

# **MUSIC, DIVING WITH SHARKS AND MOUNTAINS ARE PLACES WHERE I FIND PEACE**

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*Second Edition*

# **DISCLAIMER**

The author is a self employed Director and is not a qualified psychiatrist, psychologist nor counsellor in the subject matter of mental health.

This book details personal experiences of the author and the lessons he has learned as part of his recovery from depression and anxiety.

The author accepts no responsibility for any outcome of any reader or other implementing the lessons the author has detailed in this book.

The author encourages all those who feel they may be suffering from any form of mental illness to seek professional and qualified help.

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# SHORT DESCRIPTION OF BOOK I

Book I of the Sing Through It series was my first book and an honest description of my life over decades suffering from depression and anxiety. It detailed my decades of struggles, as an engineer, manager and then director working in a hazardous industry, the struggles, successes and symptoms on the way down and up.

It wasn't a best seller, however many of those who read it learned from the clear honesty and some took clear decisions in their lives understanding that they were on the journey downwards.

I wrote the book partly for me, to understand and think through my past, but mostly because I had seen first-hand the stigma associated with mental illness in the work place as well as outside the work place and I made it my mission to crush this stigma.





*A drawing from a time during my later stage of recovery. It's based on a fossil ammonite coloured with varied and bright colours, with the darkness moving away.*

# BEFORE WE GET READING

Indulge me if you will before you get reading, a read I hope you enjoy. To better prepare you for the read and to get your mind working I'd like to ask you three questions that you can write the answers to below the questions:

Have you ever stopped, thought and written down your VALUES. Values are what you really live life around. They are not opinions, nor beliefs that can change over time, and indeed regularly for some, but deeper set aspects of who you are. Your values may be one of many: happiness, health, helping others, protecting our planet, providing for yourself and/or family, career, status in work or life, a big house, honesty and more. Try to think on your top five values, the values that drive how you behave on any day in life, at home, work and in the street. Try writing them down below and it's OK to revisit them as you progress through the book and to rewrite them. You'll read quite a lot about values in the book.

Value

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

And now for the second question to get us started. I'd like to deal with the wide subject of happiness and peace. Although they are different, they are also intrinsically linked. Try to think over the

last six months and write down five times when you've been really happy. By that I mean you were truly you, able to belly laugh or just marvel at the moment. Try to pick a time that wasn't a party with alcohol, as this can be a false happy at times. Write these down below. Go on get your pen out.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now for the last question and it deals with peace. We are at peace with ourselves and surroundings at (I find) rare moments, but critical moments to cherish and revisit. They may be similar to when you are happy, but may well also be, and for me they are, different. So now try to think carefully and go back over the last six months or even a year and describe below three places, circumstances or moments when you have felt real, noticeable peace with yourself and surroundings.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Enough questions, let's move on. And if you did answer them in writing or even just in your mind, thank you.



*A drawing from a time during my early stages of recovery. This book does look at my experience with suicidal thoughts that were extreme at times. This drawing shows a hole in the ground representing a grave with colours bursting out of the hole. To me this was me freeing myself of the consistent thoughts of ending my life.*

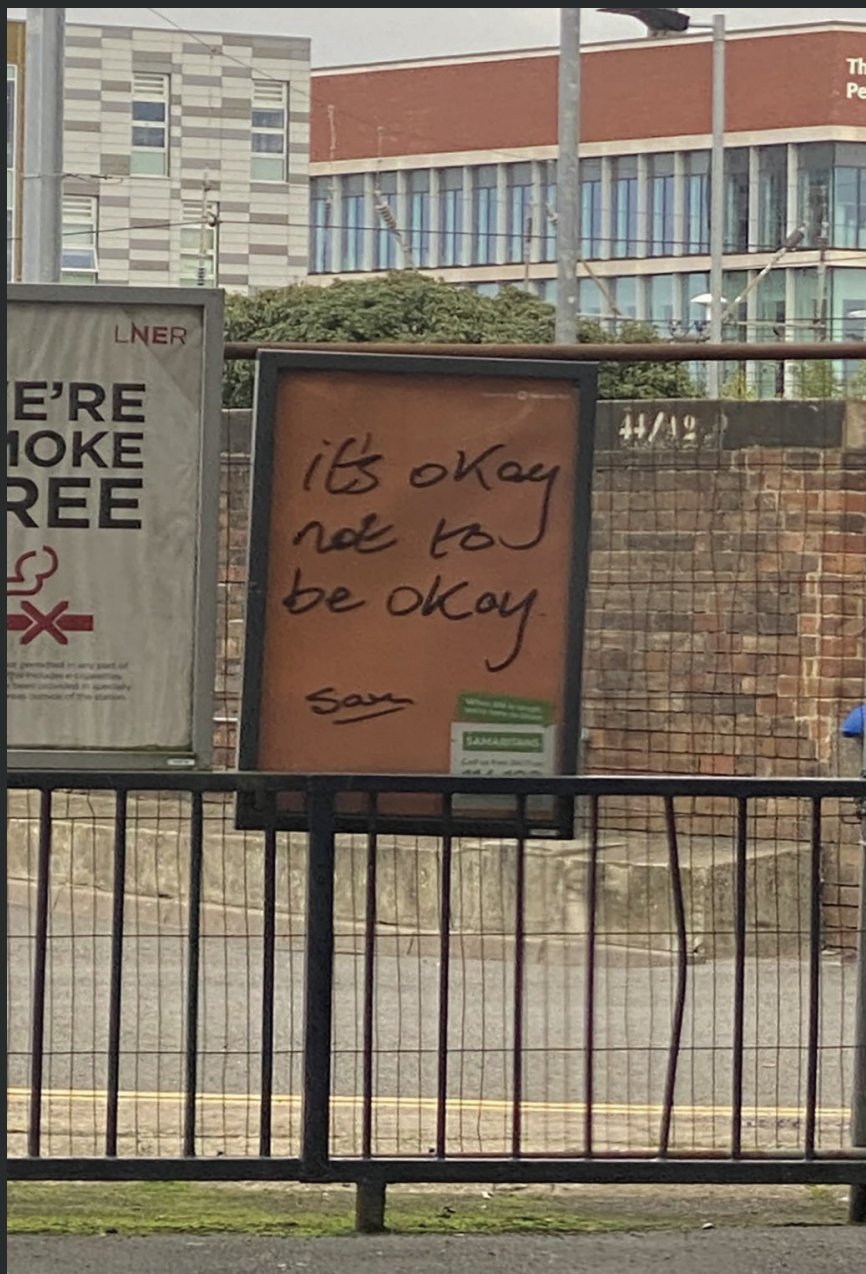
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# GOALS OF THIS BOOK



If you read my first book, welcome back, and in any case welcome to my world. I was clear in the first book, I'm not a psychologist, psychiatrist or any sort of qualified person on the general subject of mental illness. I've done a lot of reading and talking to qualified people and others who have and do suffer from depression and anxiety, but this book is about my experience, making reference to my world and life. Where I have chosen to use references, don't worry there won't be many, I'll be very clear on where the information comes from.

*The goal of this book* is to tell my continuing story towards helping those who suffer from depression and anxiety to understand you are not on your own and those of you who don't to understand how others may feel on a day to day and longer-term basis. I've learned so much more about myself this time around that I think I have a fundamentally different story to tell.

Unlike the first book, the emphasis is not just on symptoms and experience, but on lessons.

After 2019, I've come to see that I didn't really learn much, I fooled myself that I had learned, but I fell into the same traps. Yes, I was open about my depression, talked and wrote openly but I didn't internalise the learnings that I wrote and spoke about. In this book, I will *focus on what I've learned*, and will summarise these as best I can at the end of each chapter.

## **I fooled myself that I had learned**



Alike the first book, the chapters are short on purpose, and broken up by different text orientation, size, colour and this time illustrations, as depression and anxiety shorten my attention span as well as cause me to forget where I left the book last time. Hopefully by breaking up the book to make it easier to read, put down and pick up. Maybe I should buy a book mark or maybe I have ADHD (more on that later).

As for the formatting, give me a break here please. It's all my work, and I could be so much better at formatting with a lot more practice. But time moves on and I wanted to publish this book.

The illustrations and poems that intersperse the book were drawn and written in different stages of my depression and on different days, bad and really bad, and talk to my mind and how it was working. On these days I found it easier to draw and write poetry than to talk to anybody. Some are 'dark' and I apologise for this, but were a real reflection of my mind or mood on that day.

I talk about 'talking' many times in this book. Even after writing this and the previous book, publishing a web page, YouTube videos and many psychology sessions, there are days where I would still rather not talk about my state of mind, and the old fashioned, stigma ridden me, fears people's reactions.

But talk I do, a few would say way too much, and *I'll go on shouting loud* to destroy the stigma associated with mental illness in society and notably the work place, as I can almost guarantee that as you read this book you can think of those around you at home and if you work, in work who may benefit from a kind word and just being listened to.

I use the analogy of climbing and falling down a hill many times in this book, as being a keen walker, this is exactly how it feels to me, uphill is good but it's never a straight climb and downhill is bad, and a free fall downhill is out right dangerous. Being a

runner and at that somebody who loves to find the lesser used tracks, I well used to trip and falling, and its hurts a hell of lot more when you fall downhill.

I apologise that the words “I” and “me” are too prominent in this book, as I like to refer to “we” normally, as few achievements in life are down to one person and certainly most of my achievements in life have been down to wonderful family, friends and colleagues around me. However, this is a book about my personal experience, hence these pronouns are to the fore.

The theme of music and singing hasn't been completely lost in this book from Book I Sing Through It. At the end of each chapter, I've listed a few of the songs that were high on the playlist at the time or that my mind associates with the chapter. Is the association always logical, no its not, but it's how my mind works and one thing that I can vouch to is that although we are all so similar as humans every mind is slightly different just as every DNA strand will be slightly different. Now my music taste will also be drastically different to yours, and that's just how you and I are, so you may know some of the music, others you won't know and you may hate them all. They are simply songs and music I listened to and some that I sang at the time. I would love to hear from you and on songs that come to mind reading the book, or songs that have been on your playlist in similar times to those described in the chapters so I can start to compile a play list for the chapters that I can put up on the web page Singthroughtit.co.uk and maybe in Edition 2 of this book in maybe a years' time.

Very sadly, I'm starting to write this book on a train from Edinburgh to London, and we're stuck at York because of a suicide on the line just outside York, a stark reminder of how widespread mental illness is and just what the depth of illness can drive someone to.

## **Lessons**

I'm passionate about helping people with mental illness not only because of my experience but also:

- One in four people experience mental health issues each year in the UK
- At any given time, one in six working-age adults have symptoms associated with mental ill health
- Seven hundred and ninety-two million people are affected by mental health issues worldwide
- Mental illness is the second-largest source of burden of disease in England.
- Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45 in the UK, and a significant killer of women and please never forget the children.

## **Songs and music**

- Mabel OK (anxiety Anthem),
- Sigrid Bad Life

*Hello there  
You can't creep up on me now  
I can feel you near me  
Your tiredness  
Hopelessness  
Worthless  
Unloved  
Fear for future  
Ooze from your being*

*I recognised you  
Yesterday and today  
I'll vanquish you  
To the far-flung corners  
Of my non present brain  
With chains that may hold you  
If I keep them strong*

# WHERE WE ENDED LAST TIME



At the end of my last book, I was on the up, albeit a bumpy road upwards. In 2019 I had been signed off work for acute depression, and had recognised that I had suffered from depression much of my adult life.

But in 2021 when I published the book “Sing Through It”, life was good, I had accepted a new job in Edinburgh in Scotland with an amazing company, whose values were aligned with my own, a massive step forward after some previous work experiences where a misalignment of values had led to conflict, less than optimal performance and eventually parting of ways.

As I had progressed through the interview stages for the company, I took the job with, I was open and honest on my previous depressive episode and underwent a thorough occupational health assessment prior to be allowed to sign the contract, a sound move from the company for both our good health. With approval of occupational health doctors, I was adjudged fit to take on this senior role, and was in no doubt in my own mind as to my fitness to assume the role.

I was singing again (increasingly), relationships were strengthening and whereas there were hard days, there were no really bad days, the like of “I don’t want to be here” days. The depression felt like it was almost gone, but the anxiety was there at times, but not so much associated with work.

*I had come to terms with the term “I’m ill”* and that I was still recovering from my illness being depression and anxiety. I could see a future and was planning for the coming years working and eventually retirement, and making holiday plans. “Happy”, “look forward to”, “enjoy”, were all words that were increasingly figuring in my vocabulary and were mindsets and moods I was starting to experience again, after a number of years of being miserable and numb from depression.

I knew that I had to take care not to slip backwards and was gradually lowering the doses of medications I was on. I had gone from twenty to ten milligrams of one medicine (antidepressant) and three hundred to one hundred and fifty milligrams of a mood stabiliser, and had had a few bumpy days close to the change but no big setbacks, nor even wobbles.

I was working hard, but not crazy hard, as before. I was pacing myself (sort of), planning ahead, giving my team space to work and grow and was part of the senior leadership of the company and had done my first presentation to the Board of Directors. There was only a slight “imposter feeling” at the leadership table, but not due to anybody but me, as I came to terms with my own confidence in my capabilities, after decades of needless doubt.

## **Decades of needless doubt**

We were making significant needed change to how the company was operating, preparing for a developing strategy and I was the initiator and in the centre of the change. It was comfortable but challenging and I was having a blast. I was not pushing against closed doors to make improvements, as before, but being invited to push them open by a receptive and open-minded Executive Management.

The teams I was working with were aligned on goals and as much as can be the case in any company we all spoke with one voice. I was enjoying working again, indeed for the first time in a number of years.

*The road ahead was clearing and I knew the direction it was going in.*

## **Lessons**

I had suffered from imposter syndrome most of my working life, despite rising through the ranks, I never saw myself as good as peers and suffered decades of needless self-doubt, as I was as good as my peers, and in some cases better.

The term “ill” has been a struggle at times but I’ve come to terms with it, mental illness is ill, alike any physical illness.

The feeling of guilt for so many things in my past has filled my head for too long.

## **Songs and music**

- Carlos Vives, Fruta Fresca (Fresh fruit),
- Santana, Maria Maria (feat. The Product G&B),
- Music of the night from Phantom of the Opera



# DESPAIR CREEPING BACK

## EXPERIENCE 1



It was about August of 2021 that *I started to recognize a familiar feeling of despair* creeping in, accompanied by the fatigue and fog that comes alongside the despair. Yes, I was feeling the increased symptoms of depression and anxiety again.

## Fatigue and fog alongside the despair

I had been taking care, working sensible hours and stepping away from areas of the business where I may have had experience but weren't my domain, basically staying in my 'swim lane', all lessons from my last deep depressive episode. I was running and going to the gym, but the alcohol was creeping back into my life increasingly as a coping mechanism.

We had bought a family home in the South of England and there was lots of work to be done as well as support needed for the (big) children as they progressed through critical times in their lives.

COVID 19, the pandemic was ongoing with all the restrictions that that brought, hence I was alone in the office predominately and mostly at home in the evenings and weekends. I noted in the first book that I'm not great on my own, and this was a learning and acknowledgement I made in 2020 whilst writing the first book.

The big difference between 2021 and 2019 was the recognition of the symptoms and the clear association of the symptoms with an illness that had been previously diagnosed and that I was still recovering from. This gave me a certain advantage over past episodes, I thought.

I knew I had to slow down a little and start to open up and talk about the symptoms creeping in, to stop the decline and prevent losing more of my life to depression.

By this time in 2021, I had written a book, published a website, spoken openly in the company and with family and friends about

my depression and anxiety. It was no secret, which made opening up a little easier. I say a little, as the biggest disappointment was my own. I was frustrated that here I was again on a downward and steepening hill. I was frustrated, and use the term I read on many sites on depression and anxiety *"I don't deserve this illness"*. That means I was not worthy of it. I have a job, a family, a home, a future, some funds behind me, and yet here I was again.

In the part of my role that involved safety in my earlier career there was a strong focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Maslow, a well-recognised psychologist, stated that people's aims are self-actualization, or a state of happiness and peace, content with one's existence. He surmised that a person first needs food and water, then shelter and protection. Armed with these a person needs love and community, which enables self-esteem and eventually a sense of contentment in life.

I remember many years ago, working in India. I would walk to work for the three months I worked there and pass by villages on the beach of subsistence fishermen. These people were in any sense of the word, economically poor, living in huts, battered by monsoon rains, the heat and sea winds. They earned enough to sustain a basic way of life and had very limited access to healthcare. Yet, outwardly, as I acknowledge I only stopped and spoke to the elders a few times, they were a content people. They laughed, had a strong sense of community and worked hard each day. The children were fun and respectful of older people and were given a basic education. Now, as I said, I only maybe had a maximum of a couple of hours talking to the elders in my time in India and hence there were undoubtedly hardships and many problems I was not able to see, nor that they wanted me to see, however, how could people like this be content with a life and me not be happy and content with the relative wealth that I have?

And so, on top of the guilt there lies a sense of failure that I fail

to hold myself in high esteem and am a fundamentally not very happy person.

As I started to fall, the only person to see it start again and to suffer the brunt of it again was my wife, who was bouncing up and down from Scotland to London within the restrictions COVID put on travel, hence spending long periods in London. This has been an ongoing pattern over the decades, those closer to me, living in the house with me, suffering the most.

My children were all based in London and so thankfully were spared the deeper impact of this decline although were blatantly aware the drink was creeping back into my life.

## ***As the depression invaded deeper***

I knew that my positive coping strategies were critical, but struggled to maintain them. The first coping mechanism to go was the music, at least the great and happy music. I increasingly filled my playlists with songs that triggered emotion, mostly sadness, regularly tearing up or just breaking down listening to songs.

## **The emotion made me feel alive for a while**

The emotion made me feel alive for a while, a break from the monotonous numbness I was starting to feel. But as the depression invaded deeper even this music faded away. I sang some nights fuelled by wine, loud and probably not well. I must have sounded like a cat with a sore throat.

Thankfully the building I was living in was large and empty and so I was not disturbing anybody, except the cats and foxes outside. There were nights I recall where this singing helped to tire me and again fuelled by alcohol, the fatigue of depression and tired from

singing I slept fitful nights.

In October of 2021, I contacted and starting seeing a psychologist in Edinburgh, to talk through what was happening. From my last big dip, I knew I had bottled everything up for way too long. Talking was good; however, I was not disciplined planning the sessions and there were long breaks between sessions. It may sound strange, but even arranging these appointments, that were part of the treatment for the condition was simply too hard for my anxious and depressed mind to handle. It fell into the category of administration of life, which has never been my strong side, but with depression, the emails and calls made me overly anxious.

And so, the negative swirling thoughts regularly weighed me down and forced “shut down mode” or the simple need to sleep.

## **Lessons**

After 2019 and my depressive episode I never sat and internalized the lessons I had learned.

We are all different, but the symptoms of depression and anxiety are very similar for many of us, and recognizing this and that many people get better and live depression free lives is important.

The biggest guilt lies around strained and ruined relationships as well as a guilt of feeling depressed when there are so many people less fortunate and more deserving of the illness than me. Not true – depression and other mental illnesses are out there and the guilt doesn't help nor is it justified.

## **Songs and music**

- David Bowie, Lazarus
- Silvio Rodriguez – Sueño con Serpientes (I dream with snakes)
- James Blunt, I can't hear the music,
- Bruce Springsteen, Streets of Philadelphia

**THE WORLD WAS GETTING DARKER**

## **EXPERIENCE 2**





Christmas 2021 comes and goes with me jumping up and down from Edinburgh to London to spend time with family, again hampered and rightly so by the ongoing pandemic restrictions.

## *Sliding down hill*

I'll talk later about a bundle of joy and "therapy" that came into our family just before Christmas 2021, as our dog has been a significant part of my recovery.



I won't be using his name as he hasn't been able to give written consent for this to be released.

By this time the alcohol was getting the upper hand, and as the title of this chapter suggests, the brakes were off and I was sliding down hill. I knew the direction of travel and told myself I could control it, and was too slow to admit the brakes weren't working.

## **Singing was and still is a good thermometer of my mood and depression**

*Singing* was getting harder and harder to do, and when I did it was often alcohol fuelled and sad songs at that. I sang, cried, slept and then didn't sleep at all many nights. I was listening to less music, finding that music would trigger a range of emotions that I didn't want. I spoke in Book I about music and singing being a good thermometer of my mood, and this had and has not changed. No music is an indicator of a very low mood and times.

I had bought myself a good quality microphone and had a free mixing software downloaded on my computer and spent nights mixing and deleting songs, maybe keeping one or two, all sad songs that reflected how I felt. I've still got the base recordings on my computer, and most are not good and/or mixed with breaks when I broke down.

*Sleep* has never been as good as it should be for me. As a child I slept little, suffering asthma attacks or just laboured breathing at night. Then university and out to work, in a job where I could work forty-eight or more hours without sleep. I have come to accept insomnia as a way of life over the years and even embraced it at times as some of my best ideas and thought processes have occurred at night. I had times where I stressed at night because I couldn't shut off, but got used to getting up and doing something productive that isn't the best advice but was my way of filling this frustrating time.

However, as I went downwards even given my usual poor sleep pattern sleeping at night was becoming increasingly difficult and broken, leaving me tired in the mornings and throughout the day.



Even on days when I had slept, I woke up tired and struggled to get going.

Coffee was my answer in the morning. Three strong cups would shake me into action but as the caffeine wore off, the fatigue returned. And so, some days I just carried on drinking coffee to get through the day. Six cups were an easy number for me to drink and all of medium or higher strength. Yes, I was jumpy some afternoons, feeling super switched on, with a little confusion and bouncier than Tigger (from the books Winnie the Pooh, if you're not familiar with my favourite cartoon character). I suppose this was also not a great help in the sleep arena.

I was intent on maintaining my work hours and keeping the quality of my delivery up to my standards and that of my team as well. I've always been tough on myself to deliver what I promise and now was no different.

After lunch is a difficult time for our bodies anyway and the fatigue from just needing to shut down after lunch for me was overpowering. I would time my lunch for this period, and would walk out and around the area to pass the time, hopefully until the deep fatigue passed, which it did some days. I had a favourite bench, overlooking Edinburgh Castle, but away from the road and noise, where I would find some form of peace, and occasionally just close my eyes to rest my mind.

**Struggled with the  
term "ill" again**

*My moods* were swinging underneath my game face and out of work I was finding it hard to deliver much. Administrative (admin) tasks were building up behind me worrying more, as I knew it was only time until I couldn't control the downhill slide.

*Little jobs building up* - I had let some administration slip in the office and was struggling to get to smaller tasks and knew it was time to say something.

I wrote a note to my team explaining the situation and how my behaviours may be different and that I would appreciate their help whilst I climbed back up. This was a step forward for me in honesty over my condition, but I owed it to my team to be honest in case my behaviours spilled outside my “game face”, and I maybe missed a meeting or came in late/left early.

## **The stigma of weakness that is so widely held associated with mental illness**

There was widespread support and many of my team members got behind me. I knew that for people who had not been around mental illness before it may be struggle to comprehend how an outwardly fit and articulate person who was delivering on big projects and taking decisions based on limited information could actually be ill, and I empathised here, as I had many days struggled with the term “ill”. And then there was outright aggression included in the responses, but only from one person, who made it clear that this was made up and didn’t exist. But their voice was drowned out by support, and in any case, I was used to the stigma and ill-informed responses.

It’s interesting to me, as somebody who has always enjoyed observing people, how some people’s behaviours subtly change as soon as they understand somebody is suffering from mental illness, as it is less frequently with physical illnesses. Eyes, face and body language change, if words don’t and they give away empathy, concern, unease and in some cases the stigma and impression the person has of weakness that is so widely and wrongly held associated with mental illness.

