

Transcript of Andy Smith interviewed by Gina Pickersgill about Appreciative Inquiry for the Healing Pool podcast.

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Note: there are some audio snippets at the start of the podcast quoting from the body of the interview – these haven't been transcribed.

Gina Pickersgill (interviewer): When we help people change, we do so by creating an environment in which that is made possible. Appreciative Inquiry is a method that allows us to do just that. Andy Smith explains the process, practice and principles of this method and how it can be used in a group and one to one leadership coaching session. Its main power is in its ability to support ownership of ideas generated between individuals to create a common goal and executable plan of action.

So, hello, everybody. Welcome to the Healing Pool podcast. I have with me here Andy Smith. Welcome Andy. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Andy Smith: Yeah, thanks Gina! Yes, I'm Andy Smith. I'm an Appreciative Inquiry consultant and facilitator based in Europe working worldwide, and also used to work as an NLP trainer and hypnotherapist and coach, and still do some corporate training in the NLP area and also emotional intelligence for leaders, but mainly Appreciative Inquiry.

Gina: It's been a long time since you know, we did any work together. You published an article with me in the Healing Pool magazine. So what have you been up to since then?

Andy: Right, well, if you remind me what year that was, because it was ages ago.

Gina: It was 2009.

Andy: Okay. Well, at that time I was living in the North West of England and primarily working as an NLP trainer. Shortly after that, the idea was that I was going to move to France and just kind of retire a bit from face to face training and coaching. And just creating all these products and writing books and so on.

That sort of didn't work out. We did move to France in 2011. So here I am in Limousin, which is right in the middle of France, it's the countryside, it's basically it's really sleepy, and it's forests and hills and lakes and low population, low crime. It's where if a civil servant in Paris really screws up, he gets reassigned to the Limousin area, apparently. But it's, in my view, the nicest part of France. It's just a lovely, slow, peaceful existence here. So that's what I'm doing.

However, when we moved here, pretty much as soon as we moved here, I started getting inquiries from agencies in Malaysia to come and do corporate training in Malaysia and Dubai and the Gulf and so on. So I'm actually doing more corporate type training then than I ever used to when I was in the UK, weirdly.

The other the other thing that's happened is I focused more and more on facilitating and training Appreciative Inquiry and kind of moved away a little bit from NLP. I still still do it, I've still got knowledge products in that area for NLP trainers and so on. But my first love these days is Appreciative Inquiry.

Gina: How have you been working with Appreciative Inquiry? Perhaps explain a little bit, first of all, what it is and how have you been working with it?

Andy: It's a method of change, which rather than working by analyzing problems and trying to find what's wrong, and in a corporate setting, probably trying to find who's to blame as well and so on, rather than that, instead, it looks for what's already working. Because in any situation, no matter how dysfunctional there'll be some things that are working a bit, at least, already. And if you do more of the things that are working, things will improve.

There's all kinds of effects or ramifications of looking at what's working rather than what's not working. I should say, by the way, that probably most of your listeners will be familiar with NLP or some other sort of therapy, personal development type methods, most of which probably a big difference between them and Appreciative Inquiry - and I really noticed this coming from an NLP background myself, they've got a lot of things in common, a lot of assumptions in common, like, you know, you've already got the resources you need. Appreciative Inquiry is got quite a bit of that philosophy in it as well - but the big difference is NLP is coming at things, looking at what's happening within the *individual*, and Appreciative Inquiry looks more at what happens .

So it's about what happens to people as a team or as a collective, rather than what happens within the individual, which makes it a really good system for group coaching and for improving things in organizational life. You can use it one to one as well, just in same ways you can use NLP with groups, but the focus of it, the starting point of it, is collective rather than individually.

It's about how we look at things, how our social reality changes, as the conversations between us change and the questions we ask each other change. So I've been working with Appreciative Inquiry facilitating management teams, for example, to improve a particular aspect of their performance or just like how do we work together better as a team? Also, for about the last 15 years I've been training people in how to use Appreciative Inquiry themselves as well.

Gina: On that note, then, what are the most important features, would you say Appreciative Inquiry has?

