **Sufna John, PhD:** Okay. Yeah. I'd rather have someone who's sustainable in their job who can support families over the long haul than me burn [00:20:00] out our staff members and families have to experience a rotating and revolving door of people who are committed to them. We know that some of our cases can take a long time, right?

[00:20:10] **Sufna John, PhD:** Community partnerships. Hopefully when we integrate into the community, those are relationships that last a very long time. And so keeping your workforce Sustainable and healthy is an exceptionally important part of helping professionals goals and needs, but this idea of first to arrive, last to leave, especially, I think is one that also can get dangerous from a cultural or equity perspective.

[00:20:38] **Sufna John, PhD:** Yeah. Let me give you an example of that. People don't know this, but as we're recording this podcast, it's nine o'clock my time in the morning as we're recording this podcast. And some of the options that y'all sent out would have been eight o'clock in the morning, my time. And I think for many people, they're like, great.

[00:20:54] **Sufna John, PhD:** Let's get it started. I'm fresh. I'm ready. Let's do it at eight o'clock in the morning. My kids, [00:21:00] I just got home at like 8 30 because of drop off today to summer care this morning. I had to make sure they have their bathing suits because they're doing splash pad day and make sure that their snacks were in order.

[00:21:12] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so I can't be first to arrive. sometimes. And that's not because I don't love my job or don't care. It's because I have more than one thing in my life than this that demands my attention in the morning. Similarly, last to leave could be really hard for someone taking care of an elderly parent. Or someone who has to work two jobs to sustain their family and the lifestyle and basic needs of those around them.

[00:21:38] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so this sentiment that I can tell how much you're committed to your job by the time you are spending could be accidentally marginalizing people in our work who don't have that extra time to give. And so I think that we also need to be careful that we aren't crafting valence [00:22:00] or a virtue around overworks because that's leaving a lot of people out that are doing great work.

[00:22:05] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. And I seen that play out that if you're not fully present at all the things, right, all the functions, all the meetings, all the whatever it is, then inevitably someone will, you know, Come up in their own mind, their own assumption, their own perception that you just don't care. as much or enough to be doing

[00:22:29] **Sufna John, PhD:** this work.

[00:22:31] **Sufna John, PhD:** And whether we intentionally wanted to connect these two sentiments or not, they are connected. Because if we look at someone and go, they don't care about their work the way I do, perhaps another follow up logical sentence is, Because if I don't do it, nobody will. Yes. And so these thoughts can actually feed each other this idea of if I am not gracious or not understanding of the obligations and time of those around me, I can also [00:23:00] accidentally fall into that trap of if not me, then who?

[00:23:03] **Sufna John, PhD:** Nobody deserves to be in everything ATM where at any amount of the day someone can come and withdraw no matter what. Right. That's not a healthy thing. And We haven't said this point yet, but I think it's probably important, Christina, is people who have gone through trauma a lot of times in childhood become expert observers of their environment because they had to, to keep them safe.

[00:23:29] **Sufna John, PhD:** They had to be able to tell, is my parents having a stressful day or not? Because that's really going to impact how safe my body is. Or is my grandparent sober or not? That might really let me know whether dinner's on the table tonight or whether my body is safe tonight. And so what ends up happening is, in our work, families are watching the way we communicate and talk to each other, as well as a way to tone, is this a safe environment?

[00:23:59] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so [00:24:00] if I see, let's say, Janine, our forensic investigator, which that's not a real name, I just made it up. But let's say we see Janine stressed out and hurrying from room to room to room to room. What does that feel like for a family? To watch professionals who are frazzled and overworked and overly busy.

[00:24:19] **Sufna John, PhD:** That might not feel like a calming environment, a safe environment. And those of us in the helping professionals tend to have a higher likelihood of having childhood trauma than the general population. So not only are families watching what we do, we are watching what each other are doing as well to determine whether an environment is safe.

[00:24:40] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so I think this sacrificial mindset of, Things can really influence the tone and culture you create within the work you do, and that influences families as well as your colleagues.

[00:24:53] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, as you mentioned, the impact on families, even just a family, let's say, calling [00:25:00] their family advocate. And the advocate saying, I'm so sorry.

