

Trauma

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on trauma. These free books are collections of the articles and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

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What is Trauma?

Trauma can be a slippery term to define because we often use the word to refer to both things that have happened to us (e.g. 'I went through trauma', 'that was traumatic') and to the way we've been impacted by such events (e.g. 'I have trauma', 'I was traumatised').

In many ways it's more useful to focus on the latter because, in our culture, we can get very hung up on whether what happened to us was bad enough to count as trauma or not - in fact doubting our experience in this way is one of the classic impacts of trauma. There are many lists of traumatic childhood - and adulthood - events which can be unhelpful for those of us who find ourselves struggling with trauma but not easily able to check the items on those lists. For example, such lists tend to focus on interpersonal experiences (such as abuse and neglect) rather than social ones (such as discrimination and oppression). They also tend to emphasise physical and sexual forms of trauma over emotional and relational ones which can be just as impactful.

In this collection the focus is on trauma as the *impact* of what happened to you. As Steve Haines points out in his great little overview *Trauma is Really Strange*, bodily trauma responses such as mobilising into fight or flight, or going immobile and dissociating, are the same whether we're talking about developmental trauma from the past, a recent traumatic event, or the cumulative impact of stress.

When we consider what causes us to be traumatised, I like this definition used by Bonnie Badenoch in her book *The Heart of Trauma*:

'Any experience of fear and/or pain that does not have the support it needs to be digested and integrated into the flow of our brains'

This helpfully highlights the point which many trauma experts agree on that there are two elements to traumatising circumstances:

1. A key event, or accumulation of events, which is frightening, shameful or otherwise painful to us (whether or not it would be to other people in similar circumstances, it's about the meaning for us)
2. Not receiving the support we need in order to process the event or events (which usually means having somebody to hold us and hear us in our distress, reflecting it back to us in ways that reassure us that it is understandable and help us to tolerate it)

One reason that many of us downplay, or fail to acknowledge, our trauma is that we haven't understood that the second part is just as important as the first. People can recover pretty well from seemingly extreme events when they receive relational and/or community support, and/or when the support they've received in their life today has left them with strong internal

resources. People can struggle hugely in their lives if they haven't received enough of that kind of supportive accompaniment (developmental trauma), and life events hit much harder when there is a lack of support around them, for example with unacknowledged forms of loss, or in situations where we are blamed for what happens to us, or shunned by close people or community.

This collection will include mention of the following kinds of trauma, and the relationship between them:

- Developmental trauma (also referred to as complex post-traumatic stress disorder): the kind of trauma we experience if we went through frightening or painful situations as a child which were not held and heard well enough by the close people around us.
- Intergenerational trauma: the kind of trauma which is passed on from one generation to the next, for example parents who are unable to support their kids emotionally because they didn't receive that emotional support themselves, or teachers who ignore bullying because it was the norm when they - themselves - were at school.
- Cultural trauma: the ways in which we are traumatised by the systems and structures, and cultural messages, around us, for example the acceptance of sexual harassment and victim blame around it, or the impact of structural racism and cultural gaslighting around that.
- Historical trauma: the traumatising impact of events that happened to our ancestors such as colonialism, slavery or genocide, which are passed down through generations in various ways, and which also often linger in the current culture in ways which are denied and ignored.

Trauma and Consent

Another of my free books is on the topic of consent. Trauma and consent are interlinked because non-consensual behaviour – at an interpersonal, community or societal level – is one of the main forms of trauma. Non-consensual behaviours become more difficult to identify and protect yourself against when you have experienced trauma, and it's hard to treat yourself consensually as a trauma survivor.

It's also harder to behave consensually with others when there is trauma present. Developmental trauma can result in deep fears of abandonment or annihilation by others, which can mean that we try to grasp hold of others – perhaps crossing their boundaries in the process – and/or we try to push them away, potentially in non-consensual ways. We can also be drawn to relationships which are non-consensual in similar ways to those we had growing up. The 4F survival strategies can make it very hard to be consensual in relationships. For example, fawn makes it hard to be honest with others about ourselves, our needs, and our boundaries, because them liking us and approving of us feels so vital. Fight makes it hard to avoid attempting to control others' behaviour because we often feel we have to do this in order for people to stay or to avoid them hurting us.

High levels of fear and shame when we are triggered make it very difficult to be present to another person; to engage in open communication and conflict intimacy; to be honest about our feelings, needs, and boundaries; and to hear any criticism. Often when relationships are struggling we trigger each other into trauma responses. It takes a long time for our nervous systems to return from one of these mutual triggerings, and when they happen regularly we tend to go to old survival strategies to try to avoid it happening again. We may well also become hypervigilant for signs that it might be about to happen, which keeps our nervous system on high alert and more prone to being triggered.

It's also easy to look to partners, and to people we're in close relationship with, to be The One who can prevent us from having to feel the fear/shame and other tough feelings of trauma, and/or who can reach us and pull us out of them when they hit. Both of these can easily tip into treating them non-consensually.

Working on our own trauma responses, and cultivating consensual behaviour, go hand in hand, and they require both inner work and cultivating networks of support to help us.

Trauma and the Body Basics

As part of my [deep dive into trauma](#) I wanted to write a piece about the way trauma works in the body and brain, and the implications of this when we're working with trauma personally. I want to understand which kinds of practices are likely to be helpful, and which risk retraumatizing us.

This is important given that many of the standard things that we ourselves – and even therapeutic professionals who are not trauma trained – may well assume are a great idea, are actually pretty risky. Particularly that applies to anything that involves staying with our experience – like mindfulness, the cathartic expression of emotions, or tuning into the body. We can think we're doing [something helpful](#) when actually it can be keeping us locked into trauma responses.

When I'm talking about trauma responses here I'm following Steve Haines, whose book [Trauma is Really Strange](#) is a great overview of the research. He says that the body and brain respond in a pretty similar way whether the trauma we're talking about is a sudden trauma (like surviving assault), developmental trauma (or [cPTSD](#)), and/or cumulative stress (like the marginalisation stress of ongoing discrimination, microaggressions, fear of hate crime, etc. that members of oppressed groups face).

Difficulties with including the body

Although I've read a few of the classic trauma books over the last few years, I find that the body/brain stuff is the part of it that's most slippery for me and I struggle to hold onto it. This may be because neuroscience isn't part of my everyday thinking and writing. That's because many of the thinkers I follow tend to distance themselves from biological psychology. They do so because such approaches often attempt to explain everything at a biological level, reducing human experience to evolved patterns and neurons. Such approaches often essentialize complex human experiences like sexuality, gender, or mental health struggles, purely to the biological level.

The recent writing on trauma – however – is more biopsychosocial. The book I'm drawing on most here – [David Treleaven's Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness](#) – is an excellent example of how we might weave together understandings of body/brain, lived experience, and social injustice.

A more personal reason for my difficulty with the bodily – or somatic – aspects of trauma is that I haven't generally found it easy to be in my body. This makes sense from a trauma-informed perspective because bodies often don't feel very safe to occupy when you've experienced post traumatic stress. Many of us remain in our heads. My experiences

of somatic experiences like yoga and body scan meditations is of a struggle to be present to physical sensations.

Why body knowledge is so vital here

These days my body is making it very difficult to continue this habit of detachment because it is telling me loud and clear that something is wrong. I'm experiencing things like full body twitches, a vice-like feeling across my chest when I get stuck in old patterns, panicked breathing during flashbacks, and disturbing pains in parts of my body that have been hurt in the past.

Strange as it may sound, I'm grateful for these feelings because they make it virtually impossible for me to override myself and keep doing things that hurt me as I have previously. Also such feelings give me a sense that I'm legit in claiming post-traumatic stress, not that I should need that, but given the level of **cultural and personal denial** about trauma, it does help.

Understanding how the body and brain operate when we've been traumatised is useful because we can then remind ourselves of what is happening internally when a trauma response hits. Given the high level of victim blaming that trauma survivors of all kinds experience, it is very easy to internalise self-blame, becoming angry with ourselves when we have these experiences and assuming that we should be able to easily think our way out of it or fix ourselves.

Understanding the science of how the nervous system works will – hopefully – help us to see why figuring out and rationalising aren't generally helpful reactions when we're in a trauma response. It will also help us to avoid practices that actively harm us when traumatised, and point us towards ones which are more helpful.

In his book, **David Treleaven** gives a nice overview of the literature on trauma and the body, and pulls out some good suggestions of what's helpful given this. I'm going to summarise his material here which will inevitably be a big oversimplification of what is a hugely complex area and still a work in progress.

Trauma and the Nervous System

The **autonomic nervous system** is the part of the nervous system which supplies the internal organs. It regulates bodily processes like breathing and heart rate without our conscious effort. Once the autonomic nervous system has received information about the body (interoception) and the external environment (exteroception), it responds by stimulating

body processes or inhibiting them. The *sympathetic nervous system* is the ‘accelerator’ which usually stimulates processes such as mobilising the fight/flight response to danger. The *parasympathetic nervous system* is the ‘brake’ which usually inhibits processes, promoting rest, digestion, etc. Together these systems regulate how we expend and/or conserve energy.

Stephen Porges’s polyvagal theory explains trauma in relation to three subsystems of the autonomic nervous system which function in our involuntary responses to threat. The *vagus nerve* is the longest nerve of the autonomic nervous system. The three subsystems are the *ventral vagal complex*, the *sympathetic nervous system*, and the *dorsal vagal system*.

Ventral Vagal Complex

The ventral vagal complex is the front branch of the vagus nerve. When it is active we’re able to be open, connected and present, relaxed and calm. We can also access the social engagement system meaning that we’re able to tune into – and communicate well with – others.

Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight/Flight)

When trauma hits, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in. This is the fight/flight response where adrenaline and cortisol are released to give us the energy and quick reactions needed for a crisis. Blood flows to the muscles and the focus is only on processes vital for survival, rather than digestion, rest, etc. This explains why we may not be able to hear as well, salivate, or cry in this state.

Dorsal Vagal System (Freeze)

If we can act on the fight/flight response and get to safety then our arousal will go back to normal. If not, our dorsal vagal system kicks in. This is the most primitive of the autonomic nervous system subsystems at the back of the vagus nerve, which extends to the stomach and lower gut.

When this happens our heart rate plunges, we can’t breathe, and we become immobile or faint. This is the animal freeze response which happens when fight/flight aren’t possible. It makes it possible that a predator may leave the animal for dead, and the endorphins released also mean that there will be less pain and consciousness if the worst happens.

Peter Levine’s work on somatic experiencing suggests that we become stuck in trauma if we’re unable to discharge the sympathetic nervous system activity – as animals do – after

we've been traumatised. This is why we tend to cry and tremble after something shocking or stressful: we need to discharge the fear. However, cultural norms against expressing emotion work against this.

David gives a poignant example of a family crossing a road when a car comes towards them too fast. They run to get out of its way. On reaching the other side one little boy starts to cry and tremble, but his parent tells him off for doing so. The boy grips his jaw, holds his breath, and tightens his chest to prevent himself from sobbing. When this happens repeatedly, it isn't possible to release the sympathetic response to trauma and it becomes lodged in the body, leading to post traumatic symptoms because we've been unable to integrate our experience.

Trauma and the Brain

Turning to the brain, again oversimplifying, we can understand this as being divided into three parts. The first two parts are what neuroscientist [Joseph Le Doux](#) calls the 'emotional brain': the parts that are responsible for survival and overall wellbeing. These are the early reptilian brain which controls all the things we can do when we're born (e.g. sleeping, eating, cruing, breathing, urinating, defecating), and the limbic/mammalian brain which controls emotions and memory including the fight/flight/freeze response.

The neocortex is the 'rational brain' which is the part humans have which controls language, abstract thought, empathy, and making choices towards an imagined future. The frontal lobes of the neocortex develop by the second year of life giving us executive control over our bodies, behaviour and emotions so that we can navigate the complex social world, for example making decisions that may be better for us long term even though they bring short term pain or lack of pleasure.

In post traumatic stress, the coordination between the emotional and rational brain becomes out of balance so that the rational brain can't suppress the emotional brain even if you want it to: the emotional brain keeps signalling that you are in danger and must act urgently, and no amount of insight or rationalisation can override this.

Under normal conditions of potential danger the *amygdala* in the limbic system sounds the alarm that there may be a threat. The *hippocampus* registers this and tells the neocortex the time sequence of the event: the beginning, middle, and end. The *prefrontal cortex* in the neocortex assesses the situation, makes decisions, and calms us down if the amygdala gave a false response.

In post traumatic stress the integration between these three systems goes wrong, meaning that we keep responding as if a threat was taking place. The rational brain is bypassed, and the hippocampus is disabled so that no message comes to the neocortex that the stress is over. The stress hormones continue to circulate and the survival system keeps going indefinitely, explaining our continued high anxiety and hypervigilance as we keep scanning for danger.

Implications for Working with Trauma

So post traumatic stress occurs when events exceed our capacity for integration, and when we're unable to release sympathetic nervous system activity. Therefore we need to help our nervous system to process trauma by realising that this is normal, by feeling safe enough in the present (connected to our body, environment, and/or other people), and by allowing the emotional and bodily response required for integration, such as grief, shaking, etc.

Staying in the window of tolerance

David describes the ventral vagal social engagement response as the window of tolerance between *hypoarousal* (the dorsal vagal immobilisation response) and *hyperarousal* (the sympathetic nervous system fight/flight response). In hypoarousal we might experience emotional numbness, absence of sensations, our cognitive processes dulled, and little physical movement. In hyperarousal we might experience heightened sensations, emotional reactivity, hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts and images, and distorted cognitive processes.

A big part of the work with trauma is learning how to tell when we've gone into hyperarousal and/or hypoarousal and bringing ourselves back into the window of tolerance. This is why Love Uncommon's emotional intensity thermometer is so helpful. Practices which put us into hyperarousal or hypoarousal, or keep us there, aren't helpful with trauma.

Learning how to shift attention

David explains that people with post traumatic stress reflexively orient towards trauma relevant stimuli whether internally or externally: we're tracking constantly for signs that something is wrong or that something bad is going to happen again. When we imagine we've experienced such a sign we go into a vicious cycle of fear and freeze, as the panic immobilizes us, everything constricts making us feel more frightened, and this constricts us all the more. Peter Levine describes it like this:

- The physiological sensations of trauma continue to activate the mind's fear response
- Which, in turn, activates the physiological response to danger

- Which is the root of the physiological sensations of trauma

This sounds very familiar. For example I recognise that when I feel the physical sensations of fear and shame I often start to hypervigilantly scan my traumatic memories for things that I could have done differently in the past, search the present for anything that might be wrong, or imagine future possible traumas so I can be prepared for something hitting that I fear would overwhelm me. All those strategies intensify the bodily trauma sensations, resulting in even more desperate hypervigilance and scanning/planning.

So it's useful to learn to shift our attention, when we feel the flicker, flame, or fire of such experiences, back to a stable anchor. This reorientation will help us come back to a more regulated state. What the anchor is differs for different people. Some find that focusing on the breath is helpful, for others that can be retraumatising. The same is true for bodily sensations, self-touch, visualising something pleasant or calming, or focusing on what you can sense with one or more of the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). The vital thing is finding what works for you. Often it helps to focus on feeling grounded in the body, and orienting to the environment. Both are also helpful reminders that the traumatic situation is over.

It can be very helpful to work with a trauma-informed practitioner because it can be hard indeed – at first – to unlearn old trauma habits. A practitioner can help us to notice when we're drifting towards reactivity, or dissociating. They can slow us down, ground us, and the social engagement itself can help us to remain in the window of tolerance as we're connected with another person.

Babette Rothschild talks about mindful gauges which can help us reestablish self-regulation, including bodily sensations, moods, feelings, and thoughts. This is about learning what the key signs are – for us – which tell us we're going into a hyper- or hypo-aroused state. For me I'm noticing that my thoughts become noisy and churning, feelings of fear and shame come up, and I have a clenched, constricted, tight feeling across my chest making my breathing shallow. Things that can help me come back from that place include slowing my breathing, soothing self-touch, movement, kind self-talk, and bringing my attention gently to feelings and/or sensations, if that feels okay.

Reflections

Feeling not figuring

Personally I found this material very helpful to understand quite what a profound impact being discouraged from expressing emotions has on kids. I was so struck by David's description of the little boy gripping his jaw, holding his breath, and tightening his chest to prevent himself from sobbing. I'm also thinking about the link between this kind of reaction and shame around bodily functions: how clenched the entire body can become around tough feelings, physical sensations, and 'embarrassing' bodily functions like wind/gas, urination, defecation, and menstruation.

Recently I caught myself automatically going into clenching and carrying on, having hurt my finger in a cupboard door. I deliberately slowed down to let myself feel the pain and feel my feelings – both for the physical pain and for the automatic self-blame and push to continue what I was doing that came up. I'm trying now to pause and notice both physical and emotional pain, allowing time to experience and express it, instead of continuing the old habit of pushing it down. I still think the Pixar movie *Inside Out* is one of the best depictions of the potentially profound psychological impact of disallowing certain emotional states.

I also found the trauma material helpful for the explanation of why we can't just think our way out of a trauma response. That's definitely been my go-to way of trying to cope in the past, and it just gets me caught up in endless loops of self-blame when I can't seem to figure it out or think any differently. Now I'm trying to focus on strategies that ground me in the body and/or in the environment around me. 'Feeling not figuring' has become a mantra for when I'm in that place: gently *being with the feelings* rather than trying to make sense of anything at that moment.

Welcoming the trauma response and what it has to tell us

I found it useful to learn that trauma responses often involve us reacting to interior signals as if they were exterior. Our nervous system is sending us warning alarms and it feels like we're in actual danger, but we may well not be right now. All triggers land with the same intensity whether there is physical threat or emotional threat, and whether that threat is large, small, or just a reminder of a threat that happened in the past. The body and brain are not making these distinctions.

It's good to remind myself that I'm safe enough in this moment and that this is what's going on in the body. I was left with the question, though, of how to know whether the trauma response was telling me something important or not. I mean obviously I wasn't in life or death danger as it sometimes seemed to be suggesting, but had it come up because I was facing a situation which could be emotionally dangerous to me?

Here I find it helpful to return to *Buddhist teachings* which suggest being with all experiences that come up in a warm, welcoming way. I'm finding it helpful to try to embrace

the trauma feelings warmly and tell them they are welcome, rather than trying to avoid them, get rid of them, or figure them out, as I once would have done. It helps with this to remember that I'm grateful to them for trying to protect me. They are enabling me to notice, now, situations which could be risky to me, which I might've ignored in the past.

If the feelings are very overwhelming I recognise that having pushed this response down so much over the years means that it now has to scream to be heard. I promise the feeling that I will return to what it's trying to tell me when I'm feeling clearer and calmer – once I can access the rational brain again – and I try to focus on soothing my nervous system for a while.

If the feeling is not so intense then I turn towards it and take it seriously. I try to be understanding of why whatever just triggered me might've done so, and I commit to putting some time into reflecting on that thing, rather than dismissing it or going to a habitual response (e.g. fight, flight, freeze, or fawn).

Kindness and creativity

I also found it very helpful to read about how trauma takes you out of the social engagement system. I often blame myself harshly for how hard – if not impossible – I find it to be kind and empathic when I'm in a trauma response. This exacerbates the response further with fear and shame about whether that means I'm really a 'bad person'. Now I can remind myself that I'm unable to access the social engagement system in that place.

I think this also explains why it's extremely hard to be creative when trauma is very live – something else I've given myself a hard time about in the past. Now I can see that the main key to returning to a place of kindness and creativity is moving out of the trauma response. I can focus on doing the things that help with that.

However, again, it's not about pushing yourself to get out of the response – which can be counterproductive – but rather trying to be with it warmly, along with everything else that is here in this moment, until it has passed.

Finally, the understanding about how the hippocampus is bypassed during trauma felt useful. I like Sarah Peyton's work where she suggests that we can usefully time-travel back to traumatic times in our lives and experience them in safety, releasing any feelings, and putting a time stamp on the memory.

Of course this needs to be done slowly and carefully, perhaps with external support, but it feels good to have a way of relating to past memories which have haunted me, or been

hard to approach, previously. I enjoy this creative way of addressing trauma, and the plural emphasis in Sarah's work on accessing a kind inner witness to accompany you back.

Trauma and cPTSD 101

In recent articles and podcasts I have been increasingly weaving a trauma-informed perspective into my writing. This article gives an overview of trauma and how it works – drawing largely from Pete Walker's work on cPTSD. Content Note: Brief mentions of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, bullying, war, and sexual violence, but not details.

The last couple of months I've been reading everything I can get my hands on about trauma, particularly cPTSD (complex post traumatic stress disorder). This piece is my attempt to summarise what I've learnt so far. First and foremost this is for myself, so that I can bed this knowledge in, and weave it together with my existing understandings of how people and relationships work. But hopefully the summary of what I've read so far will be helpful as a starting point for others who see themselves in this idea of cPTSD.

