

Anam cara support for sustainability of young persons' decisions in challenging contexts

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how young people in India sustain difficult decisions—particularly the act of saying “no”—in challenging social and personal contexts. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 15 participants aged 18–25, the study examines the role of anam cara (“soul-friend”) relationships in supporting emotional resilience and decision sustainability. Using thematic analysis, four key relational roles emerged: Emotional Witness, Moral Anchor, Social Translator, and Future Mirror. These roles enable individuals to move beyond the limitations of linear Rational Choice models—which often result in overthinking—towards values-aligned decision-making within a Circular Model of Choice grounded in the Logic of Appropriateness. The findings suggest that anam cara relationships function as psychological anchors that provide emotional validation, identity reinforcement, and sustained decision support in moments of uncertainty. This study contributes to the literature by proposing a relational framework that integrates identity, emotional support and decision-making. While exploratory, the findings highlight the importance of relational support systems in fostering emotionally sustainable decision-making among young people.

Keywords: Sustainable decision support; Anam Cara relational support, Positive affirmation, Circular model for sustainable choice, Indian young people

1. Introduction

This qualitative study explores how supportive relationships, conceptualised as anam cara (“soul friend”) relationships that help young people sustain their decisions over time. The focus is on understanding how relational support enables emotional stability, reduces overthinking, and strengthens identity-based decision-making.

The general context addressed by this paper is “anam cara support for sustainability of young persons' decisions in challenging contexts”. We describe relevant features of an anam cara and identify the relationships and transactions with an anam cara that enable one to “bounce forward” (Jones et al., 2022). Our empirical research objective was to establish and analyse a case study aiming to investigate the proof of concept of value for the “interaction with an anam cara” decision support process.

We investigated the theoretical and empirical gap, namely “non-sustainability resulting from relying on a rational choice framework when decision-making in challenging contexts”. The key issue here is that “rational choice” decision support can leave you “trapped in overthinking”. We describe **how** it is possible to overcoming this “rational choice” gap by employing the circular model of choice, which is based on March and Olsen (2011)’s Logic of Appropriateness, together with decision support from an anam cara that facilitates exaptation to a new context. We obtained research findings that confirmed that:

- Anam caras’ supportive relationships can act as safety nets;
- Support can be gained from anam caras for setting boundaries;
- Interaction with your anam cara can provide positive affirmation;
- Saying “No” can offer a new beginning: bouncing forward into opportunities.

We conclude by identifying some future developments implementing the anam cara framework that could promote sustained value.

This paper contributes to the literature in three key ways:

- It extends existing relational and psychological theories by focusing on relational support for decision sustainability rather than “rational choice” decision-making alone;
- It introduces a structured framework of four relational roles that support individuals in difficult decisions. These relational roles are: Emotional Witness, Moral Anchor, Social Translator, and Future Mirror;
- It connects identity formation with relational support in real-life contexts.

1.1 General context: Anam cara support for sustainability of decisions taken in challenging contexts.

Young people today face increasing pressure in academic, social, and personal contexts. One of the most difficult skills to develop is the ability to say “No” while maintaining relationships and self-worth in any particular context. While traditional decision-making models emphasise rational choice analysis, they often fail to take into account the emotional and relational factors that influence real-world decisions within a particular context. This paper explores how a supportive relationship with an “anam cara” (soul friend) can help young people sustain their decisions over time in particular context of their own choice. Our research focus is on understanding how the relational support offered by an anam cara in any particular context enables emotional stability, reduces overthinking, and strengthens identity-based decision-making.

1.2 Features of an anam cara

An anam cara (soul friend) is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you. O'Donoghue (2023). explains:

“With the anam cara, you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. You are understood as you are without mask or pretension. You can be as you really are. When your anam cara encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold you might otherwise never have crossed on your own. There are times of great uncertainty in every life. Left alone at such a time, you feel dishevelment and confusion. When an anam cara comes with words of encouragement, a light visits you and you begin to find the stairs and the door out of the dark”.

Jankovic (2023) gives a concise account of what “having a soul friend” offers to a decision-maker:

"A soul friend makes you feel safe and seen in the world. You can tell them anything. Even the things you don't want to tell yourself. They know your sorrows and elations and insecurities and hold them tenderly. The person you get excited with, cry to and belly laugh about ridiculous things They are also a whole lot of fun. Joy is important. The hallmark of an anam cara is someone you can be fully yourself around — and at different times in your life, this may be different people. The common thread is that a soul friend is someone who has weathered life with you and is still there, either in your heart or physically, or both”.

Similar conceptualisations of anam caras may be found today in many accounts of current practices inspired by ancient Celtic spirituality (e.g., Mcintosh, 2011; Simpson, 2021).

