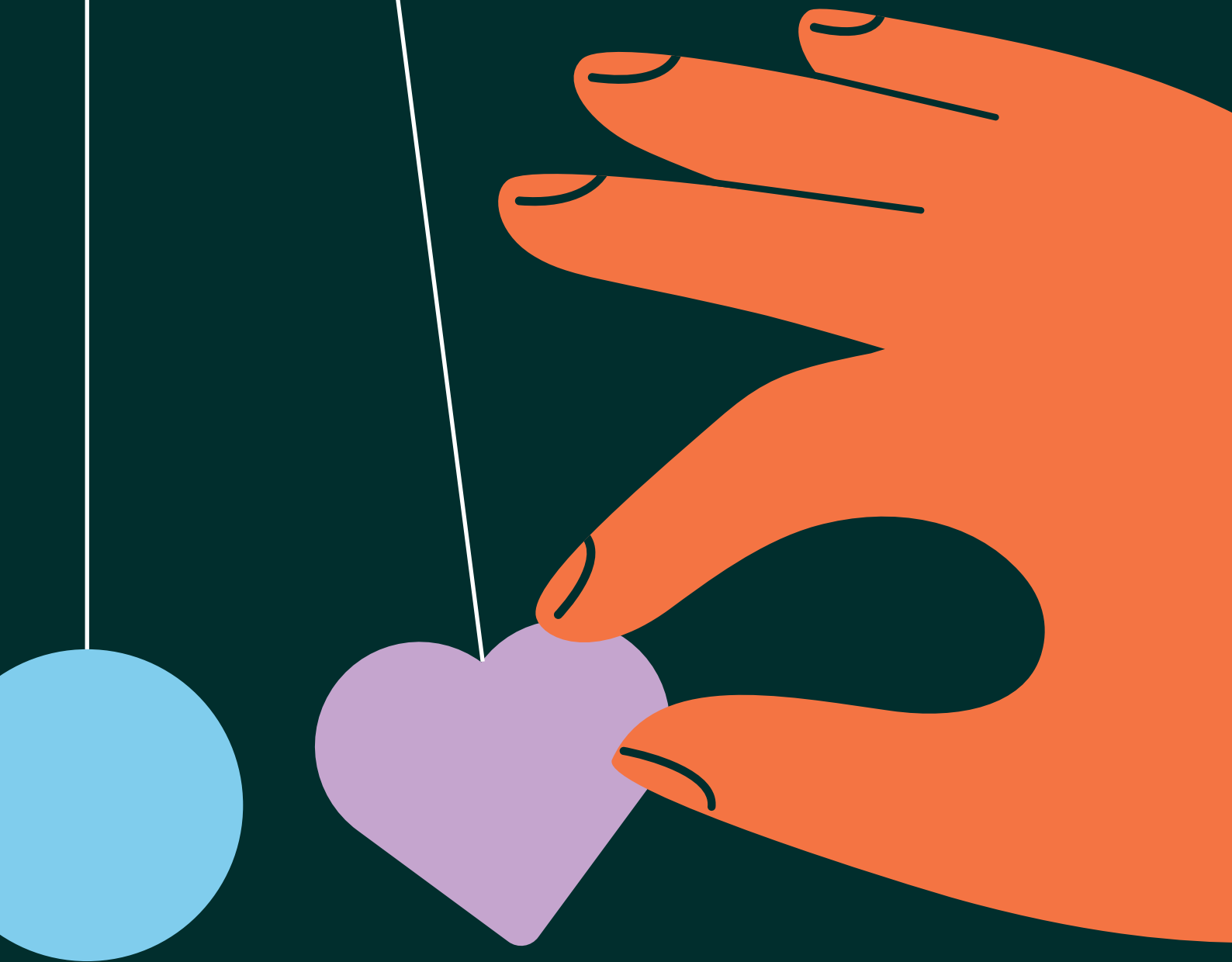


# Compassion at Work



A Conversation with  
Kevin Figueiredo on Ego,  
Empathy, and Building  
Relational Resilience

Kevin Figueiredo has always had a capacity for seeing people beyond their roles. I'd witnessed this in our many conversations over the years. So, as I embarked on new research into the role of compassion in building relational resilience, it felt only natural to ask if him if we could speak. Call it a hunch!

Relational resilience, as I'm exploring it, isn't just about how individuals bounce back; it's about how people and teams hold and support one another through pressure, change, and uncertainty. Compassion—towards self and others—emerges as a foundational element of that.