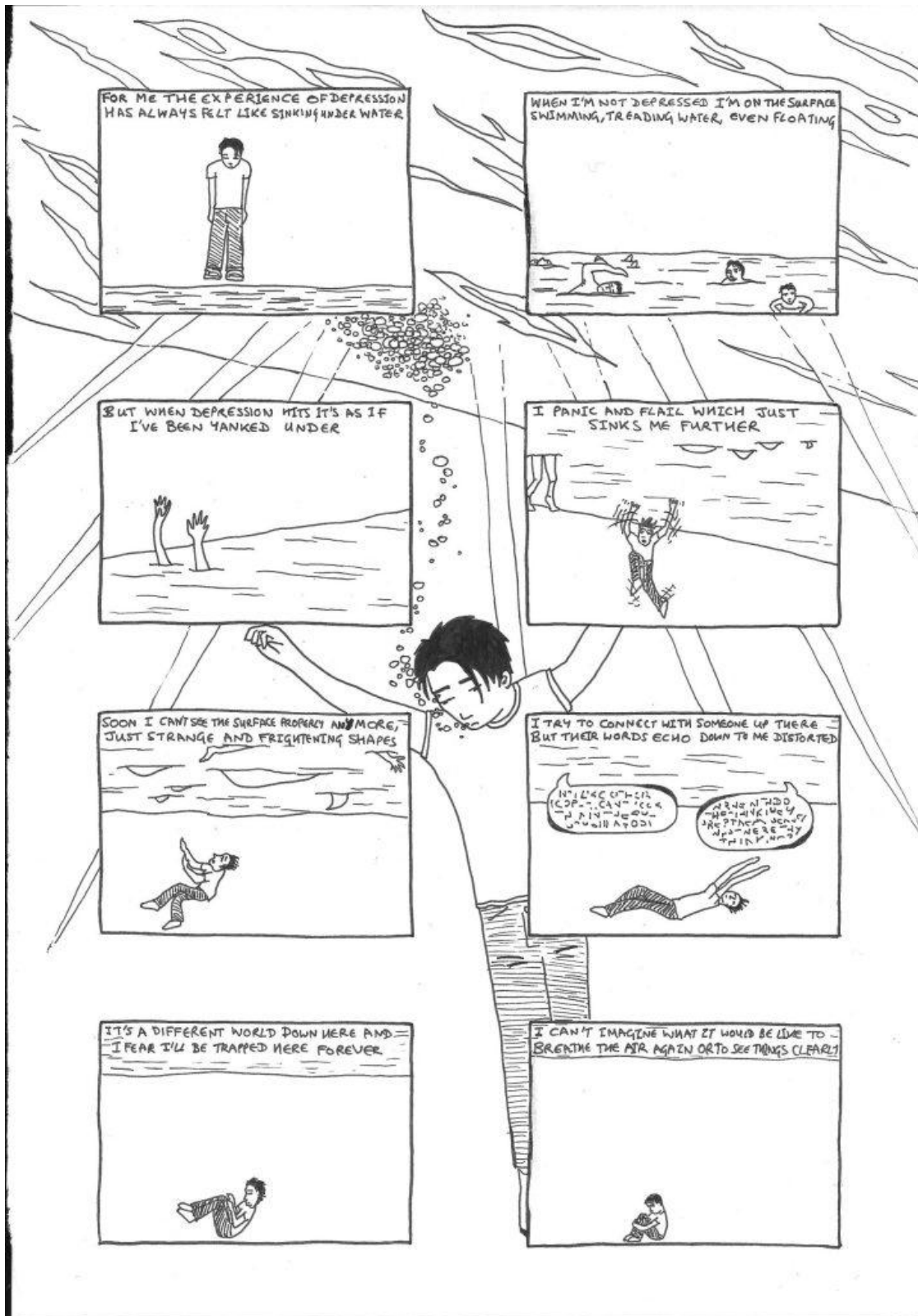
Largely I'm drawing on Pete Walker's book [cPTSD](#) here, but also on Judith Herman's classic [Trauma and Recovery](#), where she first came up with the idea of cPTSD. I also find Steve Haines' graphic guide [Trauma is Really Strange](#), David Treleaven's [Trauma-sensitive Mindfulness](#), and Sarah Peyton's [Your Resonant Self](#) helpful. I'm very grateful to my co-creator, [Alex Iantaffi](#), for their [podcast on cPTSD](#) – and for our conversations over the years – which helped me to find this literature.

Why is this useful to me?

When I was in my twenties I read every book I could find on depression, and went to see the authors speak whenever I had the opportunity. Several times I remember going up, in some desperation, to the speaker at the end of the talk and describing my experience, in the hope that they would say 'absolutely, that's a legit kind of depression. Welcome to the club. Here's how to cure it.' Actually what they said was that they'd never heard of what I was describing and it certainly wasn't anything like their experience of depression. I was left feeling confused and ashamed.

The experience I described was something I'd been going through for years: a swift plummet into an utterly hopeless place where I felt panicked and utter hatred towards myself. Sometimes it became so desperate that I self-harmed, which seemed to alleviate it. Sometimes it eventually lifted by itself. It often only lasted for hours, although it could last days, and it happened against the backdrop of a generally highly self-critical way of treating myself.

This is the way I depicted it when I tried to draw it, some years later.



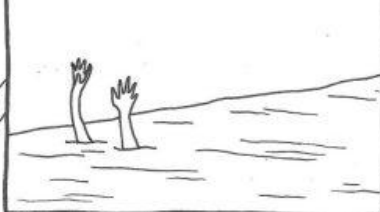
FOR ME THE EXPERIENCE OF DEPRESSION
HAS ALWAYS FELT LIKE SINKING UNDER WATER



WHEN I'M NOT DEPRESSED I'M ON THE SURFACE
SWIMMING, TREADING WATER, EVEN FLOATING



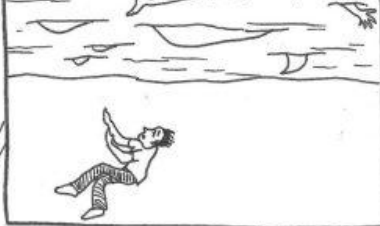
BUT WHEN DEPRESSION HITS IT'S AS IF
I'VE BEEN YANKED UNDER



I PANIC AND FLAIL WHICH JUST
SINKS ME FURTHER



SOON I CAN'T SEE THE SURFACE PROPERLY ANY MORE,
JUST STRANGE AND FRIGHTENING SHAPES



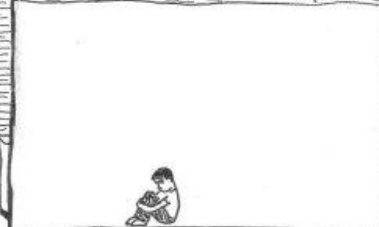
I TRY TO CONNECT WITH SOMEONE UP THERE
BUT THEIR WORDS ECHO DOWN TO ME DISTORTED



IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD DOWN HERE AND
I FEAR I'LL BE TRAPPED HERE FOREVER



I CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO
BREATHE THE AIR AGAIN OR TO SEE THINGS CLEARLY



I was confused because 'depressed' seemed a good way to describe this horrible place, but the sudden plummet was different to the long periods of dark moods described in depression memoirs. I *could* get out of bed. In fact I couldn't allow myself not to, driven as I was by this highly self-critical perfectionism. And although I often longed to eradicate myself for being unacceptable, somehow for me that came out in the form of beating myself – literally and metaphorically – rather than in the form of suicidal ideation.

Between then and now I've read a lot about mental health, reflected critically on diagnosis and treatment, and trained in forms of psychotherapy that generally see suffering as a more universally human – or existential – experience.

However, reading Pete's book on cPTSD was the first time I read a perfect description of the plummet, tied to a legit mental health label. What I've experienced my whole life is called an 'emotional flashback', and it's a sign of having cPTSD.

What is cPTSD?

cPTSD is also called developmental trauma. Steve Haines's book suggests that one-off traumatic events, developmental trauma, and stress in life which becomes overwhelming all work in similar ways through the body and brain. They have similar impacts on the nervous system, and result in similar somatic experiences, flashbacks, dissociation and the 4Fs.

My understanding from Pete's book is that cPTSD – or developmental trauma – occurs when we internalise a sense of ourselves as unacceptable as a child due to how we're responded to by the world around us. He talks of a shift from a child believing 'I make mistakes' to 'I am a mistake' (behaviour to identity). The shaming we experience from others – whatever form that takes – becomes an inner sense that we *are* shameful. Such children develop a vicious inner critic voice which they're always trying to please. Judith suggests that the imagining that we are bad, wholly responsible for our trauma and could learn to do better is preferable to the alternative that we were helpless and weren't being protected or cared for in the ways we needed by others.

Often emotional expression is punished or shamed, meaning that children don't learn how to regulate their emotions or to experience them in a positive way. They can also find other people's emotions overwhelming and frightening too. There is often a sense of not being loved or liked by those around them, and/or of love disappearing suddenly, and/or of it being very contingent on only behaving in some ways and not others. Because it's too risky for kids to believe that those around them are in any way dangerous they tend to protect those people by taking all the responsibility for what's happening on themselves.

According to Pete, cPTSD is characterised by the following kinds of experiences:

- Emotional flashbacks
- Being highly critical of ourselves and/or others
- Toxic shame
- Abandoning ourselves
- Anxiety and/or struggles around social situations or relationships
- Loneliness and/or feeling abandoned
- Dissociation (feeling checked out and/or distracting yourself/numbing with food, drink, worrying, working, social media, TV, etc.)
- Feeling bad about ourselves from low self-esteem to self-loathing
- Big mood changes and struggles with feelings
- Difficulties with relationships
- Being easily triggered into the 4Fs

The following kinds of somatic (bodily) experiences are also common:

- Hypervigilance, constantly scanning our lives and worlds for any sign of danger, convinced it will happen again, trying to figure out how to avoid it
- Shallow breathing
- Feeling adrenaline a lot of the time
- Feeling physically 'armoured up' and braced for trouble: muscle tightening, back pain, etc.
- Wear and tear from how much we've rushed at everything and/or armoured up
- Struggling to be fully present, relaxed, and grounded in our bodies
- Sleep problems
- Startle responses, twitches, etc.
- Digestive problems
- Forms of self harm which jolt the body out of the painful panicked desperate out-of-touch with self place that trauma puts us in

OMG Pete, it's like you've seen into my soul!

Emotional flashbacks

Emotional flashbacks are like standard flashbacks – where people respond as if they're right back in a traumatic memory – but without the clear memory of what is being replayed: just the emotions and bodily responses.

Emotional flashbacks involve sudden drops into debilitating fear and shame. It's like we're right back in the overwhelming feelings that we experienced as a child, and we are: our nervous system has literally been put right back there. We often feel small, fragile, young, desperate and helpless in these moments. We may panic and flail or we may shut down and give up. We generally feel like we're unacceptable and bad. Everything feels way too hard, being seen feels excruciating, and it feels like a matter of life and death. We go into survival mode and fear we will not survive.

Pete suggests that often retraumatising experiences as adults – such as deaths, losses, or going through something similar again – put us into extended periods of flashback. This is what I've been experiencing recently.

Also flashbacks can be triggered by all kinds of things – internal and external – which we may or may not understand at the time. In the past couple of months, for example, I have been triggered into flashback by: a stranger looking away when I smiled at them; a message from someone asking something of me which I didn't want to do but didn't feel able to say 'no' to; a bad dream; a memory of someone being critical of me; trying and failing to write this piece; and not being able to decide what to watch next on TV that would be both distracting and soothing enough (the answer was *This is Us*).

These things seem so small, but the point is that they plunge you back into the place you were in as a child. One of the books I read suggested that evolutionarily the sense that we were being abandoned by the people around us as a child was life and death, because without their care we'd be eaten by woolly mammoths or similar. I'm always a bit suspicious of evo psych explanations, but this makes some sense of why a stranger looking away from me can feel like a life or death scenario. Pete says kids learn to register the looks on the faces of those around them and connect them with being punished or rejected. It's certainly a powerful one for me in relation to shame: being monitored by others, or others being so disgusted/embarrassed that they don't want to look me in the eye.

The 4 Fs

The 4 Fs are the four different responses that all animals go into when something traumatic happens: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. Fight is when we attack back. Flight is when we try to escape. Freeze is when we go still and frozen. Fawn is when we try to appease our attacker to get out of the situation.

In cPTSD one or more of these generally become our entrenched survival strategies: the ways we learn to relate to ourselves, others, and the world. We use these strategies to try to meet our yearning to experience the kind of love we always wanted, to avoid getting abandoned, and to try not to feel the overwhelming feelings. Needless to say they are not

helpful strategies for achieving these aims, but even pretty smart people will continue to employ them regardless...

- Fight involves learning to control others and to demand things from them, to blame others for any relationship problems rather than ourselves, to try to fix them and/or to criticise or attack them.
- Flight involves perfecting ourselves, trying to make ourselves worthy of love, and/or working very hard.
- Freeze involves hiding, retreating, keeping intimacy at a distance, dissociating and distracting.
- Fawn involves people-pleasing, focusing on others' needs rather than our own, trying to make ourselves into what we think others want us to be.

All four strategies have something that's helpful for us, if we can cultivate them all and go into them all appropriately. Fight enables us to be assertive and hold our boundaries. Flight to disengage and to be industrious and endure things. Freeze to retreat and be mindful and present. Fawn to love and serve people, to compromise and listen.

Pete suggests that they can be best seen as spectrums: Fawn to Fight, and Freeze to Flight. If we're at one end of the spectrum we need to cultivate the capacity to be at the other end. For example as a fawn/flight my tendency is to do whatever it takes to keep people happy with me, and to go into 'doing' mode (for example writing long articles about cPTSD). I need to work harder on fight (assertively holding my boundaries) and freeze (valuing just being and not always needing to be productive). For other people it would be the opposite. A good balance is to be able to be vulnerable/open *and* assertive/boundaried; to be able to do *and* to be.

Repeating patterns

The fucker of cPTSD is that it sets us up to repeat the very kinds of situations which caused the cPTSD in the first place, because our survival strategies fetch us up there time and time again. This can lead to further trauma, which can retraumatise us and tighten those survival strategies even more. Pete calls it 'the awful gift that keeps on giving'. This can mean – like me – that we end up with cPTSD and the regular garden variety PTSD.

Judith refers to people sometimes driven by desires to return to familiar dangerous dynamics with the hope of putting them 'right' this time: perhaps an attempt at healing. She also says that trauma puts people in double binds where they both want to withdraw from relationships *and* seek them desperately.

For me one example of this is where my 'flight' desire to work really hard has put me in situations where whatever I do is not enough to meet the external/internal criteria for success, and I'm further shamed or bullied for not measuring up, which makes me work even harder. Another example is where my 'fawn' desire to please others and get their love means that I shape myself to fit others, and end up having to pull away because I've given up too much of myself, fueling further shame. It can be that I specifically seem to pick the kinds of people and situations with which these strategies are most likely to fail – because that is so familiar to me.

Why do something about it?

Perhaps this should be a no-brainer, but sadly it's not. When the thing you struggle with is feeling toxic shame and believing yourself unacceptable then it's pretty hard to allow yourself to (a) acknowledge that it's real, and (b) allow yourself to get support around it.

Also those 4F strategies are often entrenched in ways that get in the way of addressing this. Fighters are going to keep believing that everyone else is at fault and not them, flee-ers are going to be far too busy to make time for healing, freezers are going to struggle to stay present with themselves when distracting and dissociating is more comfortable, and fawners can't stop hoping that they can find someone who'll prove to them that they are okay really, if they can just be pleasing enough.

I feel fortunate in a way that my particular combo of flight and fawn has eventually led me here. I've become so focused on working hard to figure out how all this stuff works and be better for others that I end up reading all these books on how people and relationships work, and synthesising it for other people in ways that (hopefully) gets through to me too. However knowing this stuff still doesn't make it easy to do the things I know I need to do, because they go against the grain of these survival strategies so much.

Here's some reasons to do something about it if you need them:

- This stuff is probably getting in the way of you getting good, loving relationships of all kinds even if it *feels* like the way to get them.
- It's also probably making you abandon yourself and treat yourself non-consensually.
- You'd probably feel a lot better if you could lift out of that toxic shame and inner criticism.
- It's not great for the other people in your life. You're probably hurting others with these strategies, especially if you're unaware of them (for all my fellow fawners).
- You'll get a lot more done and do it better with all the energy you free up (for all my fellow-flee-ers).

What to do?

Pete says you need to work to become an ‘unflinching source of kindness towards yourself’. Sound good? He also warns us to let go of any ‘salvation fantasy’ that we’ll never have another flashback, to focus on progress not perfection, and to recognise that some flashbacks will probably happen as we try to shift our survival strategies and do the things that are less familiar to us (like fighters listening and recognising how they’ve hurt people, flee-ers trying to just be, freezers getting out and about, and fawners asserting their boundaries). He likens this to going to the dentist when we have a sore tooth: we need to go to a bit more of a painful/scary place in order to not be in such a painful/scary place.

Pete talks about education, grieving, and relationships as three key aspects of the process. I would add safety as an important initial one. These things could be seen as linear stages – one following from the other – but probably we all oscillate between them. For example, feeling the feelings might help us to recognise what feels safe-enough – and not – for us, which may lead to us making more changes there. Or addressing our relationships might bring up more information which we then want to go and find out more about.

I think every person will develop their own versions of this work, bringing these ideas and practices into dialogue with other understandings or spiritual practices they already engage in, for example, or the things that they find soothing, or the kinds of relationships which are most supportive for them. It will also depend on what you have available to you, of course, in terms of time, money, resources, and other people.

Don’t be afraid to develop your own version of safety, education, grieving, and relationships. I’ve said a bit here about how they work for me to give you an example

Safety

Something that Judith emphasises but Pete doesn’t go into much is the importance of being in a safe-enough place to address this stuff. It’s incredibly hard to do this work if we’re still in dangerous situations where we’re being re-traumatised frequently or playing out our 4Fs on the daily. A good first step would be to ask yourself how you can create a safe-enough home, relationship situation, and work-life to do this process, and what support you might need in order to do it.

Safe-enough means safe-enough for *you* to be able to look at some painful stuff, feel some tough feelings, and shift some stuck habits. It also means safe-enough for others around you. For example you might well be particularly prone to getting triggered in certain kinds of relationships and need to pause or slow down these down while this is going on. You need

to be careful that the people you're asking for support from can offer it consensually, and are held and supported enough themselves in order to be able to give it.

For me this creation of a safe-enough container has involved slowing down work significantly, deciding to live alone for a time, taking time out from any erotic/romantic relationships because my stuff tends to play out in these particularly, accessing a therapist and support group to help hold me through this, avoiding big group socialising, embracing quiet nights in because I realise I often feel overwhelmed at the end of the day, cultivating morning rituals which get me into the day gently, and communicating with close people about what kinds of contact I'm capable of – and not – through this period (however long it lasts).

To some extent that's about decreasing the amount of triggers coming in to a manageable level, although the aim isn't to avoid triggers long term. That just makes our life very small indeed, as I found out in my twenties when I employed this strategy and wound up too scared to leave the house a lot of the time. It's about retreating a bit and slowing things down sufficiently that you can learn how to navigate triggers and flashbacks when they occur, so you'll become more capable of doing so, and able to expand out again eventually.

We need what Pema Chödrön calls a 'cradle of kindness' to do this work in, which is real fucking hard to develop when you've learnt that you're an unacceptable person and you can barely hear anything through the noise of the inner critic. Anything that you can do to cultivate kindness for yourself will make it more possible for you to do the other parts of this process. Check out the literatures on self/community care and self-compassion for help with this.

Anybody helping us through this also needs to be safe-enough and kind-enough. Judith emphasises that because survivors have been so disempowered then they have to be in control here. Any therapist or other supporter has to be an assistant to the person on the journey they are on, trusting their process, not taking control from them, telling them what to do, or trying to fix them.

Educating ourselves

This part is about learning about cPTSD from the outside-in: reading books, watching vids, listening to podcasts, or whatever works for you. We can then apply what we're learning to our experience and apply the various approaches to find out what works for us. For me it's also about bringing this literature into dialogue with the Buddhist teachings I'm already familiar with, and the plural selves literature.

It's also about learning about ourselves from the inside-out. Mindfulness type practices, journalling, and therapy can help us to notice how flashbacks or the 4Fs tend to work for us. We can slow down and notice what happens when we get triggered, what kinds of things trigger us: the anatomy of a flashback. It's great if we can eventually start to get curious and take each tough experience as an opportunity to learn from, instead of something to avoid or beat ourselves up for.

Grieving and feeling the feels

Grieving is big here. We need to grieve for the stuff that put these habits in place back in the past, and for the ways it has impacted us and others, and constrained our lives, since then. A major part of that grief for me – and perhaps for all of us – are the ways in which those early traumatic experiences set me up for yet more traumatic experiences in the future.

The early tough experiences – for me – were mostly emotional rather than physical or sexual, but because they resulted in patterns where I struggled to experience my feelings, felt everything was my fault, and learnt to put myself back in dangerous situations rather than asking for help, they set the scene for the physical and sexual forms of assault that I did experience in later life, and how much I minimised the impact of those later traumatic experiences.

Pete talks about four different kinds of grief: *angering, crying, speaking/writing, and feeling*. These are all useful and may be available at different times. Sometimes you can feel rage at what's happened to you and the impact of that. Sometimes you can let out tears and mourn. Sometimes you can speak or write about it to ventilate the emotions that way. Sometimes you can just stay present to whatever your internal feelings are via the sensations in your body without having to let them out, or repress them, or tell any stories about them. Because the origins of cPTSD often involve our feelings being disallowed or punished we often feel afraid or ashamed of them. The process of reconnecting with anger and sadness can help unlock our capacity for the kinds of self-protection and self-compassion that we've struggled to give ourselves.

Grief can involve time-travel: another thing I want to blog about separately at some point. We are grieving for ourselves past and present. Present trauma responses can put us in touch with earlier feelings and we can feel for them both simultaneously. Linked to this I've found it helpful to feel grief for the intergenerational nature of trauma: the ways in which the traumatic stuff that happened to us was generally the result of patterns put in place by other peoples' trauma, and the ways in which playing out our own trauma has impacted on others: perhaps tightening their own trauma habits. That can be a lot to face, but for me it can result in a lifting of feeling isolated, a recognition that we're interconnected through this,

and that our attempts to shift this stuff can have a much wider benefit than lifting our own individual suffering.

