INSIGHT 02

BEYOND PERSONAL SACRIFICE

What needs to be in place so that care does not depend on personal sacrifice?



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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB

RYS Insights draw on ten years of frontline work alongside people on the move. They include contributions from former staff, volunteers and leaders, presented through case studies, first-person accounts, questions for discussion and practice prompts.

They can be read alone or discussed with a team. They are intended to support reflection and discussion, rather than provide fixed answers or concrete solutions.



CONTINUE EXPLORING

This Insight can be read alongside the following RYS Learning Hub resources:



INSIGHT 01

The Pull Towards Suffering



INSIGHT 06

Ending Well



TOOL 01

Before We Say Yes: The Reflective Pause

IN THIS INSIGHT

This Insight explores the pull towards personal sacrifice in caring work, why it happens, when it can be necessary, where it can become harmful, and what helps us find a more sustainable way forward.

01 WHEN SACRIFICE BECOMES NORMAL

How caring professions can quietly turn overwork, and putting yourself last into signs of commitment.

02 WHEN SACRIFICE CAN BE NECESSARY

Why some situations genuinely ask more of us, and how choice, support and recovery can make that safer.

03 WHEN CARING CROSSES A LINE

How the urge to help can pull us beyond our role, capacity or boundaries, even when our intentions are good.



A more sustainable way for everyone.

04 WHO PAYS THE PRICE?

The consequences of sustained personal sacrifice for ourselves, our organisations and the people we are trying to support.

05 WHAT MAKES CARE SUSTAINABLE?

The professional and personal support that allows us to care deeply without continually depleting ourselves.

06 BEYOND PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Learning to say no, recognising professional people-pleasing and finding a better balance between compassion for others and compassion for ourselves.

A LONG AND BUMPY JOURNEY

I invite you to come with me on a long and bumpy journey from personal sacrifice to the great beyond. We'll take a few rest breaks at burnout, a long detour to total identity collapse, before we finally arrive at a sustaining balance between personal life and caring work.



What I've come to learn is that caring and humanitarian work with children sometimes demands personal sacrifice. But when that sacrifice is made without conscious choice, willingness or the right professional and personal support, particularly over prolonged periods, it can have profoundly negative consequences for our personal health and relationships, the health and effectiveness of our organisations, and ultimately, most devastatingly, for the children we strive so hard to walk alongside.

When done consciously, willingly, and with support, it can be sustainable.

WHEN SACRIFICE IS DEMANDED

My journey began in Manchester as a social worker. I regularly worked ten to twelve hour days, forgot or was too busy to eat lunch, I barely had any personal life, forgot important dates, neglected to return messages or calls to close friends for months and sometimes years.

I remember being on a call in the office to a father I was working with whilst literally banging my head on a wall. A new manager asked my colleagues: “Is she OK?”. They replied: “Oh yeah, that’s just what she’s like!”.



The culture of self-sacrifice was so normalised, and the signs of chronic stress so unrecognised, that I agreed and laughed along with them. But I was not OK. And I handed my notice in soon after.

WHEN SACRIFICE IS DEMANDED: CONTINUED

Self-sacrifice is, to some extent, perceived as essential in roles working with children. Look at the demands placed on teachers, on doctors, on social workers, youth workers, humanitarian workers. It is also often celebrated and admired by others. “You’re a good person” is often what people will say when you tell them what you do. “I couldn’t do what you do” might follow. It can then become a source of pride or meaning in life, can give a sense of purpose, and even validate one’s existence.



It can be a beautiful thing, the giving up of your own interests or even your own needs, for the benefit of others, or in service of a cause.

There are many examples of animals who perform acts like this; such as the octopus who nurses its young whilst starving itself, salmon who travel thousands of miles offering their lives in service of young to come, or honey bee workers who forage for the colony.



The octopus
who nurses its young whilst starving itself.

Salmon
who travel thousands of miles offering their lives in service of young to come.

Honey bee workers
who forage for the colony.

WHEN SACRIFICE BECOMES PART OF WHO WE ARE

We could give plenty of examples from human contexts which necessitate such acts of bravery, dedication and sacrifice of life. Humanitarian crises, natural disasters, emergencies, to name a few. But in contexts where that level of self-sacrifice is demanded but not necessary, we may come to decide the harms perpetuated were not warranted at all.



