

Can You Pour From an Empty Cup?

Understanding Staff Burnout and Exploring Strategies for Support

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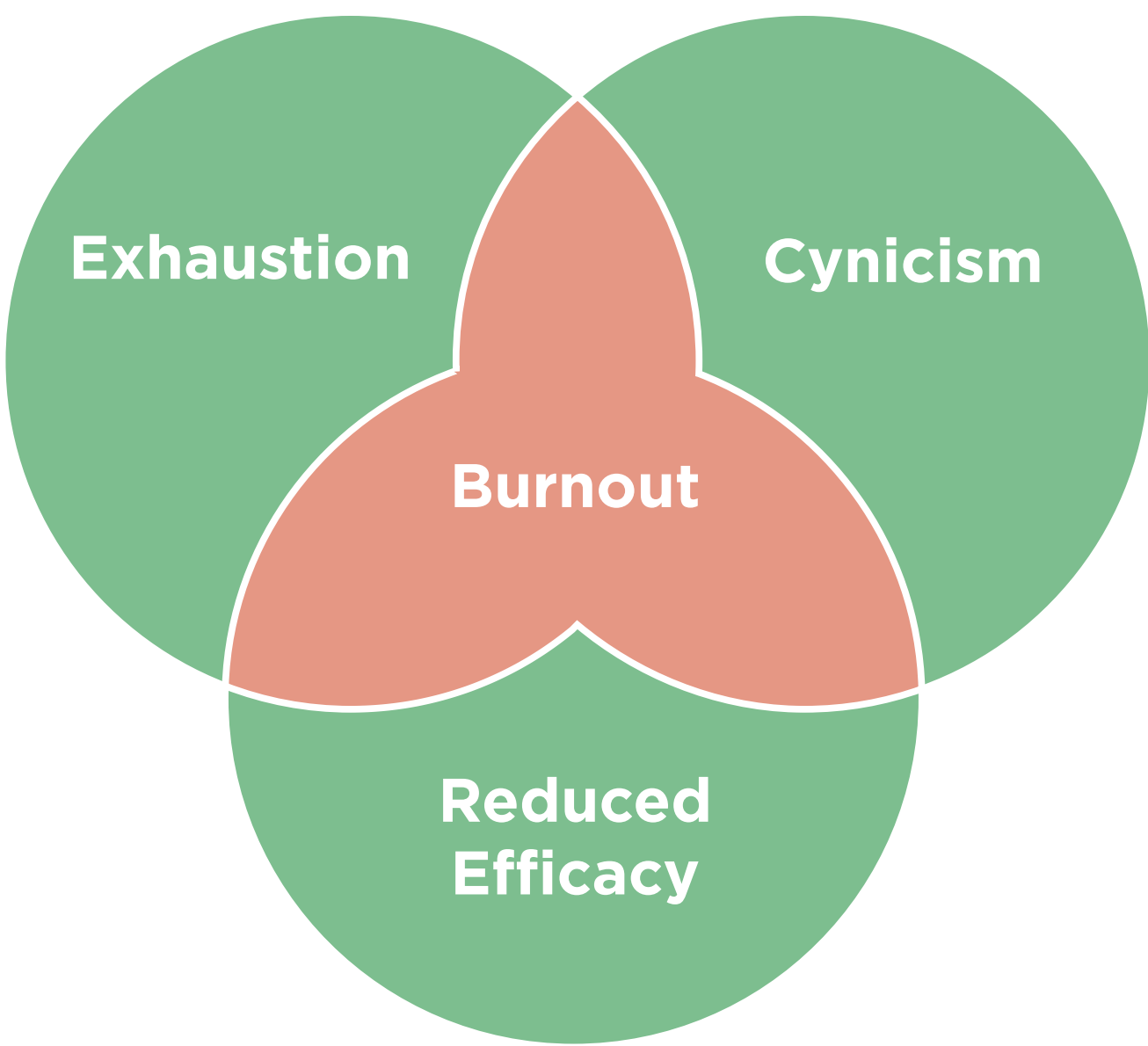
Focus solely on individual behavior without examination of systems – or the context of contributing factors – can engender a culture of fear around speaking up, and perpetuate the taboo of burnout. Treating burnout as a problem inherent to an individual leads to increased cynicism, feelings of negativity towards one’s job, or a lack of belonging – all factors that accelerate burnout. Adopting a preventive approach, with the means to recognize signs of progressing stress and/or obstacles to job satisfaction, can prevent a negative mindset from taking hold.