The main thing to emphasise with all of this is the importance of going slowly. Being such a good flee-er I always want to barrel into this stuff at a hundred miles an hour in order to have it all sorted. This is coupled with being a fawner who wants to sort it out quick so I can go back to being better for others than I'm being while so much of my life is taken up with this process.

But one of my big lessons is this will not be rushed. In fact rushing it tends to have the opposite effect of re-traumatising you such that it's even harder to do this work, and may well take even longer to reset some of this stuff. [Love Uncommon](#) has a helpful suggestion for navigating this territory. She suggests taking your emotional temperature on a scale of 1-10. Feelings up to 7 or so are ones to move towards and stay with in the ways Pete describes. Feeling from 8-10 are too intense – maybe a sign you're heading into flashback territory – and it's better to go into soothing activities to bring them down a notch, or maybe wait till the next day or whenever you feel back in the 1-7 zone.

Steve Haines and many of the major writers on trauma – [Peter Levine](#), [Bessel van der Kolk](#), [Gabor Maté](#), [Babette Rothschild](#) – emphasise the role of the body in trauma, and the importance of somatic practices for releasing trauma and navigating trauma responses. Steve says that it is all about 'meeting the body'. I'll mention a few of these practices in the next section on flashbacks. As with their emotions, people with cPTSD often struggle to be in contact with their bodies very well, so this is both an important and challenging area.

Relating with others

Pete has a great concept in his book that cPTSD work is about simultaneously reparenting ourselves, and getting reparented by committee. We may well have spent our lives using our 4F strategies to try to get the kind of love, protection, and kindness that we so long for, and this may well not have worked out so well. Now it's about learning to get those things on the inside (developing self-protection and self-compassion as mentioned above), and developing relationships which can help us to feel loved, protected and nurtured on the outside, through being open and real with others rather than employing those old strategies.

For a lot of people a therapeutic relationship can be a safe-enough container to start that work – if we've struggled with relationships in the past. Support groups can also be great, so can relationships with [companion animals](#), although it's worth getting support around that too of course.

Also it can be helpful to develop several friendships slowly over time, ideally with others who are up for doing this kind of work, so that we have a network of mutual support rather than one or two intense relationships where we're likely to find ourselves drawn back into trauma patterns. Basically it's all about going slow and steady and learning how to relate in sustainable ways which are kind towards ourselves and others.

Coping with flashbacks

As Pete says, we will keep getting flashbacks. At first one of the hard things is that old stuff – like realising we've over-ridden our self-consent or letting someone treat us badly – may well trigger flashbacks, but new stuff – like treating ourselves consensually or holding our boundaries – may also trigger them, because this is new territory and we're going against our survival strategies, which feels scary. Damn this is hard.

What I'm finding is that if I can slow things down a lot then I can notice the flickering of the kinds of feelings involved in a flashback (fear and/or shame usually). It's a bit like the aura people describe before a migraine happens. The feelings are around but haven't set in yet. If I can catch it quickly enough then I can do something I call circling. It's like the water circling a drain rather than going down the plug-hole (which would be plummeting into a flashback). That metaphor works for me anyway.

Here's a list adapted from Pete of how you might be able to circle rather than sink with a flashback, and how to lift out if you're in one.

- Name that you're having a flashback/pre-flashback feelings. I find it really helpful to say this out loud. To another person if I'm with a friend, or to myself – in my kindest voice – if not. If it's pre-flashback I try to stay with those feelings and remember what they are, that they make sense (whether or not I understand what triggered them right now), and that I don't have to plummet. I can circle for a while until the feelings shift.
- Remind yourself that you're not in danger and/or that you can leave any dangerous situation if you are in one. For me this is about getting myself to a safe-enough place. This means getting home if I'm out. It means getting alone – or with a safe-enough support person – if I'm in a dynamic with somebody else where we're triggering each other. Once there getting as warm and cozy as possible is great. Blankets, hot water bottles, and hot drinks can all be excellent. Remind yourself that you're in a safe-enough place to get through this.
- Remind yourself that this will pass. It often feels like this feeling is all there has ever been and all there ever will be: that it is the default that you always return to. This happens because when you were younger it probably felt very permanent. As with the idea that you are safe, it may be hard to believe the impermanence when you're in a

flashback, but you can at least say this to yourself and remember that such feelings have passed before.

- Practise feeling safe in the environment. People often find it useful to focus outwards, for example saying everything you can see in the room of a certain colour, or going through each sense saying what you can see, hear, smell, touch, etc. I find it can help to look at things in my room and remind myself where they came from or what they mean to me.
- Practise feeling safe in your body. Returning to feeling grounded in the body is also really helpful. Here people can find it helpful to hold a particular object and really feel it, to feel every part of themselves, to put their face in cool water, to do a minute of vigorous movement/dancing to shake it out.
- Respond to any critical thoughts with kindness if you can. Over time developing a kind inner-parent voice to talk you through this stuff is really helpful. Reaching out to friends who get it can help to access a voice like that if you're struggling yourself. However, it's worth talking in advice about which people in your life you can offer that with and receive it from and how it'll work, so you feel reassured in the moment that it is okay to ask, and what any limits might be. Generally it's best to avoid people who you can get caught up in mutual trauma responses with easily.
- Allow any feelings or grief. See the different ways of experiencing/expressing this mentioned earlier.

Trauma denial

It is hard writing this piece. Even though I've wanted to write it for some time, there's been an equal and opposite sense of blockage to writing it. What's that about? Judith Herman's book gave me a useful perspective on this. Culturally, and personally, we're trained to deny and minimise trauma and its impact.

Judith points out that each time psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy have begun to take trauma seriously, it has been shut down by people denying that it's even a thing, and suggesting that those who are traumatised are making it up or exaggerating its impact. When Freud first published a paper pointing out that most of the people with mental health struggles he was working with had experienced childhood and/or adult sexual abuse and assault, he was ignored and shut down. He went on to shift to a theory that suggested his patients had fantasised those things: they couldn't possibly actually have happened. This is pretty terrifying now that we know the statistics on the prevalence of abuse and assault.

After the world wars there was a movement to take 'shell shock' seriously as a mental health condition. This was shut down with a cultural belief that soldiers who struggled in these ways were just morally inferior, or seeking attention, in some way. Judith writes about how veterans in the US are still treated: how the culture simply can't face the horror of what they've been through – or their role in putting young men through that often for dubious

reasons – so it pushes them back into ‘normal life’ and doesn’t allow them to tell their stories or express their feelings.

Judith also points to the backlash of victim blame and minimisation that follows each movement to take domestic abuse and sexual violence against women seriously. I also think about how common it is for those in positions of privilege to deny or minimise the trauma experienced by those who are marginalised in any way. Judith says that each time psychology has had a wave of researching and theorising about trauma, it has been followed by a wave of silence, as if even the scientists and therapists can’t face the extent of it and its ongoing impact. I certainly experienced this myself as I studied psychology and psychotherapy. There was very little about trauma on any of my courses, and I certainly learnt several theories which were skeptical about the whole idea.

The cultural denial of trauma itself could be seen as a form of intergenerational trauma in itself. And it is internalised. One of the key features of cPTSD that Judith and Pete describe is constantly doubting whether you’re really traumatised, whether what happened to you is bad enough, whether you’re really just a bad person.

This makes it confusing territory to think and write about indeed. It’s possible that the things that happened in your life were actually way worse than you’ve ever given them credit for, because a feature of trauma is downplaying and minimising your trauma. But simultaneously it seems possible that they are not as bad as you’re now thinking they were, because you want to reach some arbitrary standard of ‘bad enough’ to legitimise how hard you’re finding things.

As Pete says, this can be particularly hard for those whose traumatic experiences don’t match the ones that are usually ‘counted’ by wider culture or online checklists. One of the important things about his book is that it includes emotional abuse and neglect as pivotal in cPTSD, whether or not they go along with more physical and sexual forms of trauma.

I would add that we should include those that happen outside the home as well as within it. School bullying is normalised and there is still the sense that the most vulnerable people – children – should put up with treatment which might well be the subject of workplace dismissal or police investigation if it happened to adults (although of course it is often overlooked in workplaces and relationship settings too). This is true whether that takes the form of ostracisation, shaming and hatred, coercion and control, unwanted touch/physical violence, and/or sexual harassment.

The trauma literature can also focus too heavily on individually traumatising experiences, leaving out the collective trauma of being in an oppressed or marginalised group and/or forms of historical trauma. I’m now focusing my reading on authors like [David Treleaven](#),

Tada Hozumi, and Alex Iantaffi who bring trauma-informed perspectives together more explicitly with social justice thinking.

Here's some useful counters to denial of trauma in yourself / from others:

- You don't have to locate the causes of your cPTSD in order for it to be legit. Some of it may well have occurred before you can remember, or be lost to memory now.
- If you're experiencing trauma responses like emotional flashbacks, dissociation, bodily responses, or going into fight, flight, freeze and/or fawn responses, that's enough evidence that it's there and it's worth getting support around it.
- People respond differently to events. It's okay for you to be traumatised by something which didn't traumatise another person who a similar thing happened to. Steve Haines uses the example of an everyday person being punched versus a boxer. Traumatic experiences also land differently in us if they're taken seriously and supported by those around us when they happen, or if they aren't.
- It's a spectrum, not an either/or. Few of us escape childhood with zero trauma, and pretty much everyone develops survival strategies (like a tendency to fight, flight, freeze or fawn). We mostly have things that particularly trigger us from the past, and become reactive or activated when that happens. The ease with which we are triggered, and the intensity of our reaction, varies between people, and maybe within the same person over time. If we've recently been retraumatised we'll probably be a lot more fragile and prone to trauma responses. Wherever you are on the spectrum, it's fine to take your trauma seriously, and to work to ease/shift your responses.
- Working on this stuff will make us better for ourselves, each other, and the wider world, and that requires taking it seriously.
- There's a strong urge to deny/minimise trauma in wider culture which gets inside us and inside others (particularly those who might fear they had a role in your cPTSD). Anyone who says they have been hurt or traumatised is usually told that: It wasn't that bad (or as bad as stuff that's happened to other people); It shouldn't have impacted them as profoundly as it has; They are probably making it up or making too much of it; They probably brought it on themselves (these are the basis of rape myths, for example). It's understandable if you find yourself thinking these things yourself.

cPTSD superpowers

I'll end on an upbeat note with the list of superpowers which Pete lists as potentially coming from working with cPTSD (and a few of my own):

- We understand trauma really well, in ourselves and others
- We're capable of deep intimacy, emotional intelligence, and really feeling the feels

- We can live an examined life, make good choices, follow our own path and rewrite the rules
- We're not covering over or hiding this stuff any more
- We can handle pain and suffering
- We have increased joy and it feels So Good when it's been so unfamiliar
- We see complexity
- We're badass: we've done all that we did in life even though we had cPTSD

This is the quote from Pete which will stay with me the most:

'Shame and self-hate did not start with me, but with all my heart I deign that they will stop with me.'

Fear/Shame and the Anatomy of a Trauma Response

In this piece I want to share some connections I've made as I experience the kinds of trauma response that I've been writing about here lately: the flicker, flame, and fire of post traumatic stress. Specifically I want to write about the combination of fear and shame which seem to occur when we're triggered or reactive, and how that relates to the existential tension between self and other.

Lately I've been writing in two different formats: the regular style, like this one, and a plural style, where I work things through in conversation between two different sides of myself. This time, as an experiment, I've tried writing on the same theme in both formats. You can read the plural conversation version [here](#). Feel free to pick just the format that works best for you. Or, if you like, you can read them both. I'm fascinated by the different potentials opened up by the different formats, and how they compare for readers, so feel free to give me any feedback about that.

One of the big ideas in Pete Walker's book on [cPTSD](#) is the sense of trauma response as a combination of fear and shame. That's very much how it is for me. When something triggers me I tend to feel somewhere on the spectrum from worry to utter panic, combined with somewhere on the spectrum from self-doubt to self-loathing. In emotional flashback I'm convinced that I'm in huge danger *and* that I'm a terrible person.

Understanding that this combination of feelings probably underlies most of my stuck patterns in how I relate to myself, others, my work, and the world. I've tried to get curious about them and to make it my business to understand the anatomy of my trauma response. Of course my experience and understanding may not resonate for everybody, but I expect these conclusions apply beyond just me.

Fear/shame and other/self

As I've mentioned before it's not always possible – or advisable – to sit in the overwhelm of an emotional flashback. But what I have been doing is to pause when I feel the flicker or flame of fear/shame coming up and to ask myself what might be happening. I've also been reflecting after a period of flashback about what might've been going on for me.

Where I've got to is that nearly always a triggering situation had occurred which I felt required to make a choice between myself and somebody else: either I could choose the other person and hurt myself, or I could choose myself and hurt somebody else. Sometimes it's more that a memory of a previous such time has come up, or that I'm imagining a future situation which might put me in that predicament.

This self/other dilemma is something I've had a sense of for **years**. The new piece is to map this onto the fear/shame element of trauma. I feel the combination of fear and shame in those moments because choosing the other person over myself equals fear, and choosing myself over the other person equals shame. This makes it feel an unbearable choice.

The fear(others)/shame(self) spectrum

It seems extraordinary how this simple binary – fear(others)/shame(self) – underlies practically everything I struggle with: from something as massive as a break-up to something as tiny as deciding what task to do next today.

Big fear(others)/shame(self) moments

When I'm deciding whether to walk away from a relationship which is hurting me, it generally manifests as a sense of terror at the possibility of remaining in such pain in order to avoid hurting the other person *and* a sense of debilitating shame at imagining being the person who walks away and hurts the person they love. A similarly huge fear/shame response generally accompanies finding out that something I did in my work hurt somebody.

Small fear(others)/shame(self) moments

When I'm trying to figure out what task to do next today, sometimes the choice of doing something 'productive' like writing or answering emails can be accompanied by an almost imperceptible frisson of fear that I'm falling into my old habit of overriding my self-consent in order to do something for others. The choice of doing something 'unproductive' and gentle for myself – like watching TV or going for a walk – can be accompanied by a similarly tiny frisson of shame that this behaviour – and therefore I – am somehow bad, or at least less good than the alternative. A similarly small fear/shame response might flicker up, for example, when deciding which book to read next: one I think I should read or a 'guilty pleasure'.

I could probably map pretty much every situation I struggle with on a spectrum between these big and small examples.

Where does the fear(others)/shame(self) binary come from?

I think there are many strands which come together to create – and reinforce – this fear(others)/shame(self) binary.

In one sense it is a human tension, which existential philosophers in particular have written a good deal about. Sartre's famous quote 'hell is other people' is all about his notion that we're constantly forced to choose between objectifying ourselves for other people, and/or objectifying other people for ourselves. This is something I've written about a lot in my work on conflict. I love Terry Pratchett's Granny Weatherwax quote for this: *'Sin is when you treat people like things. Including yourself. That's what sin is.'*

In another sense this fear(others)/shame(self) binary is a product of – at least exacerbated by – neoliberal capitalism, because within this system we are trained to experience ourselves as atomised individuals in competition with others. More from me and Justin about how that works [here](#).

Finally the trauma component of the fear(others)/shame(self) binary is important. Pete Walker – and others – locate the starting points of developmental trauma in the lack – or loss – of protection and care. This is another binary that we could see as mapping onto fear(others)/shame(self). When we are protected we are safe enough and have no need to fear others. When we are cared for we know that we are okay in who we are and have no need to feel shame.

Personally I have a memory of a pivotal moment when I became locked into this fear/shame binary way of thinking, feeling, and relating. At nine I moved to a school where it seemed that I was being taught, daily, by my peers that everything about me was unacceptable. My struggles with this were hard for people at home so I felt increasingly unacceptable there too.

I realised that either I could hide this unacceptable person that I was and shape myself into what others said I should be, in order to belong and be approved of. Or I could 'be myself' and continue to feel isolated, unwelcome, and disliked. I chose the former: fear(others) over shame(self). Interestingly I've since had conversations with people who felt faced with the same choice and went the other way. At that age it's unlikely that we'll be able to find options beyond the binary.

The four Fs and the fear(others)/shame(self) binary

If we see the four F trauma responses – fight, flight, freeze and fawn – as habitual styles of relating to ourselves, others, and the world, then we can also see them as four different ways of trying to avoid those horrible fear/shame feelings. Of course most of us employ a combination of these different strategies.

- In fight we blame others, attack out, and attempt to control others so we don't risk anyone overriding us (fear) and don't have to feel at all responsible ourselves (shame).
- In flight we keep busy doing things. This means we don't have to slow down and feel the fear that we may be prioritising winning other's approval over our own needs. It means we avoid addressing the shame that means no amount of 'success' will ever mean we're good enough.
- In freeze we distract ourselves constantly from having to face the fear that we might not be protecting ourselves well enough, and the shame that we might not be okay. That may be with social media, TV, food, alcohol, or whatever our mode of avoidance is.
- In fawn we become what we think we need to be in order to please others. We hope this will mean we can avoid the shame of realising we're not really acceptable. We hope that if we are 'good enough' then other people won't hurt us and we won't have to feel that fear.

But none of these strategies work. In fact they all fetch us right back in the horrendous fear/shame place that we were trying so hard to avoid.

- Fighters will probably hear more and more from others that we hurt people and are 'bad' (shame). The more we defend against hearing this, the louder and more attacking and intrusive those voices are likely to get (fear).
- Fleers are going to have to go faster and faster, overriding ourselves more and more, in an attempt to outrun our feelings. We may well start to feel the underlying fear of what we're doing to ourselves. We risk overstretching, burnout and the accompanying shame of not being able to do anything any more.
- With freeze, the fear tends to get louder and louder the more we distract ourselves because we're not listening to what it's telling us about how we're failing to protect ourselves. We may also face the shame of realising that we haven't been there for others.
- Fawn folks are going to keep fetching back up in fear/shame because we can't sustain turning ourselves into something for others long term. However hard we try to be good, others will hurt us, indeed we may be particularly drawn to relationships in which that's likely to happen. And however much we try to be something pleasing and good for others it will be unsustainable and they will see what we've been trying to hide.

You could also see it that in the forced binary choice between fear(others) and shame(self), flight and fawn choose fear(others) over shame(self), and fight and freeze choose shame(self) over fear(others). Flight and fawn are both more about being-for-others in order to get approval, recognition, love, or belonging. Fight and freeze are both more about being-for-yourself either by blaming, attacking or controlling others, or by disappearing into self distraction or avoidance.

So perhaps fight and fawn get used to managing the fear which comes when overriding themselves for others. They find the shame which comes with standing up for themselves intolerable. For fight and freeze it's the other way round. Certainly as I've moved towards balancing my go-to strategies of **flight with freeze**, and **fawn with fight**, I've noticed a tip towards more shame and less fear, rather than the other way around.

So what can we do?

So far so bleak right?! There's already a lot in my other pieces about how we can notice the **flicker, flame, and fire** of the fear/shame response, work with **emotional flashbacks**, and shift our **stuck patterns**. Here I want to focus on two things which I haven't written so much about yet, but which have been hugely helpful to me recently: welcoming fear/shame with gratitude, and shifting out of fear/shame logic.

Welcoming fear/shame with gratitude

This week it dawned on me that pretty much everything I'd been doing till this point was still with the aim of stopping the fear/shame response. This is pretty understandable given that the feeling feels utterly horrendous to me. When the flicker of fear/shame arises, a previously pleasant day becomes tinged with doom. There is an additional layer of fear that it might get worse, and shame that that could mean I won't be able to do the things I had promised to others. When a full flashback hits I feel small and incapable, terrible about myself, and under huge threat. Who would want to feel like that?

Of course I'm also an advocate of **staying with feelings**, but the trauma literature has helped me to see that this is not always the **best strategy with trauma responses**. Staying with intense trauma feelings can be **retraumatizing** and keep your **body and brain** locked in trauma responses, making it more – rather than less – likely that it will keep happening.

However, trying to avoid these feelings, freaking out at the first sign of them, and attempting to get rid of them was not working for me either, to say the least! Conversations with my

therapist and listening to a new Pema Chödrön audio got me thinking about whether there might be another way. When the feelings were up I decided to try to welcome them warmly as part of the full experience that I was having in that moment. I guess it's that idea that I've written about before of holding everything in an open hand rather than grasping hold of it or hurling it away.

What this looked like for me was pausing the moment I felt the flicker, flame, or fire of fear/shame and sitting – often in my window – trying to be with the whole moment that I was in (the sounds, the sensations, the thoughts, the feelings). This moment included – but wasn't restricted to – the fear/shame element which often manifested as churning compulsive thoughts, a tight chest, an adrenaline lump in the throat, a sense of contraction, and feelings of anxiety and being a bad person. I tried to welcome those aspects of my experience – while not making them the entirety of my experience. I even said 'you're welcome here' and tried to hold them with warmth.

What surprised me was a sense of gratitude that started to come up. I realised that previously in my life I have managed to cover over this fear/shame feeling with my four F strategies, stuck patterns, etc. Now the feeling is so strong that it's having none of it! Also it seems to have flipped from a preference for fear(others) over shame(self) to the opposite. The fear I feel every time I risk overriding myself – even in small ways – is so intense that I can't do it to myself any more. This means that I can't abandon myself, even if it does mean feeling a lot of shame when I set boundaries or walk away from a situation that is hurting me.

It feels like this fear/shame feeling is protecting me: warning me when a situation has arisen where I risk hurting myself. Maybe it has always been trying to protect me. I can feel grief for the times I haven't listened to it in the past, and gratitude for its continued presence and the fact that I am listening to it now.

So now I can – sometimes – sit with fear/shame and say 'thank-you' as well as 'you're welcome here'. I know that the feeling is probably trying to tell me that I'm risking overriding myself in some way, even if it does feel like an overreaction to a small situation – or even to a memory or an imagined event. Paradoxically, of course, when I listen to fear/shame in this way it doesn't have to shout quite so loudly.