[00:25:04] **Christina Rouse:** I didn't call you back. I'm really busy that family might feel like they are not important enough to that family advocate. Now, that family advocate might not feel that way. They might very much feel that that family is important, but just relaying that I'm really busy. can set up a dynamic of an experience, like you said, that we don't necessarily want to put forth to the families that we're serving.

[00:25:29] **Sufna John, PhD:** I agree with that, that this idea of busyness implies a prioritization or an element of drain. And you might be sitting and listening going, yeah, I'm not going to tell a family I'm really busy. That's not what I'm going to say. But sometimes things are implied by the way we talk, even if we don't say it out loud.

[00:25:47] **Sufna John, PhD:** So, for example, if I'm the only one who does follow up calls to families, and my center saw 10 kids yesterday, and I'm the only one who can do this job, I might make [00:26:00] those phone calls shorter. I might not even realize I'm doing it. I might not follow up on something important a parent says, because I don't think I have enough time, because I'm too, busy sacrificing myself on an altar instead of asking for help or instead of talking with the team about this is a load that's too much for one.

[00:26:19] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so I think also when we set up this idea that everyone is overworked, what it does is inhibit professionals from asking for support when they need it. And that, again, will filter down to the family level, whether you're saying it overtly or by your behaviors. Remember, you can't check who you are at the door, and I wouldn't want you to, but families are picking up on a lot of cues we're giving them both verbally and non verbally.

[00:26:48] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I love that. And so when we think about CACs and some organizational structures of CACs, there are some CACs exist [00:27:00] that there is only one person that works at these agents. So for that person who's listening and going, yeah, must be nice to share this. load and these tasks to others, but I literally cannot.

[00:27:16] **Christina Rouse:** I am the only person. How do we help support that individual?

[00:27:21] **Sufna John, PhD:** There's a couple things that come to my mind and perhaps this is my therapist side of my brain talking right now. I'm not sure that's ever true. that all tasks on your plate can only be done by you. All or nothing. Statements tend to be times when our brain is convincing us or tricking us of something because it's eliminating the nuance involved.

[00:27:43] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so a lot of times this all or nothing, some people call it black or white thinking that it's only me for everything. But I would urge someone to maybe even do something practical, like list out all the things you have to do and really look through that and be like, am I the [00:28:00] only one who can do it?

[00:28:01] **Sufna John, PhD:** Not am I the only one who does it the way I like it to be done. That might be true. But am I really the only one who can do this? Okay, but let's say you wrote out that list, Christina, and 80 percent of the things on your list really are for you alone. What that would let me know is your workplace is probably not sustainable in the long term.

[00:28:21] **Sufna John, PhD:** That you might need to think about, do I need to recruit more volunteers? Do I need to go to my board and think about fundraising to open up new positions in my center? Do I need to build new

service agreements so that there are people in my partners in my community who could do some of this work? So I'm freed up to do the things that are only my responsibility.

[00:28:45] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so the problem with this idea that I'm overworked and that's a good thing is someone's not going to explore those options then. Because they're going to look at that list and go, duh, I'm overworked. Everybody else is. And so I think that [00:29:00] it's really important that people build a job that is manageable for them for a long haul.

[00:29:07] **Sufna John, PhD:** Right? Again, one of my goals in my job is to keep helping professionals doing the work they're doing over the long term because families deserve stability in these moments where we're meeting with families in the worst moments of their life. The least we can do is be our close to healthiest, most stable selves in our jobs as we're supporting them.

[00:29:29] **Christina Rouse:** And I think too, to go back to our passionately dedicated statement, we want to keep those individuals in their job because they love their job. Yes. So we need to create that cultural environment, whatever it might be, to sustain them so that they don't feel that they're in a space that they can't be their best dedicated selves because of these other things that happen that burn us out.

[00:29:55] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. We know there are other mantras that exist, but we [00:30:00] don't have enough time to dive into all of them. Are there any others that you want to name for our conversation today?

[00:30:05] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think maybe the only other one that I can think of is this idea that if people don't work the way I do or have the same goals as I do that they don't care or don't have value for the job.