I’ll talk a little later about mental health first aid, a course I put

myself through and the importance of training as many people as possible in this critical subject.

I have come to learn the term High Performing Depression which is where a person can continue to perform at high level of performance but be breaking or broken inside, *with a tried and tested game face* in front of others, and this very much explains how I was operating at the time.

*Short term memory loss* – I've never been the greatest at memory games and remembering names comes hard. This is an embarrassing state as I can see a person after years and remember a face and a place, but names, that's another issue. Numbers, such as codes, telephone numbers etc. tend to stick.

A side story and lighter side to this inability to recall names occurred many years ago. As a junior engineer, I was offshore the Netherlands sector of the North Sea and was there to blow the holes in an oil well to enable the oil to flow to surface (using perforating guns). I was a geology graduate and looked at the well logs and was not happy that blowing the holes at the level determined by the client company was the right place. I contacted my company onshore and was told they would speak to the company concerned. However, the client representative or Company Man on the offshore rig was unhappy with me causing a delay and threw me off on the next boat to town. This was punishment enough as the boat ride was sixteen hours through rough seas and I was sea sick, very sick.

Years later, in Colombia, I was asked by the same company to undertake an organisational review as they felt they could make changes to optimize their in-country capability. I was given a list of names of people to interview of which I knew a few through professional and social circles, but by no means all the names. Now optimization can mean many things, including downsizing

and there was disquiet in the office knowing my remit.

I embarked on the interview process to learn as much as possible and about half way through walked into the office of a now senior person in the organization and whereas he didn't recognise me, I recognised him and yes now there was a name and a face. I asked him openly if he remembered me from the past, which was met with a blank and rather haughty look, until I reminded him of the circumstances of our last meeting. I'll not share the outcome of the process; however, this was a fun moment. Is that wrong to call it fun?

Getting back to the situation in hand, I knew I was starting to forget numbers and names more than usual, however my work duties remained little unaffected. I would see a familiar person walking through the corridor and struggle to get a name, and would forget names of places I commonly visited. Telephone numbers I knew were gone and I could jumble my words at times. I managed to make a joke of this when it occurred and had I not associated this with depression, I would worry about early onset dementia, having seen my father go in this direction.

**Smiling through despair was  
just part of my game face**

*The smile was gone* – as the fall continued and more days were filled with despair, I found the emotions of joy, happy and my smile less frequent, with the smile forced much of the time. Smiling through despair was just part of my game face, and I was good at my game face. I speak about this in a video on my website where I try to explain what putting on a Game Face feels like.

## **Lessons**

I rushed back to work and life too quickly not giving enough time for recovery.

Singing was and is an important thermometer of my mood and depth of depression. Singing without the fuel of alcohol is the real thermometer.

As I fell, I allowed the positive coping mechanisms to fall away, such as exercise and singing and allowed alcohol to replace them. This is like warm air rising and cool air flooding in to replace it, it's going to lead to something bad.

I have a tried and tested GAME FACE that I use to hide my real mood, how I am, and indeed I use it in-front of family and friends.

## **Songs and music**

- Chris Daughtry, Breakdown
- Barbara Streisand, Send in the Clowns
- Barbara Streisand, Papa can you hear me (from the musical Yentl),
- Cristina Aguilera, Hurt

*The world weighs me down again  
Got up, tick, showered and shaved tick  
First coffee, its good, tastes right  
But the tiredness and weight of depression, anxiety  
Confusion, overload flows over me*

*No punch, freight train just a wave flooding over my  
head  
I love the sea  
Words "love" "enjoy" "can't wait" lost friends in a dim  
past  
And an impossible future  
They're just out there*

*Now I'll walk out the door  
Retinal sun warms me  
Birds and green remind me  
Of the world outside my boundaries  
In the office door  
Log on computer and brain  
And all is normal  
Smiles, support, happy, normal,  
Decision, clarity.*

*Normal fades fast when not needed*

*Shut down mode hits hard  
No wave  
No pattern, just there*

*Continued*

*Fogging my head  
Confusing my brain  
Part of brain, entangled in my brain*

*Shut down mode hits hard  
No wave  
No pattern, just there  
Fogging my head  
Confusing my brain  
Part of brain, entangled in my brain  
Fight as I can, I know it has to win, shut down  
needed.*

*Dark, quiet, I crave and need.  
I "look forward" to the dark  
Silent world of warm bed, floor, sofa, anything  
Sleep*

*Ever there waiting  
I know there's a better way  
Life, world, better than normal  
I hope it's there  
I want to find it*

*I'll lift up my head, look forward  
and peer into the fog and tangle  
To see "enjoy" and "can't wait" again  
Distant but there*

# LAST DITCH EFFORT TO STOP THE FALL

## LESSON 1





Towards the end of February 2021, I booked a hurried dive trip, remembering that back in 2020 a dive trip to the Philippines had been a major turning point.

Yes, I hear you say, the lucky man can book a dive trip as part of his recovery, and this is not lost on me. I know that as a result of my past fortune of holding down senior roles on multiple continents I do have some funds behind me. But I have a mortgage and other debt just as many of you have, and the trip was to a local island in the Maldives meaning nightly costs were minimal (thirty UK pounds) and to add to that because the Maldives is a Muslim nation, on local islands there is no alcohol.

The goal was to spend as much time diving with sharks as possible as well as swimming amongst amazing Indian Ocean reefs and the myriad of creatures of all colours that inhabit these reefs.

So, I travelled, loved the quiet and understated and wonderful hospitality of the islanders of Fuvamullah and notably the owner of the guest house, Salih. A self-made, humble man who has come home to invest his money at home on the island that he was born on.

Oh yes and the diving was incredible. Three-meter tiger sharks at an arm's length or less at times and at no time was I worried about being breakfast, lunch or dinner, or even a snack. I worried one of them may try to take my camera, as they have been known to in other locations, but none did. This action of taking a camera talks to the inquisitive nature of these sharks, indeed most shark species and biting is their way of asking "what is this and does it taste good?". And the sharks were sneaky as well. They would approach us from behind mounds of reef and follow us off the reef over the drop off to the deep. Far from being scared of this behaviour I marvelled at it, that these were animals that had learned how to be around divers and were constantly inquisitive. At times, the way they followed us off the reef and quietly swam through

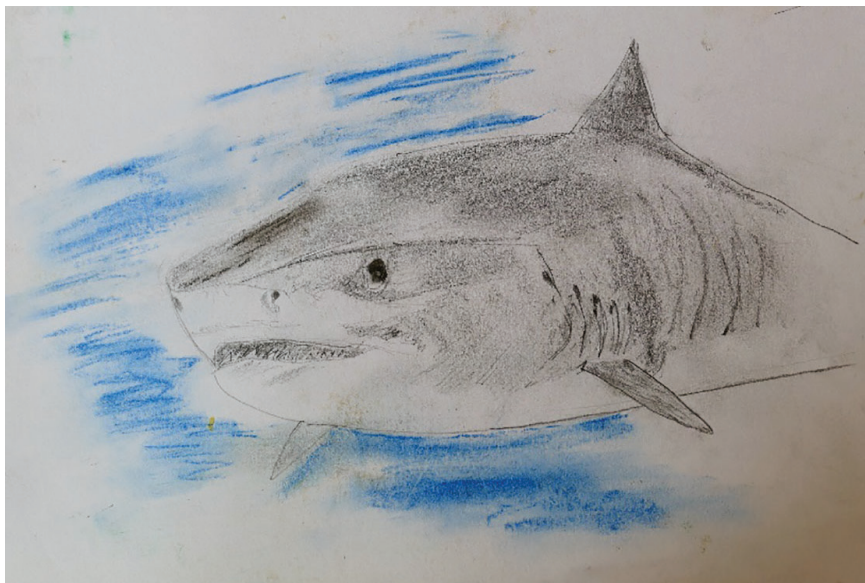
a group of us, making us get out of their way it was almost like a game, something they enjoyed. I could write for days about sharks and my love for the hundreds of species, of which I have seen too few at this age, but that's not the point of this book and I'm no specialist. Needless to say, I'm now hooked and planning more dives with big sharks.

To indicate the different person I am under water, on the first dive of day one, I went deeper than I maybe should have done on day one, but there was the possibility of thresher sharks at depth. Deep, jet lag and tiredness were a rotten combination and although it sounds and indeed is gross as I ascended, I felt nauseous and started to vomit (sorry) under water. Rule number one underwater is never stop breathing (pretty intuitive) and my rule in all situations, is never to panic. My above water self may have become anxious about this horrible scenario, but the me that was underwater continued this vomiting for another five minutes whilst I did an extended safety stop to get more nitrogen out of my body. On surface, I was probably green, to the amusement of my dive buddies when they reached surface, as there is little sympathy on a dive boat amongst experienced divers, unless there is a real problem that is, and then they are all caring and helping.

Despite the eventual outcome of the trip, I'll never lose the mental images of this trip. I'll talk more about creating memories later in the book, they are important.

Oh yes and there is a tattoo of this "puppy" on my right arm (my only tattoo), but don't tell anybody.

Diving is not just about being underwater. There is a quiet (and sometimes outright noisy) comradery amongst divers, who revel in swapping adventures and silly stories and this trip was no different. Divers from multiple countries were on the same boat, all for one reason, to dive with big sharks and have fun.



I found myself speaking more Spanish than English on this trip, with a wonderful, sarcastic and comic group on the dive boat from the Canary Islands and a sweet young couple in the guest house from mainland Spain.

It was about day three of nine that the first people on the boat started to miss dives from a flu like bug. People had tested negative for COVID before travelling and were testing themselves on the trip, and were showing negative, so despite feeling rough, we carried on diving as this was a trip not to be spoiled.

Now this is against everything in the rule book, notably when you have a blocked nose as you can do serious damage to your ear drums and sinuses. On about day five, I started to feel rough and took a day off diving to recover. On day six, I was back underwater. Despite negative COVID tests, as is the way with COVID we did indeed all have, at least I did, have COVID. By the end of the trip, I was feeling better and travelled back to the UK.

## The trip had turned into one that would set me spiralling downwards

On arrival and getting home, I started to go downhill again from the virus, clearly having abused it in many ways. Also, on arrival I got my first positive test result for COVID. Taking any virus for granted is not a good idea and despite being fully vaccinated my body was knocked sideways by the COVID as was my mental state. Research during and after the COVID pandemic has clearly linked COVID with having the potential to trigger depression and anxiety or the return of previously suffered mental health conditions.

Far from being an intervention to set me on the upward path with my depression the trip had turned into one that would set me spiralling downwards.

Here in lies a lesson not learned from my father. He was a hard-working experienced bank manager working in a bank in London. My dad was a positive person, kind, calm and deliberate in what he said. He had grown up in war years and times of shortages and appreciated what he had in life, as a result of his hard work.

But work pressures built up on him over time and politics increased in a previously good environment. He caught the flu (influenza) and was in bed for a couple of days, but wanted to return to work as soon as humanly possible and that he did. But in a stressed state, still suffering from the flu, he was helped home very soon afterwards by a work colleague unable to function and was forced to take a number of months off work, with a total mental breakdown.

In the weeks after the trip to the Maldives, I was consistently tired and my body ached, and I was sleeping more in the day time, but at night my brain went into a never-ending loop of thoughts. They weren't all bad, but mostly bad or negative thoughts. Thoughts of not being able to work, financial crisis worries, not being able to

pay the mortgage, how people would see me if I “failed” again with depression.

This last thought is an interesting one, as in 2019 I was still undiagnosed and could tell myself I had an undiagnosed illness (when I became easier calling it an illness). But here I was in 2021, working in a job I enjoyed with people who I enjoyed working with, and although I was suffering with the same illness, my mind focused on the word “failure”. I’ll talk a lot about how my mind treats this illness in later chapters, as I now accept that I have an illness, which maybe, in some form, with me for the rest of my life and recognizing this and not making many of the same mistakes is going to be important to keep it at arms-length.

## **Lessons**

I left it too late to try to stop the fall and escaping from every trigger was not the wisest way to arrest the fall.

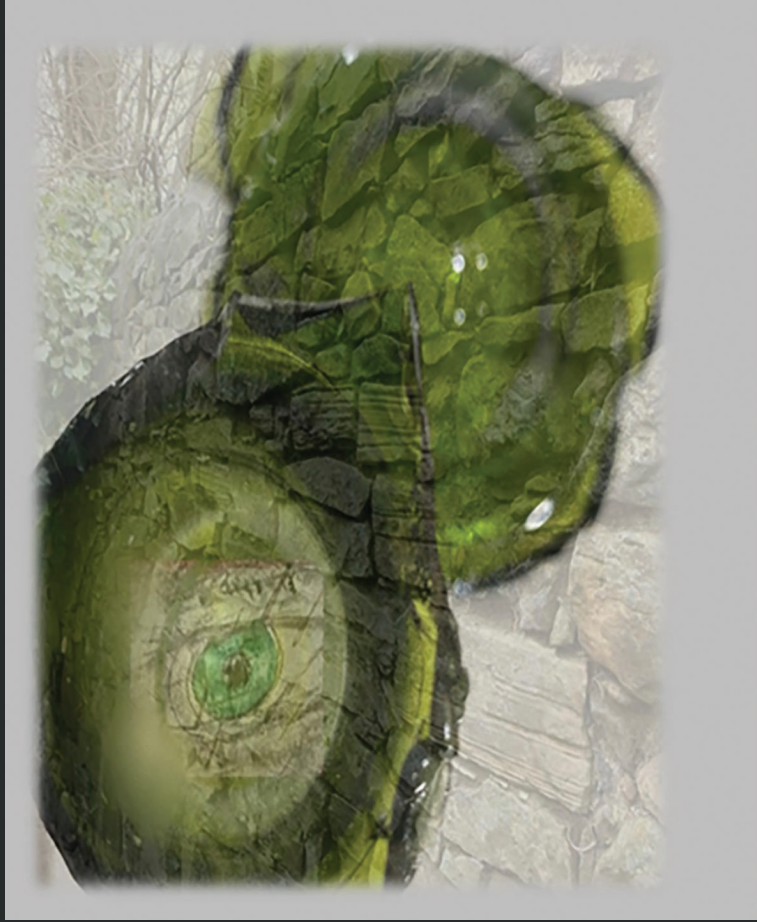
Viruses are dangerous, notably if you suffer from mental illness such as depression. If you abuse them, they can push you further down, indeed they can be the breaking point. BEWARE.

## **Songs and music**

- Beyonce, I was here
- Queen, The Show must go on
- Pink Floyd, Another brick in the wall

# ALCOHOL A POOR CULTURE

## LESSON 2



I can't write this nor any book without talking about my negative coping strategy.

As my fall steepened and I started losing the drive to undertake my usual coping strategies I started to rely more and more on alcohol to fill the void, a self-defeating strategy as I knew, but I saw few alternatives. Alcohol is a depressant and whereas the first two glasses may lift the fog and bring some respite from the despair, the ultimate impact is always going to be the same, greater depth of depression, that night or the next day, and not to mention the longer-term impacts of bombarding my body with poison.

**I was part of this drinking culture  
and lived it to the full**

I discussed this at length with my psychologist over the progressing months and we spoke on the “drinking culture” that many of us grow up in, notably in the UK, where alcohol is seen a pre-requisite for a good time/enjoyment, rather than looking to just have fun without the influence of alcohol.

As a youngster I played cricket and rugby at clubs and at the age of fourteen was invited to put my money in the kitty or drinks jar, was given a pint glass and had my glass filled as the jars of beer came around. This was not bad upbringing by my parents, nor bad influence from my older brothers, it was how things were, an accepted way of life.

The only saving grace in this latest depressive episode was the total lack of spirits from the drinks mix, no whisky, vodka nor others. It was focused on wine mostly with gluten free beer in the mix. In addition, it wasn't every night, maybe three nights a week. I was waking up with hangovers and battling through the mornings at work at least once a week. And this pattern was one



that I told myself was more acceptable than the 2019 episode. It wasn't, I was needing the alcohol.

***I was good, my game face had been developed over many years***

I knew the direction had changed and was desperate to turn it around, but couldn't manage this alone. *I was ashamed, falling into my own trap of hardening my "game face"*, the veneer that the world saw. But I was good, my game face had been developed over many years and so I drove on with the world oblivious to the negative thoughts and hopelessness that were invading my core.

***I was ashamed***

After a particularly bad weekend, meaning I had drunk too much, I turned up at work, not quite knowing which way to turn. I went out at lunch to escape my own worries. I had to do something and thought I'd look up Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a potential manner to intervene. As fate would have it, there was a session that day in a hall of a church almost across the road from the office.

Now knowing what to expect I turned up a little late and took my seat at the back and listened to person after person starting with the phrase "hi I'm ----- and I'm an alcoholic". To describe the feeling of pure panic as it got closer to me would be an understatement.

Finally, it got to me and here I was *"Hi I'm John and I'm an alcoholic"* kind of came out. I explained I'd been battling alcohol for years and that I literally had less than twenty-four hours since



my last drink.

The stories I listened to were heart breaking and inspiring. Inspiring people who had twenty years without a drink after losing their families and homes and having lived on streets. One story, from a smartly dressed gentleman, was particularly interesting to me. He described how he could go a week without a drink and longer, but once he started, he didn't stop, which pretty much described me. He had a number of years at AA and was in control of his relationship with alcohol, indeed he had years without a drink, but described nights alone, especially when travelling for work to be the most challenging.

The act of simply attending and feeling like I needed to attend had an impact on me. I knew I had trouble controlling my alcohol intake but had never used the word alcoholic before, although those closest to me had used this term many times.

But here's the trouble I found myself in. I could stop when I wanted to, could go many nights, even weeks without a drink, didn't drink spirits and it hadn't, to date, destroyed my life, although, had damaged relationships. I hadn't been fired, slept on the streets, so the John who makes excuses told himself, this is not for me.

## **I had no ability to look one week ahead let alone twenty years**

I had no ability to look one week ahead, let alone twenty years and was just going to be embarrassed if I couldn't live up to these inspiring people's expectations.

Reality is they had no expectations of me, didn't know me and were rooting for me, but that's depression "nobody cares about

me” is a voice that invades your brain.

And so, after just one more session I quit and went my own way downhill.

The nights I didn’t drink were spent curled up laying quietly on a sofa or the floor, with negative and self-destructive thoughts whirling around my head until I eventually slept in the hours of the morning, or sometimes until the morning when I didn’t sleep at all.

“On the floor” may sound strange, however to the constant amusement of my family I’ve always been comfortable sleeping on a floor, maybe with a pillow or rolled up coat, but it was a floor just the same. We always joked that I was brought up by wolves, as I love the outdoors, but I’m sure my Mum and brothers will counter this.

We all maybe need a moment to trigger a change and that moment can be dramatic or not. In my case it was one morning, still groggy from a night drinking I left the apartment I was in to get some shopping, and missed my footing on a step. The thud in my head as I fell backwards was shattering. That feeling of hitting your head can’t be easily described. I knew I was hurt, so picked myself up and walked back up to the apartment. I cleaned the wound as much as I thought was needed and doused it with antiseptic, but didn’t bother looking at it, primarily as it was at the back of my head. I was angry with myself for falling and not reacting fast enough to stop the fall, almost certainly still slowed by the alcohol in my system.

The following day I showered and the wound hurt like crazy. I decided to use my phone to take a picture of the wound and was shocked at the size and mess there was on my head. Now I hadn’t passed out, vomited nor other worrying symptoms of concussion, however I felt sleepy and foggy. To ensure I didn’t bother the hospital accident and emergency department in a bust time, I

went at 07:30 in the morning and was seen immediately and was so grateful. They cleaned the wound and sent me packing. For days afterwards I was foggy and had a headache, and remained angry at myself. This was my alcohol moment.

In times when I have abstained for a period of two weeks or more, which is regular now, the clarity of thought that comes with a brain not impacted by alcohol is incredible, it's like living in a different world, where I wake up and have the ability to get on with a day more quickly. Yes, there may be an early depression fog, but it lifts quicker. I miss the buzz of a few glasses of wine, but increasingly less over time. In addition, when I am not drinking, especially at weekends I feel that I am in control of my life, not the craving or addiction.

I need to get lasting control, and with the caring peer pressure when I'm in London, from my family, I can maintain control. However alone in Edinburgh I struggle to maintain control. Zero would be the best option, and I'm going in that direction, but not there yet.

Just to finish off, this chapter has been all about alcohol and its negative impacts and indeed I struggle to find a positive, however one thing I have to add is that I'm a chatty person. I love talking to people, learning about other peoples' lives and experiences, and I'm a pretty good listener. Sitting in bars has kept me above water many nights through the interaction with wonderful people. I've met so many interesting characters and inspirational people. I have become real friends with some bar staff around the globe and have valued these friendships. The key to all of this is that to enjoy the interactions and friendships, it's necessary to moderate the drink to enable you to appreciate others. Nobody wants to interact with somebody who is drunk. however nice they may be.

## **Lessons**

I struggle with alcohol and have to admit it, and until I admitted it to myself, I had little chance of addressing the problem.

Alcohol lowered the noise in my head just for a while, and then made it worse.

Drinking left me feeling guilty that I was failing myself

I now understand that my struggle with alcohol is a longer-term project and am learning to control it through taking long breaks from any alcohol and recognizing the multitude of negative impacts on my body and brain.

## **Songs and music**

- Eagles, Hotel California
- Chris Daughtry, Cry for help
- James Blunt, Same Mistake,
- Neil Diamond, Piano Man

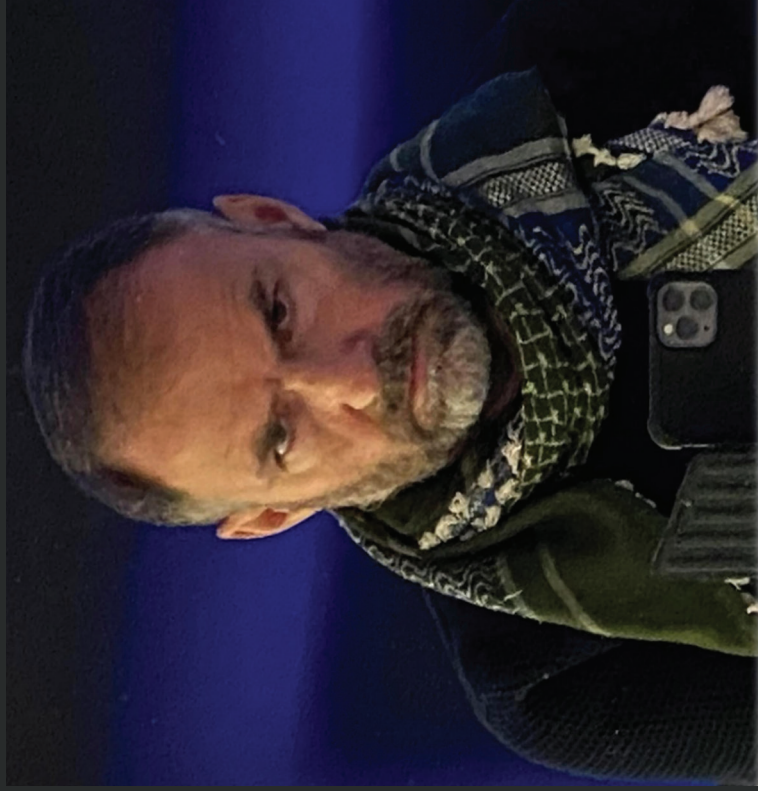
*Round and round I go  
I've tried to get off  
But it's the hotel California all over again  
Even if I've succeeded before  
The elastic pulled me back  
Slamming me into the wall of guilt and alcohol*

*Drink one, two, now I'm going  
Pop into a bar  
Noise, laughing, people  
Lonely company with a glass in my hand  
Confused as to why I'm here*

*Has my life emptied  
No, my life is full and lucky  
So why the void in my life  
A void not real but in my face  
I have to get away before the void kills me*

# EMOTION, LOVE AND SADNESS

## LESSON 3



In the first book of *Sing Through It*, I spoke briefly about emotions and relationships, but chose not to expand on the subject owing to many personal reasons at the time.