1.3 Anam Cara relationships and transactions

Anam cara relationships and transactions are non-competitive and non-exploitive. Anam cara relationship-building focuses on creating, strengthening and enhancing positive bonds and transactions between pairs of anam caras which bring positive affirmation, happiness and ability for self-love to each of them. These relationships are non-competitive between the participants and with a participants' other relationships (with their partner, with their family's members, etc.). This can permanently enhance and strengthen positive aspects of those relationships. A decision-maker can develop, with his or her anam cara, a shared context as a mutual space of understanding (Brezillon and Humphreys, 2026) that enables:

- Co-building a shared mental model by synergy between you and your anam cara;
- Replacing traps emanating from “rational choice modelling of the decision problem” by a satisfying understanding of the “pathway for fixing the problem according to March and Olsen's (2011) “logic of appropriateness” and employing a circular model of choice (Nappelbaum, 1997, Humphreys and Jones, 2007);
- Building with your Anam Cara a conceptual model of the shared context.;
- Reinterpreting the “problem to be fixed” until you reach a shared solution together with your anam cara.

1.4 Empirical research objective

Our empirical research objective is to “establish and analyse a qualitative case study that aims to investigate the proof of concept and value for the anam cara interaction decision support process”. Evidence from the resulting research findings that validate this research objective in practice is presented in sections 5 and 6, below.

In this qualitative case study, we explore how 15 participants aged 18–25 (8 female and 7 male) from diverse urban schools and colleges across India learned to say “No” in challenging contexts. with decision support founded on “Aman Cara: implementations of a fundamental process ontology” (Bedi, Brezillon and Humphreys, 2026). Our design for this case study enabled comparison of Anam Cara-based decision support, while respecting each person’s unique decision context (Brezillon and Pomerol (2001) . We investigated whether the outcomes of “saying No” were sustained over time and how support from their anam caras could help young people to uphold their decisions as life contexts changed (for example, entering college or joining new social groups). We draw on Bedi’s (2024) self-love framework which emphasises strengths-focused coping practices (e.g., present-moment awareness, positive self-talk) and celebration of small victories. Our conceptual framework for analysis the empirical results gained in this case study integrated an anam cara ontology framework (Bedi, Brezillon and Humphreys, 2026) with relevant psychological and social theories.

2. Decision making within a particular context: The “Rational Choice” linear model.

The fundamental task facing a decision maker is to resolve uncertainty about how to go about developing a prescription for action and get it implemented. The desire to take some action is generated from a feeling that there is a “lack” (as conceptualised by Lacan, 2011) between the actual state of affairs, as perceived by the decision maker, and some imaginable preferred state. The decision maker starts out, at

the level of feeling, with complete freedom about how to translate this desire into action. All imaginable courses of action are candidates for implementation until structural constraints are placed, by the decision maker, on the way that the problem is represented.

According to the now prevalent linear model for the problem structuring process (Simon, 1977, Humphreys and Jones, 2006), the decision maker, in order to act, must first strengthen the constraints at 5 qualitatively different levels of how the problem is represented until only one course of action is prescribed: the one which is actually embarked upon.

At Level 5, the roots of the decision problem are imagined by the participants in the decision-making process through exploration within the “small world” (Savage, 1955; Toda, 1976) whose bounds are defined by what the person who is invoking the decision-making process for him or herself is prepared to imagine and talk about.

At Level 4, problem-expressing discourse is employed to make claims that particular elements of what was explored should (or should not) be included in the representation of the decision problem.

At level 3, the claims established through exploring problem-expressing discourse then need to be linked into frames at level 3, so that their collective implications for potential prescriptions for action can be explored. We have found that the frames actually employed in personal decision making predicated on the logic of rational choice usually fit into three principal categories: (i) Rule-based frames, (ii) Future scenario frames, and (iii) Preference -structuring frames.

At Level 2, through asking “what-if” questions, the decision-maker investigates the impact of changing the assessment of elements within the problem structure that he or she has now created.

At level 1, the remaining task is to make best assessments of “the most likely value” at those points in the represented problem that have previously been represented as uncertain.

Simon’s (1977) “rational choice” conceptualisation of the decision-making process offered a widely accepted model for the progressive strengthening of these constraints in decision making practice. Simon identified the four phases in the process of “rational choice” decision problem structuring as follows:

- In the Intelligence phase, the decision maker “searches for the conditions that call for decision”;
- In the Design phase, the decision maker focuses on “inventing, developing and analysing possible courses of action”, thus authoring the outcomes represented in the decision-making model;
- In the Choice phase and the Review phase, the decision maker focuses on “selecting and reviewing a particular course of action from those available” according to what has been represented in the model.

3. The theoretical and Empirical Gap: Non-sustainability resulting from relying on the linear “rational choice” framework when decision making in challenging contexts

A “problem-solving gap” occurs when a decision maker employs rational choice problem structuring discourse that results in the decision maker becoming “trapped in over thinking” in cases where all the remaining options are now judged inadequate in cost-benefit terms. A decision-maker employing the linear “rational choice” model when structuring his or her decision problem must, in the Choice and Review phases identified by Simon (1977), has to commit to a course of action that will be implemented

in reality by him/herself. But, in contexts where the individual decision maker does not have the agency to achieve this, as all the remaining options are judged inadequate in cost-benefit terms, the procedural question that confronts the decision maker is “what to do?”