For the human species, with complex needs around identity, the danger is your sense of self-worth can become interlinked with your work, whether that's paid or unpaid. It's common to hear people say, "I don't have time to eat lunch", "I can't remember the last time I took a day off", or "I had to be told to take time off work".

For some of us, it can be rooted in childhoods of caring for others, learning that to survive you need to put others first, that your needs or wishes are not as important as those of others, or learning to disconnect completely from yourself so you're not even aware of your needs and wants.



And which group of people could have the most paramount and essential needs, if not children? Especially those travelling alone and seeking safety.

CYCLING AWAY FROM BURNOUT

Eventually, I left Manchester and went looking for something different. That journey took me to Calais, where I joined Refugee Youth Service. From the outside, that might sound like an act of self-sacrifice, but in truth I was cycling away from burnout. Away from a culture of chronic stress that demanded self-sacrifice that was not sustainable. Away from the routine of unachievably high expectations, set by a chronically underfunded state service, in one of the world's richest countries.



WHEN SACRIFICE IS SAFE AND NECESSARY

In the middle of a humanitarian crisis, at one of the worst borders in Europe, I discovered a new world of collective care, compassionate low tolerance for poor boundaries, and vitality. It was here I learnt that sometimes self-sacrifice is necessary and can be made safe.

One night, a young person I was working with broke his leg in a hit-and-run accident. He was in a strange country, in pain, frightened and alone. I stayed with him late into the night, sacrificing my personal life and my sleep. But there were things in place to make this safer. I went with a colleague, we notified colleagues and management where we were, we debriefed afterwards and took time back to rest.



The sacrifice was real, so was the support around it.

WHEN SACRIFICE IS SAFE AND NECESSARY

In Calais where multiple organisations are based out of the same warehouse space there are signs and posters everywhere about taking rest, about how each individual life is important, about how to find hope amidst so much suffering, reminding us to ask each other when you last had a day off. People could recognise the signs of burnout, support each other in identifying it, and encourage people to take small steps to recover.



There were travelling clowns, yoga teachers and therapists who came to help with this.



WHEN SACRIFICE IS SAFE AND NECESSARY

Like many people who feel strongly drawn to a particular cause or movement, I later made more conscious and willing personal sacrifices. I also learnt how vital both organisational and personal support are in making those sacrifices sustainable.

I had left a career with a salary, given up any notion of financial security, and cycled around Europe to volunteer and find out what life was like for children on the move. There was immense privilege that made that possible, including the support of a partner who helped financially support the trip.



I landed back in the UK two years later with few possessions, some debt, and a dose of secondary trauma. A year later, when I was asked if I wanted to support Refugee Youth Service in setting up and running an age disputes project, it was a clear and resounding 'yes'! I checked in on my support network, got their pledges, and off I went.

Like so many others, I felt that pull towards suffering. It brought meaning, purpose, and a sense that I was exactly where I needed to be, doing exactly what I needed to be doing.

It didn't feel like people pleasing because I was doing it willingly and consciously. And as I didn't care about certain core needs, I didn't think I was negating them.

That's partly true, but the other truth is...

> I was such a people pleaser I started doing it at a professional level.

WHEN SACRIFICE IS NOT NEEDED OR SAFE

Everywhere I've worked, I've met people who wanted to be heroes and had terrible boundaries and tendencies towards pleasing people.

Especially the one in the mirror.



Here are some examples:

WORKING LATE

when admin time could have been allocated during the day

TAKING TOO MUCH ON

more work, responsibility or emotional load than I had capacity for

STEPPING OUTSIDE MY ROLE

because helping felt more important than the boundary

Once, we were told by the management of an organisation not to complete welfare checks at the weekend as the necessary safety measures couldn't be put in place. A senior worker asked me to disregard this because she was worried about a suicidal teenager, and I agreed to go with her.

The reality was that most of the children we worked with were at risk of self-harm and suicide. Meeting one of them over the weekend had a multitude of negative impacts: on their sense of the relationship, on other young people's sense of how they were valued by staff and the organisation, and it exposed us and the organisation to risks we weren't aware of.