Emotion is the reaction to an event, something that has happened at that moment, in the near or distant past or even something in the future, such as an upcoming holiday. Grief can last for months or years, happiness tends to be more temporary, and so emotions can be positive or negative. But even this term negative is sometimes unfair, as negative emotions such as grief and sadness are emotions that are being expressed and are often needed. Holding back grief, or keeping negative emotions held inside over a long period of times, as I have done for years through my well-practiced game face, is damaging. The neurotransmitters released by stress bombard your brain over years causes real damage to parts of the brain as well as the pathways along which helpful and essential neurotransmitters need to travel (*Psychology Today*).

However, what if you find the positive emotion spectrum, negative emotion spectrum or indeed both blocked or repressed. This was one of the symptoms I experienced in many depressive episodes and have found that it is the most difficult of symptoms to recover from.

Let us make a clear definition between thoughts and emotions. This is maybe very obvious; however, it is possible to express no emotion whilst holding or suffering devastatingly negative or suicidal thoughts. This is why so many people express amazement at how normally or happy people are able to behave just hours before they attempt or complete suicide. The mind can be numb, hurting, spinning, but outwardly everything may appear fine. This is the GAME FACE that can be perfect as a disguise and impossible to see through. I know that through major depressive episodes colleagues and friends have consistently told me they had no idea I was suffering at all, and that was my aim, but a dangerous game to play.

I really do love my family members and a few very special friends such that them not being there would leave a hole in my life and I would struggle to live without them in my life. I have times when I can feel real love, but it's not as strong as it should be, at least that's how it feels to me. It's like love is suppressed by a dampening influence. This leads to shame and self-imposed guilt, as I consistently feel guilty that this is the case and I should feel joyous love.

## **The life I had lost to depression**

The same goes for grief and sadness. I have spoken about breaking down in tears at times, however this has been as a result of how low my mood was on that day of that week, and how sad I was for the life I had lost due to depression. Additionally, I remember being sad and close to tears watching events on the television, such as Queen Elizabeth II's coffin being driven through streets filled with mourners along the road side. But grief towards "close to me" matters is dampened. My father died in November of 2020 after a long struggle with dementia. I sat with my Mum and one of my brothers (the other was shielding during Covid for good reasons) for my dad's last few days as he slowly shut down and his breaths became less frequent and more laboured. I was sad, and we all shed tears over these days, and when my father eventually slipped away, we were heartbroken, and I fought tears to call and tell my family that he had died.

But immediately afterwards, just a matter of maybe thirty minutes, I was in operating mode, with the funeral directors, organising the funeral, the coffin, flowers and more. I found myself strangely detached from the events and able to get things done. Now this was only fair that I took on this load, after years abroad and especially the last few years where my brothers had taken the load



of helping my parents through difficult times.

I talked about mental compartmentalisation in my first book, the ability for the brain to put all other matters aside, to focus on a particular problem. This was an ability I have always had; however bad my mental state has been. Initially I associated my detached state to this compartmentalisation, however as time went on, it became clear this was just another emotional dampening occurring, suppressing my ability to grieve.

I miss my dad desperately in my life, his wisdom, humour and hugs, but I don't think I've ever been able to grieve, and this may have been a contributing factor to my depressive episode that started in 2021. I still don't think I've properly processed my dad's death even as I move into 2023.

And now let us deal with the absence or at least the weak positive emotions that I experience during depression. I spoke earlier about love for my family, and the same goes for happy and laughing because of events.

Many times, in the years abroad, and in the UK, I would get angry at myself and sometimes (unfairly) at family members when everybody else in the room was in uncontrollable laughter, or simply laughing a lot. It seemed to me that they were being silly and overreacting to a situation or event, however as I've come to analyse more of ME, it has become obvious I'm the outlier in the equation and I'm simply unable to let go and laugh, and indeed find humour where I used to.

In a later chapter I'll deal with a setback I experienced over Christmas of 2022, Just as I had started a steep upward climb feeling so much better. I had set myself expectations of how happy the festive period would be. However, it didn't turn out that way. As ever, the travelling Dad was not part of plans, and correctly so, my children all have their own lives ongoing. But then there was the inability to let go, to laugh out loud, to really enjoy aspects

of the time that I feel I should have enjoyed more. The positive emotion spectrum was dampened and it led to the period being a disappointment to me and one that pushed me back towards deeper depression, a setback.

Sadly, back to alcohol, as alcohol can encourage emotion, notably sadness and nearly always a deeper depression, however small quantities enabled me to be lighter and feel a little happier and so I drank more over the period, which I knew wouldn't help in the short, nor long term, however I did it for a few days, however stopped before the change of year to 2023, and have stayed "low to no" since.

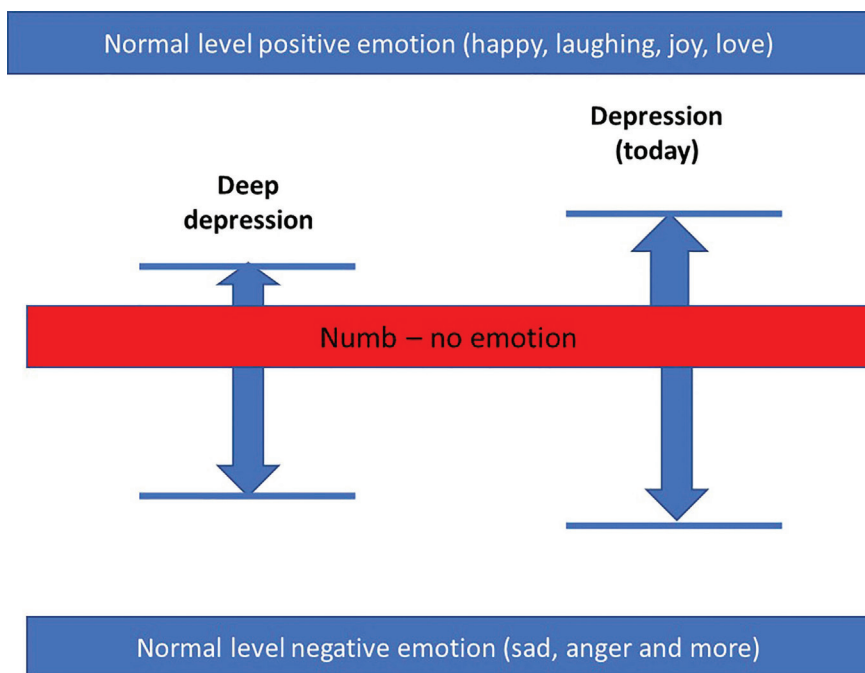
This dampened emotion or incapability to feel positive emotions was especially noted one evening in London. Unable to keep on going with fatigue and anxiety, I sat on the bed and focused on a few beautiful photos of the family and especially my children on a few memorable holidays and on local forest walks in Aberdeen.

## **I can remember the feeling of joy, through the looks on their faces**

I can remember the feeling of joy, through the looks on their faces, and remembered how wonderful it was to see them happy and enjoying life. And then I can remember the many events and times when they were happy over the years and I undoubtedly dampened this joy and happiness through my moods and that made me sad.

Being the engineer, I talk about spectrums and I can see life in graphs and the diagram below illustrates how I see my emotional state presently (writing this chapter) and during deeper depression.

Now to slightly more personal symptoms and maybe a little uncomfortable read.



A recognized symptom of depression is a lowering of sexual drive or libido. This is often an embarrassing side of depression, that is less talked about with psychologists and in books, but its real. As I took the dip in 2021 and into 2022 this symptom was clear. I wasn't interested or had significantly less interest which led to complicated relationship problems.

At this time, I still wasn't comfortable talking about this with anybody, neither psychologists nor family and indeed the drive had been low for some time.

## **Lower libido is a potential side effect of some antidepressants and indeed depression itself**

Lower libido is listed as a potential side effect of some antidepressants (*UK NHS and many other references*) however this

was lower than I had experienced in the past.

And with low libido can come varying levels of erectile dysfunction (ED). Should I be talking about this, well if I want this book to be an honest account of my depression, then yes. This problem was not drastic, but present, however following the procedure for prostate cancer in mid-2022, it was exasperated and became a frustration.

In references these symptoms of lower libido and erectile dysfunction are listed as usually persisting for a few weeks, however can last longer (UK NHS).

In my depressive state this was just another frustration, but not a constant concern, as “shut down mode” from the fatigue was a far greater concern as was the potential of not getting back to work. In addition, it is documented that as depression becomes less severe, so these symptoms can improve. Plus, I had been assured that as time passed after the prostate cancer procedure, symptoms would probably subside.

After the surgery for the cancer, I was given many good tips for making my life easier as the body healed, many of which I follow today. But one piece of advice was shall we say unpalatable. Stop drinking coffee and tea. I don't drink tea so that's easy, but the coffee, that's another question. I struggle with alcohol but not with coffee. I'm addicted and have a couple of cups after I wake up and then some during the day. I love my coffee, the taste and how it makes me feel. I don't over indulge as I don't want to be an unhealthy electric, and I know that is diuretic that dehydrates me, but it's one piece of advice I'm not following very well.

## **My symptoms are common and documented**

In researching this dampened nature for emotions I've read the

term Anhedonia, or as one person called it “emotional flatlining”. Reading these references was helpful as it reinforced to me that my symptoms are common and documented and as the depression lifts over time, should become less pronounced, and hopefully I will get to a time when I can feel joy, happy, grief and more.

## **Lessons**

I kept my dad’s death bottled up inside, and still struggle with grief and that emotion.

My symptoms are common, not unique to me, but some potentially aren’t as openly spoken about as many symptoms of mental health.

The depression dampened my emotions, both positive and negative. My ability to experience emotions such as happiness and love were dampened and even my ability to experience emotions such as grief and sadness. This dampening was impossible to explain to those closest to me but I should have tried.

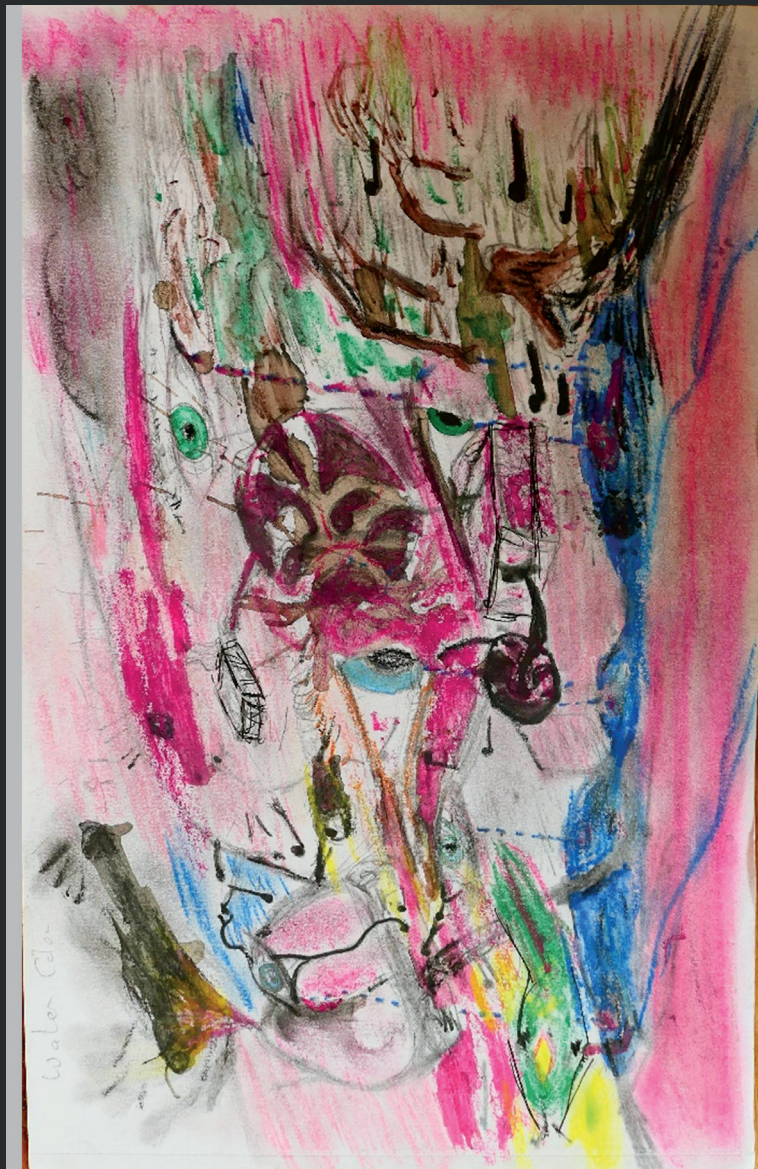
I feel I had important parts of my life to anxiety and depression and it had negatively impacted all those around me – time to change.

## **Songs and music**

- Elton John, Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word
- David Bowie Space Oddity
- A Great Big World, Say Something,
- You must love me (from the musical Evita)

# THE CALLING DAY

## EXPERIENCE 3



I arrived in the office on a morning in early April 2022, with fog filling my head, I hadn't slept for nights on end. I had no idea which way to go. My head was exploding with stress, which is a difficult to explain if you haven't experienced this. It's like a painless explosion that builds and builds. The world in front of me was a dark place with no hope for a future, the future was too difficult to contemplate in my fogged-up mind.

I knew I had to do something or go home and I had no idea what. I was depression again, John had partially disappeared and I was incapable of holding my standards, or even a conversation at times. It must have been more noticeable for those around me as my game face was crumbling.

**I couldn't control the  
symptoms, the illness  
was known**

Just in 2019, I was close to tears all the time, my brain was filled with the fog, and I was moving closer to a mindset where not being alive was the better outcome.

The difference to 2019 was I was consciously taking decisions, understanding that, although I couldn't control the symptoms, the illness was known.

The solution was to go home but to call the Doctor's office immediately on arriving home. I explained the level of fatigue and total despair. Within minutes I was called back by a doctor or a General Practitioner (GP) who was simply amazing, *a literal life saver.*

I am filled with admiration for the National Health Service (NHS) GP's as they work under incredible stress, long hours and yet can make that call to somebody like me on that day, ask the right questions, listen and take clear decisions to get their patient through. As with any profession there are better and not as good GP's, but their standards and the job they do is still amazing.



I don't recall much about the conversation, as is the case with many significant events during depressive episodes for me and others. A long conversation and clarity on my mood, which was moving fast towards suicidal, and I received clear direction from the doctor. Don't return to work and sleep. I was signed off work for two weeks by the GP and told a Sick Note would be left for me at the reception.

At this same time in 2022, I had started to experience mild symptoms that pointed towards a prostate problem. My father and one brother had suffered from prostate cancer and hence getting it checked out was a priority.

I had been to a specialist who had found an abnormality, albeit small, and who was referring me onwards for further studies. Based on the family history of cancer, I was strangely calm over the prospect of a cancer diagnosis.

That day, of being signed off, I went back to bed and slept the day, waking up regularly worried by this latest dip and the outcome, being work absence.

At some time in the afternoon, I put together a hurried email to let my boss and the Human Resources (HR) Team know where I was and the proposed time off suggested by the doctor.

The next day I went back into the office to meet with my boss and was shocked, but now thankful, by the request of the company, which was to take two months out to return to work fully recovered as well as having sorted out the cancer diagnosis and story.

## **I was ashamed I had lost control**

I walked out of the office in the same fog I had walked in, not talking to anybody, just leaving. Yes, I was still ashamed that I had



lost control, I didn't and indeed couldn't talk. I was tearful and whereas I'm not ashamed to show emotion now, at this stage of my recovery, that day it could have been a Niagara Falls of tears which would have been awkward for others and me.

Back home, I slept curled up on a sofa under covers and very much hid from the world.

## **Lessons**

I knew the depression was building and walked away from the triggers way too late (again). I had put work and money above my health (again).

I did acknowledge the increasingly steep fall by talking to colleagues which was a great help to all. It's important to explain to those around you, family, friends and colleagues that you are feeling the symptoms of mental illness and help them understand your limitations.

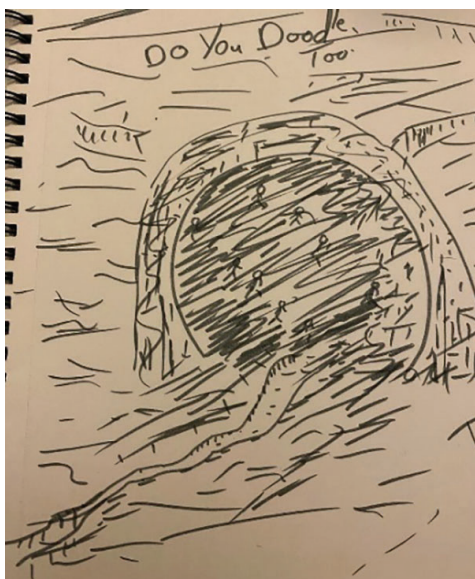
Most people want to help you in your efforts to address the illness and move forwards towards recovery, but some won't understand or won't want to. In most cases it's because they feel awkward talking about mental illness. A few may be bigoted and see you as weak. You're not, they are.

## **Songs and music**

- Lady Gaga, A Million Reasons
- Lady Gaga, I'll Never Love Again
- The Beatles, Eleanor Rigby
- The Beatles, Yesterday

*I don't remember when I doodled the doodle below. It was how I felt, like I was heading for a dark tunnel and I couldn't stop, I was being drawn to it. There were others there, as I acknowledged that I'm not alone in my anxiety and depression, however they were all trapped there with no way out.*

*The drawing below was drawn in better times and shows the tunnel full of light and life.*



*Happy, merry, joy  
Everywhere  
Streets, TV, media  
But I can't feel it  
It's out of reach*

*Of my doing  
Of relationships, friendships broken over years  
Far and near  
Longing to feel the spirit*

*A brain healing  
Regrets still strong  
A veneer over what needs to be  
Smothering the next step  
Up a hill ever steepening*

*Dips and rocks  
Stand in my way  
Words, misunderstandings, guilt  
Always there, in front of me  
To my side and following*

*Have to run faster  
Further, pushing the limits  
Outrunning barriers that always outrun me  
A day, a time to be happy  
To find beyond tonight*

# DAYS UNDER COVER

## EXPERIENCE 4



Insomnia was with me every night and I slept all day. I was in a dark place moving into a much darker place. I was moving towards suicidal, with no escape. The picture used for this chapter's first page was me trying to draw the picture of my mind struggling with dark thoughts of ending my life, no sleep, just a wisp floating in a multicoloured dark world.

## **you look into your own mind and its dark, and meaningless.**

In this book and other texts on depression and other mental illnesses, and indeed physical illnesses you will see the term “dark” many times. Dark in this sense meant no hope for the future, a futile future that delayed the end of my life, the future was ten minutes in front of me and it scared the hell out of me. Every thought was negative and part of a constant spiral downwards. It's as if you look into your own mind and its dark, and meaningless. That is what dark was for me.

On top of the negative thoughts is the spiralling mind, ever downwards. In my first book I described it alike watching an action movie at ten times speed and over and over again. It was the same.

I was alone in Edinburgh and decided to stay up in Edinburgh on my own at first, as I didn't want my children seeing me in this state, and indeed I didn't feel capable of arranging and taking a train journey. Now this does sound silly.

A train journey is:

1. Choose time and day of travel (massively overthink this)
2. Book ticket online
3. Pack bag
4. Walk to station
5. Wait for train (silence the anxiety)
6. Get on train (is my booked seat filled, who will be next to me)
7. Amuse myself (stay in control for four and half hours)
8. Get off train
9. And more
10. Get Tube
11. Get train
12. Get Taxi
13. Get home

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future (NHS).

Anxiety is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations (The charity MIND). It leads to the need to a natural reaction to fight, run or in some cases freeze. Over the years, working in a hazardous industry, living in riskier countries for security and health, I had learned to listen to my instinct or gut feel, and trusted it. However, here in this situation my gut feel was not to be fully trusted. I perceived every step of the way as frightening and my reaction was to run away. My overthinking negative brain (the anxious brain) devised every negative outcome of every step. The being on the train was the worst. How would I stay in control for this time. I could listen to music, watch a movie on my phone, draw, write poetry, but then there would be alcohol and that would be tempting to calm my brain, and that could be disasterous, or at least a step backwards that day.

And then there is the problem that I couldn't and still can't watch a series or film for long before it makes me anxious, and so I may go through multiple tries to watch something, and then resort to drawing or listening to music. I hear you "so what" but in a bad state of mind all of these scenarios were thought through and dreaded.

And so for this short period of a few weeks I stayed on my own, not talking to anybody but bar staff if I ventured out to get a drink in the long evenings of Scotland in summer. Bar staff knew me as a happy person who was chatty, and indeed I've always been chatty, however there were many nights if I ventured out where I was able just to sit, nurse a glass of wine and look inwards. I must have looked like a strange character.

The title of this chapter is "days under covers" as that is how I spent most days. A cover over my head hid the world from me and me from the world.

I was numb much of the time, unable to think of emotion, but then there were tears and uncontrollable crying when I was able to let out any emotion. There was no happy, no future, no positive takes on life and a detachment from loving relationships, relationships seen as just a part of a bigger picture, not special.

I noticed my jaw hurting from clenching my teeth so often day and night, I suffered leg cramps as I was almost certainly not drinking enough water and not taking in enough essential salts. On the funny side (I can see that now) the sofa was really too small to sleep on, so I was constantly bent up, which didn't help the cramps.

I kept the blind down most of the time, as I didn't want the outside world seeing me in any state and at night closed the window shutters, to further isolate myself from the world outside.

Staying on my own was a mistake as there was no person to even



interact with, to distract my self destructive brain. Even a short call or a few words with another person could shake me free for a while, albeit a short while. And so outside WhatsApp calls with family, phone calls with my brothers or interaction with somebody in a shop, I was in self imposed solitary confinement. This state was unhelpful and allowed me too much inward negative thought time. Now I know that you are told to establish a routine when you are off work, however I wasn't capable of setting nor keeping to a routine at this time, and so moved from day to day, sleeping in the day, frustrated at insomnia in the night spiralling downwards.

### **Lessons**

Purposely staying on my own was a mistake. Even if I wasn't talking to anybody at the family home things were happening that could duistract my mind from the negative thoughts that were there 24 hours a day.

Over the years, working in a hazardous industry, living in riskier countries for security and health, I had learned to listen to my instinct or gut feel, and trusted it. However, here in this situation my gut feel was not to be fully trusted. Anxiety was over sizing every threat.

If you are off work ill, and can establish a routine it is a good idea, and I should have put more effort into establishing some form of routine, even if I messed it up many days.

### **Songs and music**

- James Blunt, No Bravery
- Chris Daughtry, Heavy is the Crown
- Ed Sheeran, Supermarket flowers
- Robbie Williams, Angels



## PLANNING THE END

Millions of crows circle my brain.  
They mean no harm, nature  
never sets out to harm us, we're in the  
way of her.  
+ So mental illness is here it seems like  
in in life's way. Need to step aside  
away / down, off the planet she  
needs.

## EXPERIENCE 5

The rather depressing poem, if you call it that, was written on a very “dark” night for me in charcoal, as it was to hand. I was going to do some drawing, but I was simply too low in mood to achieve that.

On the “calling day” I made the call because I was seriously considering taking my own life. This way out of the unbearable low continued as a serious option for months to come. Signed off work and with too much time to myself and unable to partake in my coping strategies, I kept falling.

I would be curled up on a sofa in Edinburgh or London, it didn’t matter. I covered my head and made the world dark to hide from reality and slept a lot as an escape from the increasingly intrusive thoughts of taking my own life.