In such contexts, the decision maker usually finds him or herself left “adrift in a sea of implementation uncertainty” (Humphreys and Berkeley, 1995; Pomeroy and Adam, 2008) where one is trapped in continual overthinking (Hill and Sharp, 2021, Bedi, 2024). Because of this result, “Rational Choice” based decision making is not, in itself, sustainable in situations where exploring potential courses of action ends up in blocked opportunities, undesirable consequences or requires non-available resources, and so all receive negative evaluation within the preference frame. Bedi (2024, p152) comments:

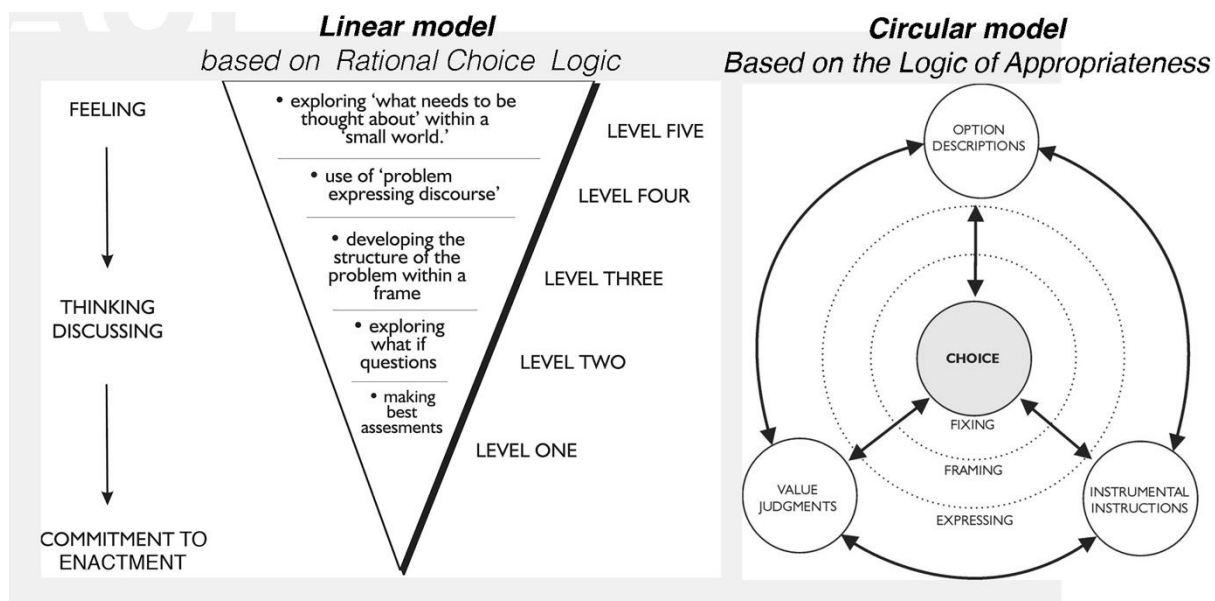
"One of the biggest pandemics affecting humanity today is overthinking. This silent affliction paralyses us with endless doubt and worry, overshadowing or potential peace of mind we spiral to 'if and if only's': trapped in a web of our own making."

This kind of gap may be overcome if the decision maker switches to employing circular problem structuring discourse, resulting in the expansion of available and attractive opportunities.

3.1 Overcoming the “Rational Choice” gap by employing the Circular Model of Choice

Nappelbaum (1997, p 252) proposed that the best strategy to overcome this gap is to “abandon completely the implicative linear logic under the approach and to start analysing the problem the light of an entirely different circular logic: as shown in the *Circular model* in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Alternative Decision Process Structuring Models



3.2 The Logic of Appropriateness

Breaking free from this web of overthinking, requires that the decision maker makes a change in his or her perspective. Here, explorations within which his or her initial "Rational Choice" perspective get supplanted by activities represented in the circular model for structuring decision problems (Nappelbaum 1997; Humphreys and Jones, 2007). This model is predicated on the "logic of Appropriateness" (March

and Olson, 2011) whereby humans maintain a repertoire of roles and identities enabling appropriate behaviour in situations for which it is relevant and opens up opportunities for positive affirmation, emotional resilience and self-love.

Enabling appropriate behaviour involves thoughtful reasoning that is not connected to the anticipation of costs and benefits. Rather, the presumption is that actors will generally try to answer three elementary questions, when deciding on what action to take with support that can be gained from *anam caras* ("soul friends"). These fundamental questions are: "What kind of a situation is this? What kind of a person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation like this?"