So, I reached out to Kevin and asked: "Do you want to have an interview with me on this?"

His reply was immediate: "Delighted to!"

What followed was a raw and layered conversation—about self-awareness, trauma, listening, ego, and what happens when leaders move beyond theory and into practice.

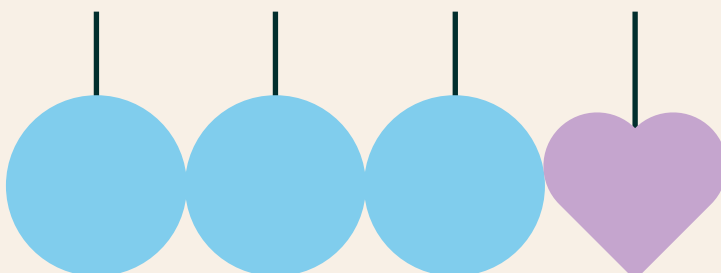
**"The question that started it for me was, have you ever stopped to think about the way you think?"**

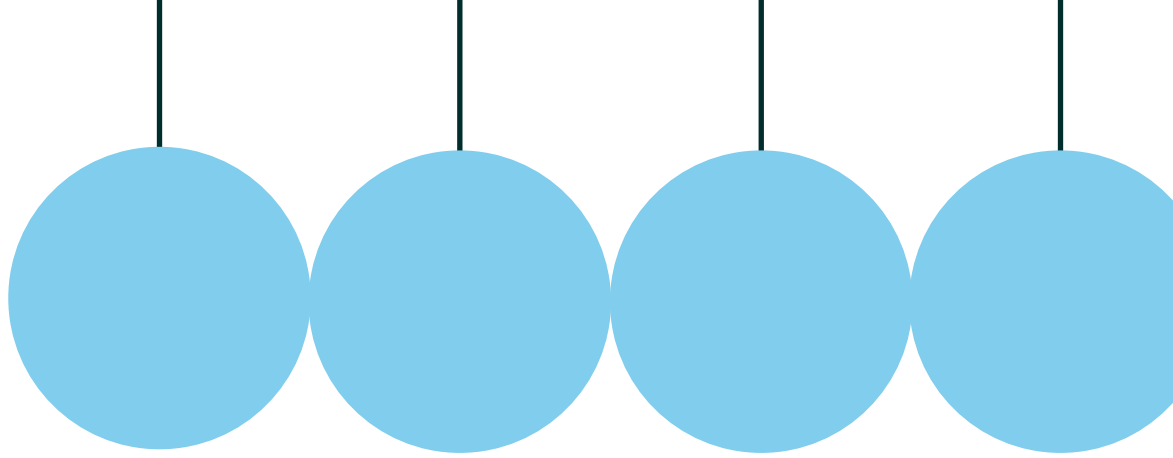
## **The First Question: Thinking About Thinking**

Before Kevin ever arrived at compassion, he explained that he first had to wrestle with something subtler: his own patterns of thinking. "The question that started it for me was, have you ever stopped to think about the way you think?"

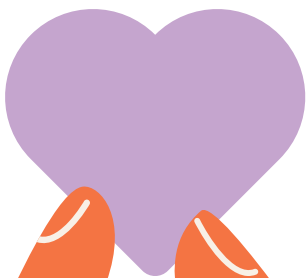
That question, from a programme called MindSense, launched him into a years-long process of inquiry and development. He described working with a four-part model: sense of self, emotional states, behaviours, and outcomes.

"The part most people don't look at," he said, "is how our emotional state erodes our sense of self. And if that's under strain, we don't act. And we don't get results." That's where Kevin sees the bridge to self-compassion. "If you're stuck in frustration or arrogance or fear, you're not going to practise compassion. You're going to stay in defence. Compassion starts with emotional awareness. It's a shift in consciousness."





**“I’ve come to believe one of the greatest gifts another human being can give you is to tell you how they feel.”**



## **When Empathy Goes Too Far**

Kevin’s honesty about his earlier views was striking.

“I used to wonder, what are Australians even complaining about? I grew up in India and the Middle East. My parents were refugees. Let me show you what hardship looks like.” That mindset - comparing suffering - he now sees as ego-driven. “I was using my trauma to discount others’ pain. I had no empathy.” But when his team gave him feedback and challenged him to work on this, he swung in the other direction. “I practised empathy so hard that I over-identified with others. I couldn’t detach. Even when people were hurting others, I’d still be thinking, I wonder what they’re going through.”