Defining Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one’s job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job
- Reduced professional efficacy

(World Health Organization, IDC-11)



Research by Maslach and Leiter suggests that cynicism may be more of a core part of burnout than exhaustion. Cynicism spreads quickly and is toxic. Newly hired staff members hearing only negativity from existing staff are easily absorbed into that mindset and may quickly leave the job. Longer-term employees are impacted over time as this cynicism permeates the organizational culture. Burnout, itself, is contagious, partly due to the toxic effects of cynicism.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS) are tools that can help identify worklife profiles. These profiles range on a continuum.

Burnout: most negative experience, characterized by high ratings in all three burnout dimensions

Disengaged: characterized by high cynicism only

Overextended: high exhaustion only

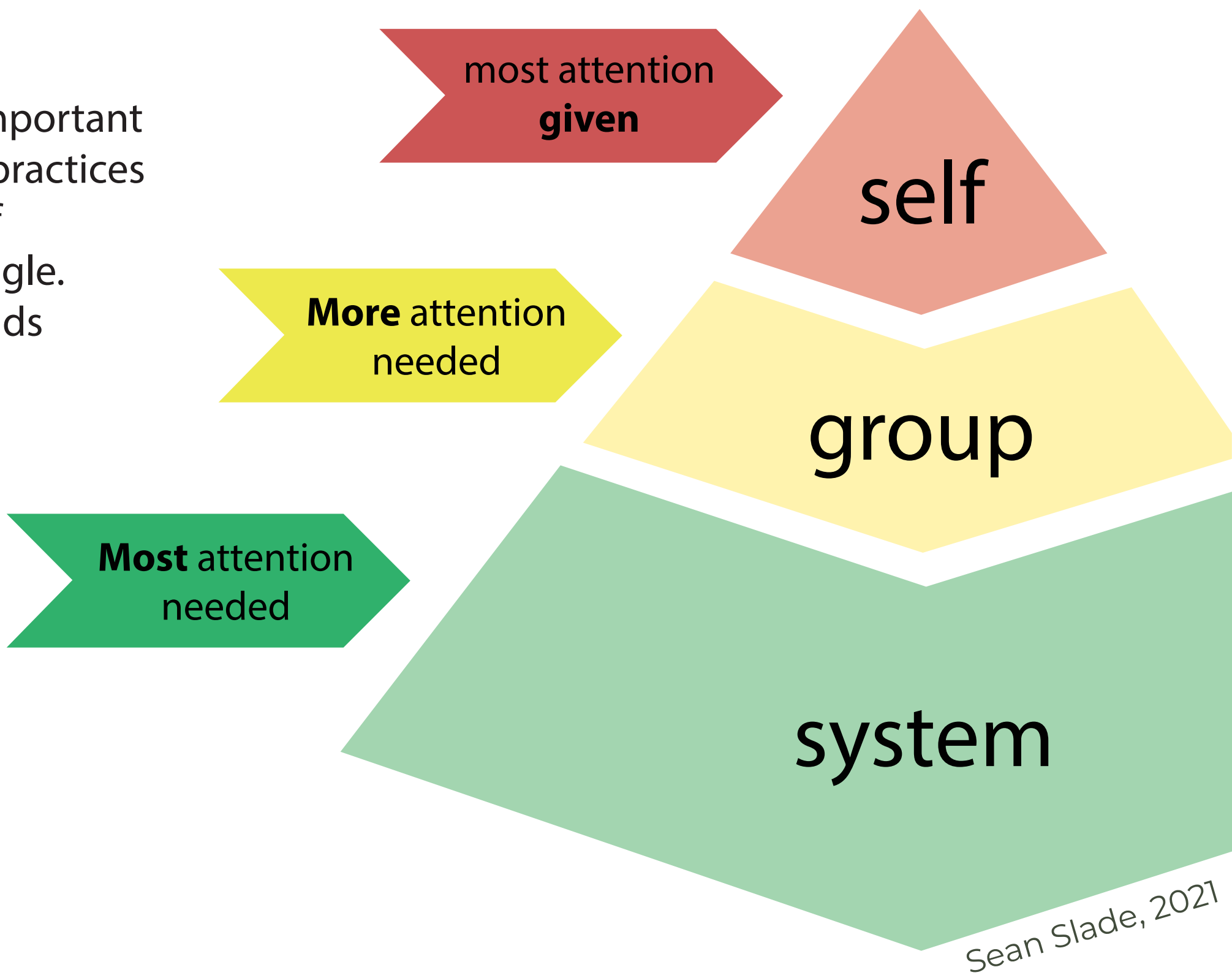
Ineffective: high inefficacy only

Engaged: most positive experience, characterized by low ratings in all dimensions