Self-love is not merely self-acceptance or self-care but a deeper form of emotional literacy that allows individuals to decode their inner experiences in accord with the Logic of Appropriateness. It encourages decision-makers to ask questions such as, "Why does this make me uncomfortable?" or "Why do I feel the need to comply when I don't agree?"

In addressing such questions, a decision maker can obtain emotional support and directional suggestions from his or her *anam cara* while continuously and creatively navigating, within a circular model for decision process structuring, the links between option descriptions, value judgments instrumental instructions and potential choice in a way that continually opens up new opportunities.

3.3 Anam cara decision support facilitates exaptation to a new context.

Gallego-Bono and Chaves-Avila (2020) show that the directional suggestions made to a decision-maker by his or her *anam cara* can be instrumental in moving to, and understanding, the new context that opens up as a result of saying "No" to all the alternatives identified through employing the linear rational choice model. They identify a "double process of innovation penetration" mediated by these directional suggestions. This process involves, first, an attempt at *adaptation* by the decision-maker of the set of available alternatives identified in the initial context and, secondly, when this adaptation process fails, leaving the decision-maker "trapped in overthinking" (Hill and Sharp, 2021), by *exaptation*, defined as "the process by which features acquire functions for which they were not originally adapted or selected."

The process of *Exaptation* always leads to a new context. When the exaptation process is supported through interactions between "seeker" and "provider" *anam caras*, the specification of this new context is generated bottom-up by means of these their interactions. This pushes the emergence of a novel circular formulation of the decision-making process that enables its sustainable development in the new context by providing facilities for implementing innovative and creative solutions. This enables successful "bouncing forward" by the decision maker (Jones et al., 2022).

3.4 Four critical functions offered by anam caras that support decision making within the circular model of choice.

An *anam cara* can offer four critical functions when supporting decision making within the Circular model of choice and promoting emotional sustainability. They are:

- Personal Mirror: Helping the individual to recognise emotional signals, internal conflicts, and suppressed needs, fostering self-awareness;
- Interpersonal Buffer: Providing protection against shame, social pressure, and manipulation – creating a sanctuary of safety;
- Community Connector: Normalising values-based choices within peer or institutional contexts – reducing isolation;

- Institutional Challenger: Modelling compassionate accountability when confronted by systems that reward compliance over authenticity.

We found, through our case study research (described in sections 4 and 5 below), that each of these functions reinforced a young person's capacity to maintain their decision to say "No" in the face of internal or external regression.

4. Research Methodology: Case study on proof of concept and value of the anam cara framework in India

In order to provide proof of concept and value for the Anam Cara framework, we conducted a case study project on 'Support for sustainability of young-persons decisions on "how to say NO", focusing on fifteen young people (ages 18-25; 8 Female, 7 Male) in India, providing an account of engaging in activities in contexts of their own choosing where implementing aspects of the Aman Cara framework might prove to be beneficial that sustain effective personal decision making, positive affirmation and self-love. We were particularly interested in the young people's descriptions of the support that they received by means of discussions with an anam cara ("soul friend": physical or spiritual). We limited our sample selection to young people whose beliefs in spiritual anam cara relations (if any) involved a compassionate God, as our framework does not cater for people who believe otherwise. We explored how interaction with their anam caras enabled the Indian young people in our sample to say "no", bounce forward and sustain self-love (Bedi, 2024) in the challenging contexts that they chose to talk about.

4.1 Participants and recruitment

The participants in this case study were recruited from diverse educational institutions in urban India. School counsellors and youth organisations assisted in identifying individuals who had recently faced difficult personal or social situations requiring them to say "No" to significant pressures (for example, resisting peer pressure or defying a prescribed academic or career path). Participation was voluntary, and we obtained written informed consent from all participants (with parental consent for minors). We ensured diversity in socio-economic background, religion, and region to reflect India's cultural heterogeneity. Each participant selected the specific decision context that was most meaningful to them. For example, one chose "handling a misunderstanding with my friend," another "resisting family pressure to enter a national sports championship," and another "navigating a rift between a student and teacher at school." Using participant-defined scenarios heightened the relevance of the inquiry and gave participants ownership of the research process.

4.2 Data collection procedures

In *Stage 1 of data collection*, participants completed a brief questionnaire collecting demographic details and a written summary of their chosen situation. Gathering these details in advance allowed us to form a balanced cohort and tailor interview questions to each person's context (for instance, by using culturally appropriate examples). It also helped establish initial rapport, as writing about the experience beforehand gave participants some control and time to prepare, reducing anxiety. Asking youths to share their story at this stage was itself an empowering act that confirmed to them that their voice was valued.