[00:30:22] **Sufna John, PhD:** This assumption of intentions and motivations of others when they don't align with our behaviors and humans have a way of making quicker judgments when they're not regulated. Okay, let me give you an example. If you were running away from something dangerous,

That's probably not the time for your body to be like, should I take this door or this tour?

[00:30:44] **Sufna John, PhD:** Well, maybe this red door on the right has a push entry. And so maybe that would be faster. What about this green door? Maybe it goes to this other hall. We don't like to be doing that slow, intentional thinking when we are in a serious situation, right? That's a [00:31:00] survival instinct. I think the tricky part is if we live our jobs in survival mode, We are not allowing ourselves to make intentional, thoughtful decisions and gracious, benevolent, and kind interpretations of those around us.

[00:31:19] **Sufna John, PhD:** So please hear me when I tell you, don't sacrifice yourself. It is important, it's an important value, but it's also an important kindness you can bestow on to other people. So this just isn't about you catching these tendencies in yourself, it's also about you naming them and figuring out what does our center want to do if we realize we've kind of built this climate.

[00:31:41] **Sufna John, PhD:** Or we start to hear sentiments that let us know this is the climate that people think they're getting into when they come into work like this.

[00:31:49] **Christina Rouse:** Do you see that play out more with MDT partners of looking at people's behaviors and saying they must not care enough more so than inside CAC [00:32:00] staff or do you think those are very balanced types of mindsets?

[00:32:05] **Sufna John, PhD:** Honestly, like I told you, my job, I get to train people across disciplines. I'm talking healthcare, law enforcement, mental health. It's everywhere. This idea, this quick to judge, because remember the pacing of child advocacy centers can feel very fast, right? Very urgent. We have so much to do. Families deserve intentional choices, not rushed ones.

[00:32:28] **Sufna John, PhD:** Your colleagues deserve true understanding from you, not false rushed performative understanding. And so I think that I see this really everywhere, to be totally honest, Christina, is this idea that I

infer what someone else feels or is committed to based on a snap judgment in me.

[00:32:50] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah.

[00:32:51] **Sufna John, PhD:** And would we want a family to think that's the type of work we do?

[00:32:55] **Sufna John, PhD:** Would we want a new person coming into our workplace to go, Hey, heads up by the way, this [00:33:00] is the kind of job where you're going to be overworked and everyone's going to snap the judgments about you sometimes. Who's going to want to join a work environment like that? And so I think that, again, a lot of these points that we're hitting today are not just important for the families we serve.

[00:33:14] **Sufna John, PhD:** They're also important for the team that you are on.

[00:33:17] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I saw this happen quite frequently when we would get a referral. And on the other end of the line, it was an emergency. And then as we used intentional thought process to learn more about said emergency, it ended up being a slower process because we were gaining information and figuring out how the best way to respond would be other than immediately.

[00:33:43] **Christina Rouse:** And that When that wasn't the culture or common practice was met with a lot of resistance of like, well, why aren't we jumping right away? And we need to react right away. And so we intentionally tried to bring the team [00:34:00] along when we were talking about our shift in our referral process to make it that we weren't making these rash, quick, jumping to conclusion decisions.

[00:34:11] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. That feel good. Right. We're immediately going to go out. We're going to figure out what's happening. We're going to help this family and child, but sometimes it does need to be a more intentional thought out response than just reacting. Oh,

[00:34:26] **Sufna John, PhD:** definitely. Think about it this way. I think we've all had those experiences where we go into the doctor.

[00:34:32] **Sufna John, PhD:** 10 years, meaning that a lot of times when I'm doing my life, I'm doing it with a migraine. Right. Right. By the way, the world has so many suggestions for me on how to help with that migraine. The amount of times I've heard people say, have you tried Excedrin Migraine? I have. I really have. Having these migraines for 10 years, right?

[00:34:52] **Sufna John, PhD:** If I went to a doctor and I told them a new doctor, let's say, because families are often coming to us new. They don't know who we are yet. Right. [00:35:00] And I said, I'm having these chronic headaches and they went, great, you're going to need to start sleeping more. You're probably dehydrated. Go ahead and pick up an ibuprofen sometimes.