Too many times I closed my eyes and was hoping I wouldn’t wake up, that I’d just leave this world. Logically I know this wasn’t going to happen, however logic wasn’t very abundant in my state.

Thoughts of responsibility and those close to me, family and friends were being lost. How the hell wouldn’t they be better off without me, a waste of space and air (in my mind). I had convinced myself of this case over many days, with the depressed brain reinforcing this. After a day of no contact with family, that wasn’t unusual, as I had hidden the worse of the symptoms well, my depressed brain told me they really didn’t care. I have found that my depression can induce this self-centred thinking. My family had their lives to live. I was a travelling father, and I wasn’t always highest on the agenda and rightly so.

**How the hell would they not  
be better off without me**

My depression and the mood swings between low and very low and inability to work was a reality and, in my mind, it was better to let everybody move forward without me. I couldn't see this situation changing, getting back to work, and in that, being useful again.

No, I didn't choose to have depression but I had it and that was a fact, and it was here to stay, and I didn't look forward to this as a consistent existence.

I started spending more time in London at this point (mid 2022) as I had realized on my own was really not good. When I could take our dog out for a walk, and look at trees and branches I would think through how to elevate myself enough for fall, which branch would hold my weight and how I could ensure I wasn't found by a child. In short, I was planning, and doing what I'd done my whole life, thinking through the countless things that could go wrong and countering them with alternatives to ensure success.

In Scotland I had the option of just wandering into the mountains or even the sea but at this point my plan cantered on hanging myself, which I have come to understand is the most common form of people taking their own lives.

What stopped me? I do know. There was the niggling thought of my family's financial future as life insurance doesn't pay out for suicide, and it was this small amount of responsibility that held me back.

So, the same subject and matter in life that drove me partly towards suicide, financial stability, also held me back from moving forward with my plans.

Holding back, was painful in the way that my head spun and the fog stayed with me, memory loss worsened and dying was high on the spinning agenda in my head at most times of the day and

night.

## **Self-harm is maybe not a common way of referring to uncontrolled drinking**

Self-harm is maybe not a common way of referring to uncontrolled drinking, but for me it was. I would drink, eat fatty foods and know that the combination over time may lead to a condition, any condition that would lead to an end. I looked on this as an easier way for my family to take an end, but understood it was a long-term plan to end my life, but in many ways if I had continued it would have been just as certain.

These suicidal thoughts and planning continued into September 2021, until I started to notice minor improvements. I started to see life differently and started to see a changing, improving trend in my days, which I'll walk through in the next chapter.

**these thoughts intrude at times,  
they're not gone**

As I improved, these thoughts intruded at times, they're not gone, but pushed backwards to be held there and not to be allowed to come forward, which I know a major relapse would cause, hence my determination to live my life differently.

I now understand some but not all of the desperation and false logic in the minds of those people who attempt and/or complete ending their own lives because of depression and just how difficult or close on impossible it can be for family and colleagues to identify the crisis a person might be in, as the thought process and

false logic become clearer in the mind, in some ways it brought me some peace having made my mind up to bring closure to what appeared to be an impossible future.

This is just my experience and maybe not that many others however again I can understand that those suffering may be able to either mask or “game face” their suffering or may find a degree of peace through the thought of an end.

## **Today I’m looking to the future, far less at the past**

Today, I’m looking to the future, and far less at the past. I’m happy I didn’t go through with my plans as I can see recovery happening and am feeling increasingly happier and am starting to find a degree of peace in life, through doing the things I should have done years ago, that I’ll talk about more in the chapters on happiness and acceptance.

Now I’ll never make light of the subject of suicide, and have deep respect for any battling these thoughts and emotions and deep sadness when I hear of anybody ending their life. However, one story comes to mind that in a strange way had me crying laughing one day, that was a reaction to the depression but also the event. I had walked through a local park many times picking the best branches for my end. The night before had been a windy night and to my amazement a number of the potential branches had come down in the night, big strong and solid lower branches. The mental image of me taking the final step and ending up on my butt with a branch on my head just made me laugh. Not very funny at all, but that day it shook me free for a long while, and the image still makes me smile.

## **Lessons**

Thoughts of responsibility and people who cared for me left my head in these bad times. Depression works to convince you others don't care and that you are a burden. This was simply not true, and many around me did want to help.

People close to me wanted to help, but I didn't give them the chance.

My depressed brain lied to me all the time. It made me think family and friends didn't care and made me think everybody would be better in a world without me. They did care.

Mine and others game faces are very good, even at desperate times when ending life is high in your mind or even decided. It is difficult to spot the signs of despair, notably when a person has taken that final step in their mind to end their life.

Even though I'm improving and back at work, these thoughts jump through my mind at times.

## **Songs and music**

- Queen, Who Wants to Live Forever
- Jesus Christ Superstar the musical, Gethsemane
- Moulin Rouge (the musical) One day I'll fly away by Nicole Kidman
- One hand one heart from the Musical West Side Story

*Life, not really laughing, smiling  
Of being what I'm planned to be  
Fighting shut down mode so hard  
Every day*

*Never let anybody down, only me  
Conditioned to succeed  
Accustomed to success  
Scared to concede to reality  
World breaking down inside not around me  
Talking half-truths of my illness  
Hiding gravity*

*The end would be easy  
I'm not here for easy  
Fight or flight, fighting most days  
Flight is fought but can win  
Computer says shut down*

*Tears are fought but can win  
Maybe they're good  
but they're not for me, them they don't belong to me  
I sing when it happens, rare but like flight, a rare  
beautiful moment*

*Hanging in fighting for a day when I SMILE*



*Walking home one night, this street lamp lit  
end of an alley struck me as beautiful and  
as representing the light at the tunnel.*



## LESSON 4

TRIGGER TO TURN



Chronologically, I struggled where to place this chapter as I had already started to feel slight improvements when this change occurred. After struggling for a few days, I decided to place it here, in this book.

I was sitting in the house in London in mid-2022, when I received an email forwarded to me by the HR team at the company I was working for, who stayed in contact with me, talking about a merger that the company I work for was putting forward with another company. This was the second proposed merger in a few months, however, different to the previous attempted merger, it would drive the company in a fundamentally different direction, and was a deal that very much aligned to the company direction on sustainable management of hydrocarbon resources. It had synergies with existing activities as well as having geographical locations in countries I had not visited before. Now it was a proposal at present and by no means a certainty and did indeed vanish in 2023.

## **Changes drives me and gets my brain working**

In short it was a change that excited me for the first time in a while. Whereas I acknowledge that routine is needed, and in any job, there is routine work to be done, change drives me and gets my brain working. It's the healthy mix between the logical and creative brain and in some ways having been through mergers in the past with previous companies, left me relaxed in this situation.

The merger would mean that my job was not secure, however that would be out of my hands in many ways and hence with the NEW ME letting things go I can't control, I focused on the potential positive outcomes, rather than negatives.

I could be laid off; however, I could have a more exciting job. I may visit places I haven't visited before, deal with new people and new challenges.

At the same time as this potential change was emerging in the company, I was in recovery from the procedure I had undergone for prostate cancer which was going well.

This combination of potential change coinciding with the positive outcome of the cancer procedure and my acceptance of me and who I am today triggered a change in my mind set, which built on the already achieved improvements I was starting to feel.

The positivity driven by this change in my circumstances, flooded into nearly every aspect of my life, relationships, ability to get back to more strenuous exercise, sleeping less in the day and more at night.

The alcohol was still there but I worked to limit it to Friday and Saturday rather than drop it all together. It could be argued (in my and your head) this was a weakness and acknowledgement of a weakness and giving in, and in some ways it was. However, when I drank, I told myself I did so because I enjoyed the drink rather than to quieten the noise. At the time it felt like a step forward beyond drinking more nights of the week.

It still surprises me the speed of the change in mind set, that I doubt would have been possible without the help I was receiving, understanding from the company I worked for as well as the medications I was on.

It wasn't a miracle nor an epiphany but it was a rapid change. Good days became the normal, with random worse days but very few survival days (see Lesson 6). It felt like I was actually finding me.

As time went on the merger deal appeared to be on and off, as

shareholders rallied to vote down the deal. Change was happening rapidly in the company with voluntary redundancies, and potentially further forced redundancies. I could have applied for voluntary redundancy; however, the truth was I was improving and wanted to test myself back at work. I was realistic on the fact that I may not succeed, but at least wanted to start back through a managed gradual return to work (RTW) and see if I was capable.

By the end of 2022, I was in a setback, that is described in another chapter, but not a relapse and whereas my confidence in myself and ability to return to work had diminished, I was still keen to try, to set myself up for future opportunities if my job in my current company came to an end.

In January of 2023, I attended an occupational health doctor with knowledge of the industry I work in. The company I worked for were rightly concerned at my ability to return to a senior role without two independent views on that capability. This was for my wellbeing but also ensuring that if I did return, they would get a recovered John and not only parts of me.

Now that's an interesting phrase, "parts of me" as indeed there are parts of me, I have let go. If anything, I am determined to work smarter in future giving people who work for me a lot more reign to get on with work, cutting down on clever, but low value tracking of costs when the big picture is what matters. To some extent I had always been happy analysing numbers and trends, it was comfortable, however at times it was a shield and added some but not enough value to justify the time spent.

## **Lessons**

Change can be hard and uncomfortable as it can be a perceived threat and can lead to anxiety, however without change when you are not happy over an extended period of time, at least for me, I was unlikely to emerge a happier person. Change can be small

such as setting a routine, going out for a walk regularly or large such as changing your job.

My trigger to turn was a single event supported by all the other efforts such as the psychology sessions and medication. I'm guessing the trigger to turn will be different for us all.

## **Songs and music**

- Don Maclean, American Pie,
- Chris De Burgh, A spaceman came travelling
- Chris Daughtry, World on fire.



*Looking out to sea from Seafield Tower on  
the Fife coast of Scotland. A day I needed  
to escape*



# OPENING UP (STARTING THE CLIMB)

## LESSON 5



I've talked a lot about talking, and I can't emphasise too much how important it is to have or find somebody to talk too about how you are feeling if you think you have mild or more severe symptoms of anxiety and/or depression and indeed every other form of mental illness.

## **Keeping it bottled up inside you has an inevitable**

Keeping it bottled up inside you has an inevitable outcome that the pressure builds up and it finds a way to vent in a way you don't want nor need.

Earlier I mentioned that I started seeing a psychologist as soon as the symptoms got worse, even before the brakes came off. Now it didn't have to be a psychologist, it could have been a good friend or family member, however I was still in the mode that they didn't need to be burdened with my problems. This was a mistake, as they were seeing me go downhill slowly, and many would have jumped in and visited me to talk to help me, but I made the mistake of bottling it up between psychology sessions, that I spoke about earlier, were few and far between, owing to my inability to plan forward.

The depression was affecting my moods, I was drinking too much. So, between the depression and the related fatigue and inability to get things done, as well as the impact on the "higher senses" such as love and relationships, I wasn't a great person to be around, which resulted in me spending more and more time on my own in Edinburgh and when in London.

Having written the and published my first book on this subject in 2021, I owed a debt of gratitude to the company I work for, and after talking to a few people in the company, whilst I was still at work in 2021, I arranged a Lunch and Learn to explain the fall I had taken in 2019 and the myriad of symptoms over the years that I should have recognized and had treated, that could have stopped my fall. The presentation took some planning, trying to

pick the salient facts from a book to talk about in an hour.

This presentation was only possible because of the open and inclusive culture of the company I work for. I know for a fact that there are other companies, and indeed many where my presentation and messages would not have been welcome.

My planned messages were clear:

1. Talk to somebody, anybody
2. Recognise the symptoms
3. Medications are OK, they are often necessary just like they are for other illnesses
4. Depression and anxiety do NOT need to be career limitations.

This was COVID time and hence I was in the office on my own to do the presentation (with the exception of one person from my team). The invite was an open invite and I hadn't looked at the attendee list, as I was keen for as many to attend as possible. I made it clear I could be interrupted at any time, and that I would also answer any questions after the presentation.

I had a couple of questions, and also people going off and on video, as happens with video calls, especially at lunch time. At the end there were a few more questions and a few people who came back on video with tears in their eyes, as the presentation had been very close to either their own experience or people around them experience's.

After the presentation I exchanged multiple messages with those on the call and some who had not attended about the presentation. It would be wrong to talk about any of those exchanges, apart from thanking everybody who attended and was so open afterwards. However, in summary, I got the message that in suffering from this illness, I was definitely not alone.



I have spoken already and will speak further in the book on my interaction with my psychologist, as I feel she has given me many great tools and pieces of advice which may help you the reader or those around you to understand, cope, and indeed improve if you are suffering from anxiety and/or depression.

The first lesson I learned was in this day and age, and notable after COVID, video calls have become the norm. I am a great supporter of this to avoid unnecessary travel, carbon emissions and simply to take life easier, HOWEVER, there are times when face to face is simply the best and is needed. My psychology sessions were in this category, and indeed simply talking with people was in this category when you are dealing with subjects such as mental illness.

Face to face communication involves so much more than can be conveyed on video. The entire three-dimensional picture of you and the person you are talking to is there, body positions, hand movements, leg positions, as well as the facial and eye expressions. Body language is vital in the communication of feelings and emotions, displaying unspoken details of an individual's mental state for psychologists. It is simply human nature to me to expect that a face-to-face conversation on matters such as mental illness will be more productive. And hence after trying a few sessions over video with my psychologist we both agreed that face-to-face was better. This meant me travelling up to Edinburgh, sometimes for a few days, just to attend a session for an hour, and now I say it is worth it.

## **I could speak completely openly**

I used these sessions to talk through the circling thoughts in my head and to understand, and most cases simply to be more open about triggers that worsened the illness. In some cases' these

triggers were very personal and a third party was invaluable to be able to open up to. As time has progressed, we have informally tracked my progression and as the sessions draw to a close, they are focused on avoiding relapses and how to deal with set-backs (more on this later).

I found that structuring the session was a mutual arrangement between the psychologist and me, as everybody is different. I also learned that not every psychologist is perfect for everybody, however in my case it was a matter of building the trust and relationship with the psychologist such that I could speak COMPLETELY OPENLY, as if you hold matters back and keep them bottled up, you are wasting a valuable opportunity in talking to a qualified third party.

**About being honest with yourself** I know that in the UK and probably in other parts of the globe that access to qualified psychologists and counsellors is not always readily available. First thing to note is that these sessions benefit over a longer time period. If you are feeling severe symptoms and are worried about your own safety you *HAVE TO GET IMMEDIATE HELP or help for the person you know is suffering from emergency services or help lines.*

I now know that so many people around me wanted to help me and sometimes it's as easy (but never easy) to ask a friend or family member "could you please spare some time to listen to me talk over some problems I have". You will be amazed at how many people will say yes, and even if they have no experience in this area, they may be a good listener. Psychology and counselling are as much about being honest with yourself as the advice you'll get, and talking through your mind, mood and way you feel with another person can help you get honest with yourself.

I am a lucky man in many ways, and have come to understand through my last dip that included in this fortune are members of my family and a few very great friends who have been there for me, even from a distance, and have called me and stayed in contact. Many a piece of good advice has come from these conversations, which I have taken away and acted upon, many of which will be touched on in later chapters.

As I write this book in 2023, I'm coming to the end of my sessions with my psychologist and looking to develop and continue on with coping strategies on my own. However, I won't be on my own, as I come to understand so many people don't consider me a burden and are happy to talk and share experiences, even if they are different to mine. And many a time people are kind enough just to listen.

## **I also found my own eyes open to others and notably I've become less judgmental**

As I was able to open up about my illness, and having worked through the Mental Health First Aid course, I also found my own eyes open to others and notably I've become less judgmental of people I might have quickly taken an opinion on before.

Alcoholics Anonymous had also helped me in this light, as here were so many good, hard-working people, who for one reason or another, usually life problems and often mental illness related, had turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism. This ended up with many of them losing everything, living on the streets and many on drugs and in trouble with the police.

Firstly, if I didn't get control of my drinking, how different was I really?

One night I was coming out of Haymarket station in Edinburgh on one of my many trips up and down from Scotland when I saw a young man (maybe early thirties) sitting quietly waiting for donations with his black Labrador. Now it's easy to say "how can he afford a dog if he's on the streets" and to dismiss him. But having recently become a dog owner and seeing such a beautiful well cared for Labrador I decided to talk to the young man.

His story was straight forward. Lived on his own, had a decent job, lost his job, lost his flat and ended up on the streets with his dog.

He had tried the normal hostels in Edinburgh but been thrown out because people bothered his dog and it barks. Now he had limited options and they cost more money. He had to make enough to feed him, the dog and get accommodation and lived day to day. He wanted to work but was caught in a daily financial trap.

I didn't have solutions to give him but could listen and gave him enough to get off the street that night.

That and a few other conversations I have been fortunate enough to have with a few wonderful people has shown me that my previous judgmental self was in many ways bigoted and have moved to a decision to give me of my time to helping others when I am able to. I knew from my parents and as a parent and also from experiences in many locations where I've lived that the joy of giving far outweighs that of receiving and indeed "giving" is listed as a Key to Happiness, talked more about in a later chapter. I don't want to sound trite or cliched but giving is simply rewarding, and it's a question of how you give your means and time within the constraints that we all live in.

## **Lessons**

I didn't TALK enough to those around me, doctors or anybody else.

It took me a long time to talk about these thoughts of ending my life as I was ashamed in many ways of having the thoughts. I still haven't spoken openly with my family about these thoughts and just how intrusive they became. Talking as soon as you feel this way is CRITICAL. Talk to anybody you can PLEASE.

As you get to know a therapist or other professional you can structure the sessions to suit you both. Always try to finish with something you will take away from the session, something to remember, a lesson to practice or keep in mind. I'm sure they will help you structure the session far better than I can suggest.

Giving is so much more rewarding than receiving, practice it a little more and you'll discover this. I have but need to do more, give of my time as well as money. If you haven't money to give people will always benefit from your time and kindness.

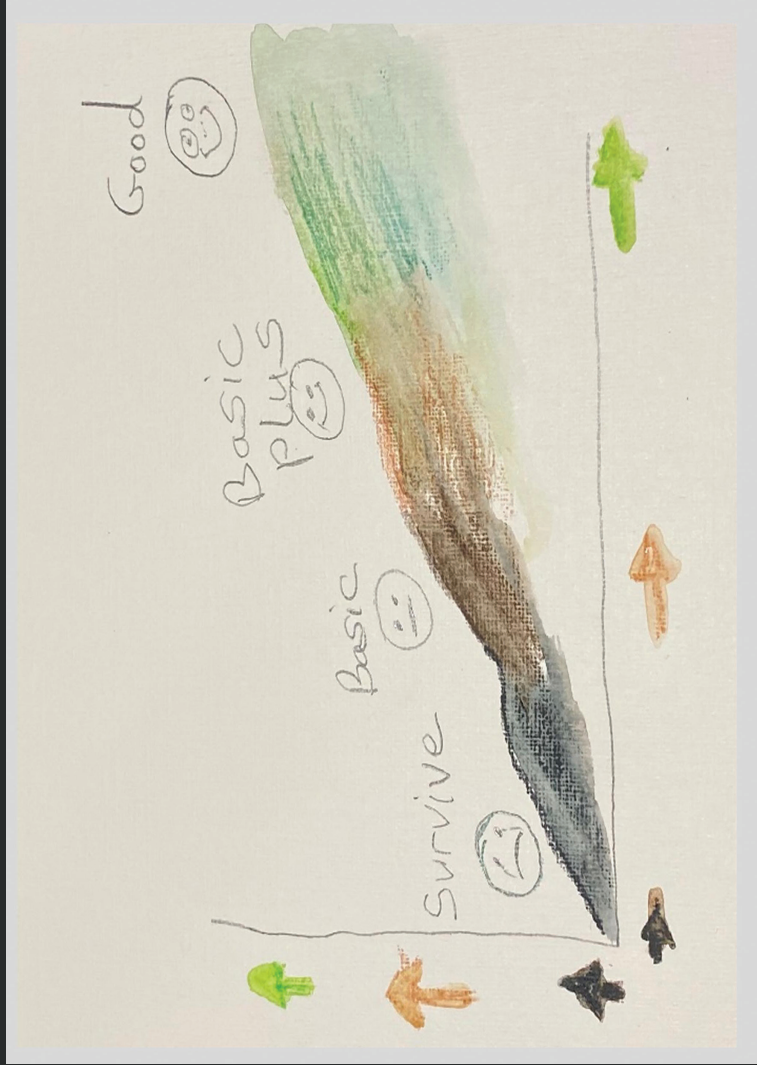
It's too easy to judge people who ask for money, people who sit talking to themselves, the person drunk on the street and more people. Try not judging them for a minute and recognise something has gone wrong to get them where they are, that may well not be of their doing.

## **Songs and music**

- Emily Sande, Read all about it
- Chris Daughtry, Let it rain,
- Chris De Burgh, Old Friend

# PLOTTING MY TREND

## LESSON 6



A particularly valuable session with my psychologist, we discussed a way of describing days to enable me to keep track of how I was progressing, or regressing at times and to have a common language. The chapter below talks about how we described days and what they meant for me.

It's important to note here that days, except survival days, were rarely uniform. A basic day could descend into a survival day very quickly, sometimes for a reason (a trigger) or sometimes just did. Mid-afternoons in summer were the best times when I had slept much of the morning, and could see the day in front. Autumn and winter survival days were just that. So, when I say something like "two out of seven days were basic days", I'm summing up the day by the predominant feeling.

## **Survival days**

On these days I would stay in bed for hours. They were dominated by fatigue, fog, confusion and panic at the basic of challenges such as answering the phone or responding to messages. I would shower at a stretch.

Keeping my head under a thick, dark cover was the best way of coping and sleeping. This was hiding from the world and everything it appeared to be throwing at me.

The worst days, if I got up it was to consider how to end my life. The only escape was the river in Edinburgh that I discuss more in "The silence noise of nature". I would push myself to the ends of my capability to dress and get out, walking down to the Waters of Leith, as I knew I could listen and be lost and, in a way, saved for a while.

I stayed away from other people on these days, even family as I was scared of my reaction to any trigger, in addition to knowing I may not smell the best. Would I get angry, sad, cry, easier to hide.

If I could, I would muddle through fatigue and fog to go to shop to buy wine, come home and drink it to quieten the noise and eventually force sleep.

I would buy one bottle of wine and never spirits and have no other alcohol in the house. I know it wasn't a good coping mechanism but limiting my possible intake it did work to limit the damage from alcohol.

My phone went unanswered on these days, messages, emails, nothing was responded to, and definitely not administration jobs. This led to tensions as even family would not be responded to, as I simply panicked if I looked at the telephone with the potential of what might be there. I understand that no response was annoying, but it was not intentional avoidance.

Letters would arrive and be thrown in a pile to be looked at a later date, if ever.

After my 2019 dip, one aspect of life that stayed with me was the wonder of everything around us in nature.

## **Wonder of everything around us**

Yes, there are wonderful and amazing buildings, but the natural world around us is what has continued to amaze me and occasionally lift me, even on a survival day. Seeing a small plant that is flourishing in a crack in a wall, a plant that survives in the gutter in the road, or a tree with different coloured leaves or crazily intertwined branches. They all amaze me in good and bad times.



*Bad Morning  
Opened eyes  
Is there, maybe was before  
A tower of bricks, jumbled on me  
Every brick a "to do"  
Illogical, real fear and tense fog  
Coffee bundle it up  
Bottle it away to fizz over later*

## **Basic days**

Basic days allowed me to get up slowly, shower but rarely venture out except to buy alcohol, go to the river or walk the family dog when in London. I was able to walk the dog on these days which I felt was my responsibility, as at the end of the day I was the one who bought the dog.