Stage 2 of data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant, using an interview guide designed to explore their decision-making process and the multi-level support systems

around them. We used open-ended questions to invite narrative accounts – for example: “Can you tell me what happened when you decided to say no in that situation? How did you feel and what did you do next?” – and then probed three key domains of the anam aara framework to capture different forms of support:

- Interactions with a living anam cara: Did the participant have a physically present “soul friend” or mentor? We asked them to identify any friend, family member, or other person who played a guiding or supportive role, and to describe how that person helped them through the experience;
- Interactions with a spiritual anam cara: Did the participant draw on support from a spiritual or non-present figure (for example, a deceased relative, a religious figure, or an imagined confidant)? This recognised the role of faith, ancestral guidance, or inner spiritual resources in self-love and resilience;
- Community and institutional resources: We inquired about broader sources of support, such as peer groups, teachers or counsellors at school, online communities, or self-help resources.

We also asked whether any organisational or institutional factors (e.g., school policies or cultural norms) influenced their ability to set boundaries. Each interview lasted about 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a private setting chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

We conducted interviews in the participant’s preferred language (English or Hindi), with occasional code-switching as needed. Interviewers (the lead researcher and a trained assistant) introduced themselves as empathetic, non-judgmental listeners to build rapport and encourage participants to speak openly.

4.3 Data analysis

We analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowing patterns and themes to emerge inductively while being informed by existing psychological frameworks. Our approach combined deductive and inductive coding. Initially, we applied a provisional coding framework based on our theoretical lenses (for example, themes like “boundary-setting” and “positive affirmation” drawn from the self-love model of Bedi, 2024) and then refined this framework iteratively as new patterns emerged from the transcripts. Two researchers independently read each transcript in full to become familiar with the content and generated initial codes (using NVivo software to organise the data). These codes were then collated into broader candidate themes, which the team reviewed and refined through discussion. Related themes were merged or redefined as needed – for instance, codes related to self-confidence and assertiveness were combined into a single theme of “Empowerment through Boundary-Setting.” Each final theme was mapped to one of the four levels of the vaman cara framework (personal, interpersonal, community, compassionate institutional), in order to ensure that our analysis captured influences at every level. In the final phase, we defined and named the themes and produced detailed analytic memos integrating participant quotes with relevant theory. Throughout the process, the team remained reflexive: we regularly discussed how our own perspectives or cultural assumptions might influence interpretation, and we ensured that our findings stayed grounded in the participants’ own accounts.

4.4 Ethical considerations and researcher positioning

Ethical approval was obtained from Delhi University’s Human Research Ethics Committee before the study began. All participants gave informed consent (with parental consent for minors) and were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. We guaranteed confidentiality: any identifying details (names of people, specific school or city names) were omitted or generalised in transcripts, and we used pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 10) in our reporting. All digital data (audio recordings, transcripts) were securely stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team. We were conscious of power dynamics between researchers and youth. In order to mitigate

this, we adopted a friendly, youth-centred approach. Interviewers emphasised that they were learners interested in the participant's perspective, not judges, and they spoke in an empathetic, non-authoritarian tone. The lead researcher's familiarity with Indian culture and her multilingual background helped build rapport, but we also remained aware of our own biases (for example, a personal belief in the benefits of mindfulness). The team kept reflexive journals and consulted an external peer auditor to ensure that our conclusions were grounded in participants' accounts rather than our preconceptions.

We prioritised participants' emotional safety throughout the interviews. We made it clear that participants could skip any question or stop at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Interviewers responded to any distress with empathy and normalisation (for example, saying "It's understandable you felt hurt in that situation"), affirming that upset feelings were valid. After each interview, we debriefed participants to thank them, ask how they felt, and address any concerns. Many youths reported feeling positively about the conversation – one even remarked, "I've never actually talked about this fully before, it feels good" – suggesting the interview process itself had been somewhat therapeutic. All participants who began the study completed it. At the end of the study, we provided each participant with a summary of the findings written in accessible, youth-friendly language so they could see the knowledge gained from their contributions. With participants' permission, we also plan to share aggregated results with school counsellors and youth programs to benefit the communities from which our participants came. In sum, our methodology was designed with careful attention to rigour, cultural sensitivity, and compassion, laying a strong foundation for the credible and meaningful findings that follow.

5. Research findings

We found that all participants began by identifying a particular context in which they had needed to say "No." These contexts ranged from academic and career dilemmas to family and peer-pressure situations. Participants initially approached decision-making in these contexts using "rational choice" problem-structuring discourse ("cost-benefit thinking). They made mental lists of advantages and disadvantages of saying "No" versus saying "Yes". This mirrored a linear "logic of consequences": aiming to maximise benefits and minimise costs. For example:

- One young woman agonised over refusing a friend's plea to copy homework. She weighed the risk of losing the friendship (a "cost") against the stress of compromising her integrity.
- Similarly, another youth considering his parents' plan listed the repercussions: "They might be angry, I might fail on my own, but I'd be unhappy if I complied."

Such reflections show bounded rationality at work: trying to decide under uncertainty while employing linear problem-structuring discourse. However, as participants moved toward action, "rational choice" cost-benefit reasoning often felt insufficient. Nearly all described a turning point: employing circular "problem structuring discourse, informed by the "logic of appropriateness" (March and Olsen, 2011), where they began to ask: "What is right for me in this situation?" This more values-driven question aligns with a circular logic wherein decisions are guided by identity and values rather than utility alone.