[00:35:11] **Sufna John, PhD:** not only would those suggestions be perhaps unhelpful, but also a little insulting. It's a little insulting and invalidating that I'm coming to you with a severe problem and you have an answer right away. How do I even know you know me or you understand how effective that answer would be? So cookie cutter approaches not only have a higher likelihood of not being effective, they also have a higher likelihood of making a family feel like They're not being listened to or making a team member feel like they're not being listened to and they're not being heard.

[00:35:47] **Sufna John, PhD:** So again, slow is not just to regulate ourselves. Slow is also an indication of respect for someone else, but I'm actually taking the time to learn you and learn how to help instead of using my [00:36:00] own judgments. to determine what is needed here in a rapid sort of way. So I'm impressed that your team took on that idea really intentionally of we want to slow down the work that we're doing or at least elements of the work we are doing.

[00:36:14] **Sufna John, PhD:** So we're still rapidly responding to real crises that need timely responses, but also not having our entire work life be putting out those fires and leaving no room for us to get balanced again.

[00:36:28] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, it was a very intentional decision to figure out that our response, both the CAC policies and procedures and also the MDT response has to be flexible, but it has to be fluid.

[00:36:43] **Christina Rouse:** And the field that we work in is ever changing. And so we also need to change how we respond. So this is a great transition into how do leaders and directors. Even approach wanting to [00:37:00] change some of these CEC workplace mantras that we know exist.

[00:37:05] **Sufna John, PhD:** You kind of mentioned it a little bit in the process you just described is one communicating very intentionally about why that is, right?

[00:37:14] **Sufna John, PhD:** So people don't feel like these are just arbitrary changes I'm giving a shot to, but that there's a reason there's a value behind why we're thinking of making a change. And that, you know, My goal as a leader is to then elicit your feedback to be like, did we get it right? Is this something we actually do want to change?

[00:37:32] **Sufna John, PhD:** Top down leadership can be more efficient. It also can make people less connected to their jobs because they're like, why does it matter how I feel about this if one person is going to be in charge of anything anyway? And so I think intentional communication is a really important part as well as eliciting feedback.

[00:37:47] **Sufna John, PhD:** But I think that When you do it as a team, it becomes the collective responsibility of the team to sustain and nurture that belief system. Okay, so I do think it's important [00:38:00] that leaders set a tone. I totally agree with that. Leaders are not the only people in the room though. And leaders have different skill sets and different temperaments, right?

[00:38:09] **Sufna John, PhD:** So you might have a leader who's exceptionally organized, but are they going to be the ones that confront someone about something? Maybe that's not their strength. And so I also usually recommend to teams when we've set a goal of something, why don't we appoint one member of our team in a rotating role where they're

keeping an eye on this for us, that they know this is a goal we're So for example, we're setting a goal of Reducing the level of self sacrifice and busyness.

[00:38:38] **Sufna John, PhD:** as a badge of honor. Okay. And then that one person's role is to notice times where we're doing it, right? These are insidious. We don't even realize we're doing them sometimes. So what that might sound like is if that's your role this quarter, let's say Christina, and you hear a team member say something like that, you might feel more empowered to go.

[00:38:57] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think I'm hearing that. This is reminding [00:39:00] me of that goal that we are setting because that is makes it a lot easier to bring it up as it's happening. Because as a team, we've decided this is a goal we're working on versus if we didn't decide that you might not feel comfortable confronting that in a team setting.

[00:39:15] **Sufna John, PhD:** Right? Because you might feel really, Yeah. Like it's not your place to do that. This is not the type of team we have. So I would encourage leaders to set intentionality, but you can't be the only one setting the tone of a team. A team's tone is the team's responsibility. And we want to empower people to feel committed to the type of culture that we are creating and sustaining in our organization.

[00:39:36] **Christina Rouse:** Would you say that there's one step maybe before that of really educating or bringing to light what those look like, why they're problematic, how that can be detrimental to the work we're serving? So would you think that there's one pre step before figuring out how to reframe it

[00:39:57] **Sufna John, PhD:** for your team? Yeah, I think it's a great point.

[00:39:59] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think that's part of [00:40:00] intentional communication, right, is this idea that we're going to talk about. what we're trying to change, why we're trying to change it. And again, not assume we are correct in that, but to approach it in a humble way, because we might say, this is what we're noticing. This is what we think the solution is.