Shifting out of fear/shame logic

The other thing I've been doing is recognising that fear/shame is rooted in binary logic. Some of my favourite thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks have challenged the self/other binary, suggesting that there are ways to engage mutually with others, supporting each others' projects reciprocally, and valuing ourselves and others equally. It's not a matter

of pendulum swinging from others-over-self (fear) to self-over-others (shame). It's about how we can hold all lives, bodies, and labour as equally valuable, and understand ourselves as inevitably interdependent and interconnected.

This is partly why I make such a big project of exploring how we can treat ourselves and others **consensually**. Fear(other)/shame(self) logic is inevitably non-consensual: either we override our own consent or another's consent. For me the consent project is all about finding alternative – mutual and ethical – ways of relating to ourselves and others in all aspects of life.

I read an interesting idea in Jessica Fern's forthcoming book **Polysecure** from the attachment and trauma literature. This is that for good relationships with ourselves and others we need both protection and connection. Protection requires keeping ourselves safe-enough, having **boundaries**, not allowing others to hurt us, etc. Connection requires being open, vulnerable, and real with others.

It struck me that being stuck in fear/shame logic doesn't allow for either of these things. In fear we override ourselves for others and don't give ourselves protection. In shame we cover over our vulnerability in case others see how 'bad' we are, so we don't allow ourselves real connection.

Instead of choosing fear(other) *or* shame(self) it's about choosing protection *and* connection. This moves us from an **either/or binary to a both/and**. Also it neatly maps onto Pete's sense that we fetch up in fear/shame trauma responses because we **lost or lacked protection and/or care**, and that finding protection and care within – and from our team of outer relationships – is the way forward.

What shifting out of fear/shame logic looks like – for me – is, again, pausing when I feel the flicker, flame, or fire of fear/shame. I sit with myself and often try to talk from a **kind, wise voice** to a more **vulnerable child voice**: the one who is stuck in the fear/shame response. I invite that child side to reflect on how whatever has triggered me is a fear/shame thing.

Usually it's fairly easy to see how this situation feels like a choice between others (fear) or myself (shame). Generally naming this, in itself, results in feeling a bit more space or expansiveness around it. I usually try not to rush to any decision right then, but I remind the part of myself who is caught in fear/shame that there are always other options beyond choosing other or self: that this is a false binary, albeit one that is very understandable to fall into.

In exploring how this fear/shame logic works I've also realised that it's understandable to obsess over past memories as I can find myself doing. It's an attempt to prove to myself that the situation was bad enough to warrant hurting another person, in order to avoid shame. But it's also retraumatizing to keep going over these memories, putting me back in fear. It similarly makes sense to hypervigilantly go over situations where I might have fucked up, or to imagine future scenarios playing out in order to figure out how to avoid fucking up. This is all about trying to prevent shame. But again I can recognise that it's triggering to do this, which puts me back in fear.

Generally when I feel any flame or fire of fear/shame I park any decision-making until a time when I'm feeling clear and calm again, perhaps promising myself that I'll check in about it over morning coffee which is often a good time for me. Once I get to that point I try to expand out to consider all options, and aim at a choice that combines protection *and* connection. For example, lately the eventual choice has often involved openly explaining my vulnerability to others (connection) *and* clearly stating my **boundaries** (protection). If clearness and calmness do not feel possible around this situation yet, I try to commit to **going slow** and **refraining** until I feel ready, perhaps explaining that this is what I'm doing to anyone else involved if a response is required.

I'm not saying here that any of this is easy. Believe me the last year or so of my life is living proof that it is not! This approach towards fear/shame goes against the grain of all our habits of avoidance and attempts at eradication. I know it'll be super easy to slip back into trying to avoid recognising when fear/shame comes up, pretending it's not really happening, distracting myself, and/or acting quickly to avoid the pain – usually in ways that override myself and give others what I think they want. I'm hoping – as with all of these pieces – that writing it down will help new ways of being to bed in, as well as hopefully helping others who're grappling with similar stuff. I see you!

What you can do when fear(others)/shame(self) hits:

- Notice the flicker, flame, or fire feeling (however it manifests for you: familiar bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, habits, etc.). Name this as a fear/shame trauma response, remember how these work in the **body and brain**. Everything that is happening makes sense and isn't your fault. Try to reframe it from something bad that has happened to an opportunity to get curious, understand it better, and practice new – kinder – habits.
- Pause and find somewhere you can be with it safely for some time (if this is impossible, promise yourself that you will do so as soon as you can, and do whatever you need to survive in the meantime). Slow down your breathing and talk to yourself kindly. Give yourself as long as you need. Try to spaciouly feel the whole of what you're experiencing in the moment, including all your senses, not just focusing on the

fear/shame. Refrain from going into a fight, flight, freeze or fawn strategy to avoid it or act out of it.

- Welcome the fear/shame feeling with warmth and gratitude, recognising how it has helped you in the past and may well be trying to help you now if you can listen to it gently and curiously instead of grasping it or hurling it away.
- Soothe (if intense): If the feeling is too intense to stay with in this way, thank it and promise to return to it once you're in a calmer, clearer place. Then go to activities which soothe your nervous system, or wait to address it when you can be supported through it, by a therapist or support group for example.
- Recognise (if possible): If you can stay with it, recognise how the trigger was about fear(others)/shame(self). Remember that it can be a fleeting memory or response to internal sensation as much as an external situation. No worries if you can't identify the trigger this time. Allow any feelings that come up to be released.
- Explore once you are in a calmer, clearer place. Step out of binary fear(others)/shame(self) logic and consider all the options in relation to the triggering situation, perhaps prioritising those which combine protection and connection.

I have also found it useful to do this as a preventative activity – just checking in with myself at several points during the day, perhaps whenever one task ends before beginning the next. I ask whether there is any fear/shame feeling around, and apply this process if there is. I keep this list on my phone to remind me of the process during the fear/shame feelings when it can be hard to access.

Chronic Shame

Lately the focus of my learning has shifted from trauma in general to one element specifically: shame. As I've mentioned here before, toxic levels of shame are a key element of [developmental trauma](#) and/or [post-traumatic stress](#) for many people - often [combined with incapacitating fear](#). I've noticed that - as I've shifted from survival strategies which involve [people-pleasing and keeping busy, to trying to hold my boundaries and stay present with myself](#) - shame has come up big time.

I have a whole article coming on what we can do about shame when it hits, how it operates at multiple levels (cultural, systemic, interpersonal, and embodied), and how we can relate with ourselves, others, and our communities in ways that minimise the potential for crashing into toxic shame, or triggering it in others. I want to read a bit more on the subject to ensure I cover all the bases before sharing that.

Meanwhile I thought I'd share my notes on one book that I've found particularly helpful. The book is [Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame](#), by [Pat DeYoung](#). The book is aimed at therapists, and some parts are pretty theoretically dense, weaving together relational psychoanalysis and neurobiology. For that reason I imagine that most folks who struggle with chronic shame would be unlikely to pick up this book. Hopefully my summary here will be helpful if that's you.

The full book is definitely worth checking out if you do enjoy grappling with big ideas, and I found Pat's descriptions of her client-work some of the most generous, caring, and open that I've read. She demonstrates huge compassion for all those struggling with chronic shame, whether it manifests in ways that are easy to spot and work with, or a great deal harder as in cases where people attack others or shut down in the face of shame.

What is chronic shame?

Pat points out that most of us struggle to describe shame because it's so unbearable that we generally don't tolerate it. We push it down or cover it over with feelings that we *can* handle, and often these are all we know of shame.

'The classic shame response is hyperarousal and a desperate struggle to contain it: blushing, sweating, trying to shrink, slumping the shoulders, dropping the head, averting the eyes, covering the face. This state of shame is excruciating'.

Pat locates most mental health struggles in the strategies we use to repel and avoid further harm - and shame - after experiencing relational trauma as kids. These struggles include depression, anxiety, relationship difficulties, and numbing addictions that 'fill-in' for deeper unmet needs or offer some sense of emotional regulation.

When something comes up which is beyond these tactics, we probably experience shame as utter fragmentation or disintegration of ourselves. It feels like we are totally falling apart, and we are utterly desperate for anything to get rid of it. Shame is related to self-loathing, to the emotion of disgust aimed at ourselves, and to having a vicious and noisy inner critic, but it 'is fundamentally non-verbal and visceral, a "sickness of the soul", as Tomkins put it.'

The definition of shame throughout the book is:

'the disintegration of the self in relation to a dysregulating other'.

Shame is relational not individual

A major message of the book is that we tend to experience shame as *individual* but it's actually *relational*.

When shame hits we individualise: believing that we are a bad person, that there is something terribly wrong with us, and that we're personally responsible for harming others. We tend to withdraw into ourselves to address this and/or to protect others from ourselves. 'Shame feels like solitary pain, and chronic shame seems like a personal failing caused by one's own negative thinking and low self-esteem.'

However, Pat insists that shame in all its forms is relational. It is forged in relationships - the dysregulating others mentioned in the above definition. It is generally triggered by relational situations, such as being blamed or shamed by others. And it needs connection with others in order to be addressed.

This point is vital to keep ahold of: while shame feels like it's happening in our self because we are bad, it is really happening in relation with others - past and present, and it needs to be addressed in relationship too.

Why do we have chronic shame?

So shame comes from the impact of 'dysregulating others'. What does dysregulation mean? As children we require regulation of our feelings by those close to us in order to learn how to regulate them ourselves. That means that we need those around us to be attuned to our feelings - to pick up on them, and to help us to hold them, to tolerate them, and to understand them. If we don't experience this then our emotions will end up feeling overwhelming and terrifying, and we'll fragment or fall apart in the face of them.

'People who struggle with chronic shame usually report that emotions were either shut down or out of control in their family.'

‘Acceptance was missing, too; the family system didn’t create space where the kid could be confident of an unconditional welcome for his unique being, including his wants, feelings, and failings.’

‘A child has to have at least one caregiver who is able to respond in an attuned, consistent way to what the child feels. If this is missing in a major way, the child will translate the distress of the mismatch into a feeling like, “I can’t make happen what I need...so there’s something wrong with me.”’

Like other authors, Pat explains that - as a child - when faced with a choice between:

- Believing that we are bad but at least that the world makes sense and that we might have some control over it (e.g. by becoming good), and
- Believing that we are not bad but that the world is chaotic, that our caregivers can’t contain us, and that we have no control

We will choose the former as the far safer option. ‘It’s so much easier to understand, “I’m bad and disgusting” than it is to understand, “Something happened outside of my control and I feel like I’m falling apart”.’

Because we’re not familiar with others responding to our feelings with empathy and compassion, we don’t develop the capacity for self-empathy and self-compassion. Because others do not meet the whole of us - in all emotional states - in regulating ways, we don’t develop a coherent sense of ourselves and there is always the sense of threat that we might disintegrate or be annihilated. Shame makes people ‘feel blank, “vaporized” or incoherent, even to themselves. In moments of feeling humiliated, they can’t speak, or even think. They feel shattered, or as if they are falling apart.’

Dysregulating others

I was particularly struck by the links between shame and the gaze of others that Pat discusses in her chapter on shame theories. This dysregulation does not just happen verbally, but often non-verbally through mismatches between children’s cues and the facial responsiveness of the caregiver.

‘When a child fails to elicit a gaze that supports his intentionality, excitement, and indwelling sense of self, he will experience something else: being looked at in a way that objectifies him.’ This leads to us objectifying ourselves: evaluating ourselves from the outside as bad, assuming that others are always looking at us, and judging ourselves through others’ imagined eyes. I’m struck by how we can feel visceral shame when others won’t look at us, or drop their responsive expression when they look towards us.

Another thing that I appreciated about this book is that Pat demonstrates vast compassion for the ‘dysregulating others’ as well as for the children they meet in that way. Clearly she

locates our relational trauma in the similar trauma that resulted in our caregivers being fragile, needy, wounded, or otherwise unable to regulate our emotional states. There's a real sense of the [intergenerational trauma](#) that's in play here: shame passed down through the generations.

'I'm never surprised when, after a while, a shamed client tells me that her mom, or dad, or both, "had a really crappy childhood too." For their own reasons, they just didn't have the selfhood they needed to attune to their children.... Shame was everyone's lonely secret, managed however possible. No one talked about all that pain, or even tried to make it any better, even though no-one wanted it.'

Guilt vs. shame

Like many authors, Pat delineates between guilt (I'm a worthwhile person who did a bad thing) and shame (I'm a bad person). Guilt can be painful but it doesn't affect your core identity, whereas shame is acutely painful, often incapacitating, and feels as if you've been 'exposed as a fundamentally defective or worthless being'.

Shame makes good relationships extremely difficult because we experience everyone as potentially threatening - they could so easily disintegrate us. Collapsing into shame makes it virtually impossible to empathise with others, or to accurately discern what is ours and what is theirs. Guilt is a relational strength because it helps us to express regret, empathise with others, and take responsibility for any harm we have caused. Pat describes shame therapy as all about helping clients to move from shame to guilt.

When caregiving is good-enough there may be momentary shame when a child misbehaves or makes a mistake - felt as a danger of shattering - but there is a quick return after the caregiver's displeasure or discipline to relational connection, so the child gets the message 'I did a bad thing, but it's over, and I'm still a good kid'. In later life presumably such children will be able to feel guilt when they have hurt others or made mistakes, take accountability, and forgive themselves.

However, if a child frequently experiences such disintegrating moments which are not repaired, with no quick return to connection, they're left struggling alone with wondering who they are in relation to the other. This might happen, for example:

- If there's unclear distinctions between having done deliberate wrong or having made innocent mistakes - responses to both give the message that you are bad and stupid,
- If caregivers show that they can't tolerate emotional distress or there is a 'no emotions in my house' rule in the family,
- If it takes too long to reconnect after a conflict or drop in connection,
- If a caregiver's care and attention often drops unpredictably - or blows up into anger,

- If a child's moments of delight and excitement tend to be squashed or deflated by a caregiver - this is felt as a painful and sudden fall.

'When I am feeling a rush of emotion, the other's response fails to help me manage what I'm feeling. Instead of feeling connected to someone strong and calm, I feel alone. Instead of feeling contained, I feel out of control. Instead of feeling energetically focused, I feel overwhelmed. Instead of feeling that I'll be okay, I feel like I'm falling apart.'

Instead of learning that we can *do* something bad and survive, in shame we learn that our emotional self - who feels those 'bad' feelings - *is* bad, and we try to disconnect from them. We often learn to perfect a 'good kid' performance, and block out any sense of badness - and the 'out of control' feelings we associate with that. As we grow through adolescence we often attach our shame to challenging parts of experience like our bodies, sexualities, emotions, and competence. By the time we're adults we may have perfected ways to cover up our shame, but those will tragically alienate us from ourselves, and make it very hard to forge genuine connections with others.

'A person with chronically unresolved shame can't be "a good person who did a bad thing." The idea of having done harm may be unthinkable - it just couldn't/didn't happen. Or it may feel like the excruciating exposure of a despicable self. In neither case can good and bad aspects of self coexist in a coherent experience of doing one's best to live up to certain chosen ideals.'

The neurobiology of shame

The big message from the neurobiological understanding of shame is that it is all happening in the non-verbal relational/emotional parts of the body/brain/mind but that we generally tend to deal with it in the more verbal, rational, analytic parts.

This understanding makes sense because our emotional experience hasn't been met, recognised, or regulated growing up. We have little experience of good body-to-body non-verbal emotional connection. Therefore our rational brain has had to do all the work of trying to deal with frightening emotional experiences. This explains why people with chronic shame attack themselves with self-denigrating ideas (to at least give them some sense of control), or try to 'think themselves better'. Neither approach helps because the sense of being terrible, disgusting or despicable is non-verbal and visceral, out of reach of this rational, logical, language-based approach.

These ideas relate back to what I wrote, previously, about [trauma and the body](#). If we are met with caregivers who are dysregulated themselves - or reactive - and who can't regulate us, then our own nervous system will go into energy-expending hyperarousal (fight or flight), and then into energy-conserving hypoarousal (freeze or dissociation). If dysregulating

interactions happen frequently, our self-protective habit will become dissociating from emotional connection and our emotional brain development will suffer.

'From a neurobiological perspective it seems that someone could live in a chronic state of low-arousal shame that is chronically dysregulated because, although she's always somewhat conscious of shame, it is well hidden from others. At the same time this shame-prone person could use various forms of dissociation to keep memories and experience of acute emotional pain completely out of her conscious awareness, and also to protect herself against any further shame-assaults on her self-cohesion.'

Of course what we know now of neuroplasticity suggests that we should be able to address this way in which the nervous system has become set up. This is why Pat puts so much emphasis on emotion-to-emotion attuned, regulating connection with a therapist as an important part of working with chronic shame. I've certainly found this to be gold myself and now tend to focus, in therapy, on finding and expressing my feelings - and having them met - rather than on talk or figuring things out. Having my emotions met and welcomed, and also having any moments of disconnection or misunderstanding repaired, are extremely valuable.

What is also needed is better emotional-rational brain integration so that the emotional brain self comes to make sense to us again. In chronic shame these connections are often poor. We can tell rational stories that make sense of our experience, but when we can't connect the emotional and rational brain it can feel - to us and others - like there's a disconnect between what we're saying and the experience of our being. This can even feel gaslighting to others as we say one thing but they feel something very different from us.

How does chronic shame manifest

Very few people approach a therapist directly to help with shame because we tend to avoid and cover over shame so well. We might well not realise that shame is at the heart of it.

Pat details clients who manifest shame in a range of different ways, depending on their particular childhoods and dispositions.

One client could avoid shame so long as she was performing well and being a competent self, but the inevitable failures along the way felt intolerable. Performance became a way of life, hiding some disgusting or demeaning truth about who she was. Another client kept a double life where he could be a happy enough family man, but on the side he kept engaging in risky sexual activities. He felt split between being a hero who he liked and a total jerk who he hated. A further client only felt able to survive if she was utterly extraordinary, and could never meet that standard so spent much of her time melting down and feeling worthless, but she still strived to eventually pull off something extraordinary.

Another client felt hopeless despair much of the time, exacerbated by deep loneliness when those around her misunderstood her. A final one kept herself separate from other people because nobody noticed her struggles as a kid and she'd learnt she was safer without others, fearing that any friends would - of course - eventually see what was defective about her.

Shame in relationships

Finally, Pat describes an example of how relationships often play out when more than one person carries chronic shame:

'Both shame partners bring to the relationship the hope that true love will erase their vulnerabilities and undo the deprivation of their childhood attachments. But of course, each partner has moments of failing to understand and appreciate the other. And then, for that other partner, the original trauma of not mattering seems to happen all over again. The vulnerability of wanting to be loved becomes shame and then rage that lashes out in counter-shaming attacks.'

Pat explains that early shaming relationships become internalised - in the form of voices within us that replicate key people in our lives. For example, our internal voices may directly shame us with attacks. They may indirectly shame us with disappointment in our 'failings'. They may neglect to give us care or pride. They may require us to be high-performing. They may transfer the shame that really belongs to others for their abusive behaviour onto us. Internally we have both an inner critic part who shames us, and other parts who are shamed by them.

When these internal dynamics are highly familiar to us, shaming relationships easily get replicated again and again in our lives. 'Shaming and being shamed is just what they know how to do. It's no surprise that the drama gets played out in the world when it's what they are negotiating internally, unconsciously, all the time.'

'Karen Horney speaks of three ways to manage shame anxiety: moving toward people, moving against people, and moving away from people. Each is useful, with a downside. If we move towards people with compliance and self-effacement, we won't lose their love; however our self-worth comes to depend on being liked, needed, or wanted. Moving against people feels powerful, but we have to keep winning to stay superior and invulnerable. Moving away from people liberates us from needing approval or success. What can shame us then? A small life seems a small price to pay for such freedom.'

These paragraphs about shame in relationships really hit home for me:

'People who struggle with chronic shame are deeply lonely, and they have trouble with love. Most of all they have trouble believing that anyone actually loves them. But usually they

keep trying to love and be loved. Something tells them that what they so desperately need is hidden there in “love”. They are profoundly right about that, even when they go about it all wrong, hiding their longing behind performance... On the one hand, this is the truth: what they have missed and continue to miss is genuine connection with somebody who understands and accepts who they are and what they feel. On the other hand, it can be a very dangerous enterprise to try to get that connection while feeling so vulnerable to exposure, so sensitive to slight, so damaged and defective, or so extraordinarily misunderstood and angry.’

‘What they know in their bones (their neural wiring) is that bad things that happened before will happen again: their need to connect will only cause them pain; a regulating other will become dysregulating - will turn away or turn mean - and the awfulness of disintegrating shame will happen. It makes sense that they protect themselves from this kind of repetition - even though they also want to trust.’

‘A chronically shamed person knows in a visceral way that what happened before in moments like this - dysregulation, rupture, or misunderstanding - is too painful to repeat. And so he repeats disconnection instead.’

Addressing chronic shame

Because this book is aimed at therapists, the focus in the chapters on how to address chronic shame is on the therapeutic relationship. Engaging in therapy is certainly a great idea - if possible - for chronic shame because a good therapist can provide the kind of emotional regulation that was lost or lacking in childhood. Given that shame is relational, it probably does require experiencing a relationship like that in order to address it.

Therapy

Pat suggests that this importance of a regulating relationship might be one reason for the well known finding that it doesn’t much matter which type of therapy a therapist practices, it is the quality of the relationship that is vital, particularly the presence of what Daniel Hughes calls PACE: playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy.