Andy: From a practitioner point of view, compared with – I mean NLP again is the thing I'm most familiar with, but you could also use an example something like Ericksonian hypnotherapy, for example. Most therapy methods are quite complicated, there's quite a lot to them. You know, if you're going to train people in NLP, for example, there's a huge amount of material and techniques and so on that you have to get your head round in order to be able to do it successfully, and in order to know what's the right thing to use here, if you're working with a client.

Appreciative Inquiry is actually quite a bit simpler, because it's more of a facilitation method. It doesn't rely on you having to understand what's going on in somebody's mind. Their strategy for having a problem for example, you don't have to analyze that and take it apart and understand it as fully as you would need to in NLP or, you know, psychodynamic therapy or whatever, instead, you just get people to ask each other some simple questions. The skill level required, it's - you need to have people skills, you need to be able to facilitate a group, but it's not incredibly complicated. You just get people to ask each other questions.

Typically, if there was a team of, say, eight people, you would get them to pair up and ask each other, “Tell me about one of the best experiences you’ve had in relation to -” whatever the topic of the Appreciative Inquiry process is, whatever problem you're trying to fix. You turn that into an “affirmative topic”, you think, “What do we want instead of that problem?”, and then we put “How do we...?” or “How can we...?” in front of that, and then you get them to tell each other stories about their best experiences that they've had related to that topic.

So I was called into help nursing staff at a women's prison to improve the drug dispensing regime there. Most of the people in there, certainly in this one, there was a lot of a lot of drugs involved. A lot of them were in there because they were, like, heroin addicts. And most of the rest of them were on some sort of antipsychotic or antidepressants, or there was a lot of both prescription drugs and, you know, substitutes for non-prescription drugs being dispensed there. And they couldn't just line them up and hand out the appropriate prescription to each person because some of them would take the right amounts, but other ones might save some of their stash and like sell it on to somebody else and so on. So they have to be quite closely supervised.

The drug dispensing regime took most of the day, and the nursing staff from the prison and the prison officers were two kind of pretty distinct communities. They didn't have much to do with each other, beyond communicating in like a transactional kind of way, handing people over and so on. They weren't mates. They didn't have a shared language. They didn't have a shared outlook. So the prison officers thought that the drug dispensing regime - the whole routine of the prison was being bent out of shape around having to do this drug dispensing regime. The nursing staff thought that the dispensing regime was nowhere near as good as it could have been, because it had to fit in with the routine of the prison. So they were kind of almost blaming each other about this as two separate groups.

So we got them together, representatives of prison officers, nursing staff, and as a warm up, really, I paired them off with each other: one nurse, one prison officer, and so on like that, and got them to ask each other “What's been your best experience of working here? Tell me story about one of your best experiences of working here,” and almost immediately the atmosphere in the room started to change. Because you got these quite – prison officers as a profession, they're not very emotional, they're not easily moved. There's a professional facade they have to keep up, obviously.

Some of these prison officers were telling really moving stories about how they'd helped this woman get off heroin, or how they'd helped another one when she'd been released to get to get her kids back from from the kids being in care, and so on.

So, when people are asked about - if they're asked about mistakes, failings, gaps, “How did you manage to screw this up? What went wrong there? Tell me what your greatest weaknesses are?” - they tend to clam up, they tend to be defensive, they don't want to drop themselves in it. They don't want to drop their mates in it. And they feel like they're under attack to a certain extent.

Instead, when you ask them about “What's been your best experience? What are you proud of? What have you achieved? What are your strengths? What are you really pleased that you've been part of?” - when they're talking about stuff that they like, they open up much more easily. And in fact, it's hard to get them to shut up sometimes because they love talking about it, their defenses drop, they become more open.

Rather than viewing it as a problem, and thinking of what you want to get away from and what you want to avoid, and what you want to never happen again, if you think of what I want *instead* of that, where do I want to get to? So you're bringing in that ‘towards’ motivation, rather than ‘away from’

motivation, and then put, “How can I...?” or “How do I...? in front of that ‘opposite of the problem’.