[00:40:17] **Sufna John, PhD:** And our team goes, you've got it wrong. That's not why I'm saying I don't notice that impact in myself. Another quick, I guess, suggestion for having these types of conversations with your team is making sure you have methods to elicit feedback that aren't identifiable. So that everyone could write down a note, you pass it to the front end, they open it.

[00:40:39] **Sufna John, PhD:** Or if you're on a virtual setting, having a way to do anonymous reporting. Like Jamboard, for example, through Google, because a lot of times people also aren't going to feel comfortable sharing their genuine reactions if they think that's not what the group is thinking or feeling. And so I think that education is really important, Christina.

[00:40:56] **Sufna John, PhD:** I just want to caution us not to assume the teacher [00:41:00] role and just assume that we are correct in what we are saying. People deserve to have info that comes from research, that comes from lived experiences, But many people in that group probably have very intelligent things to contribute. To this conversation.

[00:41:13] **Sufna John, PhD:** So yes, teaching, but maybe in a humble way,

[00:41:17] **Christina Rouse:** if that makes sense. Well, it made me think of how we can keep bringing it back, which you and I have done throughout our conversation of bringing it back to the experience of the family. Yeah. Right. And really thinking that that's our product at a CDC and an MDT is how a family feels when they interact with our system.

[00:41:36] **Christina Rouse:** And so if that's part of. a mission, a values, whatever it may be, how you're always bringing it back to that element. Yeah,

[00:41:48] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think that is a very, for lack of a better word, that's a very intentional way to do that, right? To go, this is trickling down to the families that we serve and because [00:42:00] this world is full of ands, right?

[00:42:01] **Sufna John, PhD:** So we're sometimes tempted to say, but, but that just says that the thing we just said isn't important. So I think what you

just said is really important. Right. That this impacts the work we're doing for families. And that's a strong value of our workplace is the experience families get. And we don't want to accidentally reinforce and all you are as a human is the thing you give to other people.

[00:42:24] **Sufna John, PhD:** I really care about the experience families are getting, genuinely. And I think that's a uniting thing, right? It's a uniting value across an MDT, but it also kind of conveys that maybe the only reason we would do that is because we're sacrificing everything else for the sake of the family. And we don't want to reinforce that either.

[00:42:40] **Sufna John, PhD:** So that and might sound like this is really impacting the way a family feels with us. And it could really be impacting the way we feel with one another. And both of those things are incredibly important to create a workplace that feels good to work in, that we're doing good work and we're doing [00:43:00] it well and kindly with one another.

[00:43:03] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so it's insidious, right? It's tempting. It really is tempting to buy into this idea that our only goal is to serve others. I think serving others is a very noble goal. I think you're important to them within the context of that service.

[00:43:19] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. And as a leader figuring out how to input or create these practices that support the importance of the person.

[00:43:31] **Christina Rouse:** Right. And so how can a leader think about fostering that environment where the staff and the team members. are as equally as important as the families.

[00:43:44] **Sufna John, PhD:** Okay. I had a few thoughts come up as you asked me that question. Probably the first, and it might sound strange, so bear with me for a second. I think one of the first things a leader can do to cultivate that environment is actually believe it.

[00:43:56] **Sufna John, PhD:** Like, I'm not interested in building a leader who can [00:44:00] perform this idea. I'm interested in building a leader who actually believes it. Because a lot of times when we actually believe something, most of the stuff that comes out of us for ideas and how we

communicate is great. It's good enough, at least because it actually is a value of ours.

[00:44:16] **Sufna John, PhD:** What I'm not interested in is this idea of a leader performing that self care is important, but their behaviors, their policies, their procedures don't align with that value. So my first thought was, you got to believe it in order for it to be something you can implement. Right. But let's say we're there and the leader is really on board and they were like, this is a really important value of mine.

[00:44:37] **Sufna John, PhD:** I think a couple things to think about is. How are you conveying that value with your words and with your actions? I'm going to call out myself here for a minute. So one of my values is that rest is a very important element of work. That we need places to rest within the workday, but also places to rest outside of work.