Tier 3: Self-Care

Promoting self-care and social emotional skills is important and necessary! However, recommending self-care practices as the solution, without addressing the source(s) of burnout, may increase instances of individual struggle. To support staff well-being, Green Chimneys expands its employment benefits to include:

- Access to free services supporting work performance, health and well-being
- Investment in employees’ professional development and educational advancement
- Reduced-price family programs including summer camp and preschool
- Discounts at local and nationwide retailers and service companies



Tier 2: Group-Level

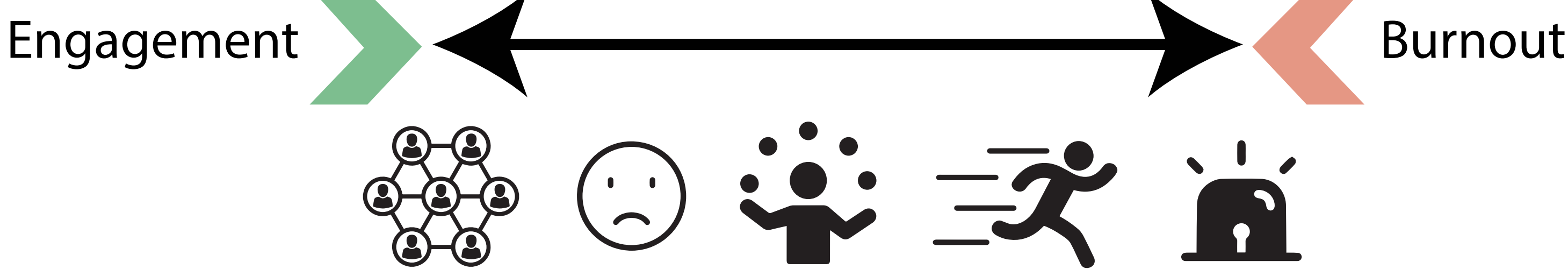
Different groups within a system may have different needs to address. Structures at the group level should provide social emotional learning support to staff, and involve workers in the process of implementing solutions to group-level issues:

- In 2024, Social Services held workshops to build staff awareness of burnout and currently maintains ongoing conversations to address job challenges and workplace barriers.
- The Education Department adopted a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model, which provides opportunities for staff to speak openly about initiatives and work collaboratively with peers.
- Residential Services has updated staff supervision forms to include regular check-ins with staff about their well-being. *See graphic “How Full is Your Cup”*

Tier 1: System-Wide

Improvements should focus most on systems, not individuals. Strong and effective universal precautions can help to create a better work environment for all and small, meaningful changes add up. They demonstrate that leadership is committed to supporting staff and collaborating to reduce obstacles to effective performance and personal satisfaction. Practices at Green Chimneys to address system-wide issues include:

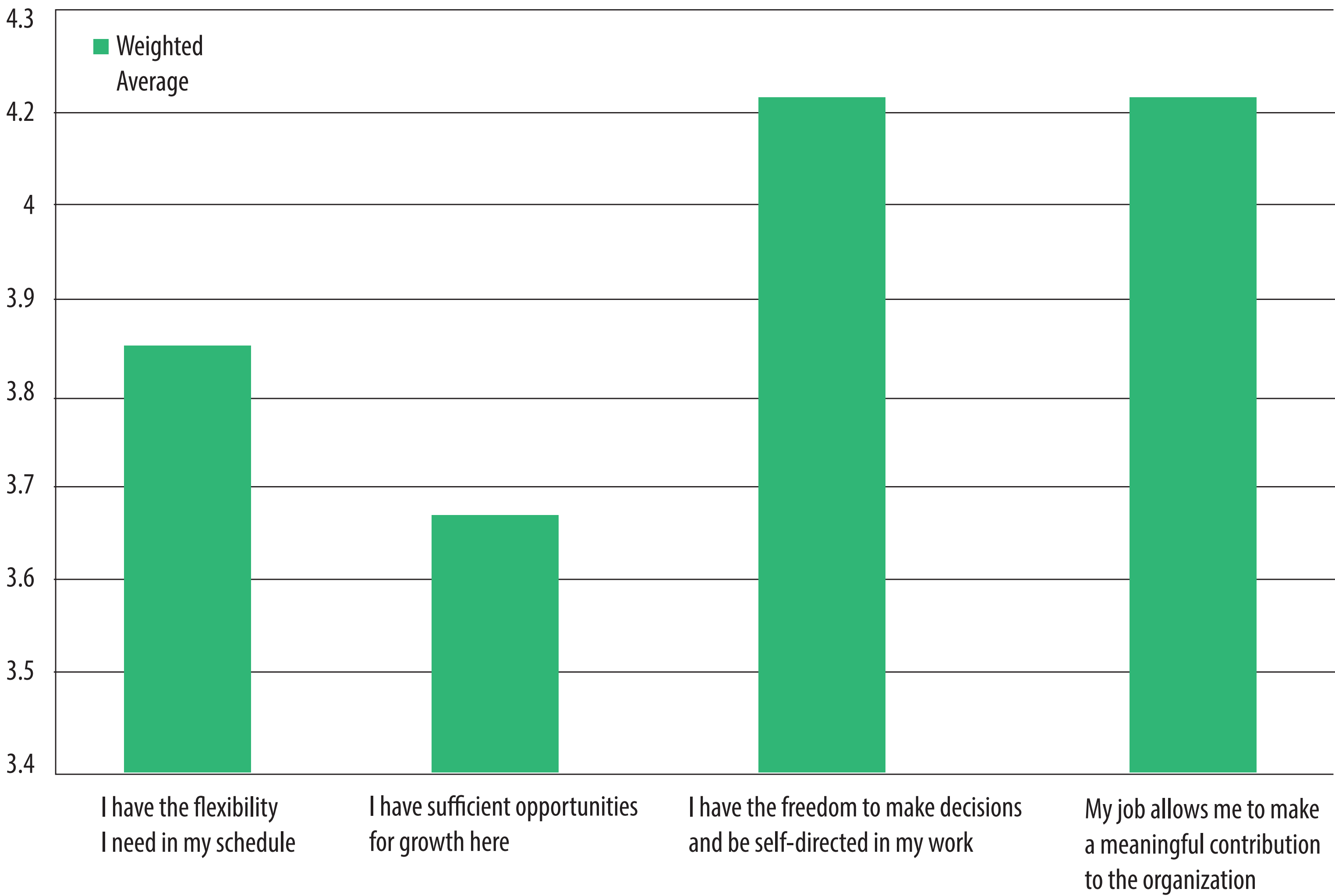
- Focus groups and topical committees to support agency initiatives and Guiding Principles
- Improvement of post-crisis response processes
- Periodic town hall meetings and staff surveys