Certainly it is vital to [shop around for a therapist](#) and find one who you have this kind of rapport with, and who has worked on their own shame. I found these ideas about shame and becoming a therapist/healer very interesting:

‘Why might excellent therapists also be shame-prone therapists? First of all, it’s a matter of innate emotional sensitivity. Some babies are born needing extra regulation for an emotional response system easily over stimulated. They become emotionally sensitive children, alert to the interpersonal dynamics that surround them.

Second, it's a matter of family history. If there's emotional trouble in the family, these sensitive children try to manage it as best they can. They feel responsible for the well-being of fragile parents and vulnerable siblings. They spend their childhood offering emotional attunement beyond their years and doing without the emotional understanding they need. It's no wonder that some of them would one day make a career out of their attunement skills and their deep desire to see emotional hurts eased and relational brokenness repaired.'

Pat suggests that a therapist who has worked on - and continues to work on - their own shame has more capacity to help those who are burdened and silenced by shame, knowing what they are up against. Also, if you - as a client - have a lot of shame - the therapist is bound to pick up on it, and probably feel it too. They'll need to be familiar with shame in order to work through such moments well with you, as well as to tolerate the times they make mistakes and to model the capacity to own these honestly, and make amends rather than being incapacitated by shame. A good question for any potential therapist would be whether - and how - they have worked on their own shame.

Working with a therapist in this way helps us to learn what it is like:

- To experience emotional connection,
- To be accepted and accurately mirrored,
- To be with somebody who can tolerate and contain our emotional states,
- To navigate inevitable ruptures and repair them rather than being left in that disintegrated fallen apart state,
- To be recognised and treasured in all that we are by somebody who can welcome and enjoy the energy of our passion, excitement and joy when it is present.

All of these things should help us to develop a relationship with ourselves which is more emotionally regulating, and relationships with others which are more genuine and mutual, and less grounded in the avoidance of shame. This is akin to [Pete Walker's idea](#) that we need to reparent ourselves *and* be reparented by committee.

It's important to recognise, however, that therapy isn't available to all. I would think that process/sharing groups, spiritual mentorship, peer-support, and other forms of relationship should be able to have a similar impact, so long as those involved are trauma-informed, are working on their own shame, and have enough of their own support around them.

Mindfulness and compassion practices

Given that a problem for folks with chronic shame is that others have not been able to accept their own inner states, or to accurately hold their subjective experience in mind, something vital here is learning how to be able to do that for ourselves. Again we can learn this through therapy - through having a relationship where somebody is able to do that with us. However, developing our own capacities - through mindfulness and self-compassion practices - can also be helpful here.

Check out my [staying with feelings zine](#), and recent articles on '[the gap](#)', for more about how we can practise being with ourselves in a regulating way through all of our emotional states. Again through such practices we're developing PACE. Mindfulness can help us to hold things lightly, see the bigger picture, and not take ourselves so seriously (*playfulness*). It can help with self-*acceptance* as we get to know ourselves deeply in all our states. It encourages us to get *curious* about our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world. Mindfulness also develops *empathy* for ourselves - instead of the confusion and abandonment of ourselves that comes with deep shame.

Regarding curiosity, Pat talks about constantly asking ourselves questions like 'what's going on for me?' and 'why?', or 'what happened?' and 'how do I feel about what happened. We often avoid such questions because we fear our usual shame-filled responses (because I'm a bad person). 'Consistently wondering about "what happened?" suggests the possibility again and again that maybe feelings don't just come from weird, wrong places inside... Maybe they are understandable responses to real events!'

Mindfulness of emotions, and other feeling practices like [focusing](#), can also help us in experiencing all our emotions: both what they are (becoming more able to identify [mad](#), [glad](#), [sad](#), and afraid, for example), and what [intensity](#) they are at. It can help us to both expand our emotional range and to bring ourselves back from high intensity experiences.

Pat also particularly recommends the self-compassion practices of mindfulness therapists like [Paul Gilbert](#) as helpful in shifting away from shame and self-criticism.

Telling our story: giving shame light and air

Pat emphasises telling our stories as a vital part of integrating emotional and rational brains: bringing the emotional brain stuff of autobiographical memory - linked with feelings, relationships and context - together with the linear organisation, cause/effect understanding, and logical interpretation of the rational brain. With shame we may be able to tell logical narratives of our lives, but there can be a sense of something missing or it not all hanging together: it is cohesive but not coherent.

Depending on our specific experiences it may be that we tell our self-story repeatedly but that it lacks something - particularly that depth of feeling. It might be that we can only bear certain self-stories and try to avoid others. It could be that there are big gaps in our story, or that lots of stories spill out of us full of chaotic and intense feelings. It's not about finding the 'true' story, or a 'happy' story, but telling a story where we - and our intentions, emotions, and self - are expressed clearly and compassionately, where we can 'integrate pain and joy, pride and regret, relief and resignation'.

Through telling these stories, we're connecting up our understanding of ourselves with the emotional experience and memories that hold our sense of self together - the opposite of the kind of disintegration of self that we experience in shame.

Obviously therapy can be a great place to learn to tell such stories, with somebody who has expertise in facilitating that. But we might also consider, here, the value of [journaling](#), [memoiring](#) in various forms, sharing circles, spoken word nights, anything where we get to tell our stories, particularly anything that enables us to access the embodied, relational, and emotional aspects of our experience. Pat suggests that we might usefully tell our stories about how the following things were dealt with in our upbringings: communication, emotions, needs, mistakes, difference, achievements.

Pat emphasizes that a key antidote to shame is 'giving it light and air', given that we usually keep it - and the things that we feel it about - hidden and secret in the shadows. Telling our stories to safe-enough others can be extremely valuable in this way, although certainly we should be careful to develop trusting and mutual relationships for this to happen in. Sharing stories is also another way to get the kind of connection that we often struggle with when we hide parts of ourselves due to shame.

Playing with plurality

You can imagine how delighted I was to see that Pat's book includes two long sections on working with [plurality](#) around shame. She explores how the idea of being [different parts](#) can work with clients in general, and she then talks specifically about working with somebody who had a vivid experience of being a [plural system](#).

This latter section completely undid me and I cried through my whole reading of it. Pat describes how a client of hers began to realise how they had fragmented into separate selves, and had started to bring those selves to therapy. One self - who had previously been quite hidden - fell in love and went through a relationship and breakup, which was blamed upon them. 'That's when a lifetime of dissociated shame broke through, self-hatred wrapped around the core implicit knowing "I'll never get what I need from the other person. It's my fault. I'm wrong, bad, disgusting". A flood of shame shut the system down'. But eventually, this time of emergency meant that something could change, the excruciating emotional experience could be shared. It meant that Pat and the client could finally work through the ways each part of them had held shame for their whole lives.

I love the way that Pat presents plurality as a potentially positive way in for all clients to talk about shame ('a part of me feels...' often being safer to express than 'I feel'). I also love how she suggests that those with [vividly plural](#) experience may have an easier task than those who cover over 'unacceptable' parts of themselves completely. 'It's no different, essentially, than attuning to any client's different states of self, and in fact easier since here each "self" is so clearly delineated from the others.'

Pat goes on to discuss clients who might fall under the category of 'narcissistic injury' because they completely split off parts of themselves as unbearably shameful and bad and therefore 'not-me'. They then don't have any conscious awareness when they are acting/communicating from those split off parts, for example with defensive attacking, grandiosity, idealization, intense neediness, etc. Recognising these as just as much parts of the self as the named parts of plural people - and having just as much compassion for them - is very helpful for the therapist here.

Pat draws on [Internal Family Systems Theory](#) and [Bonnie Badenoch](#)'s idea of 'internal community'. Both of these encourage befriending all parts of yourself - particularly those who are disowned or split off, and developing dialogue and compassion between different parts. It's vital that we stop trying to eradicate shame-filled parts of ourselves, but instead learn how to turn towards them and befriend them. This is something I've covered in my plural selves [zine](#) and [FAQ](#), and will certainly be writing more about in relation to shame.

Education

Learning about shame - how it operates, where it comes from, how we tend to react to it, and how we can address it - can certainly be helpful here. Hence me writing these pieces. Pat says 'It often helps to hear that shame is probably the most painful emotion human beings can feel, and that not only does it feel excruciating, it's so disconnecting and isolating that it can go on for a very long time without anyone noticing - except for the person feeling the shame.'

She teaches clients the 'core story of shame': 'When you're little and you need to be seen and understood, when you need to matter to someone and it seems you don't, that hurts. Even the hurt is invisible. That's how it feels - you feel bad, and nobody cares how you feel. So you decide that those needy feelings are useless and having them makes you stupid. You tell yourself "What's wrong with you anyway, to feel this? Get over it!" That's how shame takes over when emotional needs are ignored or denied. The needs themselves become something wrong with you. And then your hurt feelings about not having your needs met cause you even more shame.'

Pat concludes the book saying that she doesn't think that chronic shame can ever be completely cured, but that 'shame reduction' is possible. 'Long-term relational trauma leaves our psyches indelibly marked... We don't just get over a lifetime of wondering whether we really matter to those closest to us or whether we can be enough for those to whom we do matter. We don't radically reconfigure a personality built around anxious self protection.' However she believes that coming to terms with chronic shame can make life a lot more bearable than soldiering on oblivious.

Again Pat emphasises the need for both empathic, real relationships with ourselves, and with others, so that we keep reinforcing the new neural connections through sharing openly with ourselves and others, being met by them, and - when hurt happens - taking responsibility for our actions without taking all the blame for how the other feels (guilt, not shame).

‘The dark emotional convictions of chronic shame will feel like truth until they are brought out into brighter spaces where compassionate acceptance is the rule.’

Stuck in alone or together: An opportunity to address stuck patterns

A few months ago a therapist on twitter said something along the lines of: *‘When a relationship gets tough whether you break-up or stay together the work you’ll have to do will be the same’*. It struck me that something similar could be said right now – in the time of Covid-19. Many of us are facing potentially long periods of social isolation/distancing. Whether we’re stuck in **alone**, or **with other people**, the work that we could usefully do will be the same.

This series of three articles work through what stuck patterns are, and the ways we can address them if we’re stuck in **alone**, or if we’re stuck in **with others**. However, all three are relevant to everyone because I’ll suggest that those of us stuck in alone could do with exploring how we might do some of this work **with others**, while those of us stuck in with others could do with getting plenty of solitude in order to do the parts of the work that need **doing alone**.

In this first article, I’ll start with a bit more of an introduction to what stuck patterns are, and why we might prioritise shifting them at this time.

Hopefully if/when this period of Covid-19 crisis is over, the ideas and practices here will still be helpful for those finding themselves alone and wanting to address their relationship patterns, and for those wanting to do so while in relationship with others. I’m also aware that not everybody will be ‘stuck in’, particularly those in the category of key-workers. Hopefully some of the ‘stuck together’ advice will also be useful for those who’re still out in the world working with others.

What are stuck patterns?

The point of the tweet I began with is that intimate relationships hold up a mirror to our habitual patterns of relating with others, and with ourselves. Most of us will have fetched up with some stuck patterns in how we relate along the way, which will have ended up being harmful – or at least not helpful – to ourselves and others.

These patterns will generally emerge in all of our relationships, given time. Often they influence how we relate to other things in our lives besides people too: work, leisure, food, exercise, technology, etc. In this article I'm focusing on how stuck patterns emerge in relationships, particularly in relationships where we are very emotionally close and/or spending a lot of time together. This is where they often come up most intensely.

Stuck patterns determine how we relate to others – and ourselves – on an everyday basis, and also when we're triggered or activated. Different therapeutic approaches have all kinds of ways of naming these patterns and understanding where they come from. Generally they agree that stuck patterns are the strategies which we learnt when we were young – or sometimes through stress and trauma in later life – which enabled us to survive.

One useful model comes from [Pete Walker's work on cPTSD](#). He suggests that these strategies are often versions of the classic trauma responses of fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. Some of us learnt as kids that what worked was to battle, belittle or control those around us (fight). Others learnt that striving to perfect ourselves and do all-of-the-things was the way (flight). Others learnt to retreat into ourselves and self-soothing (freeze). Others learnt to do whatever it took to appease others and be what they wanted us to be (fawn).

Most of us have some combination of these strategies, or go to different ones at different times. Generally they have become the way we habitually relate to other people, and they come out most vividly when we're triggered or activated: in times of crisis or conflict.

For example, my go-to patterns are mainly fawn/flight. The fawn part means I habitually try to monitor myself to ensure I'm being 'good' for those around me, and struggle to have boundaries if people want me to do things that don't feel good for me. The flight part means I tend towards over- rather than under-functioning, like – I don't know – writing a whole bunch of books, zines, and articles to try to figure this stuff out and communicate it to others!

When triggered, fawn/flight means that it can feel life-or-death to me to make things right with people. And I'm likely to throw everything that I have at the situation, exhausting myself in the process, rather than taking the time I need to look after myself and get some perspective.

If Pete's model doesn't work for you, there are many other ways of looking at stuck patterns out there. For example Jeffrey Young lists **ten common problematic schemas** with which we tend to approach relationships, again developed as survival strategies during our lives.

Whatever language you use for the stuck patterns, and whatever understanding you have of how they got there, we all have them and we can address them by:

- Noticing the patterns
- Doing something different
- Making that an everyday practice so that new habits can bed in over time

Why address stuck patterns?

If we decide to stay in relationship with somebody, we'll need to address those patterns in order for that relationship to work well for everyone in it over time (if it's not working for everyone, it's not working for anyone). If we break-up because the patterns are hurting us too much then we'll need to address them or we'll likely bring them into subsequent relationships.

Better for us

Addressing our stuck patterns is better for ourselves because it will help us to discern which relationships in our lives are good for us. It will also prevent us from getting into painful dynamics with others, and enable us to notice such dynamics and shift them when we have.

Better for our close people

Addressing our stuck patterns is better for the people we're close to because we're less likely to hurt them, or get stuck in dynamics where we keep triggering each other with our patterns. Hopefully once we're clearer on what our patterns are – and more able to shift from them – we'll also have more capacity for the people in our lives and deal better when relationships do become difficult.

Better for everyone else

Addressing our stuck patterns is better for everybody because when we're stuck in painful dynamics we have so much less to offer to the other people in our lives and to our wider communities. It's extremely hard to be empathic and compassionate when we're stuck in these patterns. We're also more likely to act out of these patterns with others beyond our

closest people if we haven't addressed them: friends online, the staff in the supermarket, strangers on social media.

It might seem like addressing our relationship patterns is not the most urgent thing we could be doing while the world is literally on fire with rising fevers and global temperatures, conflagrations and conflicts. In fact I'd argue it's one of the most vital things we can do. Why?

- On an everyday level our lives have the potential to be heaven or hell depending on how we relate to ourselves and each other. If we're all relating to each other through our stuck patterns we'll hurt each other and feel terrible about ourselves. If we can find ways to shift out of our stuck patterns then there's the potential for everyday life – even a much more constrained everyday life – to be okay, perhaps even pretty good if we explicitly make this our plan and notice how we're making progress over time.
- In relation to sickness specifically we know the toll that stress and trauma take on the immune system. If we're putting other people – and ourselves – under stress and/or triggering them into trauma responses with our patterns then we're making it more likely that they'll get sick and struggle to recover quickly, not to mention the mental health crises that can result from prolonged relational stress or being frequently retraumatised.
- Just as our relationship to ourselves often mirrors the way we relate to other people, so too does the way we relate to the wider world. At a time when we urgently need to all be thinking and behaving collaboratively and collectively – and kindness, compassion and mutuality are essential – unlearning patterns which keep us locked in our own individual pain – and in stuck dynamics with close people – seems pretty urgent.

Addressing stuck patterns

In the next two articles I'll cover how you might address stuck patterns if you're **stuck in alone**, and if you're **stuck in with others**. In some ways the challenges and opportunities of these two alternatives are opposite. Those stuck in alone may find it easier to get the space and time needed to do this slow habit-shifting work (although this will be more challenging for those who are still working full time from home and/or who struggle not to fill time with distractions). They may find it harder to get opportunities to practise shifting habits in relationship with others. Those stuck in together may find it hard to get enough space to do the inner work needed here, but they may find it easier to get practical opportunities to practice in relationship, particularly if those around them are up for this kind of work too.

A key aspect of what I'm arguing here is reframing our stuckness (alone or together) as an opportunity. Of course it's vital to experience and express **all of our feelings** about the ways in which the current situation has altered our lives. This isn't a Pollyanna approach. We

need to feel our fear at what might be coming, our grief at what we've lost, our rage at systems which have failed to support us.

However, embracing the potential in what has happened for befriending ourselves and addressing our stuck patterns can definitely be a useful reframe. It also means that we can relate differently to the micro-moments of difficulty which come up as we spend more time alone or with close people. Instead of regarding each freak-out, plunge into loneliness, argument, or relationship tension as a failure, we can reframe these as opportunities to slow down, to turn towards what we're finding hard, and to learn more about our patterns and how they operate in us.

Addressing stuck patterns when stuck in alone

This article outlines ways in which we might address our relationship patterns if we're stuck in alone during Covid-19. There's an article discussing the reasons why we might want to do so [here](#), and one about what we can do if we're stuck in with others [here](#).

So what if you're stuck in alone? This is the situation that I find myself in, so I'll probably be blogging a fair amount about this in the coming weeks and months. I feel fortunate that – for me – I had already decided to live alone and to take a break from certain kinds of (romantic and erotic) relationships for a while in order to address these patterns, before social distancing/isolation hit. It must be much harder for those where this hasn't been an intentional choice. However I think that solitude can be an opportunity for us all to do this work. Maybe reframing it in this way can be helpful for you if solitude and isolation hasn't been something you've historically welcomed.

The opportunity here – if we want to take it – is to take an intentional break from any kinds of relationships where we get drawn into these patterns in a big way. For a lot of us these are partner, family, and cohabiting relationships. We get drawn into such patterns there because we're often around each other a lot, and because – whether consciously or not – we tend to look to partners and families to provide us with the kinds of love we lacked or lost when we were younger. Our stuck patterns often emerged as an attempt to get ourselves care and protection from others and to prevent people from abandoning us or hurting us.

So here's a great chance to go cold turkey on problematic relationship patterns! In a similar way to the way that, for some of us, the current situation enables us to have a period of not doing our job in the way we used to and perhaps addressing some of our stuck patterns around work, it also enables us to have a period away from intense relationships. Of course, just as we could fill our time with other kinds of work, we could fill solitude with online relationships, continuing to date, have online sex, speak to family every day, etc. However, I'd like to suggest the alternative of taking this time as permission to step away from being caught up in intense relationships for a while.

You won't be surprised to hear me stress the need for gentleness around this kind of cold turkey. While I'm no fan of addiction models, there is something to the analogy between drug addiction and the kinds of compulsions we're acting out when we long for love to heal or save us. We can expect some detox pain, withdrawal symptoms, cravings, and relapses.

For me the hardest part of this process of trying to shift old patterns of relating to myself and others has been an initial period where everything felt a whole lot more painful and difficult. It's hard to have the faith needed to keep going when you're not getting any rewards for the

work you're doing and when there's a lot of uncertainty – and no guarantees – about what's on the other side. Again a whole shedload of gentleness and kindness towards yourself is key. I'll be blogging more about that in the coming weeks too, but it's worth remembering that you can't shift these kinds of patterns the same way they came into being, i.e. through treating yourself harshly.

Also this kind of work can't be done quickly because it takes a lot of time to bed new habits into our bodies. Physiologically it's like there was a deep channel through which the rainwater made its way off the roof and down to the ground. We need to wear a new channel deeper than that old one before the water will automatically follow the new channel.

Noticing and shifting stuck patterns by yourself

So the aim is to notice and shift these patterns in our ways of relating. Initially we won't even notice the patterns because they come so habitually to us. Then – by bringing our attention towards them intentionally – we'll start to notice them, but we probably won't manage to do anything differently. This is often the hardest part: realising how much we do this stuff and feeling unable to change it. If possible at this stage it's great if you can reward yourself for just simply noticing. That, in itself, is a huge shift. This is followed by a period where you can sometimes manage to do things differently when the old pattern kicks in, although it probably takes a lot of effort.

Eventually there will come a time when the new pattern feels as easy as the old one did. Here it's useful to remind yourself of times you have changed other – perhaps more minor – habits in this way. You can reach that point! This is just how learning works. Portia Nelson's poem of the [hole in the road](#), or the visual model of [unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence](#) can be helpful reminders.

So what are we noticing if we're alone without close people around us to keep pushing our buttons? Fortunately (!) even if we're completely isolated our stuck patterns will kick in plenty. They'll play out when we get a tricky email, or have a rough exchange on social media, or when a tough memory comes to mind, or a song reminds us of something hard: probably many times a day. Certainly the degree of uncertainty in the world and the frequent changes we're having to make will probably bring out our familiar patterns.

I've found that increased solitude has helped me to get a way more vivid sense of what it feels like when my [fawn/flight pattern](#) kicks in. This helps me to notice it more and more – including the smaller everyday versions of it as well as the big crisis versions. For me – as for many I suspect – the underlying feeling behind my patterns is one of fear combined with shame. However, initially we may be more likely to notice the feelings that tend to get layered on top of that feeling: anger and blame if we tend to fight, busyness and speed if we

tend to flight, lethargy or scatteredness if we tend to freeze, or guilt and self-criticism if we tend to fawn.