[00:44:59] **Sufna John, PhD:** So I would tell team [00:45:00] members all the time, when you're out on vacation time, you don't need to be responding to emails. If it's an absolute emergency, I will text you. But other than that, absolute emergency. I'm expecting you're not looking at your email inbox at all, right? That sounds great. Doesn't that sound like a leader who really cares about rest?

[00:45:17] **Sufna John, PhD:** And luckily I had one really gracious, generous colleague of mine a couple weeks later be like, so here's the deal, Sufna. We hear you say that, but you are always responding to emails when you're out of the office. We heard you say it, but you're not even doing it. So I don't feel comfortable doing it if it's just lip service out of you, but you're not actually doing it.

[00:45:36] **Sufna John, PhD:** And so I would say as a leader, we also want to scrutinize our own behaviors to see, are we getting closer to living this value? Because remember, people are watching what we are doing in order to understand the tone that we are trying to set. Not just what we are saying is important, but what are we doing?

[00:45:56] **Sufna John, PhD:** And then I think the last is just to remember. Self care is [00:46:00] different for everyone. Yes. I don't want to

accidentally assume I know how you feel taken care of. I know what's burning you out. Those are assumptions, quick thinking. Remember we talked about how dangerous that is. So take the time, right? Have a leadership check in a 15 minutes.

[00:46:15] **Sufna John, PhD:** Every two months where you just sit down with your staff and the whole point of that conversation is to talk about how are you doing not to talk about your performance on the workplace. It's not to talk about a policy. It's for me dedicating time to go. What is the impact of this work on you? And are there elements we can bring in that would feel caring and restorative to you?

[00:46:38] **Sufna John, PhD:** Not just caring and restorative to me, but actually what feels that way to you. And so, hopefully that helps in thinking about a start to this as leadership actually believing it, carrying it through with their behaviors, and making sure they avoid assumptions about what needs to change and instead be curious and intentionally ask [00:47:00] people what needs to change.

[00:47:01] **Christina Rouse:** Mm hmm. And I think too, you brought this up when we were talking about figuring out what else is needed from a programmatic standpoint of how do you ask those questions to your board or your funders or whoever else it might be that can help sustain additional elements of that environment you're attempting to work.

[00:47:25] **Christina Rouse:** So if our mantra at our workplaces, we're so busy. Yeah, if I hear that as a leader, I'm thinking capacity, I need to start thinking about hiring other people

[00:47:38] **Sufna John, PhD:** or

[00:47:38] **Christina Rouse:** I'm so busy that I cannot take PTO, right? I can't afford to be out of the office because if not me, then who? So really thinking about as a leader, if you're hearing these sentiments, be curious about people.

[00:47:54] **Christina Rouse:** What is causing maybe that mantra to circulate inside the office and [00:48:00] how can you get creative to figure

out ways to make the work more sustainable? Because like you said, the people who love this work want to do the work and it tends to be the structure and the environment that causes us to want to be like, I can't do this anymore.

[00:48:17] **Christina Rouse:** Not because of the work itself. The work tends to be the last thing that I think drains people from leaving their position. I think it's all the other stuff that we actually, and I say we, as the collective leadership movement in the CEC field have the ability to change.

[00:48:35] **Sufna John, PhD:** I agree. There's this concept of everybody has parts of their job that they don't love.

[00:48:40] **Sufna John, PhD:** Right. Put me in front of a budget spreadsheet. It's not my best day. Same. I don't love doing that part of my job. Same. Right. So I don't want us to sugar coat and make this conversation feel unrealistic. You can shift everything. You can build a work life that you're never feeling stressed for or never feeling drained.

[00:48:55] **Sufna John, PhD:** That's not true. And I would say that's not true at any profession, honestly. Right. Child advocacy centers. [00:49:00] And there are things we can usually shift. Right? We don't want to fall into that all or nothing, that this is just part of the job. I would go, let's be curious about that. Is this the only way we can do this part of our job?

[00:49:12] **Sufna John, PhD:** If it is, that means could I think of other areas that could loosen, that could flex. So that way the overarching theme of my job isn't one of drain, that there might be some elements of drain or suffering as a part of the work we do. And frankly, I don't know if that's something you can get rid of fully, right?