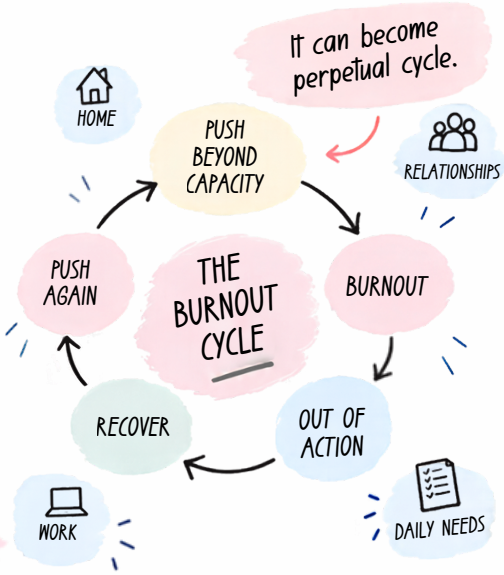
THE IMPACTS GO FURTHER THAN WE CAN SEE

- The relationship
- Other young people
- Staff safety
- Organisational risk

The tragedy is that even though everyone can see the suffering that's being attempted to alleviate, the attempts are often counterintuitive, and risky.

THE PITFALLS OF PERSONAL SACRIFICE: RISK TO THE SELF

There are multiple dangers to the self of prolonged checked or unchecked personal sacrifice that will be unique to us as individuals and our intersectional privileges and disadvantages. In some contexts such as war and natural disaster, people have no choice and have to keep going regardless. But in contexts where we do have choice, awareness of the pitfalls can give us the power to do something to prevent these.



This can show up in different ways:

BURNOUT

A constant cycle of giving beyond my capacity, leaving me exhausted, unmotivated and disconnected from the people and things that matter to me.

ANGER AND HOSTILITY

When I'm exhausted and overwhelmed, I become more irritable and reactive, which can strain my relationships with family, friends and colleagues.

CHILDHOOD SURVIVAL MODES

Old patterns of self-sacrifice can resurface, making it hard to recognise and express my own needs. This can lead to resentment and a sense of always putting others first.

You can't keep giving from an empty cup.

THE PITFALLS OF PERSONAL SACRIFICE: RISK TO THE WIDER ORGANISATION OR COLLECTIVE

When we consistently go beyond our own limits, the effects can spread across the organisation, shaping its culture, expectations and practice. What feels like individual commitment can become the benchmark for others, contributing to overwork, burnout, absence and turnover, and potentially affecting the quality and safety of the work itself.

CULTURE OF OVERWORK

What one person does can quietly become the benchmark for everyone else, shaping a culture where overwork is seen as normal or expected.

TIME OUT + TURNOVER

When people repeatedly work beyond their capacity, organisations can experience higher levels of absence, burnout and staff turnover, with the associated costs and loss of knowledge and continuity.



UNSAFE PRACTICE

Exhaustion and poor boundaries don't only affect wellbeing. They can affect judgement, decision-making and the quality and safety of practice, increasing organisational risk, particularly in safe-guarding and high-stakes situations.

AN UNACHIEVABLE PRECEDENT

I set a precedent that was unachievable and undesirable, especially for colleagues who were parents. What might feel like commitment can unintentionally create pressure and guilt for others, who may not have the same capacity or circumstances.

When one person pushes beyond their limits, it can change what is expected of everyone.

THE PITFALLS OF PERSONAL SACRIFICE: RISK TO THE PEOPLE BEING SUPPORTED

When care depends too heavily on individual sacrifice, the person providing that care cannot always sustain it. They may need time away, leave altogether, or find themselves working with blurred boundaries and depleted judgement. For the people being supported, that can mean interrupted support, uncertainty and, potentially, a breakdown in trust.



INTERRUPTED SUPPORT

When someone burns out, needs time away or leaves, support can suddenly change or stop.

BREAKDOWN IN TRUST

Relationships built over time can become less predictable or harder to sustain.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES

Unhealthy and dangerous practices that call into question ethical boundaries and potential signs of exploitation.

Personal sacrifice can begin with a desire to give more. But if it cannot be sustained, the consequences may eventually be felt by the very people we are trying to support.

TOTAL IDENTITY COLLAPSE

For me, despite recognising these pitfalls, I eventually succumbed to them again. What had happened in Manchester wasn't a one-off experience. After repeated periods of burnout and reaching compassion fatigue, I got to a point where I couldn't function and had to take sick leave. I stopped believing that care work was sustainable for me. I decided I had to quit.