Over time I've found it possible to identify the earlier flicker of discomfort in my body which precede the pattern kicking in. When I turn my attention towards that, instead of trying to deny that anything is going on as I might have done in the past, I can usually now address it before the bigger pattern kicks in. I've started to ask myself why this particular trigger puts me in a fear/shame place, and to consider what it might be like if I looked at it differently. My process is something like this:

- Message comes in asking me to do something I don't really want to do
- Sense of discomfort
- Turn towards sense of discomfort instead of pretending it isn't there or acting immediately on the message
- Ask myself how this is a fear/shame thing for me
- Realise that I feel shame if I imagine saying 'no' to the request because someone may think badly of me, but I feel fear if I imagine saying 'yes' because I know that will hurt me because it involves me overriding my self-consent
- Consider other options beyond the binary of no/shame and yes/fear, such as explaining to the person why it's tricky for me, offering something else that is a 'yes' for me, giving myself more time before responding, etc.
- Feel the sense of discomfort ease and a sense of peace replace it

For me personally, because I work in a plural way around everything, I found it helpful to locate the part of myself who gets stuck in the fawn place and the part who gets stuck in the flight place. I realised that my fawner is the one who is freaking out in the background trying to figure out what to do in the face of this fear/shame double bind, and this makes my flee-er jump to attention and try to do something immediately, often hurting and exhausting themselves in the process. I now speak directly to my fawner when this happens – from a kind part of myself. I conceptualise this process as helping my inner fawner to step out of his prison: something I drew in comic form last year, which has been a helpful visual touchstone for me.

What I'm suggesting here is that, by slowing down and attending to these things intentionally, particularly when they kick in in small ways on a daily basis, we can get a detailed sense of the anatomy of our patterns and how they play out for us. Then we can get creative about how we shift ourselves out of them, eventually coming up with a range of tools which help us to do something – anything – differently when the patterns kick in.

Addressing blocks to this work

One thing which can really block us on doing this kind of work is fear and shame around it.

Fear: We often don't want to go anywhere near it because it will involve confronting who-knows-what damage our patterns have caused to ourselves and others over the years. We fear what we might find if we attend to ourselves and our patterns so we don't go near them.

Shame: In a culture which is utterly rooted in shame in order to sell projects and police our behaviour, we're terrified of confronting anything which might validate the sneaking suspicion which has been implanted in all of us that we're unacceptable 'bad' people. Certainly admitting to our stuck patterns and the damage they have done is a radical act in a world where being seen to have behaved badly can result in public call-outs and cancelling.

There will be more articles and podcasts from me on this topic because I think that shifting the culture of frightening and shaming (ourselves and others) is another of the urgent things we need to do right now. For now let's focus on how we might personally lift the block of fear/shame in order to enable ourselves to do the work of noticing and shifting our patterns.

I find it useful to remind myself of the following things in order to avoid getting frozen in the fear of what I might find if I address the patterns, and to avoid defending against shame by blaming others instead of looking at my stuff.

- Everyone has stuck patterns which hurt themselves and each other, not just me. This is not something I should feel specifically bad about, but something which connects me with everyone.
- If I turn towards these patterns and the impact they have I stand a much better chance at halting my part in toxic relationships, systems, and cultures.
- If I can learn how to do this stuff maybe I can help others to do it too and that will be good work to do (getting my inner fawner and flee-er on board!)

Another useful practice which I've written about before are **regret rituals**. If we come up against painful memories where we have been hurt and hurt others then we can make deliberate space in our life to feel the grief and regret around those times. Doing this regularly can help us to feel less overwhelmed. It can help us in the hard work of forgiving ourselves and the others who have been caught up in these dynamics with us. This relates to the idea of embracing both our inner survivor/victim and our inner oppressor/abuser which many intersectional feminists suggest. We've all been both of these things and we need to grieve and regret them as part of addressing our patterns.

Finally I've recently come up with this process for thinking through any situation which comes up where we feel a lot of shame about our behaviour, often because we've acted out of our stuck patterns. It helps me to get my own personal role in perspective so that I can then be accountable for that without becoming so lost in shame that I can't engage helpfully and responsibly.

I assume that the following elements will be involved in any occasion where somebody feels hurt by another's behaviour. I work through the specific situation considering what I know each element to be in this situation – or what I can imagine they might likely be when I don't have all the information.

How did each of these things contribute to the situation?

- Who I am, what my patterns are, and the stuff that's happened to me to result in my patterns
- Who they are, what their patterns are, and the stuff that's happened to them to result in their patterns
- Relational dynamics that often get acted out between people like the **drama triangle** or the **four horsemen** or the kinds of objectification of self and others that I wrote about in the **Rewriting the Rules** chapter on conflict
- The wider systems and culture around us
- Random chance

Then I can consider how best to address my part in it without taking too much responsibility, or too little because I can't handle the shame.

Finding inside what you've looked for outside

Another useful way of addressing your patterns alone involves finding inside yourself the things that you've been looking for outside yourself. I mentioned earlier that when we form relationships from a place of still having these patterns we're often trying to find – in another person or people – things that we struggle to find in ourselves, perhaps because we lacked or lost them in painful ways earlier in our lives.

For example, **Pete Walker** suggests that many survival strategies come into being because we've lacked or lost care and/or protection. This means that it's hard to be kind towards ourselves (due to lack of good models of care) and to keep ourselves safe (due to lack of good models of protection). We could see the antidote to our shame as care, and the

antidote to our fear as protection. Pete suggests 'reparenting ourselves' as a way of addressing this. Instead of searching for others to provide a kind of total care and protection which is probably impossible for anyone to give, we could cultivate our own capacities for self-care and self-protection.

Working as I do from a plural perspective I've found it useful to consider what my inner carer and protector look, sound and feel like, and to intentionally bring them into dialogue with other parts of myself so that they can become increasingly accessible in a way they certainly haven't been for much of my life.

However you don't have to work with it in quite this vivid a way. It could just be about talking to yourself – internally or externally – in a kind and/or protective way each time you're struggling. If this feels impossible it can be an area where 'acting as if' is helpful at first. Imagine if you did have such a kind/protective inner voice. What might it say? What would it say to another person in your situation? Again even glimmers of being able to treat yourself in these ways are impressive to begin with, and can build into something much more available and constant over time.

It can be good to consider what else you may have been looking for in external relationships which you could use this opportunity to find in yourself. You could list some of the things you've been drawn to in the people you've had close relationships with and see if you can access those aspects of yourself. For example if you tend to romanticise or eroticise rescuing vulnerable people, can you find that vulnerable part of yourself to rescue? If you're drawn to cocky confident clowns, can you find one of those in you? If you get together with people who feel a bit dark or dangerous, maybe there's a dark, dangerous part of you who needs some love and attention. Again I hope to blog and zine more about how to do this work, but the initial plural zine gives you some tools.

I've been asking a lot lately what it might be like if the kind of love which I have projected out onto other people could be turned in towards myself. There's a lot of fun, pleasure, and interest to be had in experimenting with this, and it seems to expand with practise too. I'd recommend playing with this yourself, if you can, because we need these processes to feel good in some way if we're going to remain committed to them. Hopefully the peaceful feeling of addressing our patterns, the lifting of shame involved in regret rituals, and the joy of turning the love in, can help us to stay on this path over time. Justin and I have resources on self-love, joy, and love in the time of Covid-19 which may be helpful.

Gradual relationship practice

I've explored a lot of things that we can do alone to shift our patterns and to turn our solitude into something potentially immensely valuable to ourselves and others. However there's a limit to what we can do alone.

First, it is very hard – if not impossible – to do solo work without systems and structures to support it. This is why I'm so critical of the ideas of self-help and self-improvement, and why many are shifting their language from self-care to community-care.

Secondly, the point here is to shift our relational patterns, and we do need to practice those in relation with others. Pema Chödrön gives the example of a hermit alone in a cave practising patience. Another monk visits him and starts joking that it's all a ruse the hermit is using to look good and to get people donating things to him. Eventually the hermit explodes in anger and tells the monk to piss off, at which point the monk asks 'where is your patience now?'

While we're in this time of solitude it's worth asking ourselves how we can cultivate systems and structures to support our solo work, as well as how we can engage in relationships in ways that enable us to practise what we're learning. One bonus of this time – if we're stuck alone – is that it can be relatively easy to ensure that we have a lot of spaciousness and slowness around all our relationships in which to process what happens and act intentionally rather than quickly from old patterns.

Relationships you might consider building in online while isolated, if you can, include:

- Peers who are also engaging in this kind of work to share how it's going and to support each other
- Small groups where you all have time to share what's going on for you at the moment and be heard
- More explicit forms of one-to-one peer support or therapy (*Time to Think* gives one useful model for this)
- *Professional support* if you can afford it (therapy relationships are one place where it's explicitly intended that you notice your patterns playing out and practise different ones)
- Contact with people in your life who offer you care and/or protection (Pete calls this 'reparenting by committee')
- Engagements with authors and communities who are discussing how to do this kind of work – and supporting each other around it – at this time

Addressing stuck patterns when stuck in together

This article outlines ways in which we might address our relationship patterns if we're stuck in with others during Covid-19. There's an article discussing the reasons why we might want to do so [here](#), and one about what we can do if we're stuck in alone – and what the practice of shifting our patterns looks like – [here](#).

Perhaps addressing our stuck relationship patterns becomes a matter of greater urgency for those stuck together than those [stuck alone](#). Being up alongside partners, family, or housemates day after day can be a hell or a heaven depending on whether we're playing out our patterns on each other, or managing to do something different.

I'm reminded of Sartre's *No Exit* 'hell is other people' or the Jewish parable of the long spoons, where hell is a place with a magnificent feast but everyone has spoons so long that they are unable to feed themselves and they starve. Heaven is exactly the same, but people are using the spoons to feed each other. I guess [The Good Place](#) would be ideal Netflix viewing for folk stuck in together for the duration.

Probably, inevitably, time stuck in together will sometimes be heaven, sometimes hell, and oftentimes something in between. Pema Chödrön talks about the six [Buddhist heaven and hell realms](#) as places we're always moving between in our everyday life. In relation to our stuck patterns we could perhaps see the worst hell realm as when we're utterly locked into our patterns with each other, retraumatising each other constantly. The hungry ghost realm is about addiction and craving. Perhaps it's where we're not in permanent hell, but are still filled with unfulfilled yearning and longing for the other person to save us from our pain. The animal realm is where we don't realise that the things that bring us short term pleasure often cause us long term pain – like a moth to a flame. So perhaps in this realm we're still employing old patterns to try to get what we want – from ourselves and others – and struggling when it means relationships flounder long term even if we do get some immediate pleasure or control.

The human realm is where we muddle along with glimpses of connection and harmony with others, and times of disconnection and pain. In the realm of the jealous gods we perhaps manage to see how our patterns hurt us all long term and manage to do something different, but there's still that sense of separation of self from other. The heaven realm could be those sacred moments when we feel our connection and oneness and the sense that what helps us helps others and vice versa. Our patterns have dropped away – at least briefly – and we know what it's like to relate together without those patterns tugging us down into fear and shame.

As with addressing our stuck patterns when **stuck in alone**, two vital elements of addressing our patterns when stuck together are time alone and support from others.

The need for space

It is virtually impossible to address our stuck patterns in relationships if we have no space and solitude. We need enough slowness and spaciousness around time together to notice our patterns playing out, and to practise doing something different.

One dangerous idea about relationships is that it is better to spend all – or most – of our time together. This is likely to play out in risky ways at this time as people may be spending all their days and nights together for extended periods of time. It's easy for us to feel shame around taking our own time and space due to a cultural assumption that we 'should' be together, and that being apart is a failure or a 'bad sign' about the relationship. This can be especially hard in relationships where one or both people's patterns involve trying to maximise together time in order to avoid the fear and shame they have around abandonment.

It would be great to reverse this idea and to assume that everyone needs space and time alone in relationships and that it's okay for people to have different needs and boundaries around this. It could be good, early on, for each person in a shared space under social isolation or distancing to tune into their needs and to communicate them to others. What might be possible in terms of giving people time alone where they know they'll be uninterrupted? If it's not possible for everyone to have their own private room, then can shared spaces be allocated on a rota, or private spaces made within shared rooms by blocking off parts of them?

Alone time becomes even more vital when one or more people are activated, triggered, or in a trauma response, as is often the case in conflict. Again, there's a cultural norm that we must stay together at such times and sort it out to get back to good feelings as quickly as possible, often by making the other person see that we're right and they're wrong. Actually when we're in such a reactive response we are way more likely to act out our stuck patterns and to hurt the other person and/or ourselves in the process. Finding ourselves in traumatic interactions regularly will likely make those patterns play out more, as well as retraumatising us so that we're less and less able to handle the conflicts and crises that do occur. Over time it becomes increasingly hard to see each others' perspectives and to look after ourselves and other people in our lives.

As soon as we recognise that anyone present is triggered it's best to get some space and time so that we can soothe ourselves and/or get support from somebody who is not caught

up in the dynamic with us. There's advice about how to do this in the conflict chapter of my book *Rewriting the Rules* and in the literature on *trauma* on and offline.

I love this *four elements* idea that I recently heard about from Elan Shapiro. Earth stands for grounding, air for breathing, water for salivating, and fire for visualising something safe and soothing: all things that help to calm our nervous system.

Getting support

Another dangerous idea about relationships like families and partnerships is that they should be private and protected from the eyes of anybody outside of them. That means that all kinds of damaging dynamics can begin to play out without anybody spotting them and saying that something doesn't seem right. For those within the dynamic it can often be hard to spot this happening because the dynamic has developed so gradually over time, and/or because it may be so familiar from damaging dynamics we've been part of in the past that we don't realise there's a problem.

Again there's a risk that this ideal of privacy and protection will play out more during this time because we're stuck with each other and it feels risky to acknowledge – to ourselves or to our friends – that there are any problems. The cultural ideals around families and romantic relationships really don't help here because we're bombarded with images of happy families and perfect loves which we can never live up to, but may well feel we have to pretend we're managing in order to avoid shame.

It would be great to reverse this idea and come to a new cultural norm whereby a healthy family or relationship of any kind is one with the *windows open* where everyone involved is nurturing their support system and able to talk freely about what the relationship is like for them: good *and* bad. That means that the inevitable patterns which are present for all of us can be more easily seen and discussed openly, instead of becoming hidden and unspeakable.

It can be useful for each person in the partnership, family, or household to consider what their needs are to get support from outside, and how those supports might be put in place. Again supportive relationships that each of you might consider building in, separately, online if you can, include:

- Peers who are also engaging in this kind of work to share how it's going and support each other
- Small groups where you all have time to share what's going on for you at the moment and be heard

- More explicit forms of one-to-one peer support or therapy (*Time to Think* gives one useful model for this)
- *Professional support* if you can afford it (therapy relationships are one place where it's explicitly intended that you can notice your patterns playing out and practise different ones)
- Contact with people in your life who offer you care and/or protection
- Engagements with authors and communities who are discussing how to do this kind of work – and supporting each other around it – at this time

When doing this work together it's also useful to consider whether the relationship can be supported, as well as the individuals who make it up, whether that be a partnership, a family system, or a group of housemates. If dynamics have become stuck and/or damaging this is particularly vital. Possible forms of support for this – which can all be done online – include:

- Relationship therapy
- Systemic/family therapy
- Mediation
- Restorative and transformative justice

You might also get creative about how conversations between members of any cohabiting group might be witnessed and supported by others in your system or community, instead of doing such conversations in private. Can it become a regular practice between you that difficult conversations are carried out in front of each other, perhaps with a designated facilitator? Can you agree a structure for such conversations, such as each person getting time to speak and be heard? Can you have a process for what will happen if anyone gets triggered or activated? Such conversations can be returned to over time rather than being a one-off, and it's useful to have aims like 'everyone being heard' rather than figuring out who is right and wrong.

Doing it together?

One great opportunity of being stuck together for extended periods is the potential to do this kind of work together. Very few things bring up our stuck patterns like our close relationships, especially when we're around each other a lot. What a fabulous *AFOG* (as Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy call it)!

However it's very hard to do this kind of work together unless everybody is fully on board. As I stressed when talking about *doing this work alone*, we're in for a hell of a ride here. Engaging with our stuck patterns involves facing our deepest fears and shames, and may

well bring up tough memories from when these patterns came into being, as well as times when they've been most vivid over the years. We'll likely have to face times when we've hurt others badly as well as times when we've been hurt ourselves.

If we're stuck in with families then we might be doing this work with the very people who we were with when the patterns developed in the first place. If we're stuck in with partners then we may be doing this work with people who we hoped would give us the things we lost or lacked back when these patterns were put in place. Often part of what we have to face is other peoples' inability to give us those things – at least not in any completely consistent ongoing way – as well as the impact of their patterns on us.

My own personal criteria for doing this kind of work with others are:

1. Is everyone involved up for doing their own individual work?
2. Is everyone involved cultivating their own support system to help them through it given that it's hard – if not impossible – to support each other within a relationship where this is currently playing out?
3. Are we broadly on the same page with this way of understanding things: acknowledging that we're all part of these dynamics with our own stuck patterns, rather than trying to pin it on one person being the main problem?

If everyone involved is up for it then it can be a good idea to start having discussions about what the processes will be within your partnership or group, as well as how these might be supported from outside, and what support you might offer out in return. For example, you might think about making times for everyone to gather together:

- Just to share how they are doing (where each person gets allocated time to share),
- To address practical aspects of living together during this time
- To address emotional dynamics of living together during this time and what stuck patterns are playing out between people
- To deal with specific conflicts
- To relax and have fun together (because it's hard to do this work if all your time together is focused on hard stuff)

Addressing our part when others are not on board

Whether or not the people around you are working on their stuck patterns, it's still worth **doing your work**. In fact, you doing this kind of work can become a model for others which they may take up if and when they're ready. Also when one person changes their patterns it

can be that the whole system shifts to encompass that change. [Harriet Lerner's](#) work is really helpful on how to shift our own patterns and hold firm when others try to pull us back into old dynamics or systems.

It wouldn't be consensual to push anybody into doing this kind of work. Also it's important to recognise what a big ask it is, and how it may well not be something people yet have capacity for.

However, it is also a hell of a lot of emotional labour for one person to work on their patterns – and to try to improve the relationship or family – when others involved are doing nothing. It is hard – if not impossible – to make these changes within a system where others are actively resisting such changes, or unable or unwilling to confront their role in it at all.

If you want to address your own stuck patterns within a relationship, family or group where others aren't up for doing it together, then you might find my suggestions on how to do this work when [stuck alone](#) helpful. Considering how you can carve out time and space within your home to do this work, as well as how to get outside support, will be particularly important here.

Of course the most dangerous end of the spectrum of these kinds of stuck relationships patterns are abusive relationship dynamics of various kinds, including [coercive control](#) as well as physically or sexually abusive relationships. Slightly lower down the spectrum – but still concerning – are relationships where one or more people are frequently being (re)traumatised by the degree of conflict or the kinds of dynamics that are playing out.

In situations where there is abuse, damaging dynamics, and/or where other people involved are not up for addressing the dynamics, it is important to consider other options. Of course this may be far more difficult during this time of social distancing and isolation. There's government guidance for safe accommodation provision [here](#), a useful article about the spike in domestic abuse [here](#), and a list of places to support you in crisis [here](#) and [here](#).

Personally I think it's useful for all people – whether living alone or with others during this time – to have a sense of what their contingency plan will be if their living situation becomes damaging and their mental health deteriorates because of it. Mental and physical risks need to be balanced. It may be the case that alleviating stress by moving location for a brief period of respite – or longer term – is less risky to everyone's physical and mental health than staying put. Also remember the toll that the stress of repressing the pain you're in – or having regular trauma times – can take on the immune system.

Zones of stuck patterns

I'm thinking a lot at the moment about how we can shift our stuck patterns and habits. I'm weaving together various ideas and applying them to my own life. It seems that there are some pretty universal ways of doing this work that apply to us all, but the way we do it needs to be tailored to every one of us uniquely.

The general approach to shifting stuck patterns and habits is:

- Notice the patterns when they kick in
- Gradually shift them by doing something different
- Make that an everyday practice so that new habits can bed in over time

Adapting practices

I've written [here](#) about some of my current ways of doing this in my everyday life. While the practices offered by therapeutic approaches, Buddhist mindfulness, religious faiths and so on may be very helpful to point us in the right direction, I've found that any of these practices applied too rigidly or harshly doesn't work great.

Pema Chödrön's comparison of training a dog is helpful here: you get a much better trained, happier, and more flexible dog if you train them with rewards which work for that particular dog (e.g. cuddles, treats, or walks) within a broader understanding of how dogs work. If you just punish the dog whenever they do something you don't like, and try to force them to conform to what you want, they may eventually do what you want them to do but they will be unhappy and inflexible when situations change. They may potentially become so stuck they can't do anything if your training is inconsistent as well as harsh.

When endeavouring to change our own stuck patterns, then, it's great to adapt practices to suit us. I tried – for years – to meditate, but struggled like hell to notice my stuck patterns and bring myself to the present, which is pretty much the point of meditation. However, bringing myself back came far easier to me when I allowed every glimpse of a bird to remind me to return to the present (I live in a place with a LOT of seagulls). It came even easier when I allowed myself to visualise the [part of me](#) who had gone back into a stuck pattern, and invited [other parts](#) of myself to help that part to come out again, often by talking with him directly rather than sitting in silence.

Three zones of stuck patterns

Something that came together for me today was that we need to draw ourselves back from stuck patterns in three ways. Again this is influenced by ideas from Pema Chödrön, and also Love Uncommon's [emotion thermometer](#).

It's easy to feel we've done 'well' at catching a stuck pattern if we notice the first flicker of falling back into it and manage to say 'nope' and bring ourselves back out again. We can feel like we've failed if we wake up to ourselves and realise that we've been back in our stuck pattern for the last hour or so without realising it. And we can feel the absolute worst when our pattern has plunged us into full-on reactivity: an intense overwhelming response where we may melt down or shut down entirely.

I experienced all three of these yesterday.

Noticing the flicker

In the morning I was being a boss at noticing when flickers of uncomfortable feeling arose. Instead of pushing it down or acting out of it by rushing into doing something, I paused, took myself to a gentle place, and asked myself what the feeling might be about, assuming it was a perfectly sensible response to the situation. Then I gave myself time to tune into what seemed like the best thing to do next with my day, of all the options, instead of trying to force anything.