So I'm going to take a really trivial sort of corporate example. All right. So say you're really not very good at time management, for example. So traditional thinking about that would be along the lines of “Why?” “Why is my time management so awful?” Or, “How is it that I'm so useless at time management?” None of which is actually going to give you useful answers.

If it's a really trivial problem, you might find the solution to it by thinking about the problem and analyzing it, but with a complex problem, and most things in the human mind even, certainly what happens between people, are complex problems, it's more likely that the person is going to go round and round and round because if it was an easy problem to solve, they would have solved it already. Instead, you would say something like, “What do I want *instead of* that? What's the opposite of that?” Well, I want to manage my time well, so your topic would then become: “How do I manage my time well?”, or “How do I get better at managing my time?”

All of a sudden your attention is being focused in a different direction. You're not looking into the heart of the problem, you're looking outside it. You're looking for solutions. You're going to find those solutions outside of the problem, they're not inside the problem. So that's the Definition stage where you're defining your topic, which sets the frame for what you're going to inquire into.

The next stage, the Discovery stage, we're looking for - and this is another actually another parallel with NLP, where in NLP, we're not looking at average performance. We're looking at people who are exceptionally good at doing things we're looking for. Yeah, peak exceptions. In Appreciative Inquiry, we're also not looking at average performance. We're looking at the times when things go really, really well, because that's where the gold is: the stuff that would, if you were doing like a statistical benchmarking, comparing your company to somebody else, comparing somebody's mental health to the average, you're going to get the occasional sort of outlier where things are exceptionally good. These tend to get dismissed in traditional methods as ‘statistical noise’. NLP is interested in those exceptions. Appreciative Inquiry is also interested in those exceptions, because that's where you can learn from, about improving things.

So in the Discovery stage, you're looking for whatever is already working, and what's worked in the past. So we're taking a realistic look at the situation, but we're not looking at the stuff that's not working, we're not looking at the problems. We're looking at stuff which is very often neglected or thought of as not important. We're looking at when things *do* work, and when they work exceptionally well. So this is what those questions in the Discovery stage are designed to bring out.

“So tell me about a time when you had a really good experience of (whatever it is that we're looking at).” We're not looking for bullet points, we're not looking for any sort of detached analysis, we're looking for a *story*. As the person tells the story, you will know when you're doing (and this is what I always say, actually, to the groups even that I facilitate, and certainly the ones that I train), you'll know when you're doing a good interview, because you'll see the person telling the story start to relive that experience, and start to feel the same emotions that they had back then. In NLP terms they're associating back into that experience, which as we know, gives you a lot more information. It gives you a much richer experience. If you can associate into it, you remember a lot more, you notice a lot more. So they tell that story. Ideally, they go back there and they actually - in fact, you'll know when you're doing a *really* good interview if you as the interviewer also start to feel some of that same positive emotion, through rapport or emotional resonance.

So now both of you, especially the person being interviewed, are on a bit of a high, probably remembering a lot of good stuff that you'd forgotten about. Because when we just face problem

after problem after problem, we can forget how good we are. We just think in terms of the problems, we think “Ah, I’m not really handling this very well”, forgetting about all the times when you did handle things pretty good, and a few times when you handled things exceptionally well.

The next thing you might ask is, “Okay, what's important to you about this experience?” This is, as you know, getting their values (or some of them), reconnecting with their values, reconnecting with their motivations. There's been some research done which tends to show that people are more resilient when they reconnect with their values. They can recover from things quicker, they handle stuff better, their energy levels are higher and so on. So you get those.

In a corporate setting, I would also get them to ask each other, “What conditions were in place that made this successful experience, or this exceptional experience, possible?” Was it teamwork, was it leadership, was it access to budgets, what was it? Was it the physical environment?” So you get them to identify the conditions that enabled the success to happen. If you can put more of those conditions in place, you're going to get better results more often.

And then finally, typically, your last question whether interviewing each other like that will be, “OK, if you had one wish, or maybe three wishes for yourself or your team, or the organization as a whole, in relation to this topic, what would that be?”