**this was part of me hiding behind  
something else so I didn't need to  
look at me**

Personal hygiene was a struggle. I grew a beard for two reasons: I didn't like my face in the mirror and it was easier to make the excuse of not shaving. To some extent this was part of me hiding behind something else so I didn't need to look at me. It was big and bushy and hid many of my features. Many were kind saying it suited me, and maybe it did, but it would have to go eventually if I was to accept myself in the mirror, heavens even like my face in the mirror.

On Basic plus days were the days I found myself most creative. This term “creative” and indeed the creative part of my nature had been a part I had pushed away and down for many years, despite my love of singing and as a younger man of drawing, poetry and classical music.

I recorded videos on my illness and finally found the courage to post some on YouTube and to publicise them. Before publicizing the videos, I typed the message for social media maybe twenty times, but the videos were one take, no scripting, just talk and hope the words would help one person.

Basic days were just as likely to return to survival days by the end of the day and especially at dusk. I still found myself needing to sleep and would find a sofa or bed to curl up into and cover my body and head to block out the world. This was and is a journey of bumps and cracks in the road and it was not always clear what pushed me backwards or allowed me to push upwards, and on good advice I am learning more and more to accept this and how to cope with downward as well as upward.

The poem on the next pages alludes to the fragile nature of a Basic plus and Good days.

*A beautiful day*

*Old friend meet-up made me happy  
Smiles, laughs, family, remnants of fun times*

*Walk away smiling at life, people  
Once again, after so long  
Seeing beauty in all, seeing faces, lives,  
Seeing life to be lived*

*Driving forward armed with energy of old memories  
Work energised, home,  
Gym, heart racing in the red again,  
Feeling alive for the first time*

*Crushed in an instant  
Brightness blotted out, eclipsed  
Fogged, misted, shrouded  
Un-listened words, flattened*

*Justified through clouded, unfeeling mind  
The illness belittled put aside unspoken  
Convenient to be passed by no turning of head nor eyes*

*Fragile peace, fragile happiness  
Grasped onto tightly  
Easily ripped away  
To descend back into my hole, abyss  
Back to un-hope*

*Continued*

*Hope fades again  
Created from dark, made again  
Illuminated by life, by friend, by past joined  
compatriot  
Blotted, stamped on, obliterated  
Justified by satisfied mind*

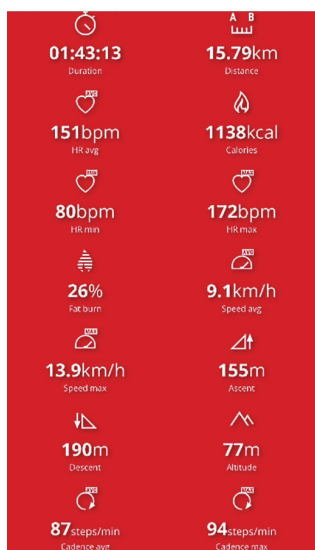
*My end hastened  
Forced back to unstable bad ways  
Dying for a noble way to die  
Noble is hard found, remote, not comfortable not here.*

## **Basic plus days**

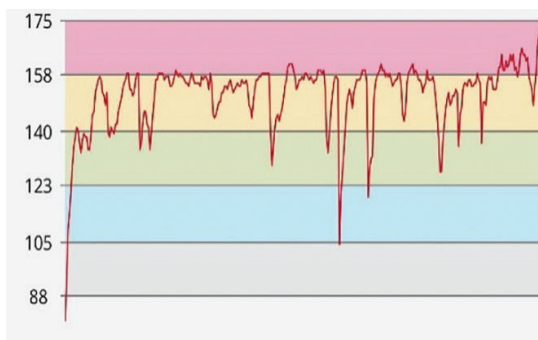
Up shower, walk the dog and/or or take walk. At a stretch there was a short time in the gym, but this was rare until the basic plus days started to really set in.

I have a massive problem pacing myself and have never been good at it. I would kick off on a ten-kilometre run and if I felt good, I'd keep on going until my legs told me to stop. I would fool myself that a day was better than it was, and wouldn't listen to my body. This inability to pace myself just compounded the fatigue from the depression and pushed me backwards for days. A big lesson and a real learning for me.

**Inability to pace myself just  
compounded the fatigue**



*A screenshot from my watch after a run when I intended to do ten kilometres but felt good, so I continued on.*



- *Too far*
- *Not paying enough attention to heart rate*

One basic plus day, I packed up my camping gear and hiked off into the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh. These are indeed hills, not reaching the three thousand feet needed to be called mountains but are steep and rugged and with the fatigue I felt could have been the Himalayas. It was autumn so I wasn't worried about freezing, and the blurb on the internet said it was a popular camping spot, so I didn't think I'd be alone. But I hadn't looked at the weather report that stated strong winds and cold temperatures with the wind chill. I was alone camped next the beautiful Threipmuir reservoir, with just the fly fisherman in their boats as company until dark set in. The wind howled through the trees all night, but I was strangely calm about being on my own camping for the first time. It was "safe" wild camping and taught me to be with me better, and restored a little faith in me. On that night I turn a few degrees in the right direction.

I could have packed up and walked back down to Balerno or Penicuik, but just listening to the wind and the promise of a

warm coffee first thing in the morning was a good thought, it made me smile for the first time in a long time.



I sat and watched the sun go down, gathered a few small twigs and made myself a very safe little fire to accompany me. One by one the fishermen left the reservoir and eventually I was truly alone. Once I settled down to sleep, I slept one of the best nights I had slept without alcohol for a long time.

**I missed the depression, low  
mood and fog**

A now for a weird feeling, that those of you who have suffered with anxiety and/or depression and maybe other conditions for a time will recognize.

There were days when the fog would lift and I'd be able to think clearer, I would not be planning my death and I'd have an element

of hope. Strangely at first on these days I missed the depression, low mood and fog, and still do now unusually. These symptoms of depression had become the normal state for me and I felt strangely alone without them. I would crave sadness, that didn't always come.

## **Good Days**

Many of you will call these normal days.

### **Natural light coming through your eyes to your brain makes a positive difference**

A good day is where I don't feel the depression, but the anxiety can be there and has to be controlled. On a good day I want to get up and get ready for the day. I'll have a minimal plan for the day, but I'm OK if it doesn't all come off. On these days as well as on Basic and Basic Plus days I make a point of getting out as soon as I can after getting ready for the day. One piece of advice I was given was to get out as soon as possible in the natural day light, even its cloudy and raining, the natural light coming through your eyes to the brain makes a positive difference. Just imagine what an entire day in nature can do?

On good days I also have to be, indeed it's important to pace myself more carefully. I take the opportunity to get a little administration completed and try to spend as much time outside as possible. This doesn't have to be in the open country not by the sea, although I have admitted that days by the sea, when possible are magical. There is simply something about the sea and open water that sets me and I know many others at ease. Naturally I'd rather be diving under the water but that's not possible very often.

As these days became more frequent my ability to recall memories, names and numbers has improved. A notable victory was remembering my code to enter the gym, a simple eight numbers. You can't imagine how happy I was when I arrived at the gym and the numbers came to me without checking.

The anxiety and acceptance of uncertainty on these days is mild, enabling me to simply get things done. I'd lie if I say administration tasks don't present an element of anxiety, and financial future is still a concern, however less than on worse days.

As these days became more regular, the noise in my head lessened, meaning I needed the alcohol less to silence it. Alcohol was still a craving, but not needed to silence the circular, negative intrusive thoughts.

This enabled me to drastically cut my alcohol intake, from maybe four bottles a week to equivalent of one.

## **finding a positive and constructive way to silence the noise**

The importance of finding a positive and constructive way to silence the noise in your brain and in mine was so crucial to the continued improvement. Quieting it through exercise, getting into nature, drawing, singing, writing and not drinking has enabled me to continue the bumpy climb.

As I monitored (on a blackboard in my little summer house in the garden) my days and how I classified them, for a long time there was little change, however slowly there was a good day and then more than one per week, it was improvement. Monitoring these variations in mental health day-day creates a level of self-awareness and potential motivation. Also, as the number of good days increased it highlights positive progress and gives



you a more positive outlook of themself.

I continue to informally plot my progress recognizing patterns in days, Survival, Basic, Basic plus and Good. And now use this as a common language with psychologists and doctors.

## **Lessons**

A common language to describe how you feel, or to classify days with your doctor and/or others you talk to can help, as in the chapter Plotting my Trend – Lesson 6

Suicide was high on my agenda in the deepest lows, but stayed there even as my mood lifted. It was there on survival days. The more time I gave myself to allow the negative circular thoughts to whirl around the fog, the stronger the desire to end my life became.

Depression and anxiety, and notably the fog and despair, become the normal after a while and as things improve, I missed and craved the normal. It's important to remember they are NOT the 'normal normal' and to focus on leaving them behind.

Celebrate small victories in your mind and hold onto them. One of mine was simply remembering my access code to the gym.

When you're on the way up it's too easy to go too fast, to forget to pace yourself. Me, I admit I rubbish at pacing myself and tend to try to much too quickly, which can lead to mini setbacks.

## **Songs and music**

- Chris Daughtry, White flag,
- Led Zepellin, Stairway to Heaven,

# HAPPY CALCULATOR

## LESSON 7



Sitting through the mental health first aid (MHFA) course in August 2022 a small section looked at “happiness” and specifically the ten keys of happiness (see page 105), elements of life that are needed to be truly happy. Now there can be arguments on the model you use to measure happiness, and there are many, however this one helped me to understand what I should do to be happier, as at the time I was a fundamentally unhappy person and still not a good person to be around, except for my forgiving dog.

Looking at the keys I realized I was pretty bad in most areas with average score of three against ten. I realized I couldn’t bite off every key at once and needed to focus on a few elements and raising my score and NOT doing what I would normally do, and aim for a sensible rate of improvement, rather than expecting miracles.

Indeed, as I started to look at recovery and every aspect of my life a big lesson, I had to learn was to pace myself, accepting that improvements would come, in the future and in time, notably as this was my second (or maybe third or fourth) major dip.

Pacing myself has been a large part of my recovery. Accepting bad days and sleeping when I have to, as well as moderating myself on good days where it would be too easy to go for the moon, OK, maybe run fifteen kilometres just because I feel good. At the time it would feel right but I’d pay later that day and for days to come as I alluded to in a previous chapter.

Fifteen kilometres would come, but I had to wait for the right time to kick up the pace and distance again. For now, just getting out and exercising was a victory and a mark of a good day.

I desperately wanted to raise my score on “giving” but realized that charitable donations I give over a year and year on year, causes I’ve supported as well as my reason for being in the profession I’m in is to help people through energy security and limiting the impact of the company activities whilst maximum community gains. YES, I wanted to give more of my time to charitable causes, and

this will come, but I have to be fitter mentally to reach this stage. It will come.

When thinking about the keys to happiness, I decided to focus on: exercise; direction and acceptance. I'm a strong believer in the acronym SMART being: Specific (I can describe it); measurable; achievable; realistic and time bound. I'm sorry to spell this out, as I know some of you won't need that. Here the engineer in me kicked in and I tested myself through developing an excel spreadsheet (sad I hear you say) that would be able to plot my progress against those SMART targets. Now the other seven elements weren't forgotten, and I set minimal improvement goals on these.

Exercise is easy to understand, and where possible within a person's capability, even mild exercise, has a profound impact, as long as you, and me in this case, exercised within my current limits, not past nor future limits.

**I've come to learn that it's not being selfish. It's being kind to me**

Direction meant finding a direction in life, for me, as opposed to the me that served and did things for others. Maybe it meant being a little more selfish, *although I've come to learn that it's not being selfish. It's being kind to me.* I know that not only do I need to work, but I want to work. However, I wanted to balance my work with my "giving" time and simply work differently in the future. I also set myself the goal of how long I was willing to work, irrespective if that meant living a more frugal life afterwards.

The last focus area was "acceptance". That is acceptance how things are and stopping worrying about things I have no real control

over. I am a natural born worrier which stretched to anxiety and onto stress and eventually depression. I would worry about everything, even world events. I'd think through every scenario of world events and life events and understand everything that can go wrong, irrespective if I could change it. Ironically this same trait had allowed me stand out in managing crises for companies in the past, as I had the inbuilt forward scenario planner in me and my mind understood worst case scenarios. I was more comfortable in a world of crisis and hence calm. This also allowed me to take clear decisions and manage complex responses to crises, even in times of extreme stress and even on the way downhill towards depressive episodes. Again, this was my mind's ability to set aside the depression and to focus on a specific problem or compartmentalization.

I made up my mind I would CARE but not worry myself on a daily basis by things I can't control. *Control and care are very different.*

This also meant understanding that I didn't control so much. My children are grown up and live their lives and I don't control them. I live between Scotland and England and can control my life to some extent, but do not control their lives in any way, and accepting this and being prepared to help when asked and needed was a big step forward for me.

And then there was the acceptance of me and who and what I am, and indeed what I can and can't to, and what is achievable in the future. I looked at how I saw me in Book 1 Sing Through It, and the fact that I didn't like me in the mirror, didn't like listening to my voice played back, hated photos of myself and although could deliver everything I needed to and more at work, wasn't confident in my capability.

At the back of the book, I'll spell out the definitions of each of the Ten Keys of happiness in more detail and if any wants, I can send

you the spreadsheet I used.

In August 2022 I was very much up and down and slipped on every target I set myself, but I had at least set targets and revisited them even though they were past and not achieved. It was important to keep them there not in-front of me but there enough to niggle at my mind.

The next few chapters talk in more detail about the targets and working towards them

It's worth touching on happiness and wellness, as when you start to look at texts on the internet some interchange Wellness and Happiness. There are significant differences as well as major cross overs in these two areas of research and specialism.

Happiness can be thought of being delivered through practicing the Ten Key's as set out in this book, whereas Wellness focusses on a wider set of metrics looking at how you value yourself, how you see yourself and your relationships with others as well as other subjects and metrics. Wellness qualified professionals will talk about whole body wellness and health looking at the brain, digestive system as well as overall body health. I am a believer that the human body and brain (we) are an amazing feat of engineering and that every part of our being is inter dependent, hence a good diet is important for good mental wellbeing, and a healthy brain is important for the entire body function. If we see ourselves as holistic beings, and that every aspect of our life is interrelated it becomes even more important to focus on our overall wellbeing as well as our mental health.

I'll discuss this a little more in the later chapter on Future, Near and Far, Lesson 14.

## Exercise – getting started





I've always been relatively fit throughout my life, never as fit as I'd like to be. I haven't run marathons, done triathlons, cycled 100 miles, but have fitted exercise in between work and family commitments, and there's the problem. I have been fit but as a side effort in my life and not as a meant part of my life.

As a child I was a chronic asthmatic, in and out of hospital, by car and ambulance. At the age of eleven I was seen by a doctor who was less than conventional. He advised me that I should run and run until I collapsed as this was a natural response and I would be OK. I took this to heart and went for it, running until I couldn't breathe anymore. I'm not sure this was very good counselling, and I wouldn't advise this course without medical professionals' advice today. However, it did work and little by little my asthma lessened and I was able to run further and faster. It may have also simply been I grew out of the asthma, but I discovered my own ability to push boundaries. This experience in childhood gave me much of my drive in early and later life.

At university I was lucky enough to do a four-month project in North California with a boss who was a multi marathon runner and more. He helped me increase my distance and taught me pacing. "If you can't hold a conversation, you're going too fast" was his counsel.

I continued running throughout the coming years, even in Bogota, at 2640m altitude.

Bad times from depression, amongst other signs, were all characterized by a break in running and loss of fitness. One such stop was whilst I was in Egypt, which I spoke about in the first Book 1, where I drank excessively as well as, stupidly, smoked for a short while.

As 2022 progressed and I struggled to do much, I also put on a few kilograms that I didn't like, but didn't feel I could do much about. As I turned the corner in September and October of 2022, I also started to build my exercise back up. I wasn't confident



in going to the gym, still lacking self-confidence and honestly not liking the kilos I had put on. So, I went back to running as a way forward slowly building the distance. Running mostly in Edinburgh and the surrounds steep hills as well as amazing scenery as part of the run and these have greatly helped me with my fitness.

The fact that exercise helps with depression is unsurprising, as it has an immediate and a longer-term benefit (UK NHS). Immediate are the happy neurotransmitters that are released helping with an immediate positive mood, however longer term, aerobic exercise of any type, helps to build neuropathways that are damaged or inhibited by the stress hormone released during depression. Once I understood this fact, it made perfect sense that exercise over a period of time would benefit greatly, and it has figured more in my life.

I run, am back in the gym, but am not what people might describe as a “gym bunny”. I don’t “pump weights” or look to build big muscle. I’m there to stay in shape, to push myself just a little past my comfort zone all the time, but always with the benefit of my watch which constantly measures and displays my heart rate. I push, but have no desire (at this stage of my recovery) to kill myself. I recognise now that even a short ten-minute walk can increase mental alertness, energy and mood.

I go up and down in my exercise intensity depending on mood, and therein lies a problem of “routine”.

Routine is so important, especially if you are not working as was my case, as I was signed off work. Without a routine and ideally somebody to share it with, it’s all too easy to wake up late, tell yourself you’ll do double the next day. All lies to yourself. I’m not saying push yourself if you are not physically able, but it’s important to try to establish a routine for a day that involves exercise, and other activities that can stimulate thinking when possible.

## Direction setting a course



Over my working life and personal life, I told myself that my direction was to continuously progress, be promoted, earn more money in the pursuit of supporting my family and enabling a comfortable retirement where I could do all the things and trips I've dreamed of, and continuing to be able to take my family with me. Alongside this some might say misguided direction was my passion for my role in health, safety, security and environment. I was obstinate in the face of cost savings that would bring excessive risk to people and the environment, and was an advocate for community based sustainable development in the countries where I worked and had influence through operating activities of the companies I worked for. So, in that sense, I look back with some quiet pride that I did all I could to help people and protect the environment within my sphere of influence. I always recognized that the energy industry is a commercial activity and that there were shareholders who were the ultimate bosses, however was not willing to lay down when told to on many occasions.

The drive for promotion, accepting roles where my values were misaligned with that of the company and at least my boss, took me down to the bottom twice and towards that direction countless times before. Although it's strange for a guy like me to be uptight over finances all the time, I have hard wired my brain to have financial security at the front and centre of much of my thinking.

I relate spending money on dentists, holidays to a percentage of what we have. I'm like many of you, or at least some of you reading this book. I have a mortgage, I have no pension from any company that will continue to flow in, having not stayed with any company long enough to amass a decent final salary pension. So many years back I sold all the company pensions and amalgamated them into one pot or SIPP or self-invested private pension. This is a UK pension plan with rules set out by the UK government. Now the stock market has been kind over the last ten years or so, but it goes up and down, and as all warnings state

“the value of your investment may rise or fall”, and this negative side has obsessed me driving me to try to build a bigger pot, rather than enjoying life more before and in the present.

So am I trying to find a direction, a purpose, a meaning or something else. Truth is I don't know, so I took a decision that the Happiness Plan was my direction, and that the direction had to make me a happier person and bring greater inner peace.

That meant doing less of some things and more of others. Less worrying and more giving, more things that made me happy. To some extent it still feels a little selfish and it's going to take time to get over this.

Direction also meant looking forwards and not backwards. I've made many mistakes in life, been a good and not so good person at times. I've been an alcoholic and still battle this, I've obsessed over promotion and titles, worried what others think of me and over thought nearly everything in life. The future is the only thing I can really change, beyond the now.

## **We enter this world with nothing, we leave this world with nothing**

I read an Instagram post recently that said “Are you allowing yourself to reach your full potential? Are you the only thing standing in your own way preventing you from living your dreams? Don't be afraid to take risks, face your fears and get after it. We enter this world with nothing and we leave this world with nothing, so you literally have nothing to lose. So just do it already, chase your passions and turn your dreams into reality! The most dangerous risk in life is to not take risks at all” (from Instagram account *abc4explore*). I like this quote and will be living more by it in the future, taking sensible risks.

## Lessons

Owing to my early years when pushing myself was how I worked my way out of asthma, and I think having seen my father work hard and also push himself physically in sport, I'm rubbish at pacing myself or staying within my sensible physical limits. I'm hardwired to push myself to the limits. This inability to pace myself has led to worsened fatigue and days of suffering that were not needed. Pacing myself means running too far, too fast, going too hard at the gym, and all related to my physical capability which is influenced by my mental capability, or just simply walking too far and pushing myself on survival or basic days.

Exercise has so many benefits, but as with anything in life, an excess is unhelpful. Immediate benefits of exercise are the positive neurotransmitters it stimulates to be released making you feel more positive.

Along with immediate effects of boosting mood, exercise also reduces stress, improves sleep, boosts self-esteem and even promotes sharper memory (Robinson, Segal, & Smith, 2019)

Then there is evidence that aerobic (as opposed to anaerobic) exercise enables the development of neurons and neuro pathways that enable the transmission of neurotransmitters. And lastly there is the confidence that it builds in you/me. So far from shying away from exercise I continue to push, but am learning to push sensibly.

Being kind to me, treating myself when I feel low isn't selfish, its needed and sensible. The first rule of rescue that has been ingrained over the years of training and actual events; is don't rush in to help if you will become a second victim. The same goes for mental health. You can't help others unless you're fit yourself.

It's difficult to find long term happiness if you can't find peace. Finding peace within yourself takes time and practice.

Peace and happiness are different but intrinsically related.

As you search for “happier”, pace this search. Look for improvements but don’t plan beyond reality. Be SMART in you’re planning.

Don’t beat yourself up when you fail to achieve a target. Don’t lose it, keep on pushing towards it, as your moods go up and down, there will be days when you are more capable than others.

Record your targets and achievements in big writing somewhere. On a blackboard, a sheet of paper and display it prominently and share your achievements with others. If they don’t want to hear, its fine, the success is yours and its internal and can’t be taken from you by ANYBODY, even if they belittle it as nothing to them. IGNORE them.

The importance of natural sunlight, even on a dull day, can’t be overstated. Get up and get out as soon as possible in a day, or take time as the sun comes up in winter to go outside for at least fifteen minutes.

Chasing promotions and more and more money won’t bring happiness. Happiness is so much more than money.

## **Songs and music**

- Dire Straits, The man’s too strong,
- Silvio Rodriguez, La Maza (The mallet)
- Tracy Chapman, Fast Car,
- Supertramp, The logical song
- Audition (from La La land)
- Dire Straits, Why worry

## The happy calculator

Keys for happiness	Description
Giving	I give of my time, effort and/or money to help others that makes me feel good
Relating	I'm connected with people whom I enjoy being with and feel valued and value them
Exercising	I exercise for 30 minutes 5 days a week such that I feel good with myself and a little fitter afterwards
Awareness	I am aware of the wonderful things and people around me. I take note of my environment and appreciate it.
Trying out	I never stop learning new things, skills, facts, more about me and others
Direction	I have goals to look forward to, achieving something new, different and/ or a holiday I'm excited about.
Resilience	I have coping and recovery mechanisms that work, when I suffer set-backs and down periods in life and they work
Emotions	I look for the good in people and situations taking the best from life and drowning out negative emotions, or eliminating them (unless they are needed such as grief)
Acceptance	I accept who I am, what I am, how I am, and don't put undue focus on what others think of me.
Meaning	I am part of something much bigger than me, and I feel that this meaning or purpose are a key part of my life and why I go forwards and on.



The ten elements of happiness are taken and adapted from the organization Action for Happiness ([www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)). The descriptors are mine, which you can modify and change as needed. What makes you happy under the ten elements or keys may be different to mine.

Remember though, the chapter on Memories. Focus on finding peace on this journey and you'll find happiness along the way.

I added columns for a score of one to ten, ten being very happy. I then described how I feel about that element today and another column to articulate how I wanted to improve over one month and three months. I'll neaten up the sheet and put it on my website to download.