But that brought up a much bigger question. Who was I without my professional identity? If I wasn't caring for other people, did I still have value or worth?



When the people and systems around us tell us we're good and worthwhile because of what we do, we can start believing that too. Our identity and our ego can become fragile, and can collapse when we realise we don't want to, or simply can't, keep doing it anymore.

Understanding that we all have intrinsic worth regardless of what we do is vital. Our profession, and caring for others, can be an important part of who we are, but it doesn't need to be our whole identity.

I did eventually return to work. And when I later decided to leave, it wasn't because I had reached breaking point again. This time, it was a conscious decision about what I was, and wasn't, willing to sacrifice.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE IN PLACE?

Returning to work meant thinking seriously about what I needed in place to avoid falling into the same patterns again. For me, that meant having the right support both at work and in my personal life.

What makes sacrifice sustainable will be different for everyone. Our needs are different, and they can change at different points in our lives. What matters is not simply whether support exists, but whether we have the right support around us for what we're being asked, or choosing, to give.

AT WORK



Clinical supervision

A space to reflect, process and be supported.



Time and space to reflect

Opportunities to pause and make sense of what we're holding.



Financial security

Enough income to live comfortably.



Job security

Stability to plan ahead and reduce constant uncertainty.



A culture that supports rest

Leaders and systems that value sustainability, not just commitment.



IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES



People who listen and make space

For the difficult conversations as well as the good ones.



Grounding / regulating relationships

People who help you feel steady, calm and like yourself again.

Therapy / professional wellbeing support

Access to therapeutic support when needed.



Hobbies and personal interests

Time for the things that bring you joy



Rest

Proper rest is not a luxury. It's essential.



COMPASSION NEEDS BOUNDARIES

Having the right support around me helped, but I also had to keep practising how to respond differently when my instinct was to do more.

There were times when I wanted to keep my work phone on over the weekend because it was winter and I knew a child had nowhere to sleep and no other support network. There were times when I wanted to host them myself. Once, I even considered driving to Scotland, to the last place we knew a young person had been before we lost contact with him.

I could host them...

I could go and find them...

I need to do something...



Put your own oxygen mask on first.



I was great at saying it, not so great at doing it.

The instinct to do something could be overpowering. I cared, and I didn't want to stand by. But with support from my therapist and case management supervisor, I learnt to pause, seek advice and think about the wider consequences. It didn't make holding back easy. The internal resistance was still there. It probably always will be.

But when you are running a project, your responsibility is to remain strong, available and functional for more than any one individual. The kind of response a person might need from family is not necessarily the role of a professional.

Caring well sometimes means holding back

THE SACRIFICE I WASN'T WILLING TO MAKE

Over time, that practice began to change the decisions I made about my work. As the project developed, continuing to lead it meant deciding what I was, and wasn't, willing to give.

To keep running the work in the way it needed, I would have had to base myself in London. That would have meant reshaping my life around the project and making a personal sacrifice I was no longer willing to make. So I said no.
And I would have been a fool to think that I, specifically, was needed. Someone else came in to replace me. They brought things to the project that I couldn't, and the project continued.



Saying no wasn't easy. I cared deeply about the work and the young people, and it felt uncomfortable to step back. But this time, I wasn't leaving because I had reached breaking point. I was making a conscious decision about what I was willing to sacrifice.

Since then, I've been more intentional about the projects I take on. If I don't have the capacity, I turn them down. This isn't always easy, but it helps me stay focused on the work I can do well, without spreading myself too thin.

I feel more grounded and balanced. I'm better at regulating my nervous system, my relationships are more stable, and I feel more on top of my work. Letting go of the expectation to be constantly available has helped me show up more consistently and sustainably, both for myself and for the young people I support.

BEYOND PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Looking back, I can see how much my relationship with caring work has changed. Moving beyond personal sacrifice hasn't meant caring less or never making sacrifices. It has meant learning to balance care and compassion for others with care and compassion for myself.

But finding that balance can't all sit with the individual.

We also need to be in organisations, systems and relationships that respect our boundaries and needs. Cultures that don't normalise stress or expect us to overwork and neglect ourselves, but support us when circumstances genuinely require us to give more.

We need people who notice when we're struggling and remind us, gently or with humour, to go home, take a break or take that holiday. And when stress becomes more serious, we need it to be recognised early, with access to the support that works for us.

