

Beyond “Difficult”

Keeping the Reflection Going

Co-facilitated by Mary Coughlin and Mia Malcolm

OUR CONTINUING QUESTION

Knowing what I know now, how will I show up differently?

AN INVITATION

Whether you joined us for Beyond “Difficult”: Understanding What Families Carry into Healthcare or were unable to attend, the reflection can continue.

Our work is not about finding perfect words or finished answers. It is an invitation to slow down, notice the stories we create about families, become curious about what we do not know, examine what we bring into an encounter, and consider what accountability asks of us when intention and impact do not align.

Choose one or two prompts to carry with you. You do not need to answer them all. Let the questions that create curiosity—or productive discomfort—stay with you.

1 | SEE

Notice the story

REFLECT What happens inside me when I hear a family described as “difficult”? What story begins to form before I have even met them?

REFLECT Whose version of the story tends to become the “official” story in our setting? Who has the power to create that story, challenge it, or change it?

2 | WONDER

Make room for what is unknown

REFLECT What might this family be carrying that I cannot see or do not yet understand?

REFLECT What might the behavior I find challenging be communicating, protecting, or responding to?

3 | EXAMINE

Turn the lens toward ourselves

REFLECT How might my own identity, experiences, stress, bias, urgency, or institutional role influence what I notice—and how I interpret it?

REFLECT Would I interpret the same behavior in the same way if it came from someone with a different relationship to race, culture, socioeconomic status, education, language, gender identity, profession, or institutional power?

4 | RESPOND

Let curiosity shape what happens next

REFLECT Where might curiosity change the trajectory of an encounter? What could I ask instead of assume?

REFLECT What words or questions might open a relationship rather than close it?

5 | REPAIR

Let impact matter

REFLECT When someone tells me that my words or actions caused harm, what happens inside me first? Do I become curious—or feel the need to explain my intention?

REFLECT Where might repair be needed—a relationship, interaction, team habit, label, or story? What might acknowledgment and a different next step look like?

6 | ACT

Move reflection toward accountable action

REFLECT What forms of harm might occur in healthcare that never appear in an incident report? What would it mean for our teams to make relational, emotional, psychological, cultural, spiritual, or existential harm more visible?

REFLECT What is one thing I am willing to do differently—a phrase I will replace, a question I will begin asking, a story I will interrupt, a conversation I will start, or a practice my team needs to examine?

A DISTINCTION WORTH HOLDING

We will never know everything another person carries. And families do not owe us their stories. Our responsibility is not to become experts in someone else’s experience, but to create relational conditions in which dignity, trust, voice, choice, and partnership have a greater chance to emerge.

KEEP THE EXCHANGE GOING

If you are continuing this conversation with colleagues, choose one prompt rather than trying to solve everything at once. Listen for what becomes visible when the goal is not to defend intention or reach agreement, but to understand impact and decide what accountable action might look like next.

COME UNFINISHED. STAY CURIOUS. REMAIN ACCOUNTABLE.