*A life confirming to an image that I conceived in  
my head  
Conceived from what I perceived society and others  
wanted of me  
Mirror like shoes  
Perfectly pressed shirts, trousers, jacket*

*Black and white  
The look, the game face  
The face, hard but honest  
The pose, crossed legs, crossed hands, deep voice  
Professional clear concise empathetic tit  
Considered knowledge  
Many needed, many natural, many not*

*Many part of my image in the mirror  
Striving to be something  
I never got to know me  
No time, no need  
world of currency*

*Unhappy in the mirror  
Unhappy alone  
Always busy  
Distraction from who I have become*

*Continued*

*Longing for quiet in my head  
Longing for quiet in my life  
Quiet adrenaline sought  
At one, part of big nature  
Screaming for what is right  
Screaming for our planet  
To do something that matters with time left*

*Created a veneer over dark  
Activity in an ocean, a mountain for me  
Incapable action to help others  
Non existential influence on the world  
Becoming more invisible by day*

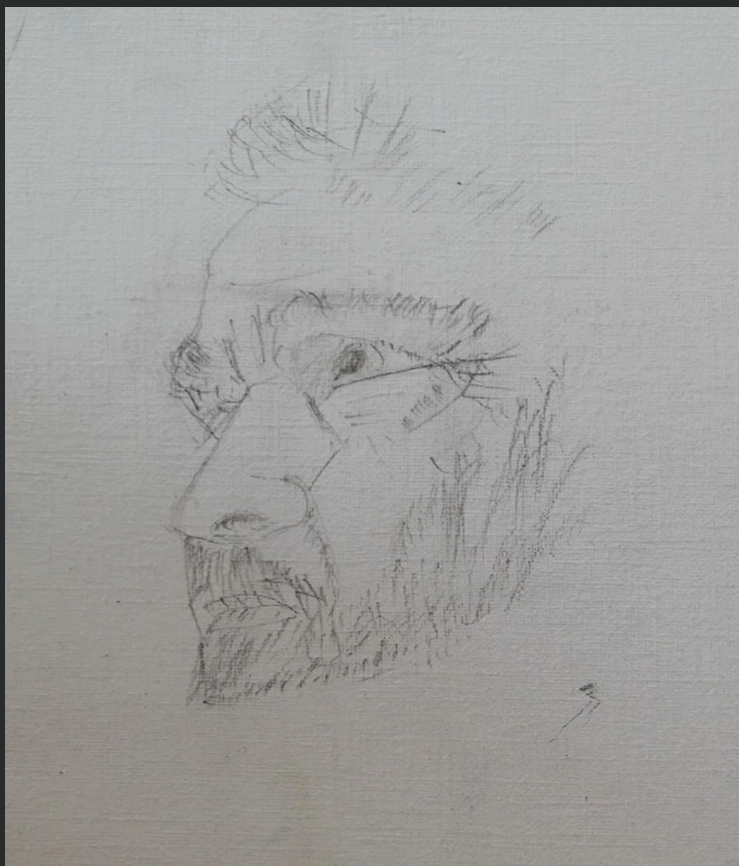
*Invisible is needed to find me  
My place in a late world  
Time is fast forward times two  
Little time until I join nature truly  
Matter neither created nor destroyed*

*Current reality strains and stretches my head  
Jumbled mountains of reality needed  
On my body and brain ever deeper  
Ever more pressure  
But no blue*

*I know I have to return  
Reality requires it  
The power of the world of currency*

# LESSON 8

## ACCEPTANCE



The drawing in the title to this chapter is a poor self-portrait. I erased bits and redrew them and couldn't get my face as it should be, but then I stopped. It's a wrinkly older and bearded guy and I recognise I'm not young, I am wrinkly and I'm bearded some of the time, so there you have it, sorry again it's not a great selfie!

This chapter, or the description of my mind set in this chapter has been a massive part of my recovery and is allowing me to make big strides forward. The first decision was that *I DID NOT WANT TO BE THE "OLD ME"* ever again. I wanted to be the me I always wanted to be but never had the courage to be.

***the me I always wanted to be but  
never had the courage to be***

This isn't throwing away fifty-seven years as you can't do this. There are many aspects of me to accept and move on from. The new mw needs to take the good parts of me from the past and meld them with new ways, direction and loosening control on the future.

Me in the mirror, was not a pleasant experience. This had to be dealt with. It wasn't about inviting people to compliment me, as this was not me liking me. I had been meaning to post videos on YouTube for many months on my experience with depression because I still feel strongly about talking and sharing and letting everybody know that they aren't alone in suffering.

Taking my mobile phone, turning it around and filming me was a step forward. I started off filming a minute at a time, and playing back and forcing myself to play it back again and again. I picked small aspects of Book 1, such as "my game face".

One night sitting on my own I filmed me at my very worst. I

was having a very bad day. I had been lying on the sofa much of the day having walked the dog in the morning, as my wife was away helping her family. In the evening I had a few glasses of wine and used this false courage to film a longer video which was raw, very emotional and frankly too personal to put out without embarrassing my family members. The next day I played it back and decided to only record totally sober (I had stopped all drinking during the week), and having thought through, but not scripted the subjects of the videos.

The next step was to put out a five-minute video on YouTube and announce this on my social media profiles, including the professional media platform LinkedIn, where I have a network exceeding five hundred contacts. It was a big step forward, not only talking about my illness but now doing it in a more personal way for whoever wanted to watch it.

## **for me to accept me, my voice, face and more.**

The channel on YouTube will never be “viral” and will never make me money, and it’s not intended for that. The first video I uploaded got about fifty views and subsequent videos have less and more, however they were uploaded for others to understand this illness, for me to talk about it and maybe selfishly, for me to accept me, my voice and face better.

I suppose in some way I was still hiding a little, as I had grown a beard that was rather bushy at times, but it was still me. Little by little I became accepting and understanding of how I looked and sounded. To say I liked myself on video would be a stretch, but acceptance was a step forward.

I continued to film short videos, some with (after 3 months) only 20 views, but that’s OK, if it did one person out of twenty some

good.

In Book 1, I mentioned how a “so called” music teacher I had at school destroyed my confidence in my voice at an early age by asking me to stop singing “baradrone” instead of baritone. I’m never going to be a Frank Sinatra, Meatloaf or any other well-known singer and would never aspire to be, as I have another profession (I think). But I enjoy, when I’m feeling good, singing and can hit a note or two. I wanted to embark on this journey at the same time as the videos.

Quietly I started to practice a few songs, on my own and recorded them on my computer through a rudimentary mixer with backing tracks I had bought online. The results wouldn’t sell, but again this wasn’t the point.

The next step was to find a reasonably priced recording studio to work with on a better recording of two tracks and get some coaching. One of my brothers went through this journey many years ago as part of his self-esteem journey and still sings at events. He was able to recommend a well-priced and amazing local recording studio. The day arrived I had the three-hour appointment at the studio. Every bone and muscle in my body was being told by my brain not to move. My brain was finding every excuse not to go. I found the address on my phone and set off. This was one the longest (it seemed) walks I’ve done for years, although it was only a mile. I found the address and walked past three times before deciding to ring the bell.

***My brain was finding every  
excuse not to go***

The experience was incredible. Mark at the recording studio has a lot to do with me finding the confidence to sing, maybe for the

first time in my life.

I recorded two songs, one from the Jazz Singer (that's an older Neil Diamond film) and a Barbara Streisand song, Bring on The Clowns, that resonated with me at the time. After three hours of making mistakes and of coaching from Mark, we had the two songs down and Mark sent them to me later that day after doing some magic on how the music and voice melded into one.

I shared them with family and then on my website and pointed people to them. I have no idea how many people listened to them, nor what people thought, but I was more accepting of my voice.

Now what to do with this voice going forward, is part of my future journey. Maybe it's enough just to sing, building self-confidence and this being a part of building a more positive outlook on life, but it would even better for me if it can brighten a day or invoke a feeling in somebody who listens. That would make me happy. I'm not into the popular songs as a rule so events aren't for me, so the goal is to busk, yes you heard it, busk with a backing track or a musician on the streets and take the raw feedback of a street audience, with the acceptance it maybe, good or bad, but it's OK if one person walking by feels better for listening.

As a boy growing up with a lot of time off school, I would sit and draw for hours, engrossed in a single drawing of a bird, a hand or a ship, as I had a love of big galleons, war ships from Elizabethan times and later, having visited the Maritime Museum in Greenwich England a few times in early childhood. But more than anything I would draw abstract with a globe hanging on a string held by a finger. As a child I understood the profound impact of humans on the natural world.

Put the singing and art together, and the word CREATIVE emerges as a natural part of me. However, as I grew into my twenties and then married and had children, responsibility and set myself on a direction to succeed in my career, I lost sight,

or allowed the creativity to be silenced and pushed to the back of life's queue, yet it was the creativity that enabled me to cope alongside running and a few other past times.

I have been in awe of colleagues along the way who have played in rock bands and maintained that creative, fun side of their lives, yet never learned to free the creative me. I suppose looking back that the logical and creative sides worked hand in hand weaving scenario plans for different emergencies and during emergencies I was involved in managing. I was also fascinated by the subject of Human Factors as part of my role, that looked at the logical and creative sides of the brain, how they worked together to enable people to envisage impacts and to enhance safety in industry. However, despite the interest in the creative brains of others, I continued to silence my creative side.

## **Stopping an internal battle that I've been fighting for years**

As part of my recovery, I'm allowing the creative me to come forward more, to sing, draw, write poetry. None of these are earth shattering but they are part of me and represent how I think and in bringing them forward I am stopping an internal battle I've been fighting for years.

Next was acceptance of what I am. I can use many adjectives to describe me, however few of them will be positive and there's the problem.

## **Hard wired to be massively critical of me**

I'm hard wired to be massively critical of me and to find fault, and



have been from a child. The pathways in my brain and the way the neurons are aligned and communicate to transmit messages have been developed to work this way. I'm unfit, I'm ugly, I'm disorganized, I'm not a good person, I'm an alcoholic, I'm coeliac, have tinnitus, am old and more and more. This hard-wired negativity is the most powerful voice that echoes in my head.

Some of the negative aspects of me such as disorganized at home, rubbish at work life balance, over controlling and a few more, are maybe aspects I have to accept about me and deal with going forward.

Some adjectives are facts. I have coeliac disease (meaning I can't eat or drink gluten) and I have tinnitus, with ringing in my ears at times. Coeliac disease is a mystery as to why I have it, but the tinnitus is no mystery. I worked offshore in days before the focus on hearing protection and was regularly exposed to very loud environments and then there was training on live fire ranges in Colombia before my daughter was born. The most annoying fact in life about the tinnitus (yes, a side story) is that the frequency of the noise in one ear is almost identical to the wine that our dog has developed to get our attention, especially at night if he needs to go to the garden to poo or pee. Hence often I'll wake up, get up and go to let him out only to see him stretched out snoring. Very annoying.

Now as to other adjectives I use simply have to go. I'm not a Brad Pitt, but I'm not that ugly. And indeed, who is to say anybody is ugly or not, as beauty is outside and within and the most important view is the person themselves and how they, or I see myself. In summary, I've stopped caring, or care less about what people think.

I'm not a marathon runner nor triathlete, but at fifty-eight I can run fifteen kilometres without too much trouble so I'm not unfit, I support my family, help others, many charities, buy the Big Issue

magazine for charity in the UK and occasionally get a coffee and sandwich for folk on the street, so I may not be the best person in the world, but I'm not in the worst category either. Indeed, if I look back many of my failings have in part come from the fact that I cared too much about people and tried to fix aspects of their lives with them I had no chance of fixing.

And alcoholic or struggling with alcohol, either is true and it's an aspect of my life I have got to hold on. I'm not going to Alcoholics Anonymous again, nor rehab but I'm wary of a very slippery, steep slope I can fall down at any time.

I know the rewiring, or the modification of the neuro pathways will take time, but the incredible thing about our brains is that they can achieve this over time. Having worked in industry, and notably in the arena of safety, I have seen a fundamental change occur in people as a result of a determination to work safer, and protect themselves, colleagues and to ensure the future of their families, and unfortunately as a result of serious accidents where the shock has left the person marked and caused a rapid change in their behaviour that has lasted a life time. This is the rewiring of the pathways occurring in front of me.

## ***Mortality has been an internal battle for years***

Mortality has been an internal battle over many years in my mind, and I know I'm not alone here, indeed we all have these thoughts every now and then.

I grew up attending Christian Catholic church as a boy with my mother, although I was Anglican. I then became Catholic when I married back in 1991. I've always believed in some form of higher presence or being but always questioned the pure and

simple nature of church teachings. As I went through the darker times with depression, I thought a lot about mortality and my life and how it ends.

## **I am part of something very much larger than me**

The thought of nothingness is not a pleasant thought, that I just cease to exist and that's it. But I don't believe this either. I know that my outlook may be looked upon as sacrilegious by many and maybe not appropriate to this book, and I apologise, but It's important to explain how I have come to accept my mortality. I see me as part of a world, nature, everything around me. I feel at one with nature and going back to nature to be part of the never-ending cycle of nature and maybe existing in that sense helps me accept mortality and indeed that I am part of something very much larger than me. I am energy and matter, and matter cannot be created nor destroyed (from my physics classes too many years ago) and hence I will go on in some form. Now as to the electrical energy that drives our bodies and enables us to exist as sentient beings, does that go on, does it dissipate or does something else happen? I don't know this answer, as if I did, I'd be writing a very different book, but I believe we go on existing in a form, just not how we are today.

I've also seen and experience too much that I can't logically explain in my life to completely discount that we go on in some way, but that's another book for another time and a few funny stories, maybe round a fire on a dark night!

I've also thought a lot on legacy and what that means. I still intend to spend more time helping others in some way when I finally retire, be those charities national or international, however legacy doesn't need to be recognized by others, as on the day I die, if I have time to reflect, I want to know I was kind and good

to people and that would be a good end. I spent years wanting to leave a lasting mark, striving to be something that would be remembered, but that's not important anymore and I've come to realise that my legacy is indeed just that, mine.

## **Legacy doesn't need to be recognized by others**

Yes, if I have the opportunity near the end of my life, I'll dwell on the crazy and wonderful adventures across the globe, mountains, oceans, reefs, sharks, rivers and more, but kindness, compassion and fairness are what I want to remember first of all, and to be satisfied I practiced these traits. I can apologise that this sounds crass or trite, but it's true in my case.

As for depression and anxiety, as I write the depression is better under control than the anxiety (most days), however that is improving as I rewire my brain to worry less about things I can't control.

Let's take an example. Travel. I am a nightmare to travel with, arriving too early and worrying about every step of the journey. However, if indeed, I have anticipated problems and I arrive early, then I've done everything I can to alleviate the stress and get to the train or plane in time. Sounds simple, but it's not that easy when you suffer from anxiety.

The depression is there. As I write this book I'm having less and less days and times in a low mood and the lows are coming upwards. But very simply put I am susceptible to depression and after two big dips in just three years, I'm more susceptible and must recognize this and adjust how I think and run my life with this acceptance. Not to always keep this in mind would be to ignore a serious illness that I could relapse into if I allow it, or events to overtake me.

## I'm susceptible to depression and have to recognize this

The new me will be a mix of the old me and indeed after fifty-eight years will be much of the old me. But the new me has to incorporate those happy planner actions and direction that I want to take my life, towards which I'm going to have let go of many of the hang ups in the old me.

### Lessons

Changing how you talk about you is important. Cut out the negative adjectives and focus on the positive adjectives.

Look in the mirror and tell yourself something positive often. I have spent so long wiring my brain to think negatively about me it does take time to reroute and rewire the brain to think positively. It's a journey and give it time. Rerouting neural pathways or wiring of your brain "takes time" but it can happen. I've experienced it and seen it in others.

If you enjoy a positive experience, be it logical or creative thinking, then enjoy it and never be afraid to admit your creativity or passion. If you like to draw, sing, paint, dance or other past time do it and be proud of it. I don't sing nor draw well, but I do it and am getting more comfortable putting it out there.

Spending time on an activity that you enjoy has been found to significantly improve mental health and wellbeing. hobbies reduce stress, low mood and depression. *International journal of environmental research and public health*.

It is NEVER too late to do what you enjoy; it is NEVER too late to change. If change is needed to make you at peace and happy, its simply needed.

Legacy, your legacy is what you leave behind you. What you leave when you leave a company and indeed when you leave the world we know as life. Your legacy is what you recognise with true honesty and doesn't need to be big, loud or bold. My legacy will be having showed kindness, compassion and fairness in my life.

We come into this world with nothing and that's how we'll leave it, so taking risks in life (not dangerous ones please) is needed to step out of where we are today. Stepping away and change can be stressful, but you'll never know if you don't try.

## **Songs and music**

- Radiohead, Creep,
- The Musical Jekyll & Hyde, No one knows who I am
- Blue Oyster Cult, don't fear the reaper
- Michael Kiwanuka, Solid ground

# A short photo collage of my life



*Two of my very  
best friends/  
brothers (Missing  
Clive and  
Eduardo)*



*Back on the firing  
range after a few  
years break. I'm  
not enamoured nor  
impressed with fire  
arms, but it's a skill  
I picked up in a role  
I held and if I get  
the chance I do go to  
controlled ranges.*





*My father travelled to Colombia to visit me. We had an amazing time in Bogota and Cartagena. My father had been a marksman in the Royal Air Force of the UK and even in his mid-sixties put seasoned body guards to shame on the firing range.*



*This mosque sat in the middle of a town destroyed by ISIS when they invaded Northern Iraq, Kurdistan. The town was the scene of fierce battles and many courageous Peshmerga soldiers lost their lives forcing the terrorists out of the town, and in the defence of the mosque.*





*Did I mention I love diving! Each weekend I'd take a tank and dive off the Dubai coach gathering fishing line, hooks and weights that could cause harm to animals in the area, and usually return it to a lucky fisherman on the break water to reuse.*



*For some reason turtles always look grumpy, and this one was no exception (Off Fujairah UAE)*



*Rio Longa  
Angola from a  
wonderful trip  
with my family  
whilst living in  
Luanda. Crocs,  
snakes and more  
were an alien  
but a learning  
world for my  
children*



*Below is a tiger  
shark from a  
diving trip in  
the Maldives*





*Puffer Fish  
diving off the  
coast of the  
UAE*



*A furry bundle  
of joy that  
came into our  
lives at the end  
of 2021*



*I never get tired of  
looking at the moon*







*Edinburgh  
by dusk – a  
time at which  
depression for  
me is at a low  
– St. Mary's  
Cathedral*



*A series of  
pictures from  
a memorable  
trip to South  
Africa. The  
scenery,  
wildlife and  
people were  
all amazing*



*We were  
Surrounded  
by a heard of  
elephants in  
South Africa  
who were  
oblivious to us*

*I had always dreamt of seeing a leopard in the wild.  
This wonderful lady posed for the camera*





*The Slater boys and my Uncle Eric (Sullivan). An old photo of us all, but one of the last of us all together with my dad*



*High in the Italian Alps*



# SET BACKS

## LESSON 9





Setbacks are inevitable events on the road to recovery and recognizing the start of a setback is important. My first significant setback was over Christmas and New Year 2022 going into 2023.

I returned to London from Edinburgh in mid-December ready to kick off the season of merriment in the run up to Christmas. However, I had set false expectations and the buildup was more of a flat pan cake for me and my brain. For years I have struggled to find the joy in Christmas, a traditional happy time of the year of giving and seeing family. I did see family, but they all have their own lives which is right and proper and they are living their lives, which meant that I was on my own in the house quite a time, thank fully with the company of my furry friend, our dog, who brought me back to reality and helped stabilize me on a number of occasions over this period and indeed throughout the year. Sounds weird, but I could talk to our dog, and he looked at me quizzically and loyally and yes, waited for his next treat or his walk

Armed with the knowledge I now have I can see this as a symptom of the depression, the inability find joy in many aspects of life. I tried hard to get into the festive mood, but failed. Instead, feelings of inadequacy filled me in that I wasn't doing enough (over and above giving) to help people less fortunate in this time of cost-of-living crisis in the United Kingdom and such strife for populations in many parts of the world due to war and famine.

I was falling into the hole of allowing events over which I have little to no control to control my thoughts, whilst I failed to develop the mood of the time. Alcohol allowed me to relax a little and over this period of setback, I also drank too much. I wasn't drunk any night, but I was certainly drinking to quieten my mind and to try to be happy.

Christmas day came, spent with family and it was indeed a good day of cooking and fun at night playing simple games such as

charades. But the next day the futile nature of my life was back again quelled by a few glasses of wine at night.

As we approached the new year it appeared to me that the despair and feeling of futility was growing. I had lost much of 2022 to depression and anxiety, I wasn't cured and may never be truly cured or out of depressive cycles. The fatigue built, causing me to sleep in the day followed by insomnia at night, exasperating the setback. The low mood wasn't making me a popular person in the house and it was easier to avoid interactions much of the time.

I had been assessed as fit to return to work in December 2022, and rightly so, as I was on a fast uphill trajectory. However, here I was again, feeling desperate that the return to work may not happen and the possible implications of this. As a boss of many people for many years, I know that companies need reliable and solid in senior positions, and I was neither reliable or solid again.

I worked hard on getting up, going out to the gym, walking the dog and working around the house, all to occupy my mind and get me out. Physical activity was easier than sitting and reading or trying to write, as my attention span had never been tested as I improved, and now it was down to fifteen minutes maximum. I could watch a film or TV program, but would become anxious after a short while. Watching programs with the family was short lived, and I'd move off to the bedroom or downstairs to listen to music or just lie down on a bed.

Now I had discussed setbacks with my psychologist in November of 2022, as the speed of recovery seemed unsustainable. The good counsel I was given was that a setback couldn't remove the learning that I now had, the methods of coping I knew worked, and even if I struggled to enact these mechanisms continually, getting to them when I could, was important.

In addition, I now knew what more 'normal' felt like, after so long and I truly wanted that back and not the sadness and numbness

of the depression.

Focusing on these learnings and letting go world events I had no control over and stepping away and giving others space to live their lives enabled me to slowly climb back up. Back up was slow and I'm still climbing. I know I can get where I want to go, but don't quite know where that is just yet.

Uncertainty is fore in my life today. I have little job security and the speed of recovery from depression is uncertain. I do not have a certain financial future with inflation running high, financial market stability and future earnings potential being unsure. However, I have to live in this environment.

## **Lessons**

The road upwards, recovery, is rarely smooth. Understanding this and what set backs are is important.

Acknowledging a setback is important and dealing with it as a setback, talking to doctors or others as soon as it starts to be noticed by YOU/ME. Dealing with it early, talking about it and not forgetting what I had learned on my way down and up helped to keep it as a temporary setback and not a relapse.

## **Songs and music**

- Cher, You haven't seen the last of me,
- John Denver, Like a sad song

*He's still there  
Been hiding  
But there  
Peeping out of shadows to remind me*

*He's depression  
Waiting on a series or maybe one trigger  
To overtake me  
With his fog and despair*

*I know he's there  
Should be able to predict a pounce  
But I don't, letting the prowler go unnoticed*

*Unfair analogue to a beautiful animal  
He's ugly, a monster, destroys without reason  
A setback, not relapse  
I can beat this one*

*Happy, merry, joy  
Everywhere  
Streets, TV, media  
But I can't feel it  
It's out of reach*

*Off my doing  
Of relationships, friendships broken over years  
Far and near  
Longing to feel the spirit*

*Continued*

*A brain healing  
Regrets still strong  
A veneer over what needs to be  
Smothering the next step  
Up a hill ever steepening*

*Dips and rocks  
Stand in my way  
Words, misunderstandings, guilt  
Always there, in front of me  
To my side and following*

*Have to run faster  
Further, pushing the limits  
Outrunning barriers that always outrun me  
A day, a time to be happy  
To find beyond tonight*

# THE SILENT NOISE OF NATURE

## LESSON 10



Trite, cliched, and dramatic I hear you think (I think) when you see this title, and yes it maybe. But even in my very worse days I have found such peace in my head listening to the noise of nature and the silence is that which I felt in my head.