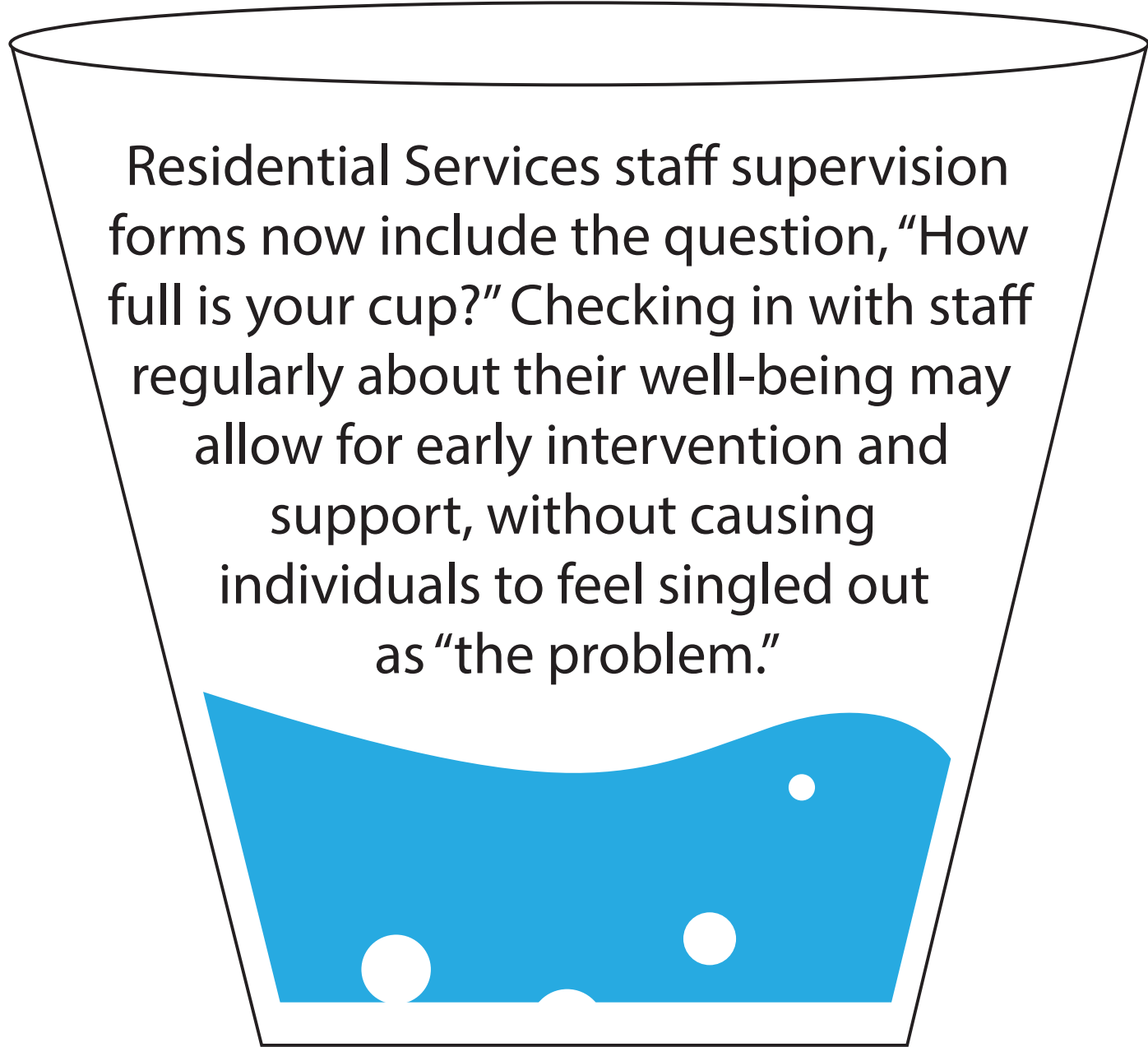
Surveying Staff

Putting in place a “fix” that does not feel supportive to the individual or group can undermine problem-solving, and often make matters worse. For example, big department or agency changes made in the “best interest” of staff, without consultation, can inadvertently send the message that staff are not capable of assisting in resolution of issues around the work they do. Even more problematic is conveying that staff cannot be trusted to be involved in decision-making, despite having to make high-risk decisions in moments of crisis.

Green Chimneys is implementing “Stay Surveys” to measure staff engagement and job satisfaction. The Residential Services department surveyed its staff in December 2024 and garnered 41 responses. Respondents rated their level of agreement with statements related to their day to day experience on a scale of 1-5. Feedback encompassed topics such as supervisory support, positive aspects of the job, barriers to performance, and retention efforts. Responses were reviewed by department and agency leadership, and are being discussed with staff in individual and group meetings.



How Full Is Your Cup?



Job Demand Control Support Model



The Job Demand Control Support model is an established theory for better understanding factors that contribute to burnout. Johnson and Hall (1988) used the JDCS model to explore the experiences of individuals working in high-demand roles that have limited control and social support. In many cases, residential care work is an example

of a high-demand, low-control, low-support role. Benveniste et al. analyze literature and conduct research with residential care workers through this lens:

“Locus of control and employees’ psychological attachment to their workplace have been theorized to be linked - whereby perceptions of organizational membership, support and care for employees can increase employees’ internal locus of control and attachment to the workplace. This in turn then leads to increased intention to stay and decreases turnover of staff. Conversely, inflexible management or strict procedures may lead to the development of an external work locus of control, while an internal locus of control may develop if an individual’s workplace autonomy is supported (Wilski et al., 2015).”

(Tessa Benveniste, Kirstie Madsen, Stephanie E Chappel & Madeline Sprajcer (06 Mar 2024): Burnout in Residential Support Workers: The Impact of Locus of Control and Perceived Supervisor Support, Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, DOI: 10.1080/0886571X.2023.2298463)

Benveniste et al. give us much to consider in regards to addressing and preventing burnout within the workplace. Their research, and review of related literature, sheds light on factors that may contribute negatively to the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy. Their findings suggest that organizations should implement practices which increase workers’ internal locus of control, such as involving staff in decision making and encouraging supportive supervisory relationships.