So you're kind of bridging to the future, you're bridging to the next stage. So now, from a collection of individuals, even if they're nominally a team, they might still be sort of very much in their own heads and not talking the shared language most of the time at work, you've now got people communicating with each other better, more effectively, they like their colleagues more and actually, if you can bring people together from different roles and different levels in the organization or even outside, if you bring in customers as well, they've got more of an understanding of each other's worldviews as well. So if you've got the boss interviewing a new recruit, and vice versa, they're both they're each going to understand more of how each other sees the world so that their maps of the world start intersecting and enriching each other, as well.

Next stage will be the Dream stage, where it's like, “In an ideal world, what would we want to happen in relation to this topic?” If we were just talking about, you know, our topic was “how do we communicate better with each other as a team? How do we work together more effectively?” You ask “What would that be like in an ideal world?”

So we're not asking, “How do we practically get there?” We're not asking, “Is it possible? Is it feasible? Is it realistic?” We're setting a direction. We're thinking ideal world - because even if you only ever get half of the way there, that's still a 50% improvement on where you started from - and to stop them from or rescue them from thinking too logically about it and bringing in constraints of what they think is realistic. And anyone who's worked with NLP or even hypnosis as a therapist will know that you can accomplish a lot more than probably the typical client thinks is possible. Because, you know, especially if they've been through other less effective methods of trying to sort things out in the past, and it hasn't really helped them very much, they may be expecting to improve things by like 10%. And actually, if they get rid of their phobia completely, like “Well, I didn't realize that was possible!” and they almost have to have it proved to them that the phobia is gone to get people out of that kind of self limiting thinking.

Typically, in the Dream stage, we would get people to collaborate on some sort of artwork. Rather than like a logically argued document or set of bullet points or set of figures, we're getting them to collaborate on some sort of collage, theatrical skit, balloon sculpture, plasticine, Lego!

We've had almost every conceivable form of artistic expression in the past on these groups that I've run, depending on the kind of skills that people have had. You know, there was a piano in the room one time and this guy just made a song up on the spot, there was a DJ with some sort of, like mixing software on his iPad and somebody else who could rap and they just sort of, like did a bit of scratching and stuff and made up a rap on the spot. There's all sorts of stuff going on. They do have fun, they do have fun, and I have fun as well watching it as well. And it's great from a practitioner or facilitator point of view because you don't have to sort of go in and do the hard work of analyzing problems for them, you just get them to talk to each other and have these positive conversations in a slightly structured way. And they come up with ideas themselves.

So they've set out this vision and they, after another probably 40 minutes it might take them to create this - whatever it is. And probably they'll have been building into their visual representation metaphors that have occurred to them while they've been talking about what they'd like to see in the ideal world. So if it's just like one team, one small team, they present it to me. If it was a larger team, you might have them in two or three tables of six or eight people and they would present it to the other tables. It's a very scalable process. You could have 100 people or 150 people in the same room, and they would essentially be doing similar things. So you just have like a series of tables.

So they're now they're now in this really creative frame of mind. They've been thinking about what they want in the future. And they're now psychologically primed to come up with the next stage, which is the Design stage. The Design stage really is about "How can we make some of this happening reality?" Or maybe all of it happen in reality? What ideas do you have? What options, what could you do for actually bringing this dream into reality or getting closer to the dream. So this is where people's creative ideas come up. And it could be just about doing one little thing differently. It could be about redesigning the whole organization. It depends on the scope of the challenge that you're looking at dealing with.

They've psychologically prime themselves to be really good at coming up with these creative ideas. Because as soon as you've envisaged where you want to be, part of your mind, the part of your mind that solves problems and decides what to do, will start thinking of ways to get there. People will come up with loads and loads of ideas, and they're not committed at this point to doing any of them, so you know, crazy ideas. And I think somewhere in one of his books, either Richard Bandler, or John Grinder, probably Bandler I suspect, would say, "I want you to make one of these ways, at least one of these options, as crazy as possible, or come up with the most outrageous thing you could do" just to get people started. They're not committing to doing it, it's just to get them to feel that it's possible. So I might chuck some of that in there as well.