**Even in my very worse days I  
have found such quiet in my head  
listening to the noise of nature**

There is a river or the Waters of Leith that run through Edinburgh, and on the pathway from the Queensferry Road to Stockbridge there is a small set of steps down to the water. There you find a few big rocks allowing you to sit nearly in the middle of the flow of the water. After rains and even without rains, this river is noisy as at this point it is channelled through these large rocks and the other bank. Just listening and fixating my gaze on the water brought me back from the depth of depression a few days. People must have wondered what this guy was doing, head in hands on a rock in the middle of the river, but on those days, I didn't care about what anybody thought, I simply needed the noise and the water.





On days when I couldn't get to the river because I was simply too tired from the fatigue of depression and anxiety, I could walk around the block and just look up at the trees, the shapes of branches and patterns of leaves and that could be enough to shake my mind out of the constant loop of negative thoughts.

I've already spoken of the semi wild camping trip I took, which lifted me for days after. Another day I took a bus to a place on the Fife coast called Seafeld, partly to look for fossils which is an occasional hobby, but also to enjoy the sea and coastal views. I was rewarded with a cold, windy but sunny day with a few fossils, yes, but also sun basking seals on the rocks giving me a disapproving look.

## ***I could have stayed for hours and hours and I should have done***

I could have stayed there for hours and hours and I should have done. I should have sat down and watched the sea and everything else for hours, however the overthinker in me was thinking about traffic on the way back and that I didn't know the bus times. Although I managed to spoil the day a little for me, the images are ingrained in my head.



And then there is my running and desire to find tracks with few people on. Running again allows me to think, whilst the neurotransmitters released by exercise are running through my head. When I run, I don't look at my time to consistently improve my time, rather than if I see something that I think is amazing, I stop look and take it in and then continue on. In that way a fifteen-kilometre run isn't a great feat of running as its stop and start, although not that many stops.

If I see a track I haven't run down before and it looks pretty, I'll

take it now, not worried if I must weave my way home. I laugh when I do this and get lost as my father would so often take the route less travelled to the dismay of the family, but the new routes almost invariably were prettier than the normal route and more fun.

As a younger man I was fortunate to have friends that loved walking in mountains. Some of my fondest memories are of hiking in the Snowdonia national park or the Scottish Highlands wet through and cold but marvelled at the simple majesty of the stark mountains. Despite loving the underwater world, I never lost my love of mountains, the more rugged the better. This makes the East Coast of the UAE a favourite of mine with the dark volcanic Hajar mountains that stretch for ever, and dive down to the Indian Ocean in most locations spectacularly from mountain to cliff to sea.

Lastly, I can talk about the underwater world, a world I am privileged to know and have experienced in many parts of the world, oceans and seas. Underwater I have always relaxed, even when assisting novice divers, I've never panicked, become anxious nor thought of anything but the world Infront and around me. And its noisy down there. The air from your regulator going in and out, the noise from the fish-eating coral and the corals themselves. This truly for me the noisiest and most silent world I know.

The benefits of getting out into nature are well documented, and wild nature is amazing, but nature is all around us, in the crevice of walls, in the road gutter, in the trees and grass and it's important we make the most of all the amazing nature we see and never stop being amazed.



*Spectacular sky in Aberdeen*

## **Lessons**

Nature in all its forms is a wonder and getting out into nature is clearly documented as beneficial to everybody in lifting mood. But don't discount what I call subtle nature, the small plant that grows out of a wall in the city, seemingly impossibly, the gnarled tree in the street, the weed growing in the roadside curb, or the scrub and bushes at the side of the train line. Big nature for me personally is better, but don't ignore and appreciate subtle nature. When I couldn't do big nature, subtle nature was good.

## **Songs and music**

- John Denver, Calypso,
- Counting Crows, Big Yellow Taxi,
- John Denver, Rocky Mountain High,



# MEDICATION AND ACCEPTANCE

## LESSON 11



After my first dip in 2019 there was no question as to taking or not taking medication. It was simply needed to survive. I saw the results of the combinations of medications, limited psychology and family support in 2019 and 2020, and continued with the medications without question through 2020 and 2021.

As I started to see symptoms return from depression, I spoke to the General Practitioner (GP) in Edinburgh who agreed with me to raise the dose I was taking of my antidepressant from 10mg, which I had been on for more than a year, to 20mg.

It seemed like a logical move and importantly it was something we agreed upon, since without agreement on the medications between you and the doctors there is little chance of success.

But as time went on and I went downhill it became clear the medications I was taken simply weren't working as well as before. From talking to family members and doctors, this is simply what can happen and quite why it happens I'm sure can be explained, but I'm not clear on it yet.

Any changes you make have to be your decision to change, but this should be done with advice from a psychiatrist, and access to psychiatrists certainly on the National Health Service in UK is not easy and an appointment was booked in February for October, for which I was grateful., however recognise that this delay could have, in itself, led to worsening symptoms, and I'm certain that for many people who have wait longer for psychiatrist appointments this may be a contributing factor to worsening mental health illness.

The psychiatrist advised to slowly reduce my existing medications and then to go to zero and start up on an alternative single drug that works in a slightly different way.

We recognised that it may not work, and he gave me the flexibility to switch back if needed on talking to the GP.

I slowly reduced both medications I was taking over a month, firstly removing the Bupropion (mood stabilizer), then the Vortioxetine (antidepressant) until I was at zero on both. I would have expected a distinct deterioration in my condition, however the change coincided with a distinct improvement of my mood and condition and had very little if any impact on me, which could have told me to stop altogether. However, I'm not a psychiatrist and have to trust that people who have trained for years know much more than I do, and that not taking the new medication may have turned a setback into a relapse, a place I don't want to go to again.

**may have turned a setback  
into a relapse**

The new medications were better accepted in UK. The drug was Fenlaxafine and I was to start at 75mg per day ramping up to 150mg after 14 days. As with all medications there are potential side effects, and with this one it was the potential of raised blood pressure. On top of monitoring the blood pressure daily for a while, I decided to raise my exercise rate to improve my fitness to help counter this effect. The engineer in me said this would be a good idea, but I could be corrected.

I understand that taking medications is something that many people are loathed to do as they see them as a never-ending part of life, however from talking to many others I know this is not the case. They are there to help you stabilize and improve an illness and alongside other treatments such as psychology it is possible to reduce dosage and eventually eliminate the need.

Taking medications for mental illness and talking about it is difficult owing to the ongoing stigma over mental illness. We talk about cancer, dementia, multiple sclerosis amongst many other



serious illnesses and diseases, however we stand back and think very carefully before admitting we are taking essential medications for mental illness despite the fact that this is one of the most common illnesses with one on four people suffering.

In my case, I never really developed the need to hide I was on medications for depression as they stabilized me, were and are a vital part of my recovery.

As one in four of us in a year will suffer with some form of mental illness, I can pretty much guarantee you're working or around people on a regular basis who either take or have taken medication.

For me there was no question of stopping medication on my own, although there were days when I forgot to take them.

In a session with my psychologist, we discussed medications and the impact I could expect. It was an important learning for me that the medication won't stop temporary mood changes in a day, but can smooth these changes with the goal of the lows and highs being ever higher, that is to move me in the right direction. This was important for me to learn as I had been long concerned that temporary shifts in mood meant the tablets were failing.

An indeed, in a previous chapter I write about setbacks. Of one thing I am sure, and that is a setback could easily become a relapse if I was not on the medication and was not following up on many of the other coping mechanisms discussed in previous chapters.

## **Lessons**

Medication, if suggested by professionals, is needed and effective and should never be feared. How you feel in the immediate and long term after starting a new medication is important to share, as it can take time to find the right medication for you and for your condition. It did for me.

Over time I needed to raise and lower dosages, but never without consulting professionals

Coming off the medication is possible after time and through agreement with your doctor or psychiatrist.

## **Songs and music**

- Pink Floyd Shine on crazy diamond

*It's still there  
Been hiding  
But there  
Peeping out of shadows to remind me*

*He's depression  
Waiting on a series or maybe one trigger  
To overtake me  
With his fog and despair*

*I know he's there  
Should be able to predict a pounce  
But I don't, letting the prowler go unnoticed*

*Unfair analogue to a beautiful animal  
He's ugly, a monster, destroys without reason  
A setback, not relapse  
I can beat this one*

# CREATING MEMORIES

## LESSON 12



I have been a lucky man. I have a wonderful family, brothers, my parents and great friends. I've been in the right place at the right time a few times in my career. At the age of fifty eight I'm still relatively healthy, have been cured of cancer and can still enjoy a long run and time in nature.

When I look back on life, as I've had an opportunity to do in the last months, and notably as I've been recovering from this latest depressive episode, I have looked back at wonderful photos, and tried to recall the time, place and feeling that I had at the time, and many times its just not there.

I have great memories and then I have memories. And in a funny way my brain has made positive memories of events that shouldn't have been positive. At three years old I was rushed into hospital hardly able to breath with asthma. Despite the drama of the occasion that my Mum remembers well, I have a crystal clear memory of the inside of the ambulance, my Mum and the ambulance staff fussing over me, and the view out of the darkened window of the trees that told me where we were. Our brains are complex and wonderfil organs, or some might say an amalgamation of organs that make the whole brain.

I know this is the case with many of us in that we look back on a photo and have this same feeling, but is that right and should we even had taken a photo, as opposed to standing and enjoying a moment. Yes I know you can do both, but in the age of mobile phones and cameras with multiple shots a second, it seems to me we have become preoccupied with a picture of the moment and think that that is a memory. Now it may assist in recalling a time and an emotion, but could those seconds have been spent differently.

And so I go back in my life, back in time and think on moments captured in photos. The photo on the following page is used, as it always brings back the joy, albeit dampened, of a memorable

holiday in Namibia where we stayed in a small camp in the middle of nowhere and could wander up to the hillside at sun down and every night there was the most spectacular sunset. There were cushions on the ground and the children were old enough to appreciate and enjoy such a moment alongside my wife and me. Its one of a few rare photos for me that conjure up a memory, whereas we have so many photos that are photos with no associated memory.



But whar are special memories for me and how were they created and why am I able to recall them now?

***One word that comes to mind  
when I am able to recall a special  
and good memory is “peace”***

One word that comes to mind when I am able to recall a special and good memory is “peace”. I was at peace when the event occurred.

Being with my Dad swimming off the coast of Colombia, walking in a country part with my wife, parents and my Grandma, sitting in a kayak on an estuary in Angola where there were all nature of “beasties” and the photo I used for this chapter. All of them were times when I was at peace with myself and events.



My past and present depression has meant that I have not been at peace at times when I should have been. When the family or friends were at peace but my depressed and anxious brain was spinning with irrelevant thoughts such as was I smiling enough, or appearing normal. I remember a notable holiday to the West of Scotland when we lived in Aberdeen. We would drive across the mountains, stop in a café and shop at the top of one of the hills, drink hot chocolate and then continue onto the lodge in the country, surrounded by beautiful walks. The children were excited and had fun, but I couldn't shut off. I had a few instances of severe and very painful indigestion, needing muscle relaxants to calm the pain. I know that my being anxious all the time detracted from the holiday for everybody and the memories are



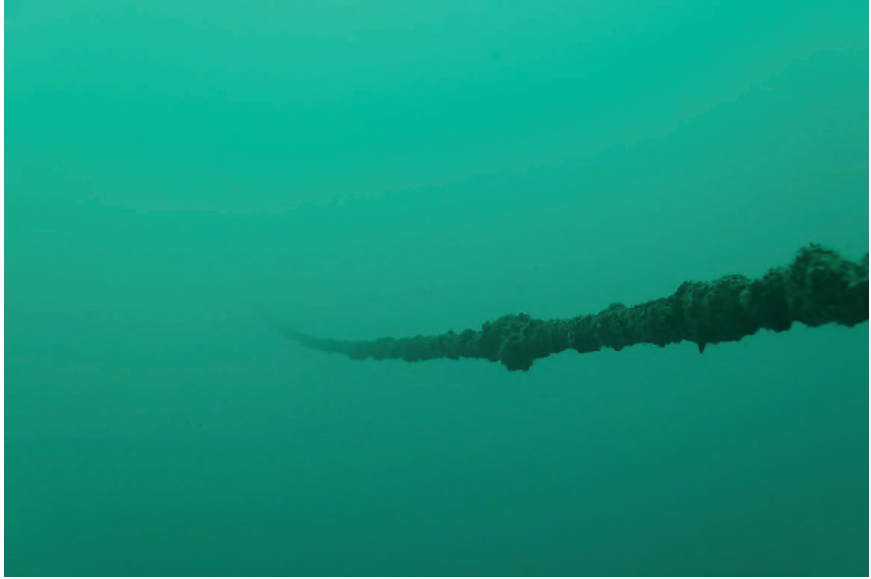
of that guilt and not of the children enjoying themselves, and indeed I've ruined many good experiences for my family.

## **At peace, doesn't have be a serene moment such as watching a sunrise or sunset**

At peace, doesn't have be a serene moment such as watching a sunrise or sunset. I am at peace when I'm scuba diving and enter a noisy and alien world underwater, where I am in the domain of the creatures and plants that call this their home. I have so many vivid memories of underwater and yes a few have been captured in photos or videos, as can be seen on my Youtube channel. I don't need the photo or video to bring back the memory and indeed the feeling of these moments.

Of note was my first ever "self reliant dive" having completed the course that permitted me to dive on my own. Now I'm not reckless and would only ever do this on sites I knew well, where I iknew the bottom profile and the currents, and which way was safety (usually up!). It was offshore the East Coast of the United Arab Emirates on a reef known as Coral Gardens. It was a maximum of thirty metres depth, but still I had to keep a close eye on depth, remaining air in my tanks (and reserve tank) as well as my no decompression time, being the time I was allowed to be at depth with Nitrogen building in my system. Despite all of these concerns, I felt so free. As a person who likes to photograph under water every now and then, I always felt like a burden to my dive buddy, especially as I would maybe snap a photo and then just hang in the water to appreciate what I was seeing, as after twenty five years diving I still consider it a special privilege to be able to dive and to be permitted to do so by the creatures in the water. Here I was, no buddy, no concern about spoiling another person's dive, no worries about ruining anybody's time,

just me. Visibility was rubbish, being maybe no more than six to eight metres, but I knew safety was either up or west to the coast. The feeling of total and utter peace was almost overwhelming at times. This immense peace is there when I think of those thirty minutes of my life, even if the photos were rubbish.



*A guide rope to a 27-meter-deep wreck off the UAE*

Making memories to hold, to recall the feeling and to remember past good times then means finding your own peace, and recently I read a quote from Dr Alex George on his instagram site that says “to find happiness you first have to find peace”. This peace is with yourself, your inward peace, a state I know so many of us seek.

As I have aged I am purposely slowing myself down at times. On a run I’ll stop and savour the view of the sea, a hill or just a narled tree. This stopping doesn’t come naturally, as my brain tells me to run for a good time and push yourself harder, this is hard wired.

This stopping and purposely savouring a moment in time, better helps me etch images and feelings into my mind which stay for

longer. I haven't found my long term inner peace yet and don't know if I'll ever really find it, but I can try and at least in moments where it comes to me I can relish and keep it for a while.



Just to finish this chapter on memories here is a short story. My Grandma was an amazing lady. She had been through two world wars, lost a sister as a child, lost her brother in a bombing in the second world war and her husband to cancer in her fifties. She had her sad moments and almost certainly more than we ever saw, however she was a small bundle of amazing fun and an infectious laugh.

One day in the car, before the times of seatbelts, we were crowded into the car, my Dad driving with my Grandma, my two older brothers and my Mum in the car. My Gran embarked on telling us a story about her father who once had a punch ball in the

house. Truth be known I don't remember much of the story as my Gran failed to say too much. Her mental image of what she has seen of the ball on a spring coming back and hitting her father with mistimed punches was simply too much for her and she creased with laughter at every sentence. We were all crying with laughter to the extent that eventually my Dad had to pull the car over as he could no longer drive safely. This is a memory that can bring a smile to my face every time.

## **Lessons**

If you find yourself at peace at a time, savour it. Don't spoil it with a picture. Focus on why it makes you at peace and hope you can bring back that peace and the emotions. For me it's many of the moments I described in the chapter on Making Memories.

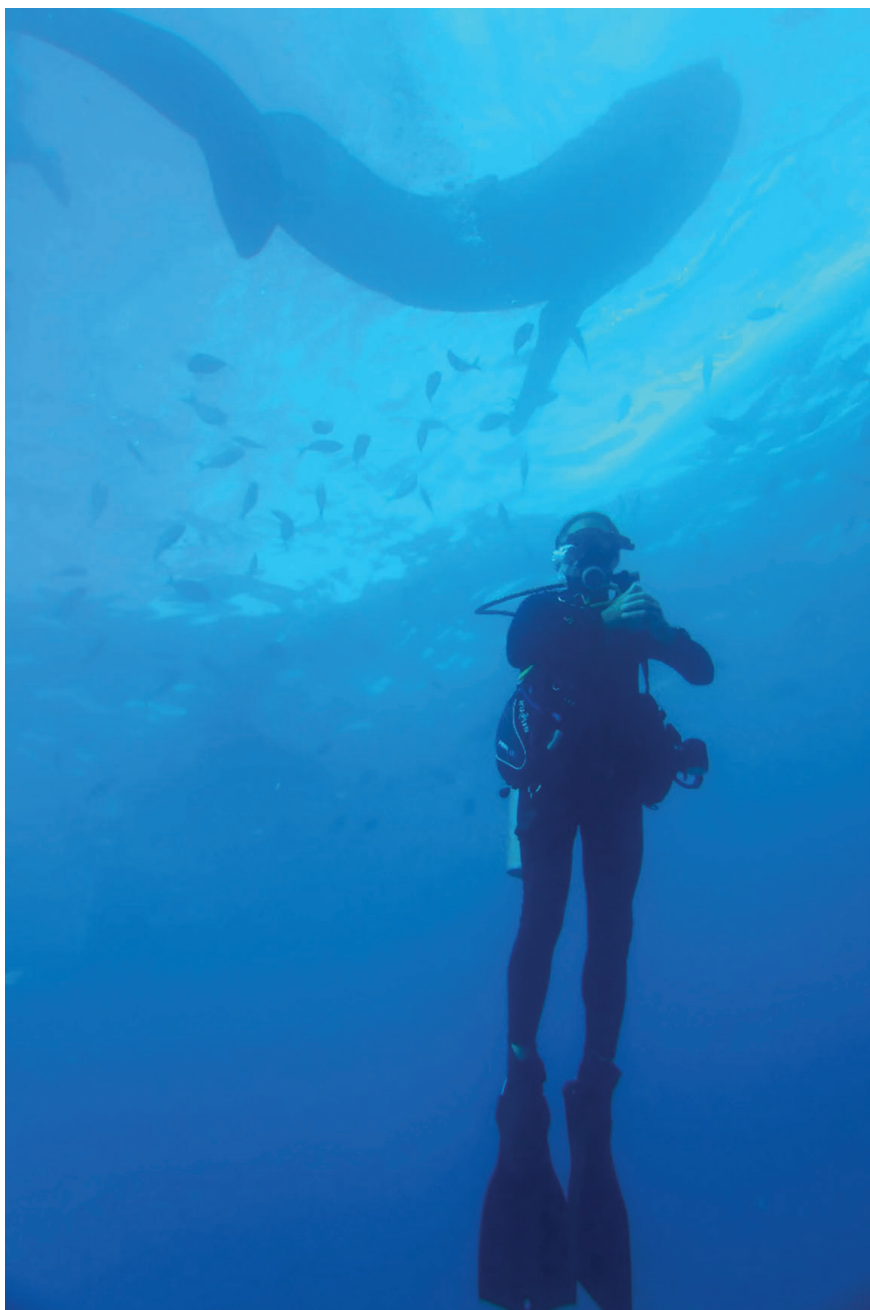
“to find happiness you first have to find peace”. This peace is with yourself, your inward peace, a state I know so many of us seek.

At peace, doesn't have to be a serene moment such as watching a sunrise or sunset. It's how you find peace, maybe a song you love, or a place you love being.

Sometimes try imprinting an image on your brain, looking left, right, up and down and leave the phone photo for another person.

## **Songs and music**

- Meatloaf, A kiss is a terrible thing to waste,
- Romeo and Juliet Act I, Scene XIII, Dance of the Knights by Sergio Prokofiev



*Truly at peace hovering in the Philippines with a whale shark overhead*

# THE FUTURE NEAR AND FAR

## LESSON 13





I am in control of my future to the extent that I can control my life and the world around me. Change and surprises will happen, some good, some sad and some amazing. But I can't control the world, nor other people and am learning to accept this and worry less, and let go of the idea I have control on anything but me today.

## **Today is when I can influence tomorrow**

Today is when I can influence tomorrow, but not the past. And as to the past, I can't change it, but I can change how I look back. Yes I have regrets about how I behaved in times of depression but I can only try not to make the same mistakes and learn, and regret less knowing now, that I was ill and at the time my depressed brain was convinced it was doing the right thing.

I'm opening up to my creative side, and embracing it. In my creative moments I feel liberated. I'm singing around the house and in the flat in Edinburgh and occasionally walking along the street, but not to intrude on others.

In January of 2023, I was signed back on to work, with the doctors happy I had recovered to the point to which not being at work was now detrimental. I need to fill my mind with solutions to problems and exercise my brain. I have to admit that I'm so much like my Dad that I fear I could end up with dementia and increasing my brain elasticity through work, thinking and planning the future is needed. I joke, but don't really joke with my children that if I go that way, could they please take me to a beautiful deep reef, point me at forty five degrees downwards and let me go. No they won't do this, but I have no intentions of bowing out without a final flourish if life and death allow me.



I'm much less concerned about my end today, and want to fill my mind with today and tomorrow and planning to live life, and to continue the journey and mission to crush the stigma associated with mental health and mental illness. Nobody chooses to have a mental illness, just as nobody chooses to have cancer.

I'm planning the end of full time work in the near future and a focus on my new direction coaching leaders on their impact on the culture of an organisation, one that includes diversity in all its meanings and one where mental illness is not exasperated and where talking about it, and opening up are simply part of running the business. This endeavor will bring my thirty seven years in the energy industry, coaching and advising from the work face to the board room and combine it with my learned experience of mental illness and the impact of leadership and supervisors.

I have seen many companies with excellent leadership programs that focus on getting the best performance out of the people who work under them. Then there are the companies that tend to promote leaders based on technical ability, forgetting that technical ability is only a small part of leadership.

I've seen inspirational leaders who are simply born inspirational, and who hone this aura and ability to inspire over years. I've seen young and more senior inspiring leaders. As I have progressed through my career, and through the years, its no surprise that most leaders are now younger than me and many have more hair and less grey hair.

What does my future offer look like, well that's to be/is being crafted currently and will be published on my website shortly.

As to the far future, I'm fifty eight and don't know if I have forty years or four years left of my life, so it's going to be about making a quiet difference to people's lives through the leadership work, as well as spending more time working for charities, all allowing me the time to hike, wild camp, run, sing and dive. I am determined

to see as many shark species as I can whilst I can. I recognise that the fitness and physical ability I have today won't always be there, so have limited time (as do we all) to experience the world and make these memories. I'm remembering the quote "we come into this world with nothing and leave it with nothing, so you literally have nothing to lose".

Through my depressive episodes I let contact, especially close contact, go with so many good friends, people who have stayed in contact with me and cared, bought my book and supported me. They live across and up and down the UK and abroad, and I'm going to find time to visit and to re-establish these contacts without the anxiety of travel. The wonderful thing about visiting good friends is that they don't care if you're a little early or late, they're good friends.