Accordingly, participants began invoking their self-concepts. For example:

- Participant 8 ultimately realised, "I'm an artist at heart, not a businessman – if I say "yes "and join the business, I'd be living a lie."
- A young person, ending a toxic friendship. framed her decision problem. in terms of integrity. She asked, "Do I want to be the kind of person who tolerates betrayal? The answer was 'NO.'"

In these reflections, personal values overtook immediate consequences. This values-based deliberation was often catalysed by guidance from a trusted individual who served as a participant's anam cara ("soul friend") who posed key questions. For example, one participant's anam cara (a school counsellor) asked

her “What matters more to you – honesty or keeping everyone happy?” Such prompts helped participants to frame the situation (e.g., as a test of honesty) and to see their role accordingly (e.g., as a friend who values honesty).

In effect, participants stepped through: defining the context, identifying their valued identity within the context and choosing an action to match that identity. The data indicate that, once a participant answered questions informed by the logic of appropriateness, his or her decision became clear and resolute. Several participants described feeling a sense of internal contentment and peace when they then chose the option that matched their authentic values.

5.1 Access to anam caras: supportive relationships as safety nets

Every participant reported having at least one anam cara – a trusted confidant or “soul friend” – to lean on. In fact, most named several. Common categories included Friends: e.g. best friend (11 of the 15 youths); Family: parent, aunt, or sibling (about one-third); Teachers or mentors: e.g. a school counsellor or coach. Spiritual guides. One young person drew strength from Lord Shiva; another from a dead grandparent. Participants described these anam caras as listening without judgment and offering understanding and support. For example:

- One youth said her soul friend was “the one person who understands what I’m going through with my parents and doesn’t make me feel wrong for wanting something different.” Another noted that her brother “always reminds me that I have the right to make my own choices.”

Often youths “tested the waters” by discussing dilemmas with an anam cara before acting; this gave them validation and confidence. Importantly, their anam caras upheld the youth’s choice. For example:

- After one participant ended a controlling relationship, his friend reassured him: “Whatever happens, I’ve got your back. If you need a place to crash after the breakup, my door is open”. That support made him feel secure enough to go through with his decision.
- In another case, a family friend intervened with disapproving parents, effectively advocating for the youth’s choice.

These examples show how confidants not only listened but could even help persuade others. This unconditional support resembles Carl Rogers’ (1977) concept of unconditional positive regard. Knowing that an Anam Cara accepted them “no matter what” gave participants the courage to stay true to themselves. In short, a network of supportive anam caras – friends, family, mentors, or even spiritual guides – served as an emotional safety net. Having someone in their corner validated youths’ decisions and made them more confident and resilient in saying “No”.

5.2 Setting boundaries: asserting self-love through limits

Learning to say “No” was essentially about setting healthy boundaries. Eleven of fifteen youths described the process as drawing a line to protect themselves. They often framed the change as moving from ‘being a people-pleaser’ or ‘too submissive’ to ‘knowing my limits’ and ‘standing up for myself’. Participants shared several examples of boundary-setting. One common scenario was resisting family or peer pressure. For example:

- Participant 6 worried that studying for exams while friends partied would make him lose friendships. His girlfriend (an anam cara) reminded him that a real friend “wouldn’t want you to harm your future for a night of fun”. With her encouragement, he simply told his friends, “No, I need to study.” He found that after doing this once, it got easier, and his friends respected him more. Another scenario involved family expectations.
- One young woman (Participant 2) faced pressure from her father to enter an arranged marriage. She firmly told her parents that marriage was “off-limits” until after she finished her degree. She admitted it felt scary,

but by explaining her reasons calmly, her parents eventually accepted this boundary. time, youths reported psychological benefits: increased confidence and a sense of control.

5.2.1 Gaining support from anam caras for setting boundaries.

Eleven of the fifteen young people participating in our case study told us about setting boundaries., stressing the need to gain support and advice from soul-friends in this process. For example:

- “My anam cara has helped me in expressing myself more confidently and in a healthy manner through Creating a boundary: I have learned creating boundary setting through Assertiveness”;
- “My anam cara helped me during a misunderstanding between me and my friend: She helped me in creating boundaries against peer pressure”;
- “I didn’t want to become a doctor but my teacher’s [Anam Cara’s] guidance helped me to take the decision of being a doctor. She told me she will be with me till the end of her life: she makes me feel valued, respected and loved”.