[00:49:32] **Sufna John, PhD:** Right, right. But there are usually things that you can do. And most of the time, one of the things that sustains us in our job is feeling like things are improving, that things are moving. This organization isn't stagnant. This organization puts things together. their values into practice, right? That can feel really connecting.

[00:49:53] **Sufna John, PhD:** So I would urge us also to not let perfect be the enemy of good enough here. Good enough is a real thing. And many of our [00:50:00] center staff would tell us maybe right before an exit interview that good enough would have been a great improvement from what we were doing now. And so I love that. conversations like this, Christina, because I usually leave them feeling really invigorated and really energized.

[00:50:16] **Sufna John, PhD:** And I have these 20 ideas that come out of this. Please don't incorporate 20 ideas at the same time for all of you who are listening. Why don't you collectively with your team determine what are one or two things we could work on this quarter or this half of the year and then build slowly towards sustainment versus let's throw all the spaghetti noodles at the wall and hope two of them stick.

[00:50:36] **Sufna John, PhD:** That's exhausting. That's a way to create a messy wall. Yeah. Instead, how do I take this energy I feel and commit it in ways that are sustainable over the long term? And that usually means gradual overhauls that we do in an intentional way versus a huge push that in three months, everyone's going to forget that's happening because we burned ourselves out [00:51:00] by trying to move too quick.

[00:51:01] **Sufna John, PhD:** Mm hmm.

[00:51:02] **Christina Rouse:** I love it. So I think we've offered quite a bit of insight and also some takeaways for the listeners with this conversation of how you can switch your CAC workplace mantras. I want to end on a circling back to the scenario I named at the top of the episode. So, you're in the environment of a social event, someone asks you what you do, and they respond with, that job must be really challenging.

[00:51:28] **Christina Rouse:** How do you do it? What else can people say other than, if I don't, no one will? How else can we inspire people to maybe change the language of how they're responding to that sentiment? Yeah.

[00:51:44] **Sufna John, PhD:** How do you do it? The first thought that came to my mind when you asked that, Christina, is, It's good. I don't do it alone.

[00:51:50] **Sufna John, PhD:** Mm. You know, I think a lot of times we can get wisdom from all sorts of places, right? And one of those places I think it's nature. You know, those huge [00:52:00] redwood trees in California, the type of trees where like you can drive through the trunk that big, okay, these massive, stable forces of nature trees.

[00:52:09] **Sufna John, PhD:** Those trees only burrow their roots about six feet deep. Instead, what they do is they grow their roots laterally to the side and wrap their roots around the roots of other trees. Because nature has already learned it's not about digging yourself deep. It's about connection to a community that stands stronger.

[00:52:32] **Sufna John, PhD:** Together become a Redwood as a part of your job, right? Families deserve a Redwood climate become a community that wraps itself around each other as a way to sustain your work. And so that job must be very challenging. How do you do it? Maybe it's. I'm really lucky that there's a lot of people who do this work alongside of me.

[00:52:52] **Sufna John, PhD:** I do it because I love it, and I don't do it alone. And perhaps if we really believed that, not just performed it, but [00:53:00] if we really believed that, we could sustain a long career that's healthy for us and immensely impactful to the communities that we live in.

[00:53:09] **Christina Rouse:** As we wrap up today's episode, let's remember the power of our words and the impact they have on our work culture.

[00:53:16] **Christina Rouse:** Changing the CAC workplace mantra from suffering is noble to sustainability is essential is key to fostering a healthy, productive work environment. Thank you for joining us for a thought provoking conversation. Much appreciation for our guests. On this episode, remember in the moments between episodes, look for the invisible threads that connect you to your purpose.

[00:53:43] **Christina Rouse:** If what you heard sparked your curiosity to learn more, hit the subscribe button and follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn at Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center for more learning content. All resources mentioned in this podcast are linked in the show notes below. [00:54:00] The SRCEC Exchange Podcast is made

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[00:54:07] **Christina Rouse:** S. Department of Justice, under Award No. 159. PJ DP 22 GK 0 3 0 5 9 JJ vo. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this podcast are those of the guests and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, the S-R-C-A-C Exchange Podcast Season three is hosted by me, Christina Rouse, and produced by Peachtree Sound Music provided by Midnight Dream.