**I'm not fully recovered and  
who knows if I ever will be,  
and I'm OK with that**

I'm not fully recovered and who knows if I ever will be, and I'm OK with that. I'll take the medication as advised as long as it is advised by my doctors and try to avoid setbacks and especially relapses, as relapses simply steal time from me and I'm not in a mood to let them steal any more time. I have days when I'm foggy in my head. Most days the fog lifts in the morning, but there are days it fuzzes my brain all day. This is annoying but I go through these days with the knowledge that tomorrow should be better.

Will I have setbacks, maybe. But accepting them for what they are, temporary glitches in the neural pathways or wiring of my brain, a time when something has caused a break in the new positive thinker and living for today. Letting the past go and living more

in the day is the key to this for me. I still struggle with the regrets, but have to push them away.

I have come to understand the critical role of sleep in overall health and am working to improve my sleep patterns. They are still very broken and I'm still tired many days and need the caffeine to kick me into gear. I'm talking to doctors now about a potential change to my antidepressants to one that would encourage sleep. However I also recognise that sleep will improve as I let go of my anxiety and focus more on today as the opportunity to impact the future. I still sleep better in my sleeping bag on the floor, so maybe I was born in a forest!. I accept this and if I'm struggling to sleep I will get out my bed and lay down on the floor and let myself drift away with thoughts of adventure.

## **I'm looking to release the child in me**

It may sound strange, but at the age of fifty eight, I'm looking to release the child in me. I never cease to smile and wonder at the simple way that young children approach the world, not burdened with the weight of life, responsibility and other concerns, they are spontaneous and unashamed of dancing or singing as they roll along the high street. They have wonder and fun in their eyes when they see something new. I've never lost the wonder at nature but want to be able to be more amazed by life. This will take some time and maybe shocking myself into this world somehow. Now I'm not going to go too far here, but awakening the kid a little more is simply needed and something I believe we allow to be crushed and pushed to the back as we grow older, and it's a mistake. If we could bottle up and take a little of the kid we were every now and then, life could be more wonderful.

I said earlier that I would address ADHD, and here goes. In talking to an Occupational Health doctor before being signed

back on to work, she picked up on my short attention span and delved into it a little more. In thinking back in time, my addiction to coffee comes from needing to take breaks from work, getting up, walking around, and invariably drinking coffee far more often than others. I have always struggled to put my head down and push through a report, and often ended up finishing close to the deadline. Now is this a mild case of ADHD or just how I am. It would make a lot of sense if indeed this is the case. I'll be meeting with a professional in the near future to discuss this.

Sharks and diving have to come back into my life more, as I can identify this as the place I feel peace. I have no idea how much longer I'll be able to undertake challenging dives, both deep and in stronger currents and rough seas, so in some way, there is a rush to do this, to create the memories and to say to myself I did it. I'm excited at diving with bull, tiger, hammerhead and other species of sharks and rays and relish the thought of seeing them glide through their ocean, where I'm their guest, who has to keep to their rules and culture. Yes, they'll be sneaky, inquisitive and beautiful with it.

I'm almost ready to go out into the big world of busking. My family have politely asked me to go far away from home, but I see this as the big step in personal acceptance that I can go in-front of the public, people I don't know and accept the feedback, good or bad, but hopefully no rotten tomatoes. I'm practicing a few songs to sing with my middle brother who has been singing for many years now and is confident in his abilities, however busking is not his scene for now.

On the holistic nature of our being, I'm eating a better diet focussed on less meat and more green leaves, nuts and occasionally (but not very often) fish. I've suffered from violent indigestion for years or hiatus hernia, as it is called, as it is a weakness in the valve that blocks the oesophagus from the stomach that allows acid from the stomach to rise through the valve and literally burn

the oesophagus. It's extremely painful and has put me in hospital once before. This condition does nothing to aid a good mood, healthy diet, probiotics and less coffee, but not much less is the order of the day.

Exercise is also back with running and the gym, but I'm not crazy. I do it to stay in shape and get the blood flowing and that's it, although I do enjoy the post exercise benefits of the happy hormones.

In writing this second book, I've solidified my ideas for the future and also realised that despite believing in my first book and receiving many positive comments and indeed with the book having helped some people change direction to avoid the lowest of depressive dips, I published it and thought that it would do the job on its own. That was misguided and it didn't sell many copies. I still believe it was a good thing to do, and will work on publicising it, at the time as launching this book.

## **Lessons**

Through depressive cycles I've let go many great friends and now its time to get back to them and visit them. Good friends are simply invaluable.

Today is the day I can influence tomorrow.

I control very little in this world, and its important to know what you REALLY control as opposed to what you can and can't influence. Focus on the areas of control and influence.

As we grow up, the creative inner child is progressively knocked out of us. Don't be afraid of letting that inner child out to truly see the wonders around you and to allow yourself to act spontaneously at times.

## **Songs and music**

- Dire Straits, Brothers in arms
- Juan Luis Guerra, Vale La Pena (It's worth it)
- Past the Point of no return from the Phantom of the Opera
- Louis Armstrong, A wonderful world

I still remember my Dad singing Wonderful World to my Mum on a Kareoke machine we had years ago in Aberdeen, Scotland, as does my Mum. She had tears in her eyes. The memory still brings a smile to me as I don't think my Dad had ever sang a song like this.

# LESSON 14

ONE KIND WORD





In this next to last chapter, I would like to emphasise the power of ONE KIND WORD. This has been a key learning for me and I hope it will be a learning for you and others from this book. I'll use an example to demonstrate just how powerful a little kindness can be, that costs nothing.

It was autumn 2022 in Scotland. This came along with the start of rail strikes with rail workers demanding better pay. The strikes were causing major disruption locally and across and up and down the country.

I was in a particularly bad way at this time, with suicidal thoughts predominating, and a daily battle to keep on going through fog and fatigue. I was scheduled to get the train down to London to be with my family for a few weeks, having attended medical appointments in Edinburgh.

In July of 2022, the apartment I was staying in had been flooded and rendered impossible to live in, hence I was in and out of hotels when I travelled to Edinburgh. Now booking a hotel and turning up is not a hard task, nor set of tasks, however for me in the depth of depression it was a traumatic event that I had to wind myself up to do.

Having stayed in a hotel for a week, I turned up to the station in Edinburgh on the first scheduled day of travel, which I seem to remember was a Saturday only to find the train had been cancelled whilst I was walking to the station. With few urgent needs in life, I was not happy with the affair, but worse it meant going back and checking into a hotel. As luck would have it, the same hotel had space for the night. I was booked on a train the next morning and had a reserved seat, as was necessary in the final months of COVID restrictions in the UK.

I duly turned up the next day only to repeat the same actions, with the train being significantly delayed, to the extent I would get back to London close to trains stopping running to get across

the capitol. Back to the hotel I went, now distinctly anxious and in a very low mood.

The following day I turned up and waited, only to have the train delayed. By this time, I was in a very bad state, anxious and simply lost as what to do. Thoughts were running randomly through my head at such speed, I didn't know what to do first. I put my bag on my back and walked to the Edinburgh Waverley LNER ticket office, concerned I wasn't going to be able to talk, would cry or just freeze. I knew that if the train was simply delayed, I should get the next scheduled train, but with no seat reserved I could end up standing all the way to London. In this anxious and depressed state this was like the world falling down on me.

I decided to be honest, I quietly told the lady at the ticket window what had happened and that I was suffering from depression and that I simply needed to leave the station to find a quiet place. That place was going to be the last place I ever visited as suicide was high on my priority list.

The lady listened, smiled and said she was so sorry I was suffering today and let me know immediately I didn't need to travel that day and that she would book me on another day, whenever I thought I would be well enough to travel.

She was calm and kind, despite dealing with a less than usual request and clearly my quiet and sombre mood.

With a new reservation in my hand for two days later, I quietly thanked her, walked out of the ticket office, found a seat around the corner and broke down crying. I cried for five minutes or more, quietly trying to hide it as much as possible from passing people. The tears were a mix of the depression, but also because of the unconditional professionalism and kindness of the lady in the ticket office. Just a smile and kind words had kicked my thought wheel out of suicide mode and back into "I need to battle on" for now mode.

I returned to the wreck of an apartment that had been flooded a few months earlier and was in the process of being renovated, and rather than book another hotel, I took out my sleeping bag and slept on the floor for the next two nights, taking out the need to interact with people and to hide my fatigue and mood. I slept and slept more, slowly winding myself up to the eventual successful journey down to London.

**That day, a smile and kind words stopped me going forward with my suicide plan and enabled me to battle on.**

I sent a note to London North Eastern Railways but it was difficult to send a compliment. So, in December when travelling for Christmas, once again I was in the ticket office in Edinburgh to change a reservation and saw the same lady. She was busy so I simply asked one of the staff assisting passengers to relay my thanks and the reason for those thanks.

I passed by later as my train was delayed and simply asked if he had managed to relay the message. He confirmed he had and that the lady was quite emotional as she had no idea of the impact of her actions that day.

I've passed by the station and had to change my ticket a few times afterwards and the same lady has been there. I've not had the fortune of being attended by her, but she invariably has a smile and is clearly getting the passengers' needs sorted.

## **Lessons**

In your day-to-day life, never underestimate the power of a smile, a hello or a kind word, helping someone who may look lost. You have no idea what that person is feeling like and it may just help them and you, as giving of yourself in any way is powerful in this world.

Stop judging the people asking for money on the street, the drunk who is bothering nobody, the sad person on a bench, the poorly dressed person who looks unkept. You don't know what has been going on in their lives and they may be very much like you. A smile or kind word may make their day (similar to another lesson but worth repeating)

## **Songs and music**

- Jose Feliciano Nature Boy

# LEADERSHIP LESSONS

## LESSON 15



This chapter is not a mini leadership course or book, nor comprehensive. It looks at a few of the lessons I've learned as and from leaders who have worked for me and who I have worked for.

In my first book, I looked in detail at leaders and their impact on mental health, specifically my mental health over my career. As I went down hill in 2021 and then 2022, and as I've been climbing back up I've had a long time to dwell on the subject of management, leadership, well being, mental health and organisational culture. I've had time to bring together the cultural work I have been involved in over the years with the training on mental health I've received as well as my personal experience and am eager to talk about this more than is possible in this book.

I had time to think back on the best and worst leaders I've worked with and time to reflect on me as a leader and how my style, attitude and subconscious biases may have positively and negatively impacted my teams' mental health over the years.

Firstly, let's get this out of the way.

## The fundamental difference between management and leadership

### Management (a job)

- Do things right
- Managing complexity
- Maintaining order
- Getting things done
- Manage change
- Manage talent and build competence
- Managers are builders
- The design of work and control
- Act decisively after consideration
- Deliver results
- Develops two-way

### trust

### Leadership (a chose)

- Do the right thing
- Simplify complexity
- Moving forward
- Energise people to get things done
- Maximise value from change
- Value talent and inspire competence
- The architect
- Focus on common vision
- Act decisively after consideration
- Enable results
- Inspires two way trust

Management can comply with a process and drive compliance (for a while). Management alone will never sustainably enable people, nor the manager to deliver ongoing performance.

## Respect and trust

Leaders can empower and enable people to be their best. They don't have to be universally liked, but mutual respect is critical, along with TRUST, both of which need to be earned.



And then there are leaders, good and bad. I was once asked to be part of an exercise on a course where we shouted out the attributes of a leader. After developing a list of maybe thirty attributes. We were asked to shout three leaders of note from history, good and bad. Great leaders such as Mandela, Churchill and Martin Luther King were shouted out, as were leaders such as Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

When we compared the attributes of the different leaders, it amazed me just how many of the attributes of admired leaders were the same as the now despised leaders, with maybe just a few differences. Both good and bad were able to mobilise people behind them and actually enabled those around them to achieve great and in some cases, despicable things. The difference between great and evil was the fear that they led by and consequences of mistakes.

There will be much more on this subject in future offerings that will be detailed on my website, however for the purposes of this book, I'd like to briefly talk about a few leaders who have shaped my understanding of good.

In my very first role out of my masters in water pollution in 1992, I was fortunate to work for a senior gentleman who had a wonderful way about him. He was tough talking, but fair and was happy to sit down and give the wealth of his years of experience to others. After a short trip to Colombia to present the then latest developments in technical risk management, I saw an opportunity for a new division of the company in Colombia. This leader (my manager) coached me putting together the business plan and then took the plan to the headquarters where it was approved, and off I went to Colombia, where I learned so much about business and myself, as well as having my daughter in Bogota. John empowered me, enabled me to grow and trusted me and continued to support me in my time in Colombia.

## **Empowered me and enabled me to grow**

Years later I found myself in the UAE as Head of HSSE for a region. I was happy in my work, and was delivering change across the region to different divisions of the company with the full support of the regional leadership, well at least most of the leadership. I was pulled into many meetings that maybe I shouldn't have been in because of this trust. After four years of delivering and with a history of delivering effective and positive change in many parts of the world, Mike sat me down and made a clear statement to me. He told me that he was happy with my performance, however if I wanted to achieve my goals of senior leadership, I had to go back to a mature part of the business, with more entrenched ideas and prove myself there. This was a challenge as I didn't want to return to the UK at the time.

## **Challenge, advice and trust**

However the advice and trust proved to be critical in my career development and in the happiness of my family. I spent four years back in the UK working as part of the UK leadership team, supported by the senior leadership delivering changes to enhance the current processes working closely with teams of long term UK employees who were sceptical of all change until they understood WHY.

How about a side story? After Colombia I was transferred to a fast track project in North Africa. It was a flagship project for the multinational company, but as is the way in many countries, it was delivered through a joint venture company whose values were not always aligned with the multinational company and certainly not mine. This non alignment of values along with the fast track nature of the project that ran into the hundreds of millions of

dollars led to friction, which at times was a gentle word.

I would be on site for a week, leave for a few days, come back and find everything had been undone and gone back to the inefficient and outright dangerous ways of working. After many warnings I had to stop work on a number of occasions often in direct conflict with a joint venture national senior manager.

On more than one occasion this action, which I would, and indeed did repeat many times, would lead to a letter being sent to the senior most joint venture leader, who would demand my removal from the project, company and country. Now my removal had to be agreed by the multinational senior director as well as the joint venture leadern. However, as it was well understood I had done the right thing for the right reasons, and in line with stated values of the multinational company my senior manager had to reprimand but not fire me.

And so on these occasions, I was summoned to his office which was left open. He ushered me to a seat, pointed to the coffee pot, and started a well rehearsed tirade of shouts, admonishing me for being so disrespectful. This would continue, in earshot of the joint venture managers, until the shouting was deemed to be enough. At which point the door was closed, we drank coffee and discussed the project and how to bring it back on track. Both the endless coaching I gave and received on this project taught me much about effectiue change in almost impossible environments. Thank you Larry.

## **I allowed my passion to drive my behaviours unchecked**

Needless to say I've have had less pleasure working for less than good bosses, but won't dwell on them, suffice to say I've learned a

lot about myself working for them and how not to lead. Looking back when I had to stand firm against more senior people in companies I have worked for, I would do the same every time, as I did it for the right reasons, however how I stood up, and how I expressed my reasoning would certainly change, and in that in many ways I have to thank some leaders for admonishing me over my ways of expressing myself. If anything I allowed my passion to drive my behaviours rather than channelling the passion into crafted, thought through cases for sticking to the path or change.

And so, what type of leader am I and what have I learned in my introspective deliberations towards being a better leader and person going forward.

## ***Have I focused on happiness enough in my coaching***

Firstly I have a fear. I have always put people first, their wellbeing, families and success. However, in coaching, have I modelled my coaching to them on what I was or what I should have been. Have I focussed enough on happiness over the years? The simple answer is no. I coached people on success in business, CV's, developing forward career pathways that took account of family but not balanced in the right way. I always tried to understand my teams, how each individual ticked, their likes, dislikes, however having not acknowledged my weaknesses to the extent I have today almost certainly didn't recognise internal turmoil when it was there enough.

Recognising that people have outgrown a role or company has been something I have been keenly aware of and have, maybe wrongly, openly encouraged team members in this situation to branch out and have openly assisted them to find their way in better suited roles.

One such notable story comes from working in West Africa. We had a translator working in our team, translating multiple documents from English to Portuguese (that gave it away). This individual was smart, eloquent and didn't see his own future potential at the time, which was simply endless. He had been a gardener for the national oil company and had learned English in his own time. He had then become a translator, all self-taught. He ran a charity supplying mosquito nets to poor families, and in the course of this saving many lives.

Next came the challenge of finding a suitable role that used his talents but kept him in the company. So from translator he went into a position managing environmental permitting for us. He very soon outgrew this and unknown to me, but incredible news, he had applied for a prestigious grant organisation that he was awarded almost certainly up against thousands of others, and was awarded a place in the US to attend University to study. I have been in touch with him sporadically over the years in his career as a lecturer and journalist. He continues to be an inspiration to me, as are many of the team members I have followed the careers of after I left the country.

I talk a lot about leaders I have worked for, but have to touch on leaders that have worked in teams I have led, many more talented and insightful than me. I am happy that I have been fortunate to have so many people more capable than me in teams alongside me as I have learned so much from them, and a big thank you to them all from my heart.

One such leader was Bob. Bob was a senior member of my team in a developing country. He managed health and safety in the team, and in that a large team. Health management was a particularly challenging area as with a small amazing health team, led by a Scottish Staff Nurse (now an accomplished owner of her own health company) had under their care the staff assigned from other countries to the country in question, their families as well

the national staff and their families. In short, thousands of people, in a country where malaria, HIV and other endemic diseases led to deaths alongside a scary average age of death for adults.

Bob, had a superbly calm nature and I don't remember him ever getting angry. He would use his years of experience across the globe to sit, sketch solutions and coach the teams in the art of solution finding, rarely giving the solution. He had an almighty white board put into the office and would have the team at the board with white board pens for long periods illustrating how things worked.

In my absence I knew Bob had my back and I had confidence in his ability to deliver business culture change to the team as well as the company and to stand up to more senior persons when it was the right thing to do. In a crisis Bob came into his own, calmly assessing and steering the response. I hope it was mutual, but I had total trust and respect for Bob, his ways and competence and the team culture he brought.

Bob was his own person, who knew himself and was happy in his ways. I learned much from Bob but could have learned so much more had I not had such a bad time in this assignment driven by one of my least favourite leaders.

## Unlearning

Now lets talk on a matter of unlearning. A weird term, however its been something I've been doing for my whole life, but especially in the last few years. Yes I learn, but I have been consciously unlearning my biases from my upbringing as well as my career and life experiences. If we like it or not, we all have these unconscious biases that develop over time, and being aware of them is important.

A simple example of unlearning might be sharks. The film years

ago, Jaws, made them out to be ferocious man-eating creatures. Today we recognise them as essential top predators and critical to ocean life and food chains, and far from ferocious man eaters, they are intelligent creatures that attack man in error in nearly every case. We are unlearning their reputation.

Now I have no biases against race, religion, nor gender, having seen amazing talented people across continents and gender. I spoke earlier on my biases on homeless people, which have changed, about people being noisy on the street maybe from alcohol.

## **Unconscious bias**

Quite some time ago, with another good leader I had the pleasure of working under, we did an exercise on biases. We were given a series of CV's to assess. In essence they were all the same CV, however all worded differently and with different names and backgrounds as well as ethnicities. As we worked through the CV's and through out the lower ranked, we all slowly became aware of the similarities and then realised that for certain roles, such as senior engineering roles, we were biased towards western CV's, despite working with multiple talented engineers from multiple continents. This, as well as a few other biases were kicked out of us that day, and I've always remembered this lesson and take a lot longer today looking at CV's as well just talking to people and trying to understand me and any biases that creep in. I think this is critical for any leader, to understand these and to be honest on the biases they hold and to slowly unlearn them, or change the neural pathways to eliminate them.

## **Knocking on closed doors**

An area I have failed in over some roles in the past, is knocking on closed doors leading to frustration, stress and worsened depression.



Let's take an example. In a past company I worked for, we were receiving pressure from banks/lenders as well as shareholders for a stronger statement on sustainability within our activities. We had a decent story to tell, and telling the story may have attracted more attention from fund managers who were more inclined to invest in companies with stronger stances. And so, along with other senior leaders from the company we embarked on writing a sustainability report to presented to the board of directors for approval to put out to the market. As with all annual reports, we had a deadline and a few of us in different countries worked up to the last minute to ensure the product had accurate data and the right corporate format. We submitted the report only to be told within twenty four hours that there was no requirement for such a report and it was not going any further. Now, despite having key members of the executive management alongside me on this effort, I should have assessed the appetite a long time before this stressful exercise through direct engagement instead of knocking on a closed door.

This experience leads to the question on my values, as well the sphere of influence and where you put your effort each day.

In book I, I addressed my values in detail and looked at how working for leaders and companies that had value sets different to mine, had lead to a number of episodes of depression.

Although my values stay constant, I have realised that at least one value, that is my wellbeing and happiness was way down the list, and am finding that leaving this down the list means it doesn't get the attention, and I tend to spend more time focussed on others even when I'm going down hill, which in the long run is detrimental to those I care for and in some cases provide for. I know I'm not alone in this trait and would urge everybody to ensure they care for themselves at the same time as others at all times.

## My values

- Care for my family
- Their wellbeing and happiness
- Care for my colleagues
- Care for those who can't care for themselves
- Care for our planet
- Equal respect for everybody
- Kindness
- Honesty
- Integrity (I do what I say)
- *My wellbeing and happiness*

In trying to push open closed doors in the past I have ignored my sphere of influence, and have put far too much head space or time into worrying about aspects of life I have little to no influence on. I care desperately about others and am saddened and give of my money to reputable organisations in times of crisis and indeed monthly. Let's face facts, there are crises ongoing globally consistently, and always have been, however our advantage today is how much we can learn and organisations can respond before a crisis is totally out of hand. And outside that small help, I can't do much more today, however I worried and lost sleep. I still worry, but work to occupy my head with what I can influence, as I would argue I control next to nothing, except my reaction to events.

## Diversity does lead to a healthier culture

Just before I end this rambling chapter I'd like to touch on diversity. This is such a politically charged word today, which is a shame, as diversity is such a wide term and should lead to healthier cultures in companies, communities and countries. It can look at race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, but also needs to encompass

differences in abilities, attitudes, age, experience, backgrounds, and drive organisations where everybody has a voice that is listened to and respected. I am a supporter of diversity in all its meanings and the breadth of diversity that exists in this world.

## **Lessons**

Working in a team and company where values are shared is important. If your values are strained and compromised often, you're in a risky situation and you need to work your way out if you can. I know that not everybody has the luxury of job jumping. If you can't change, then attend and leave and treat it as a way of making money and nothing more. I failed here a couple of times leading to deep depressive episodes.

As a leader, surround yourself with people better than you and feel comfortable. You have succession handled, and have an opportunity to learn.

Despite the above, don't be afraid to take a risk on a person who is growing.

Recognise people in your team and organisation who have outgrown their role, the team and/or the company.

Look up and down for great leaders. Leadership is a choice and leaders can be present at all levels of a company. When you find them, encourage and nurture them.

Recognise where managers are not leaders and help them to lead as well as manage. Be cautious of falling into the trap in industry of promoting to management a person who has only proven their technical capability. Prepare leaders to be leaders.

Management alone will never enable long term performance delivery of the people nor the company.

Be acutely aware of your sphere of influence, and avoid knocking

on closed doors, if they are never going to open.

Never stop learning and always be acutely aware of your own wellbeing, which is critical to how you lead your team and care for others.

**MY HEARTFELT THANKS FOR READING THIS BOOK.  
PLEASE EITHER LEAVE A COMMENT ON AMAZON  
BOOKS OR LET ME KNOW YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT  
THE BOOK POSITIVE OR TO BE IMPROVED UPON.**

**John**

