So now they've got whole field of ideas to choose from, all these ideas swirling around, and they share them with each other and that will probably spark of other ideas. So they come up with things as a group which they would never have come up with individually. So something greater than the sum of the parts emerges.

And then finally, the last stage is traditionally in Appreciative Inquiry called "Destiny". It's often actually called "Delivery" these days because it's easier for corporate clients, business-type clients to get their heads around. It sounds more 'real world' than "Destiny". But, you know, probably probably your listeners would like "Destiny" as well, they'd be open to that. And that is about, "Okay, what are we actually going to do? Who's going to do it? When are we going to do it by?"

So as you get around that 4D cycle, or 5D cycle, the closer you get to Destiny, the closer you get to normal action planning, really. But the thing is, you don't actually know where it's going to lead when you start. So for the team leader, or for the boss of the organization that's commissioning

Appreciative Inquiry, it's a bit of a leap of faith. They have to be prepared to trust their people a bit, at least.

It wouldn't work in a complete rule bound 'command and control' rigid hierarchy organization, because you don't know what ideas they're going to come up with. It works great in situations where there's no best practice for problems that people have never faced before, where the situation is fluid and you don't have this leader with this amazing vision that knows exactly where they want to get to. Because not all leaders are like that, and not all situations lend themselves to it. Sometimes nobody, including the big boss, including the management consultants they draft in, actually knows what's going on. They're having to make it up as they go along, almost. So in that kind of situation, you need some sort of process where coming up with a grand strategy and the grand plan probably won't work because you don't know all of the unknowns that you're dealing with. All you can do is involve people in coming up with ideas, trying things out. Some of them are going to work, some of them are going to fail. Drop the ones that fail, keep and build on and do more of the ones that work. That's what Appreciative Inquiry is about really.

And also in the Delivery stage, we'd be saying "How we going to learn from what we're doing? How do we know if we've succeeded?" - all that kind of stuff. Go around the 5D cycle again, to review what you've done in the Discovery stage, look at what's worked, and in the Dream stage, "Okay, how do we need to tweak this vision of the future to take account of what we've discovered?" and so on. You can go around as many times as you like

Gina: Also the added value of the people owning their own ideas.

Andy: Absolutely, yeah. And you don't have to 'sell' your change strategy to people because it's already theirs, they've been involved in it. That's one side of it. So that makes it quite attractive from the change agent point of view.

The other side of it is that your change is actually likely to be more realistic than if somebody at the top or some outside management consultant had just come up with it. Because you only get one view of the truth from where you're standing. One of the big features of Appreciative Inquiry is that you want to involve as many diverse voices from people with different viewpoints as possible. You know, you've probably come across – maybe, I don't know, if, like me, you used to work in the corporate world at one time, you may have seen loads and loads of change initiatives, which actually ended up not working, because a) people weren't ever feeling really involved with it, but b) they would fail because of stuff that the people actually on the front line actually doing the work, they could have told you it would have failed, because of stuff they know that the big bosses didn't know, that nobody actually got around to asking them. In Appreciative Inquiry, that's built in from the start. Yeah, so you actually end up with more robust and more realistic plans for change in the end.

Gina: What creates a good AI practitioner?

Andy: You have to understand the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. You have to realize that a lot of the realities that we deal with in the corporate world aren't physical things. They're what's called 'social facts'. In other words, things that are true because everyone believes that they're true. An example of a social fact that your listeners will probably be familiar with: the idea of Bitcoin, right? Which few years ago was worth, like nothing. And now it's worth, I don't know what it is, \$14,000 or something, I think it was at its high, and it's come down a bit, but it may go up again. So basically it's worth whatever people think it's worth. And if loads of people think it's worth a lot, the price goes up. Actually, all money is like that. That's how all money works. So it's not just the physical piece of paper. It's not the physical coin. It's this thing which is worth something as long as the shopkeeper also believes that it's worth something. If you've ever been up to Scotland and come

back with a Scottish pound note in your pocket and you try and buy something in the shop in London. "I'm not accepting that!" goes the shopkeeper. It's legal tender, I believe they're *supposed* to accept it. But if they don't, then it's actually not worth anything until you go back to Scotland and spend it, or maybe a bank has to accept it, but it's only worth what people think it is.

