



'The effects of bullies are so devastating because they sap people of their energy and esteem mostly through the accumulated effects of small, demeaning acts, not so much through one, or two, dramatic episodes.' – Robert Sutton

Out of the Pit

KNOWING THE FUNCTIONS OF THE BRAIN SOMEHOW ENABLES US TO GAIN ENOUGH DISTANCE FROM A DAMAGING AND HURTFUL RELATIONSHIP OR SITUATION SO THAT WE ARE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT BETTER AND SO ACCEPT IT FOR WHAT IT IS AND MOVE ON⁽¹⁾. IT'S LIKE A LADDER THAT'S LOWERED INTO THE BLACK PIT WE'RE TRAPPED IN – IT OFFERS A WAY OUT.

To help get her life back M (see March and June issues of Infusion) and I put some strategies in place. Underpinning all M did was the understanding of how the brain actually works, how it responds to stress, and the flow-on of this emotionally and psychologically. This, for M was significant. It gave her, she said, a foundation to build on.

M and I discussed various strategies she could incorporate into her life for managing stress, as well as how she could 'detox' her brain. M was aware of how she had allowed her thought life to become so toxic that she experienced physical, emotional and psychological damage – her dreams were now more nightmares – when she could sleep – and her behaviour became such that people were avoiding her.

Reflection plays a significant role in reconnecting with who we are. Revisiting and mulling over things is not enough because when we do this we can evoke the same reactive flow; the same negative response out of toxic emotions evoked by toxic thoughts. This can result

in us having the 'melt down' experience all over again.

With reflection we can observe ourselves openly and objectively. Siegal⁽¹⁾ says we gain the crucial capacity through reflection to deal with intense emotion without becoming lost in it. As M reflected on what had happened to her she learned to change the impact of those memories so that they no longer had the power to cause distress.

Writing has also been demonstrated through research to be a powerful tool in helping us be emotionally balanced. The process of writing, says Leaf⁽²⁾, consolidates the memory and adds clarity to what you've been thinking about. Writing can, if you are open to being honest, help you see your non-conscious and conscious thoughts in a visual way. The more creative you are when you write, the better. A technique called 'Clustering' is a very effective way of encouraging both sides of the brain to work together integrating the two perspectives of thought – big picture to detail (R) and detail to big picture (L). For full understanding both perspectives need to come together.

The above strategies helped M recognise areas she could work on so that she didn't fall back into a similar negative situation.

M learned that *she* could be in control; how to be assertive and how to respond to difficult people. She saw that she always had options, and how she reacted in any situation was her choice. M also learned the value of contacting her Union for

assistance and support – of refusing to allow herself to be intimidated and bullied.

M enjoyed the technique of Positive Reframing. When we reframe we look at the same situation in a new way that highlights possibilities and gets us out of feeling trapped – it takes the stress out of stressors! Reframing helped M look at the benefits in her situation so that four months after we began working together she applied for, and got, a position doing something completely different that she found refreshing and energising; something she may never have attempted if she hadn't been 'pushed' out of her comfort zone.

M's decision to *do* something positive and seek help was one that will impact her for the rest of her life as she continues to apply the knowledge and understanding she has gained.

If you don't take care of your own mental health you won't be able to support your patients' emotional needs. So, if you are stressed and struggling with distressing symptoms, don't allow it to continue. Do something today – you don't have to live like this. Access your organisation's EAP, or see a counsellor of your choice – be kind to yourself. ■

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References:

- (1) Siegal, D. 2011 *Mindsight*, Bantam Books, New York.
- (2) Leaf, C. 2009 *Who switched off my brain? Controlling toxic thoughts and emotions*, Inprov, Ltd, Southlake