Would you rather be supported by...



...someone who is dysregulated, frazzled, stressed, resentful and burnt out because they're giving more than they can to the job?

OR



...someone giving from a full heart, who knows how to take care of themselves as well as you?

A CHECKLIST FOR OURSELVES

When you feel yourself being pulled towards doing more, giving more or stepping beyond your role, pause and ask what might be driving it.

Small shifts can make a big difference.

1 NOTICE THE STORY YOU'RE TELLING YOURSELF

Do any of these sound familiar?

"just think about the sacrifices the people I'm working with have had to make... therefore I should too..."

"If I don't do this, what does it say about me?"

"I have a moral duty to..."

2 CHECK YOUR CUP

It's easier to give sustainably when our own cup is regularly filled.

Take a moment to reflect:



3 CHECK FOR PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE-PLEASING

Before stepping in, ask yourself:

- Am I trying to rescue someone?
- What is behind my urge to do this?
- Is this actually my role?
- Do I have the capacity?
- If it isn't my role, whose is it?
- Whose need am I responding to?
- What is actually needed right now?
- Can it wait?
- Who am I really doing this for?
- Am I slipping into being the saviour or hero?

A CHECKLIST FOR ORGANISATIONS

1 CHECK THE CULTURE

What are we normalising through the way we work?

- Do we regularly see staff eating lunch at their desks or not taking breaks?
- Are we working late or beyond our hours?
- What are our leaders modelling?
- Do our policies and handbook make clear the culture and ways of working we want to create?

2 CHECK THE SUPPORT

Do staff have the support they need when things become difficult?

- Are we clear about the reasonable adaptations we can make?
- Can staff access counselling or clinical supervision, or do we know where to signpost them?
- Is our sick leave policy fit for purpose?
- Do people know who they can speak to when they are struggling?

3 NOTICE AND ACT

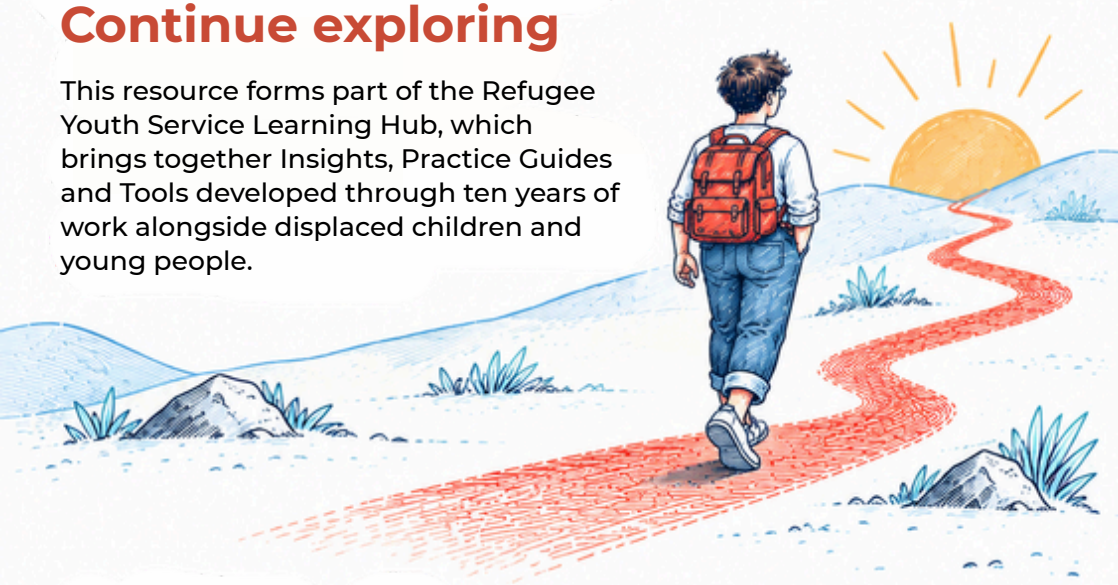
What do we do when we notice someone taking on too much?

- Can we help them reduce or reprioritise their workload?
- Can we have a compassionate conversation about what we're noticing?
- Are there signs it's affecting their work, or the people they support?
- What does the person themselves think would help, and how do they want to move forward?

THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.



INSIGHTS | PRACTICE GUIDES | TOOLS

REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

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