Or another real current example is social status - you know, Harry and Megan have just sort of stepped back from being royals - the royal family and their social status. They have that social status because everyone believes that they have that social status. If everyone in the UK became a republican tomorrow, they would just be like another family.

A lot of the realities that we deal with in organizations when we're trying to bring about change within those organizations are social facts. So if people start thinking about them in a different way, if they look at different things, if instead of focusing on problems, they start looking at what's working... very quickly the reality that we're looking at, which seems to determine what's possible, and what isn't, the constraints and so on, some of those will melt away, because they were only social facts. They weren't physical constraints. You know, "We couldn't do that, the unions would never stand for it" or something. If the unions did change their view, because they were actually genuinely involved in having input to what the changes are, then all of a sudden, they may become more accommodating, and new things become possible. So yeah, realizing that a lot of what we deal with is social facts. The power of looking at what's working rather than what isn't working.

Actually, yeah, here's the thing, a principle which isn't explicitly talked about in NLP (or not, as far as I've seen anyway) but appears really obvious once you realize it, which is this: traditional methods of change have involved looking at things from the outside, treating organizations or, almost, people's mental strategies as like machines. So, you know, a team in the organization is like a subsystem, and each individual person might be like a cog in the machine. And if something goes wrong, you might need to replace a cog, you know, fire that person, bring in somebody new to do that job, or just like reconfigure a bit how the machine is working. That kind of mechanistic way of looking at things works very well - or used to work very well in command and control systems when things didn't change very much. When you had rigid hierarchies, when people had a job for life.

Now it doesn't work like that. Because things change very rapidly, people may have to be really flexible, and organizations and the way we work together may need to reconfigure themselves really rapidly to just accomplish a particular project. And then the team dissipates and other new teams kind of re-form. So instead, we can look at organizations and societies as living organisms. So they're alive and they can change and they can adapt.

Looking at change in that way, you can't do the traditional sort of, "Okay, I'm going to diagnose what the problem is. I'm going to prescribe a remedy." This is the traditional management consultant, for example, "Let's bring them in, let's analyze what's going on. They'll come up with some remedy, we'll put that into effect." Probably the management consultant is thousands of miles away on another continent with another client by the time the effects of that remedy come through.

The thing is, people aren't machines. So you can't actually study them without affecting what you're studying. As soon as you start asking questions, that's going to direct people's attention in a particular direction in order to be able to answer that question. I'll give you an example. Imagine you are running a company and people have been reporting, "Actually, there's quite a lot of stress in this company, people are going off sick with stress" and so on. You might think, "Okay, well, we'll do something about this. We'll find out how much stress people are actually suffering. We'll do a stress audit, we'll get some consultants in." And everyone in the company has to fill in this long

questionnaire about “What's the most stressful time of day for you? Which aspects of your work stress you the most? Which of your colleagues do you find most stressful to deal with?”

Those kind of questions, right? By the end of that, even the most happy go lucky, easygoing person will probably be thinking, “Actually, you know, I *am* a bit stressed.”

You can't ask questions in that way of people without changing the way they think, or at least, where they put their attention. So you're updating their internal representation, their ‘map of the world’, as soon as you start asking questions. Or at the very least, you're shining a light on bits of the map that they maybe weren't looking at before. So if you ask questions, you've already made an intervention.

David Cooperrider, really the originator of Appreciative Inquiry, the guy who more than anyone else has established this as method, he says something like, “The really important thing about the questions we ask each other is not so much, “What information do we get?” It's “What's the effect of those questions on our relationship with each other?” Because there's that going on as well. The effect of realizing this - that ‘the inquiry is the intervention’, or the intervention starts with the inquiry (his is known as the ‘Simultaneity Principle’ in Appreciative Inquiry) - the effect of it is that change can happen very rapidly, because if people start talking to each other in different ways, having different conversations about possibilities and strengths, and what they're proud of, and what they've achieved, and so on, they start seeing the world in a different way. The world actually looks and feels differently to them because they're looking for different information.