5.3 Positive affirmation: replacing rumination with self-compassion

After asserting their boundaries, many youths initially wrestled with self-doubt and guilt. Common thoughts were, “Did I do the right thing?”, “Am I a bad person for refusing?” These doubts came from overthinking and internalised guilt. (Hill and Sharp, 2021). In order to counteract this negative self-talk, participants turned to positive affirmations and self-compassion. They repeated encouraging phrases to themselves, wrote in journals and recalled supportive messages from their anam caras. One participant gave a vivid example:

- “Each morning. i stood in front of a mirror and told myself: “I deserve respect. My choices matter.” At first, I didn’t fully believe it, but with practice my mindset changed. When a youth challenged my decision, I reminded myself, “I am doing what’s right for me.”

Across the board, young people who used affirmations reported feeling less anxious after saying no. One young man who distanced himself from a toxic friend group repeated daily: “I am strong and better off on my own than with people who hurt me”. This phrase fortified his conviction. In general, participants solidified their resolve and significantly reduced rumination by actively affirming their worth,

5.4 “No” as a new beginning: bouncing forward into opportunities

For many participants, saying “No” was not a defeat but resulted in bouncing forward into a new context that brought with it new opportunities (Galllego and Chavez, 2020), For example:

- Participant 10 quit a toxic, overworking job. Two months later he secured a new position at a company with a healthier culture and even received a raise. He reflected that leaving the first job – as scary as it was – “opened the door to my dream career.” In this new role he thrived, illustrating how a setback can become a springboard.
- Participant 11 left a long-term relationship. Though he initially felt lonely, that void became an opportunity for self-discovery. He started traveling on weekends and rekindled old friendships. Eventually he met someone new who “celebrates my dreams instead of stifling them”. He described feeling “inner freedom” for the first time in years. In his words, this journey showed him that “self-love sometimes looks like walking away – and that creates space for better things”.

Some participants took these lessons outward. For instance, one youth began sharing his experience in a blog about pursuing creative passions against the odds, implicitly acting as a guide for others. In this way, personal growth sparked community ripple effects.

5.5 The anam cara as a psychological anchor

In contemporary psychological terms, an anam cara can be viewed as a psychological anchor: someone who offers unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1977), holds safe space, and supports the emergence of the authentic self. Young people navigating challenging social terrain often face an internal conflict between belonging and self-respect. An Anam Cara bridges this gap by embodying both connection and differentiation. They do not demand conformity, but instead invite congruence. Participants in our study often described their Anam Caras as those who "saw the real me even when I couldn't" or who "kept me from going back to the old version of myself". These descriptions resonate with relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 2009) which posits that growth-fostering relationships are characterised by mutual empathy, authenticity, and empowerment. The anam cara becomes a living mirror - not reflecting social expectations, but revealing personal truth.

5.6 Anam caras and identity reconstruction

Anam caras played a key role in narrative identity, helping young people to reconstruct a more empowering version of themselves post-decision. Rather than framing their choice to say "No" as rebellion or avoidance, anam caras helped to reframe it as alignment, strength, and growth. These narrations served as protection against shame, especially in collectivist cultures where disobedience can feel like betrayal. This supports work in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) where re-framing of their decision, with the aid of "new context" stories authored by their anam caras, helped individuals develop resilience. Thus, in the contexts addressed in this case study, when participants could tell their story through the eyes of their anam cara, they often expressed greater confidence and clarity in their future decisions.

5.7 Anam cara provision of a sustained holding space

One of the challenges in sustaining the decision to say "no" is internal relapse: moments where guilt, doubt, or external pressure causes the individual to revoke their boundary. Here, the role of reflective self-love practices becomes evident. Affirmations, introspective journaling, and narrative rewriting help re-anchor the individual in their original decision. Moreover, as Bedi (2024) illustrates, sustainability comes from integration - when the boundary is not a one-time effort, but a new default mode of self-regard. With each successful application, the boundary reinforces itself, becoming part of the individual's relational toolkit. While self-love supports the internal alignment needed to assert personal boundaries, emotional sustainability - the ability to continue making authentic decisions in dynamic and sometimes adversarial environments is often anchored in external relationships.

In this respect, we found that anam caras provided a real-world "holding space" through which the young people could sustain the decisions they make, particularly the decision to say "No". This corresponds with Winnicott's notion of the a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 2005, Bahn, 2022) - a safe space that allows an individual to test autonomy while being psychologically held. Winnicott showed how, through the attentive nurturing of creativity from the earliest years, every individual has the opportunity to enjoy a rich and rewarding cultural life. In our case study research, we found that anam caras helped participants how to achieve this opportunity while maintaining their sense of integrity, even in the face of social pushback. By cultivating self-love in this way, young people are more likely to say "No" when it matters, and to say "No" with clarity, consistency, and care - qualities that promote emotional sustainability.

6. Discussion

Our research findings align with existing theories such as attachment theory, relational-cultural theory, and peer support models. However, this study extends these by showing how relationships actively support the sustainability of decisions, not just emotional well-being. Participants initially approached decisions using “cost–benefit thinking”: but found this insufficient. Over time, they shifted toward value-based decision-making, supported by trusted individuals. The concept of “anam cara support” provides a practical and structured way to understand how supportive anam cara relationships function in real-life decision-making contexts where saying “No” with anam cara support enabled “bouncing forward” (Jones et al 2020) towards opportunities that opened up through exaptation (Gallego and Chavez 2020).

