



Old books and CBT



***The mind is its own place, and in itself
can make heav'n of hell, a hell of
heav'n. – John Milton***

I have enjoyed reading for many years and before I knew anything about mental health. I recognised something of my own way of thinking in this Paradise Lost quote as I felt my mind would perceive some things positively yet on another occasion, I could equally perceive the same situation negatively, especially social situations. The following narrative

has some quotes that has helped to shape my thoughts.

***What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build
our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of the mind. – The Dhammapada***

Whilst journeying through life it is difficult to appreciate the significance of challenging events or to understand what impact they may inflict on later life. Following is one example of this from my own life.

After university I was working as a web designer. It was in the very early 2000's and the internet boom of the late 90's had expanded and then popped. I was made redundant twice while I was in my early 20's as internet companies sank without a trace. It was not something I was expecting and nothing prepared me for it.

I did not expect to find myself signing on to the dole so early in my working career and at its worst I had only £100 to my name so I was fortunate I was living with my parents, or my life may have taken a different path.

I decided to move away from the internet industry to join the NHS Bank as I wanted to be helpful to others but did not know where to start. Still in early 2000's, after about a year of solid temporary employment in various roles I gained full time NHS employment.

I stayed with one NHS trust for years but unfortunately the trust had a habit of having a restructure every few years which meant a cycle of being put at risk and competing with the people I had been working with for fewer and fewer jobs with each restructure. At risk back then meant the job you had been doing no longer existed for one reason or another. After a period at risk if you had not secured a position, you were out of a job. I managed to succeed in continued employment in almost the same role I had been doing despite the restructures and achieve promotions in the process. One day I was finally unsuccessful in the latest round of employment roulette and was put at risk again. I was offered an equivalent band 5 position, but this was quite different to the work I had been doing and by this point I had had enough of the way the trust operated. So, after many years working at one trust, I dropped a band and joined another trust which I was happy at until I decided to join BSMHFT sometime later.

In of itself this example is nothing unusual, many people have employment difficulties especially with the pandemic we find ourselves in. One of life's routine challenges when added to others can escalate in ways not apparent at the time.



I, only sweated to prepare for war, the way ahead, the grind that brings the battler to hot tears for each yard gained. – Dante

Many years later from reading Paradise Lost but also many years ago from the present time, I found myself having mental health difficulties. I had stopped doing things I would normally do such as reading to instead dedicate time to thinking as there seemed to be a lot on my mind to sort through and that needed time and effort set aside to work on. No matter how much time I spent on thinking things over, I never seemed to get anywhere or sort anything out. My thoughts slowly became predominantly endless 'What if?' questions going round and round. Sleeping became increasingly difficult, I was never great at sleeping eight hours but this was a lot worse. Leaving the house was harder and harder to do over time until I would pause on the threshold to see if I could think of a way to get out of leaving the house but I could never think of a reason, so I forced myself to leave.

I knew I wanted to understand why I had altered from being someone I recognised and I wished to know what I could do to get myself back. I realised I would need help as my own efforts were not getting anywhere.

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched with a woeful agony, which forced me to begin my tale; and then it left me free. – Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In secret I looked for help from BSMHFT services and made an appointment to see a therapist. Mental health was not widely discussed in society at that time so there was a feeling to not talk about it.

One of the first things I mentioned to the therapist was how I felt guilty seeking help when my issues seemed small compared to others who face much greater challenges. The therapist used an example of, if I had not eaten in three days and someone else had not eaten for five days, I would still be hungry. It was a good example of although others may appear to have a more difficult life, my issues were real to me and I was justified in seeking help.

My 'help' became around 24 sessions of talking to a therapist for an hour each which were exhausting for me talking all that time but very positive. After some sessions I was offered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or counselling and I chose CBT as it seemed to suit my personality.

With the help of CBT and the work I needed to put in to make it work, I gradually became more like the person I recognised as being myself. I discovered the reason I needed to seek help were the coping mechanisms I had developed to manage life for so many years, finally stopped working and I was confronted with a situation I could no longer cope with on my own which left me not being able to function in a way I recognised as being me.

I have not had a rags to riches tale, I've not overcome insurmountable odds, I have just pinballed through a fairly routine life like most people. I have experienced the kind of life events most will encounter and maybe if someone else lived my life they would not have needed to seek help or have any issues. For me though there was a point where it was too much. I tried to cope without help but that did not work and only when I sought help was I able to return to being me.

It feels as though the beginning and the end are intertwined, thus leading to a never-ending cycle. Surely this will not be the end. Just as it can't be considered the beginning. Just as it can't be determined where the beginning or the end is. – Jang Eun-Jin





The issues that led to me seeking help have not vanished as they live with me each day but I am now better equipped to manage them and so far I have not needed the same intervention as all those years ago.

I am fortunate to have green space where I live where I can go for walks with my wife and our dog, see local wildlife and get some clean air. I have a support network of my wife, my dog and a few close family members. I talk with my wife at length most days, even after knowing each other since the 90's.

I continue to read old books and I listen to podcasts like The Life Scientific, In Our Time, The Science Hour, Analysis and recently our own Mental Health Natters which help my wellbeing and broaden my horizons.

It can be easy to become world weary, jaded and cynical and I try to avoid this through the work I do in BSMHFT and by continuing to learn from others which is easy as often someone I work with will have an inciteful perspective or experience that I would not have thought of.

I am not on social media platforms as I do not think it would benefit my wellbeing. I do some voluntary work which I have been doing for some years which helps be part of something bigger than just me.

I am able to be creative and artistic as a hobby and this is also a useful way to stay well.

I have always believed, and I still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value. – Hermann Hesse

I feel that when we in a society sign up to the social contract, there is some small print that states you must also look, feel and behave in the same way as the rest of society. This of course is nonsense and in recent years I feel society, like someone tripping on a paving slab whilst out for a walk, has stumbled on many other voices and realised those who constitute to making up a society is more varied than it previously realised.

Mental health for example is now discussed by celebrities, royals, in sports and the ongoing pandemic has brought mental wellbeing to many people's attention. It is heartening that society is slowly altering its ideas to thinking more that we are all fellow passengers to the grave and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

As a member of NHS staff in a mental health trust, it feels risky to admit I have used our services when it should be as commonplace as talking about physical health. I broke my collar bone when I was young and sought professional help to heal it much in the same way as when I struggled with my mental wellbeing and sought help. My collar bone will always be changed from the break as I am from my mental health experience. Neither health experiences were bad per se, just bumps on the road of life.

What is in store for us in the future? And he thought: "Let us live, and we shall see". – Anton Chekhov

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