You know, of course, that we filter out loads of the sensory input that we get through our mental filters, and what we're interested in, and so on. If we've got a ‘problem filter’ on, we're going to see loads and loads and loads of problems. And as soon as we've solved one problem, another one will come along. In a complex system, the attempt to fix a problem can sometimes cause other little problems in the system as a knock on effect somewhere else. Sometimes, things end up worse than before you tried to fix it. As soon as you start asking questions, that's also the beginning of the change.

Really, it wasn't until I'd done a sort of short training and Appreciative Inquiry with one of the leading Appreciative Inquiry practitioners in the UK - I couldn't really... I could see, you know, oh, yeah, this is a great method. And I can see from these videos that they're playing us how it's worked in companies in America, not sure how I would actually work with it myself to use this.

But once I had been called into assist on a program - an Appreciative Inquiry summit, as it's called, where you get the whole organization in the room, senior management, middle management, frontline practitioners, and in fact, this was a local authority, I think service users as well, all having a structured conversation about where are we now, where do we want to get to, how can we make things better - *without* it turning into a whingefest. I could feel the energy in the room changing, I could see people getting more animated. I could see all these ideas that they were coming up with. You have to experience it to see how it works, and to be able to make it possible. So I'm big believer in experiential learning.

Gina: What can you tell our listeners about how to live more resiliently?

Andy: Whoa, okay, um, how to live more resiliently. Well, I already mentioned reconnecting with your values, because there have been some studies that have actually shown that people are more resilient when they are aware of and in touch with their values. So what people could do is: think about and write down what's important to you, what's important to you about living or perhaps more contextually, what's important to you about your career, for example, or what's important to you

about relationships, or what's important to you about health and fitness, whatever it is they want to be more resilient in the area of. I

If they're not a hundred percent sure what's important to them, then maybe Appreciative Inquiry, taking a proactive approach could actually help with that little bit. They could think about what have been the real best times in my life.: times when I felt really alive, really engaged, really like I knew what I was doing. Those will give the person some pointers to what is important to them, and kind of reconnect with their own vitality. It's always going to be easier - actually, you could do this on paper, you could do you could ask yourself the question and then perhaps write about it. I think it's going to have more energy to it and bring it alive more if *somebody else* asked you that question, if you're actually being asked that question by a live human being, because you're going to take it more seriously.

Something that's been emerging for me a lot recently is most of the Western tradition of personal development, self improvement, and so on - and this is true of NLP as well - being very, very individualistic. It's all about what happens within you, how you individually can be more resilient, how to cope with, you know, whatever life throws at you. Yeah, the whole kind of Western worldview really is very individualistic, and not so collective. But actually we are social animals, and we are more influenced by people around us than we perhaps think, or have been educated to think.

When I used to work as a therapist doing NLP and hypnotherapy one to one with clients, some of the interventions, most of the interventions actually, work. Sometimes they were a real sort of struggle, and you know, that may have been aiming to do the wrong thing with them. Maybe I've misread the situation, or maybe it was just that their strategy for having the problem was more complicated than I thought it was. Or maybe I hadn't achieved as much rapport with them as would have been ideal. Some clients are more hard work than others, you know this, right. Whereas when I used to do demos as an NLP trainer, the demos of a particular technique almost always worked. And I think that was largely because of the social expectation.

It's a bit like stage hypnosis. You know, where the volunteer for the stage hypnosis show may not believe in hypnosis when they get up there, but nevertheless all these people are looking at them and here's the hypnotist asking them to do something, or suggesting that they do something, and "Ooh, better go along with it because otherwise they might make you do something really humiliating, what if there is something in it, oooh..."

Our social expectations make a big difference to outcomes, I think. We don't exist in vacuum, we exist in relation to other people. This is why solitary confinement is one of the worst punishments that they can inflict on you if you're imprisoned, because we need that contact with other people, most of us do anyway. Okay, we can do without it for a certain length of time, but sooner or later, we're going to need that contact with other people just to maintain our footing in social reality, but also to get support and resources and intellectual stimulation and emotional connection with other people.