6.1 Limitations of this empirical research study and generalisation possibilities for the research findings

Our qualitative research study focused on 15 young persons (aged 18–25) and their decisions about saying “No.” It was limited by:

- Small sample size (15 young persons);
- Cultural specificity (all participants came from communities located in India);
- Qualitative scope (focussing on the personal consequences of a saying “No” in a range of contexts).

However, our research findings are not confined to this demographic or to this particular decision type. The four key roles within anam cara supportive relationships that emerged from our empirical research findings are seminal in many application contexts of the Circular Logic of Choice (Humphreys and Jones, 2006; see section 3.1, above). These roles are: (1) Emotional Witness: Providing non-judgmental listening and validation; (2) Moral Anchor: Reinforcing values and guiding ethical clarity; (3) Social Translator: Helping navigate interpersonal consequences; (4) Future Mirror: Encouraging a hopeful and empowered self-view.

In the case study reported in this paper, these roles helped participants maintain their decisions, reduce self-doubt, and build confidence. But his. four-fold support structure actually addresses the universal challenge of making and sustaining decisions that require commitment to a values-based course of action under social and emotional pressure. This challenge arises across all stages of life, whenever a decision-maker must invoke the Logic of Appropriateness (March and Olsen, 2011) and ask not merely “what produces the best outcome?” but “what is the right thing for a person such as I to do in a situation such as this?”.

This anam cara support model is therefore available to decision-makers generally: beyond situations of saying “No” to the full spectrum of commitment decisions: for example:

- Saying “Yes” to a demanding new path;
- Sustaining a long-term commitment under adversity;
- Standing firm in a professional or ethical dilemma;
- Renegotiating an existing relationship or role.

In all such situations, the relational conditions that enabled the young participants in this study to sustain their decisions —positive affirmation emotional validation, and a satisfying projection of identity — are also relevant. The anam cara support model thus offers a broadly applicable framework for provision of

the kind of relational support that makes emotionally sustainable commitment possible, whatever the decision-maker's age or the nature of the commitment at stake.

6.2 Hybrid use of generative AI and discernment in anam cara interactions

We are now constructing a public archive of the new contexts there are being addressed in anam cara interactions the described in section 2.3, above. Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) could be useful in generating answers to inquiries from users of this archive about relevant contexts represented within the archive. However, the anam cara interaction process (taking on the roles of provider and seeker) is fundamentally a human process and direct adoption of ChatGPT produced in answer to a seeker's questions like those (taking over the anam cara provider role) would not be appropriate. here. Nevertheless, application of the hybrid process of (human) Discernment applied to AI-generated information when an anam cara is playing the provider role is quite appropriate (, Garcia de la Cerda, O. et al (2026Hegarty, 2026).

7. Conclusion: Future developments employing the anam cara framework that could promote sustained value

This study highlights the importance of relational support in sustaining difficult decisions among young people. The Anam Cara framework offers a simple yet powerful way to understand how emotional and relational factors influence and sustain decision-making. The following sections describe potential implementations that could benefit from employing the anam cara support framework.

7.1 Potential anam cara support arenas for bouncing forward into new contexts.

The results from this case study indicate that Anam caras supported Indian young peoples' need for exaptation to a new context when faced with a challenging context. Thus, there should always exist possibilities for building arenas that would provide anam cara support: involving creative re-conceptualisation and regeneration. Here, people could discover themselves by exaptation of previously un-investigated resources (Gallego and Chavez, 2020) in new contexts (Brezillon and Humphreys, 2026). There, participants would achieve real gains in both their emotional satisfaction and creative capabilities. Within these arenas, participants would no longer be trapped in overthinking through trying to "bounce back" (Hill and Sharp; 2021; Bedi, 2026), but would be enabled to "bounce forward" through such exaptation of new resources (Jones et al., 2022).

7.2 Practical Implications for Anam Cara training and development

If we are to support bottom-up sustainable leadership among youth, especially in decision-making contexts, the Anam Cara model offers a scalable, culturally adaptable framework. It bridges the intrapersonal and interpersonal, blends ancient wisdom with modern psychology, and foregrounds the power of emotionally attuned relationships. Compassionate institutions' policy frameworks) should not only fund mental health services, but actively create environments, but also support the bottom-up creation of Anam Cara Counselling Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2020) fostering arenas where anam cara-type relationships can flourish - in mentorship, in teacher training, in parent education, and in digital communities. For youth development practitioners, educators, and policymakers. Here, our findings suggest that fostering anam cara roles and activities in communities of practice can significantly

enhance the emotional resilience and autonomy of young people. Programmes that pair adolescents with trained anam cara mentors, create reflective spaces in classrooms, or train parents in emotionally attuned communication, can serve to institutionalise this support structure.

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