This inability to hold boundaries, particularly in emotionally intense contexts such as with mental health issues, led him into what he now recognises as vicarious trauma. “I had the empathy. But I didn’t yet understand compassion.”

## **Doing, Not Saying**

Everything changed though, when Kevin was asked to lead a suicide prevention initiative. “At first, I resisted”. I said, “I work in safety, not mental health.”

But after thinking about it, Kevin agreed to proceed with certain conditions: no business case, no budget approvals, full freedom to act and speak, and when a solution was found, it would be made available to everyone freely.

He fell quickly into the thick of the initiative. For instance, in a video with a colleague, Kevin went off-script and gave out his personal mobile number because he sensed the need. It was the tip of the iceberg. In a single week, he took over 100 calls.

“I didn’t have the answers. I had no training. All I could do was listen,” he said. “But I’ve come to believe one of the greatest gifts another human being can give you is to tell you how they feel.” This, he told me, is where compassion begins: not with performance or language, but with presence. “It was the first time I truly practised compassion not just as a concept, but as a verb.”



## Compassion in Decision-Making

Throughout our conversation, I asked Kevin how compassion shows up in leadership, especially in decision-making, where urgency and ego often rule.

“It’s about asking: Why am I making this choice? Am I doing it because it’s right or because I want to be seen as the good guy?” he said. “That self-inquiry matters. And so does slowing down to listen.”

In Kevin’s view, compassion sharpens decisions; it doesn’t soften them. “It doesn’t mean being passive. It means tuning in to what’s really needed. Sometimes compassion looks like holding your ground. Sometimes it’s offering space.”

The practice of questioning his own intent - of asking what emotional state I am in right now - became foundational to how he leads.

## CLEAR: A Practice; Not a Programme

To embed this approach more widely, Kevin then helped design a program called *I Am Here* and implemented a framework called CLEAR:

- C** **Compassion** for self and others
- L** **Listening** with mastery
- E** **Empathy**
- A** **Acceptance**
- R** **Realness** (authenticity)

CLEAR is not a workshop or a slide deck. It’s integrated across conversations, conflict management, customer care, and even safety protocols.

“We say to people, if you’re facing into feedback, or dealing with crime, or just feeling overwhelmed, come back to CLEAR. Start with compassion. Accept the moment. Be real.”

What struck me was how CLEAR isn’t imposed. It’s absorbed. “Most people can’t explain it,” Kevin said. “They just feel it. That’s the point.”

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compassion looks  
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ground. Sometimes  
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## Building the Muscle of Relational Resilience

As we spoke, it became clear that Kevin's work is a living example of what I've been researching i.e., how compassion, at multiple levels, can help create relational resilience—the kind that is socialised and shared across teams.

"It's not just about individual grit," I reflected to him. "It's about the quality of our relationships and how we hold each other."

Kevin nodded. "Exactly. Compassion is the tissue. It connects. If people don't feel safe and seen, they don't grow."