Appreciative Inquiry is almost like a technology or a process for helping us to reconnect with people and tap into some of that being in relation and resources and connection with other people. So my big tip for resilience (I bet you thought I'd forgotten about that), and looping back to resilience, yeah, connect with other people. Get that connection with other people. Because everyone needs it to a greater or lesser extent.

Actually, yeah, I'm gonna I'm gonna drop in a little bit of neuroscience here as well. A tiny, tiny, tiny little bit, because I'm not a neuroscience boffin myself, but recently, I've come across some

research. In recent years, they've identified two different neural networks within our brains, I guess our bodies as well, which they've christened the 'Task Positive Network' and the 'Default Mode Network'. The idea of the Task Positive Network is, it's the network that lights up when you are focused on a task, when you have to get something done, when you've got a deadline, and ideally, anyway, you tend to get these blinkers where you're really focused on the task, and everything that doesn't help you focus on the task becomes like an irrelevance. The downside of it is that we tend to be focused on the task rather than relationships, so we tend to start evaluating other people as "Are they going to help me to get this thing done? Or are they just a distraction or a block or a nuisance to be got rid of or used or overcome?" So that's Task Positive Network, okay? So it's very much like, get things done. Use other people as like resources or pawns on the board kind of thing almost.

In that mode, unfortunately, people are not very open to new ideas, they're not very trusting of other people. They're all about "Get it done, get it done, get it done."

The other network called the Default Mode Network, I think because they thought, "Well, you know, if they're not in this Task Positive Network, this is this is the one that they're in the rest of the time. It's more open, a bit more kind of dreamy, more focused on relationships than achieving tasks. But also, it's a better state to be in to come up with new ideas and creative ideas and be open to ideas from other people. So if you are dealing with a problem or challenge that you've never faced before, and there's no established best practice for it... If there was best practice for it, fine, follow the best practice, go into task positive mode. And, you know, just go through the steps and get it done. If you're in a situation where really you've never encountered it before, you're going to need some different creative thinking to come up with solutions to it. And you're going to need a bunch of people to get together and help each other to come up with ideas and spark off each other. You need that Default Mode Network. First, you need to go into that, so they can establish rapport with each other and relate to each other and also be open to each other's ideas and build on them. Then you can go into the Task Positive Mode later/

Appreciative Inquiry is a really good way - going through the steps of the appreciative interview, for example, is a really good way of lighting up that Default Mode Network. By the way, the networks suppress each other. So when you're in one, it sort of shuts down the other one and vice versa. So you would want to spark up the one that you need at the appropriate time, and then move into the other one when you don't. What we haven't had so reliably is ways of getting into the Default Mode Network where we're more open to relating to other people, we're open to new ideas, we're more creative, and so on. So Appreciative Inquiry gives you quite a nice sequence of steps or a strategy for getting into that state, not just individually, but collectively.

We feel more resilient if we feel like there's a team of people around us - supporting us, wishing us well, actually offering practical help when we need it, rather than having to face everything by yourself.

You could actually run a little Appreciative Inquiry process about "How do we become more resilient?" And if people tell stories about times when they've successfully coped with challenges, when they've bounced back from things, when they've kept going, even though things are really tough or stressful, or, you know, they've had huge amounts of work to do, we're going to identify some conditions in there which actually made that possible. And if we identify those conditions, we can put them in place so that next time something like that happens, we will actually be more resilient.

The questions in appreciative interviews are readily available out there on the web, certainly on my website - coachingleaders.co.uk is my website for Appreciative Inquiry and leadership coaching, emotional intelligence and all that but principally Appreciative Inquiry. There's loads and

loads and loads of blog articles on there. If anyone from with an NLP background was intrigued by when I mentioned earlier on knowledge products for NLP trainers, they can have a look at the practical NLP podcast website nlppod.com, where there's a lot of episodes of the NLP podcast and also a link to my web store where they can buy exercise packs and ready made NLP practitioner manuals that they can rebrand and edit and alter and add stuff in or take stuff out as they want.

Gina: Thank you for your time, Andy. It's been wonderful to hear about your work and thank you for coming.