Falling into the pattern

Later in the day I felt keen to do a work task: working on the articles that I shared yesterday. However once I got into this I started to feel self-doubt about whether they were any good, and frustration with how long it was taking to edit them and get them up. Instead of pausing and noticing, I pushed on because I didn't want to feel those feelings and I just wanted to get the job done. By the end of a couple of hours I felt pretty rotten and it took a while to realise what I'd done to myself, and to bring myself to a kinder place. I took myself for a walk and had an internal conversation about how it was inevitable to fall into stuck patterns sometimes. Then I had some gentle time doing something enjoyable when I returned home.

Overwhelm

In the evening I tried to confront a situation I've been finding very difficult lately: one which triggers really old, deep pain. I forgot everything I've been learning about how evenings are my most fragile time, how important it is not to push on when I've already had one tough

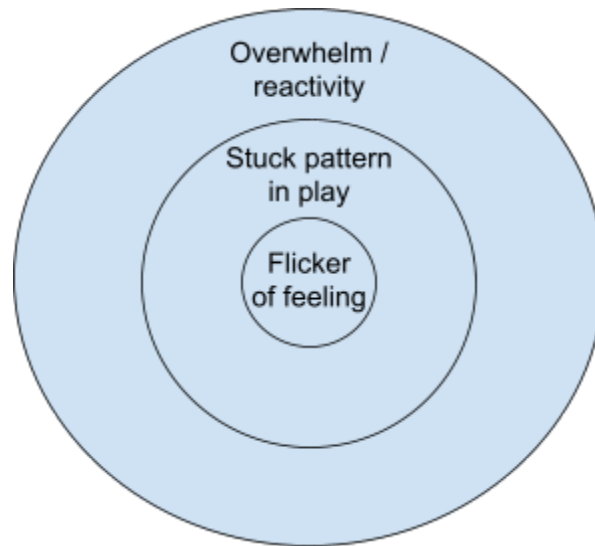
thing happen in a day, and how I need to go particularly slowly and carefully around the 'big ones'.

I got drawn into trying to come up with a solution to this big, difficult, ongoing issue, and my failure to manage to solve it plunged me into an intense **flashback**: a combination of panic and toxic shame where I couldn't stop myself from continuing to try to figure out a solution. I pulled myself back by naming what was happening, doing a minute of intense exercise followed by deep exhales to try to change my bodily state, and telling myself terrible old jokes to make me laugh (the latter worked best!) Then – once I felt a bit calmer – I put myself to bed with comfort food and my favourite current TV show, and later had some more soothing self-talk about what happened.

Working in the three zones

The point here isn't that it is 'best' to notice the flicker and pull yourself back at that stage. Inevitably sometimes we won't manage to do that and will fall into old patterns (we have practised them thousands of times, remember). And sometimes we will fall all the way into reactivity or flashback. Finding our own ways of drawing ourselves back from each of these places is the key. We could see each of them as an opportunity in that way.

We could conceptualise it like this, as three zones that we can go into with stuck patterns: the flicker of feeling that we're about to go into them. The innermost circle is our everyday zone where we're in an okay place with occasional flickers of feeling when our stuck patterns threatening. Our task if we've fallen more fully into a stuck pattern is to bring ourselves back to the innermost circle. Our task if we've gone into overwhelm or reactivity is to bring ourselves back through regular stuck patterns to the innermost circle.



So in each of the three zones the task is to notice what's happened and to draw ourselves back from enacting our stuck patterns. But the way we find to do this will likely be different in each zone.

- For the flickers of feeling it may be a fairly brief pause, allowing the feeling and understanding that it's a sensible response, and reminding ourselves of our aim to do things differently now.
- For stuck patterns playing out more vividly, perhaps we need a longer time out to shift out of the pattern. We could do a practice to really get in touch with the underlying feelings, and/or we could talk/journal with ourselves about what happened and why it makes sense given the stuck patterns we've learnt and how ingrained they are.
- For overwhelm/reactivity it's generally about taking ourselves right away from the triggering situation, not trying to deal with it right now. We might try soothing ourselves and being as kind as possible, which may take some time depending on how intense the overwhelm was. Pete Walker's list is helpful if you experience this overwhelm as an **emotional flashback** (big plunge into fear and shame). I also love this **four elements idea** that I recently heard about from Elan Shapiro. Earth stands for grounding, air for breathing, water for salivating, and fire for visualising something safe and soothing: all things that help to calm our nervous system.

Summary

Overall it's important to:

- Recognise that we will inevitably fall into all three zones at times rather than seeing one as better/worse than another
- Practise slowing down enough to notice when we're in any of the three zones
- Play with what works for us to do something different in each of the zones – and therefore to shift out of the stuck pattern. It can be useful to inform ourselves about the literature, for example on mindfulness or handling an emotional flashback, but it's great to find our own ways because these are more likely to work for us, and stick.

Caught in-between: The messy middle of shifting stuck patterns

As lockdown eases I've felt a similar easing in myself. I'm not as trapped in **trauma** as I have been for much of the last few months. The **fear/shame feelings** are not such a big part of everyday life. I haven't had a major **flashback** in a while [update: except for the massive one I had two days after writing this article, ah well it's a process].

However there has been an edgy, uneasy feeling of late. I fear that emerging any further from my own personal lockdown will mean 'going back' to **old patterns** I really don't want to return to. There's a sense of not being ready, certainly, to engage in more challenging situations until these new ways of relating to myself, others, my work, the world, have had a chance to bed in a little deeper. At the same time there's also some frustration, a pull to engage more, to be 'through this': to be able to work on bigger projects, to deal with urgent situations, to approach things I've been protecting myself from in order to address this trauma, and to get a little stronger.

It's back to **fear and shame** again of course. There's both fear that I will over-stretch, overwhelm, and override myself again, and shame that I *should* be able to do more, go further, reach some kind of imaginary destination point of recovery or fixed-ness.

The in-between state

I've found it helpful to return to a chapter in Pema Chödrön's book ***The Places that Scare You*** about 'the in-between state'. She speaks of a time in the warrior's journey of addressing our **stuck patterns** when we're completely fed up with our old ways of being, but still wish that outer circumstances could bring us lasting happiness.

We know that our usual habits are no match for suffering, but we still want to go to them for comfort because we can't quite trust our new ways yet. We struggle to hang out in **the gap** left by dropping our old strategies, and just to be with the agitated energy of that place without trying to get ground back under our feet. It's hard to hold the uncertainty and paradox of it all instead of going back to **binaries of good/bad, right/wrong, truth/lie, etc.**

Bringing these Buddhist ideas into dialogue with the trauma literature I've been studying, I see that most of my recent struggles have been around a draw back to those old habits of **fight**,

flight, freeze, and fawn, realising they're just not working for me any more, but struggling to be with the edgy, agitated feelings left in their wake.

Flight and freeze

I'm tempted back to flight. At those times it doesn't really feel okay to keep focusing on this inner work, despite everything I know about how necessary that is for me, for everyone around me, and for my outer work. I think I should be out there more, I should take on more, I should be working on a 'big project' again instead of these articles, I should get the decks cleared, I should read about something other than emotional trauma because the world is on fire.

When I try to push through with this it doesn't work. I force myself to answer emails and I know I'm being less human and connected than I want to be in my replies. I start writing something but it feels dead and unappealing: so different from the lively, fired up kind of writing I do when I wait till it's really calling me. Working like this feels zombified and dehumanising to me and to others.

Flight doesn't work for me any more. So instead I have to sit with the fear feelings that come up when I push through, and the shame feelings that come up when I'm not 'doing'. I have to keep learning to be warm, kind and tender towards them – towards the parts of me that can't 'do' like that any more, and towards the parts that struggle so much with 'not-doing' – instead of ignoring or overriding them.

When flight isn't working, I'm tempted back into freeze. Instead of sitting with that appalling shame feeling I could just give up and fall into the black hole of scrolling social media or Netflix binging. But that doesn't work anymore either. Like Pema says:

We'd give anything to have the comfort we used to get from eating a pizza or watching a video. However, even though those things can be pleasurable, we've seen that eating a pizza or watching a video is a feeble match for our suffering. - *Pema Chödrön – The Places that Scare You*

Every time I engage with any of my go-to comforting activities from that place of trying to avoid feelings or distract myself, I feel worse afterwards – and often during. The flickers of tough feelings become flames or even fires in the background in order to be noticed.

This doesn't mean never doing any work, or anything gentle, of course. It means continuing to notice how I'm engaging in both work and gentle activities. It means returning to the gap – to *sitting still* – whenever I notice I'm treating myself non-consensually around work, or around the desire to distract from tough feelings. It means staying with the edgy emotions – along with everything else in that moment – until I know that I'm in a position to make a kind, consensual

decision about what to do next, and returning to the gap if those emotions return, as many times as it takes.

Fawn and fight

In contact with others I notice a draw back to fawn and flight. When I don't *really* feel okay about giving myself this time to focus on addressing trauma I feel like I *should* be engaging with others differently. I feel like I should say 'yes' to every request for my time and energy. I shouldn't have boundaries around what kinds of contact feel okay – and not okay – for me if those conflict with what others want from me. I should have capacity for interactions that I still don't feel ready for.

That old fawn pattern manifests as quickly responding to every email request with a 'yes', before I've had chance to tune into whether it's something I want, or to get enough information. It manifests as not feeling able to honestly explain what I'm going through and the limits that might put around things I may previously have had capacity for (ironic given that it's out here for all to read, but there it is!) It manifests as jumping back into contact with others the moment I feel I might be ready, rather than leaving it a couple more weeks to be sure.

A few weeks ago I went straight from solitude to a very busy walk where social distancing was impossible, without thinking about the impact such a sudden shift would have on my nervous system. I didn't feel able to draw back, to find another way, or to figure out what I needed afterwards because of not wanting to be difficult or awkward for another person.

As with flight, the answer is to hang out in **the gap** with the feelings before responding, for as long as it takes, for as long as I don't feel ready. If I override myself I will have a backlash of fear, especially when I've offered something more than I really feel able to give, or overstepped my own boundaries.

This also means staying with the shame of being where I am, with this very limited capacity, and having to let others know that: not always being the person I would like to be for them – in fact not even close. It feels hugely shameful to say that I can't yet manage being in a busy area, or that I may have to cancel something if I'm badly triggered that day, or that I still can't manage to be open and kind in some relationships in the ways I'd like to be.

As with the move from flight to freeze, there can be a move from fawn to fight: from what **Love Uncommon** calls the **broken house to the fortress of solitude**. When the fawn feelings are unbearable it's tempting to go the other way: to go over difficult exchanges, or problematic emails, or tough relationships and judge the other people, even to be drawn to point out their behaviour in shaming ways.

Now that I'm outside of academic systems this comes up particularly around any engagement with people who are still embedded within them. I'm shocked by the tone of some editors and reviewers who are expecting huge amounts of free labour and still give their feedback in harshly critical ways 'you must...', 'wrong', 'unclear', etc. When engaging around assessing students – something I still do a little of – I've been in dynamics where the desire to follow academic procedures are clearly placed well above both student well-being, and my well-being.

At such times my head can get very noisy rehearsing stories about how and why others are wrong, what I should say to them, how to 'win'. There's fear that whatever I do or say they – and their systems – will override me anyway. There's shame because I know my response is helping nobody and actually taking me further from the kind of connected and boundaried contact I'd really like to have with others.

If I can stay in **the gap**, at these moments, I can reach that place where it all dissolves and I see that their attempts to control me and shame me into behaving as they want, have made me want to control them and shame them right back. I can see the whole tragic drama and how I've become caught up in it. Then it can dissolve and something much more tender can emerge in its place. I'm humbled by the times I have managed to 'drop the storyline' I had going about such situations – as Pema puts it – and have been surprised by a very real, vulnerable, connected interaction where I'd assumed that was impossible.

Dwelling in the in-between state requires learning to contain the paradox of something's being both right and wrong, of someone's being strong and loving and also angry, uptight, and stingy. In that painful moment when we don't live up to our own standards, do we condemn ourselves or truly appreciate the paradox of being human? Can we forgive ourselves and stay in touch with our good and tender heart? When someone pushes our buttons, do we set out to make the person wrong? Or do we repress our reaction with 'I'm supposed to be loving. How could I hold this negative thought?' -Pema Chödrön – The Places that Scare You

Hanging out in the in-between

So with **work/play**, and with **relationships with others**, the answer is – still – to hang out in **the gap**, in the in-between, with all the agitated feelings that come with that: to welcome those feelings warmly into the big open space of the present moment, to stay with the uncertainty and paradox of it all.

Right now I'm trying to notice the desire to rush through this 'in-between' to get to some imagined destination where I can do all the work from that lively creative place, treat myself gently, and navigate all my relationships with others with the perfect balance of compassion and consent with them and with myself.

A big question, for me, is what it would be like to really allow myself to be where I currently am, instead of trying to get somewhere else: to let this be my life. It strikes me that a lot of my nightmares through this period have been of being trapped back in bullying schools and workplaces, and in homes with non-consensual relationship dynamics. I've done much in the past years to free myself from non-consensual outer systems, where others involved are not keen to shift those cultures and dynamics, but the inner system still defaults so often to non-consent.

Allowing this to be my life – this commitment to consensual compassionate treatment of myself and others – involves freeing myself from those internalised non-consensual, controlling, systems, which is a much bigger ask, and requires a whole lot of time hanging out with these feelings, in the gap.

The major practice now – and perhaps forever – is looking out for those four Fs sneaking back in and – when they do – radically noticing the feelings, returning to **the gap**, refraining from any action until I can engage from a place that is consensual, compassionate, and able to hold the paradoxes. Sometimes that will be a small gap at the start of the day and then crack on. Other times I will have to return again and again to the gap as it keeps coming up. Sometimes I'll make a choice to go into that four F response to survive the moment, because nothing else feels possible. Then at least I will commit to returning to the gap, and being with whatever feelings that brings up, as soon as it is safe enough to do so.

What I'm aspiring to with the four Fs is:

Flight: Only go to work when I feel called to it, grounded in what I'm offering, and consensual with myself around it.

Freeze: Only go to gentle things when they really feel gentle, rather than being an attempt to avoid something else, or a form of gentleness I think I should enjoy rather than actually feeling called towards.

Fawn: Only offer things to others which feel right, rather than coming from a place of craving something from them, or shaping myself for them.

*Fight: Only engage in contact/relationships where I'm being treated **consensually**, and endeavour to be clear with others what that involves instead of allowing non-consensual treatment. Resist being pulled into non-consensual behaviour back, recognising how hard it is to be consensual within non-consensual systems, and trying to be open to the full human being rather than this current behaviour.*

The master's tools and mental health: We can't get out of our struggles the same way we got into them

Something hit me recently: one of those things that must have been staring me in the face for so long but somehow I never saw it. And now that I have, I can't unsee it. We can't get out of our mental health struggles the same way we got into them.

The research on trauma and mental health suggests that a huge part of the way we generally got into them was non-consensual treatment at the hands of other people and/or the world around us. So whatever we do to recover, heal, or otherwise address our issues, it has to be done differently: from a place of consent, care and friendliness for ourselves instead of a place of fear, shame, and harshness.

The master's tools

Audre Lorde famously wrote that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. This means that we can't dismantle systems and structures of oppression using the same kinds of mechanisms and tools that were used to put them there in the first place. If we try to do it that way we generally re/create corrupt systems rather than finding our way to some genuine alternative.

We can see many mental health struggles as a set of inner systems and structures which were put in place when we were treated non-consensually during our lives, often in childhood, but also through traumatic experiences which happened later on. Most of the main therapeutic approaches agree that when we're taught that we have to be a certain way in order to receive care and protection – or to avoid punishment or rejection – we develop survival strategies in order to cope.

Trauma and survival strategies

It's these survival strategies – in the form of habits and patterns like addictions and compulsions, fear and anxiety, depression and distancing, anger and acting out – which we end up addressing as adults, when we realise that they've become a problem. They may be

rooted, for example, in physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect at home, in particular traumatic events that happened to us, in the discrimination and hatred we experienced due to being part of any marginalised group, and/or in being repeatedly sent back into unsafe situations such as bullying or otherwise hostile school environments.

In our **current culture** few of us escape such experiences entirely. Few girls reach adulthood without experiences of sexual harassment and assault and without learning the ways they will be denied agency and regarded as second class citizens throughout their lives. If you are part of an oppressed group you will soon come to realise how differently you are treated: how your body, labour and life are valued less. School is a pretty non-consensual situation for even those who escape the more obvious forms of trauma there, much of which is normalised. Most families **pass on** messages that children should override their **self-consent** in order to conform to normality, hide their feelings and/or meet others' expectations.

All of this occurs within a wider culture which rests on teaching people that they are lacking and should be different to how they are in order to ensure **docile and productive citizens**, and in order to sell everything from drugs to diets, fast food to fashion, soft drinks to spirituality.

Treating ourselves non-consensually in the name of recovery

The problem is that – once we become aware of our mental health struggles, our habitual patterns, or our unhelpful survival strategies – the way we go about trying to address them often mirrors the very way they were put there in the first place. We try to fix ourselves, we push ourselves too far too fast, and we force ourselves to do all the things we've been told will help, punishing ourselves we don't find ourselves improving as quickly as we felt that we should.

This has been brought home to me recently in a few ways. I'll share my own experiences here and then give a few further examples where this might apply.

Trauma work

First I've been struggling particularly in the last year or so with what I've learnt are called emotional flashbacks: quick plunges into fear and shame which result in feeling very small, fragile and incapable of anything. I realise I've experienced these at greater or lesser intensity throughout my life, but the literature on **cPTSD** has helped me put a label to them. After reading a few books on trauma I fixed onto an idea – also common to many schools of therapy – that it could be useful to use current triggering experiences to connect back to earlier memories of traumatic events, and to revisit those in some way to loosen their grip.

Being somebody whose survival strategy tends towards the overfunctioning end of the spectrum, I grasped this idea and ran with it. One day, for example, I decided to write down all the traumatic memories I could think of in order to start revisiting them as a regular practice. Needless to say the result of this was not in any way pretty. I'm learning that the only way to do this kind of work is slowly and gently. If you try to push through, or force it, you end up retraumatizing yourself and doing nothing to loosen the grip of the habits you've developed in order to survive.

Mindfulness

Another example is mindfulness. As regular readers will be aware, I've always been **skeptical of the mindfulness movement** from a social justice perspective, and a lot of my work involves attempting to weave **Buddhist thinking and practices together with social understanding and engagement**.

However, I definitely bought the Buddhist mindfulness idea that it was generally a good idea to put time aside every day to sit, to notice your thoughts, and to keep bringing yourself back to the present. I figured that should be helpful to enable me to become more present to everyday life, to learn how not to get carried away into reactivity when hard stuff happens, and to notice forms of oppression acting through me and working to dismantle those as much as is possible.

What I actually found was that my fifteen minute meditation at the start of every day ranged from – at best – sitting with my noisy mind carrying me away for fifteen minutes and feeling a bit bad that I hadn't come back to the present at all by the end to – at worst – taking a fifteen minute journey into precisely how bad I felt about myself.

I'm now reading an awesome book by David A. Treleavan called **Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness** which brings mindfulness into dialogue with trauma-informed therapy and social justice. It's helped me to make sense of these meditation experiences. As someone with regularly recurring cPTSD symptoms, meditation like this can be counterproductive unless engaged with in a trauma-informed way. In fact many – if not most – people experience some mild to major re-traumatizing when they try to just sit with themselves without having any awareness of how trauma works. In pushing myself to meditate every day like this, with the idea that it must be good for me, I think I've been making things worse, and certainly not better.

Staying with feelings

A final example is staying with feelings: something that I've always been a big advocate of, as you can tell from my [zine of this name](#). But engaging with the work of blogger and trauma-informed counsellor [Love Uncommon](#) showed me a vital missing piece of these practices. It's only a good idea to stay with your feelings when they are in the manageable range. When they have reached a high intensity – or tipped into reactivity – then it is far more helpful to soothe yourself until they are manageable again. As with the other points, trying to stay with feelings when they are overwhelming is often retraumatising and unhelpful, making the feelings more scary and harder to stay with, rather than less so.

A similar thing is true for conflict and staying with each other's feelings. A lot of people have the sense that the best thing to do in conflict is to stay and hash it out. But if any of the people involved has tipped into high intensity reactivity – or a trauma response – then that is a really bad idea. Far better to take time out, self-soothe, and cool down, perhaps making a time to return to whatever the conflict was about when everyone is in a good place to do so. Staying when one or more of you is in a place of trauma is again a recipe for retraumatising yourselves, acting out your survival strategies in ways that tighten rather than loosening them, and making further painful conflict between you more, rather than less, likely over time.

Other examples

Other examples where people often take a non-self-consensual approach to addressing their mental health struggles would include forcing yourself to go to a form of therapy or support that doesn't feel right for you, staying with a therapist who doesn't feel good, insisting to yourself that you must 'be better' by a certain point, anything which rests on the idea of 'pulling your socks up' or 'getting over it', and engaging in any form of self-help which is based on the idea that you are broken and need fixing rather than that you are okay as you are and deserve support.

I've also had some interesting conversations with people recently who're moving away from abstinence and restriction approaches to addressing addiction, self-harm and self-soothing to models where you allow yourself all the things you want, but engage with them consciously and intentionally with curiosity. One person said that any habit that harms us *is* oppression acting through us, so we cannot and must not respond with further self-harm and oppression.

It may seem paradoxical that some people experience way more radical shifts when they move towards the latter model, but it makes sense from the perspective that progress is only possible when we stop treating ourselves in the way that put the survival strategies or unhelpful habits there in the first place.