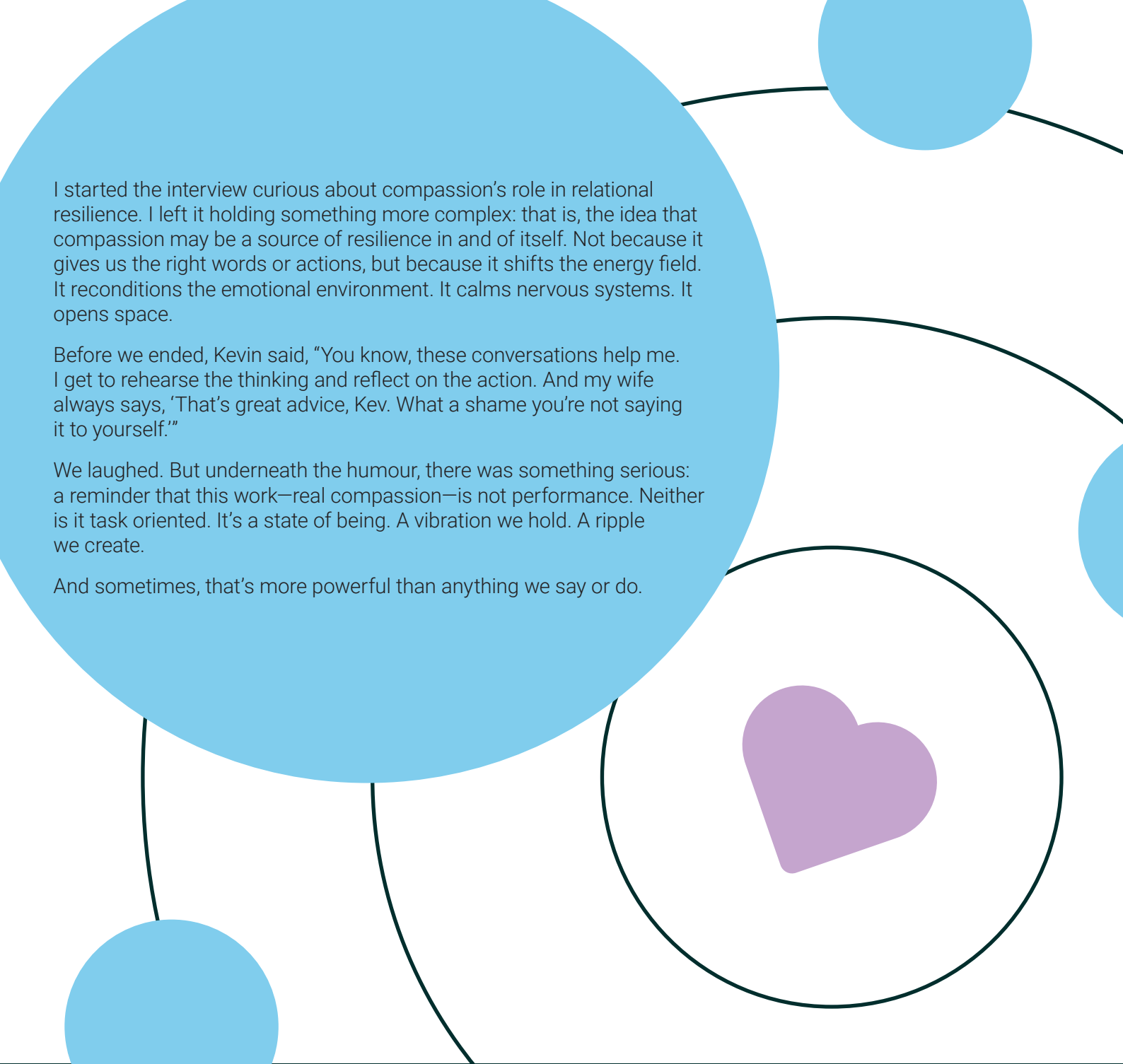
We both agreed: compassion isn't just something you do. It's something you practise. Something you are.

I found myself pausing in that moment, not just in response to what Kevin was saying, but because I could feel my own thinking beginning to shift. Coming into the conversation, I'd been holding compassion as something largely interpersonal: a choice, a behaviour, a way of treating others (and ourselves) with care and understanding. That remains true, but as we spoke, another layer began to reveal itself. What Kevin was describing wasn't just compassion as an action; it was compassion as presence. As a field.

*I began to wonder—what if compassion doesn't simply pass between people, but radiates from people? What if it's not just an exchange, but a frequency - a coherent energetic state that reshapes what's possible around it?*

This isn't simply metaphorical; increasingly, research in neuroscience and psychophysiology suggests that certain emotional states particularly those associated with compassion, care, and connectedness have measurable effects on the heart, brain, and nervous system. They influence how we relate, how we listen, and how we lead. High-frequency emotional states such as compassion appear to elevate, not just the individual, but the group. They create coherence—within, and between.

**"If people don't feel safe and seen, they don't grow."**



I started the interview curious about compassion's role in relational resilience. I left it holding something more complex: that is, the idea that compassion may be a source of resilience in and of itself. Not because it gives us the right words or actions, but because it shifts the energy field. It reconditions the emotional environment. It calms nervous systems. It opens space.

Before we ended, Kevin said, "You know, these conversations help me. I get to rehearse the thinking and reflect on the action. And my wife always says, 'That's great advice, Kev. What a shame you're not saying it to yourself.'"

We laughed. But underneath the humour, there was something serious: a reminder that this work—real compassion—is not performance. Neither is it task oriented. It's a state of being. A vibration we hold. A ripple we create.

And sometimes, that's more powerful than anything we say or do.



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