The role of fear and shame

Another part of this clicked for me after reading [Pete Walker's book on cPTSD](#) (yes I am becoming a trauma nerd). He puts a lot of emphasis on the fear/shame feeling combo as being the key feature of emotional flashback and also – I realise now – a low level everyday backdrop to life for most of us with these kinds of past experiences.

Related to the idea that we can't help ourselves using the same non-consensual approaches that hurt is in the first place, is the idea that fear and shame will not get us out of fear and shame. When we're struggling we often try this kind of approach. We feel that we are bad people for struggling in these ways so we try to shame ourselves into addressing them or sorting ourselves out. We try to frighten ourselves into action by pointing out all the terrible things that might happen if we continue to employ our survival strategies.

There's a whole additional article to be written about how fear and shame-based strategies don't work for changing other people's behaviour in a world where these seem to be the go-to strategies everywhere. Justin and I recently podcasted about this in relation to the [fearmongering and shaming responses](#) we're seeing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fear and shame tend to make people frightened and defensive, and therefore more – rather than less – likely keep right on doing the things you don't want them to do. The same is true with ourselves when we're struggling. Like what could be a worse strategy for trying to cure ourselves from fear and shame than giving ourselves a load of fear and shame about our fear and shame. Think about it.

So what can we do?

So what I'm saying here is that if we treat ourselves in the ways that put our survival strategies, habits, or [stuck patterns](#) there in the first place this will solidify and tighten them, rather than dissolving or loosening them.

What is the alternative? Well it is a massive challenge within our current cultural context because it involves us treating ourselves – and each other – in the radically different ways which [intersectional feminists](#) from [Audre Lorde onwards](#) have been encouraging us to do: valuing ourselves and others equally, practicing self-care, sitting with the places in which we are oppressed and victimised and the places where we oppress or hurt others.

Such thinkers also point out that individual and systemic shifts need to happen alongside each other, given our interdependence. It's hard – if not impossible – for individuals to change their inner landscape if the non-consensual outer landscape remains the same, and

the idea that we should be able to do so harms us more. Engaging **with others** to share our experiences and work collectively is vital if possible.

For me a key starting point is self-consent. I'm trying to slow down my everyday life sufficiently to notice every time I'm drawn to override my self-consent. This is proving easier to notice now that many attempts to do so result in an emotional flashback plummet into fear/shame (trauma humour). But I'm also trying to notice the micro-moments of overriding my consent, the **flickers of fear/shame** that come up when I do that. I try to pay attention to what happened to elicit that response, to bring self-compassion to the situation to understand why that was my response, and to consider ways in which I might engage with whatever happened differently, in ways that don't override my self-consent.

Slowness is another key here. This just can't be done fast. Speeding up inevitably involves pushing through and getting overwhelmed. It's helpful to tune into when I'm stepping out of my **comfort zone into my stretch zone**, and ensuring that I pull back into the comfort zone before I hit overwhelm. I was having a lot of quiet nights in before they became the **default**.

If fear and shame are a big part of the problem, then the solution is the opposite: cultivating protection and care to counter the fear and shame. Pete Walker talks about **reparenting** yourself and reparenting by committee. **Other authors** talk about cultivating a compassionate witness within yourself or befriending yourself, often alongside receiving a safe-enough and kind-enough therapeutic relationship to model what this might be like.

I'll be writing more about how I've gone about this from a **plural perspective**, but basically it's anything you can do to be kind and protective towards yourself rather than shaming or frightening yourself, and to treat yourself consensually instead of non-consensually.

Useful questions to ask yourself are: 'what do I usually/habitually do under these circumstances?' and 'what would the opposite of that look like?' You may find that there are several different 'opposite' options to play with. They may also be the 'opposite' of the experiences that resulted in your stuck patterns or survival strategies.

At this point you can bring those other practices back in. For me it's not about stopping addressing traumatic memories, meditating, or trying to stay with my feelings. All those practices are immensely valuable, but only if done consensually, gently, gradually, and in ways that feel good rather than bad, and stretching rather than overwhelming.

Gender, Attachment and Trauma

Today I was stoked to be asked to be part of an [online conference](#) at The Bowlby Centre therapist training institute. The event focused on gender, hence inviting me to speak. My conversation with [Jane Czyzelska](#) kicked off the day with the aim of providing attendees with a bit of a gender 101, prior to more in depth conversations around gender and attachment through the rest of the day.

Initially I had some reticence around my involvement because, while I know plenty about gender, I'm no expert on attachment theory, which is the therapeutic approach that The Bowlby Centre focuses on. I learnt about it back in my psychology degree and taught the basics of it as a psych lecturer, but never went much further than that. My own psychotherapy training was existential, so I drew on other theories for understanding how people tick.

While I'm always happy to do gender 101, having written [Gender: A Graphic Guide](#) with that aim, I felt like I wanted to do more than that here: to find some ways to weave gender and attachment together. While all therapists need to be [mindful of gender diversity](#), aware of [their own gender](#), and practice [affirmatively](#), I wanted to explore what attachment therapists, in particular, might gain from exploring gender in depth.

Attachment

Fortunately, in the weeks leading up to the event I realised that I have actually been engaging deeply with attachment understandings over the past couple of years, just without always naming it as such. During my [deep dive into trauma](#) many of the authors I've been reading have been informed by attachment theory, in addition to more recent understandings of trauma. In fact it could be argued that John Bowlby was one of the first theorists and practitioners to highlight what we now call [developmental trauma](#) which is when – for whatever reason – parents are unable to regulate their children's emotions and to help them get to the point of being able to self-regulate.

My most recent trauma read – [Nurturing Resilience](#) by Kathy Kain and Stephen Terrell – sets out the somatic experiencing approach to working with trauma. This, along with [sensorimotor psychotherapy](#), is one of the main embodied trauma approaches, and it is grounded in the attachment theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. So I now have a greater appreciation for how what I've been working with is, in fact, all about attachment.

One way of understanding the [plural work](#) that I've been doing throughout lockdown is as a journey towards what's called '[earned secure attachment](#)'. This is the sense that if we did not

have secure attachment – and the eventual capacity to emotionally regulate – as kids, we can develop this as adults. It relates to [Pete Walker](#) – and others’ – idea that we can reparent ourselves, and be reparented by committee (therapists, groups, and/or friends with whom we practice securely attached relationships and coregulation of emotions).

The rest of this article will begin with a brief overview of attachment theory, in case you aren’t familiar with it, explaining why it’s useful to explore it alongside gender (and sexuality, and relationship style). I’ll then include my answers to the questions which Jane and I explored in our conversation at the conference.

What does attachment theory say?

I was fascinated to read in [Kathy and Stephen’s book](#) that Bowlby was spurred into his work by his own experiences as a kid. He was mostly cared for by a nanny when he was a child, and she left when he was four years old, which devastated him. He was then sent to boarding school when he was seven, which he grew to believe were detrimental for children’s well-being: something born out by much subsequent research and therapeutic work on [boarding school syndrome](#).

It was useful to read that, right from the start, links were made between attachment style and the wider cultural norms around how kids were treated. Bowlby also worked closely with boys who’d been arrested for criminal behaviour. I’d previously assumed attachment theory to be quite an individualistic approach: locating our struggles purely in early childhood experience.

This linked, for me, to [Gabor Maté’s](#) more recent work on trauma. Maté argues that current cultural norms of child-rearing result in the high levels of developmental trauma and troubled attachment that we see, and that we should be addressing these at a structural and systemic level, not just the level of individuals or families. He suggests that the pressures on parents in the culturally normative forms of nuclear families, under neoliberal capitalism and economic crisis, mean that most are simply unable to provide secure attachment and the kind of emotional regulation that their children need.

Parents need far more practical and emotional support themselves in order to raise kids in ways that meet their emotional and relational needs. However, our culture has moved far away from models of extended families and sustainable communities of care which might provide this. One consequence of the current system is that many kids end up looking to peers (and, perhaps later, partners) to meet unmet early attachment needs, who are ill-equipped to do so, and often act in retraumatising ways.

Attachment theory argues that children need a *safe haven* with their caregiver/s: a caring, protective space they can return to to be soothed when they are stressed. They need a *secure base*: a stable attachment relationship with one consistently available caregiver which provides a template for their later relationships in life. Over time the child becomes more and more able to move away from this secure base. It is the knowledge that they can move away and come back that means that they gradually develop the capacity to be more independent and look after themselves and their own emotions in the way they were looked after in their secure base.

Bowlby's colleague Mary Ainsworth developed attachment theory in her research with infants who were left alone with a stranger by their caregiver. She found that those who did not have this kind of 'secure attachment' developed different forms of 'insecure attachment'. An 'anxious-ambivalent' attachment is where the child is highly distressed without their caregiver and may be either angry or helpless when they return. An 'anxious avoidant' attachment is where they avoid or ignore their caregiver and don't show distress at them leaving, or much reaction to them returning. 'Disorganised attachment' was added by Mary Main and relates to more inconsistent attachment behaviour.

Later theories mapped these attachment styles onto adult relationship behaviours, delineating between secure attachment (flexible, good at connection and at discerning nourishing from risky relationships) and insecure forms of attachment including: 'anxious preoccupied' (needy and dependent), 'dismissive-avoidant' (independent and not wanting intimacy), and 'fearful avoidant' (desiring close connection and finding it very difficult).

So both attachment theory, and the more recent **trauma theories** which develop it, propose that a key role of caregivers is to regulate the child's emotional state, meaning that the child can learn how to do so themselves long term. This means learning how to calm ourselves in times of heightened emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and frustration. Coregulation is when caregivers attune to how their child is feeling, and engage in back and forth interaction to understand – and meet – their needs, soothing them when stressful events occur.

If we are met in such a way we learn how to soothe and calm ourselves when tough things happen and our bodies go into more reactive modes (self-regulation). We'll also find it easier to form good connections and to reach out to them when we need to. Without such an early 'secure attachment' we're likely to be overwhelmed by tough events and emotions, to engage in **survival strategies** to avoid them, and we may well struggle to discern nourishing from risky relationships, and to reach out to others when we need support.

Why do we need to think about attachment in relation to **Gender, Sex, and Relationship Diversity (GSRD)?**

Attachment theory already clearly understands that our relationships are utterly interwoven with our mental health. Mental health struggles are rooted in our early relationships because this is where we learn to be okay with ourselves and our feelings, or where we get the message that we – and our feelings – are fundamentally not okay. Mental health difficulties like addiction, anxiety, and depression can be understood in terms of survival strategies which we develop to deal with otherwise overwhelming emotions. Also our current relationship experiences are utterly interwoven with our relationship with ourselves and our emotions. Problems in those relationships – due to our attachment and emotional capacity – can easily retraumatise us, replicating those early dynamics, and reinforcing our negative experience and understanding of ourselves.

Here are a few initial thoughts about why it's useful to think about attachment alongside gender, sexuality, and relationship diversity. I'll go into more detail on all of these in the rest of the article.

Cultural norms

First, the culturally normative way of doing relationships and families, which is linked to attachment struggles and developmental trauma, relies on a certain – interlinked – understanding of gender, sex, and relationships. The model of a heteronormative romantic/sexual couple meeting all each others' needs and forming a nuclear family is actually relatively recent and culturally specific. It relies on a binary understanding of 'opposite' genders where men are breadwinner-protectors and women are caring-nurturers, which developed in a capitalist context that relied on women working unpaid in the home and reproducing the workforce. Many of the strains on relationships today can be located in the cultural ideal of getting all your needs met in one person (best friend, co-parent, hot lover, etc.) as well as in an economic system where most people in such relationships are under huge financial stress and having to work long hours in addition to partnering and parenting, or face poverty.

Doing it differently

Relatedly, many people are now doing gender, sex, and relationships in different ways to this cultural norm, all of which may afford some possibilities to relate differently with ourselves and others. For example, Jessica Fern's recent book *Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma, and Consensual Non-monogamy* explores the ways in which forms of consensual monogamy may open up different attachment possibilities. Different ways of relating may work better for different attachment styles, or may enable more secure ways of relating and attaching.

Likewise those who are intentionally addressing or shifting their ways of doing their gender, and/or their sexuality, may also move in the direction of greater emotional regulation and/or more secure attachments. Consider how entwined gender is with emotional expression, and how stepping outside of the culturally normative way of doing *romantic/sexual relationships* may

offer possibilities of **slowing down** and/or prioritising different kinds of relating which may be more stable and secure.

Similar things apply

It also occurred to me that many of the things that I often emphasise about gender, sexuality, and relationships also apply to attachment.

These days most attachment theorists and therapists emphasise that attachment style is not fixed from birth, but that we can experience ourselves in different attachment styles in different relationships, for example, or 'earn' a secure attachment through therapeutic work and self reflective practices. Similarly, although once understood as fixed and singular, gender, sexuality, and relationship style are all fluid and plural. They may shift over time and/or be different in different relationships.

The trauma/attachment literature emphasises that attachment is biopsychosocial. Our way of attaching comes from a complex mix of the wider cultural way of doing child-rearing (social), how that played out in our particular family (psycho), and how early attachment experience became engraved on our bodyminds or nervous systems (bio). Similarly, gender, sexuality and relationship style are all biopsychosocial.

All are interwoven

Finally, we can question the fact that our **current culture separates out** gender, sexuality, relationship style, and mental health as if these are discrete things. Many cultures, and historical times, would not separate out gender, sexuality, and spirituality – for example – seeing all these things as utterly interwoven. In the same way that we might usefully question our current normative way of doing relationships and family, we might recognise that regarding gender, sexuality, relationship styles, and mental health struggles as fixed identities that we *have* is a relatively new phenomenon, and possibly not a very helpful one.

Moving on to gender 101, let's define some useful basic terms first – because lots of therapists are worried about getting it wrong...

I think it's important to recognise that reality. Laurie Penny wrote that 'the way we think about gender is moving so fast you can feel the breeze in your hair'. This is fraught terrain for many people. I'm always reminded of what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about how threatening it can be for mothers to see their daughters doing gender in different – more liberated ways – than were available to them, and how they may try to stop that. We see a lot that kind of thing playing out intergenerationally. There are all kinds of deep fears, losses and shames in play when relating

across generations and genders: all kinds of reasons why people may want others to support – and not challenge – their gender worldview. Perhaps it gives them a sense of safety, of knowing who the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ are, and which side they are on, for example.

This is why I always emphasise, first and foremost, that therapists reflect deeply on their **own experience of gender** and how it has impacted their lives. As with all other intersecting aspects of identity and experience (e.g. disability, race, class, sexuality, age), we really need to feel how it operates within us, and through us, if we’re to work with other people around it.

What ARE some the terms therapists need to be aware of?

I would say it’s useful to recognise the multiple different aspects of gender. So gender *identity* is whether you identify as man, woman or non-binary, for example. Gender *expression* is how you present your gender in terms of appearance, clothes, voice, etc. Gender *experience* is your lived experience of your gender. Gender *roles* are the roles you take on in life and how they relate to gender: father, feminist, waitress, widower, etc. Then there is how your gender is *read* by other people. There may be more or less match between identity, expression, experience, role, and how others read your gender, for different people.

In terms of gender *status* people are generally divided into cis and trans. *Cis* – or cisgender – people remain in the gender that they were assumed to be by those around them at birth. *Trans* people shift from that in some way. Trans can be seen as a big umbrella encompassing trans women, trans men, and non-binary people. And *non-binary* can be seen as another big umbrella encompassing all the people who are a gender other than male or female. For example they may be both genders, or between genders, a further gender, no gender, or move between multiple gender positions. Of course the category of cis is also a big umbrella encompassing many different cis masculinities and femininities.

People often associate trans with *social transition* (changing names, clothes, pronouns, etc.) and *medical transition* (taking hormones and having surgeries). It’s important to point out both that many cis people engage in social and medical gender transitions, and that many trans people do not. Think about name changes for choice, or at marriage, for example, or the huge gender-related shifts that can come with menopause, retirement, or treatment for prostate or breast cancer. I personally prefer a sense that we – as therapists and medical practitioners – should be helping all people to come to **a congruent and comfortable place** with their gender, regardless of whether they would be categorised – or see themselves – as cis or trans.

We often think of trans people as a small minority of people, when we’re focused on social and medical transition. However, **Daphna Joel’s research** has found that over a third of people experience themselves as being to some extent ‘the other gender, both genders, or neither gender’.

Historically, many psychoanalysts have conflated gender, biology and sexuality, and when it comes to trans, non-binary and folks with variations in sex characteristics, some still do – so can you explain the difference and the way they interact?

Intersex people, or people with diverse sex characteristics (DSD) have bodies which are difficult to categorise in the current western binary sex model. Historically medics have intervened with those bodies in order to attempt to make them conform to a binary, and heterosexual, norm (i.e. penises and vaginas of a certain length). **Activists** and **practitioners** are increasingly speaking out against this and encouraging more consensual practices.

It's important to know that what we think of as biological sex – as well as gender – is diverse. What are we talking about when we talk about sex? Is it chromosomes? Level of circulating hormones? Bodily features like genitals, breasts, or hairiness? Or is it brain structure and capacity? On all of these levels humans are actually diverse rather than binary.

Many biologists now prefer to talk about **sex/gender** rather than separating these out, because it's really impossible to disentangle the biological, the psychological, and the social. Personally I find the concept of 'biopsychosocial' very useful here. Gender is biopsychosocial for all of us meaning that we can't tease apart these three elements. All are in play and all influence each other. For example, what we now know about neuroplasticity and endocrinology suggests that the ways in which we learn gendered behaviours – from the world around us – shifts our brain and body patterns. So, as well as the way our brain and body are – from our early years – shaping how people read our gender and how we experience it, the ways in which we are read, and experience our gender, also shape our brain and body.

When we think about all the different elements of sex (chromosomes, hormones, body shape and size, brain structure and function) and all the elements of gender (identity, expression, experience, role, etc.) we can see how the concept of the snowflake might actually be a useful one, because with all of the different elements, all changing over time, we each end up with a pretty unique sex/gender. If we add in sexuality – which is about way more than just the gender we are and the gender we're attracted to – we have even more diversity and uniqueness.

Virginia **Goldener notes that historically psychoanalysts have considered working towards and/or achieving a stable gender identity as an indicator of a successful outcome – and that this is neither possible nor desirable. Consistency around gender identity is for many a cis myth or as Goldener suggests, a pathology. Do you agree?**

I'm really grateful to you for putting me onto the Goldener paper and I like a lot of what it says. I do completely agree with her argument that 'gender coherence, consistency, conformity, and identity are culturally mandated normative ideals that (therapy) has absorbed uncritically'. Really

we only have to look back through time and around the world today to see the truth of this. The current binary opposite understanding of gender is very recent, and it is utterly interwoven with heteronormativity and family structure under this particular form of capitalism.

There have been many places and times where gender was not seen as binary or opposite, where very different characteristics were associated with different genders, where there were multiple genders, and/or where gender wasn't considered an important feature of a person, or separable from other aspects of their personhood. It's certainly highly ethnocentric to believe that binary gender in the way our culture currently understands it is any kind of universal truth.

Goldener takes her argument further to suggest that adhering to a consistent gender could be seen as a pathology. She comes close to my view here as well. In my [BACP GSRD resource](#) I highlight the strong links between trying to conform with rigid ideals of masculinity and femininity and significant mental health struggles. Think about rates of suicide and addiction amongst men, for example, or body images issues which are highly normative among women, or the kinds of depression and anxiety associated with women basing their identities around being-for-others, as de Beauvoir put it. This is why I always say that therapists should be talking about gender with all clients, not just gender non-normative ones. In fact gender expansive and creative folk are perhaps more likely to have already dealt with this stuff.

Goldener makes the argument that people come to a consistent gender by disowning anything about themselves that doesn't fit with the ideological pressures of gender coherence. Think about the ways in which masculinity is defined by anything that isn't feminine, for example, and how boys and men are encouraged to repudiate any 'feminine' feelings, appearances, desires, etc. This argument fits nicely with my understanding of [plural selves](#) – drawn from various therapeutic approaches. This is the idea that we are all plural, rather than singular, but have to disown, or split off, aspects of ourselves in order to survive in our families, communities, and wider culture. I think it's useful to see gender as part of this.

I also found Goldener's use of double binds very compelling. This is the sense that we receive confusing and contradictory messages – in families, communities, and culture – about gender which take a huge toll on mental health. Goldener gives the example of such contradictions in a woman's family gender story: 'Mom didn't stand up to Dad, and she was always silently angry and depressed. But whenever I was argumentative, she would say I was 'too masculine' and no man would ever want me.' So the woman faces the contradiction that if she does femininity like her Mom she will suffer as she did, but if she does it differently she faces rejection by her Mom and potentially by all men. We might also think about school messages that men need to be successful but also not show any interest in studies, or cultural messages that women must be empowered and desiring, while still seeing their worth as bound up in appearance and being in a relationship with a man.

Goldener ends by saying that a more critical therapeutic tradition ‘could promote resistance to the normative construction of gender polarities and hierarchies by documenting how the exploitation of gender distinctions in the inevitable struggle for power in society and in domestic life produces untenable relationship binds and unbridgeable psychic splits, which damage the human spirit in all of us and in the next generation.’ This understanding of cultural gender as a form of intergenerational trauma comes close to my own sense of things, and that of my co-author, Alex Iantaffi, who recently published the book *Gender Trauma*.

Currently people are expected to remain in the same gender throughout their lives. There is still a *moral panic* and ‘debate’ over people who do not, and trans people are expected to promise to remain in the same gender forever once they have transitioned. There is a huge sense that people should be consistent in their gender, despite the fact that everybody clearly experiences and expresses their gender in very different ways over time, from being a child, through a teenager, adult, and older person, and as cultural gender norms also shift radically over the course of their lives.

I think we need to shift this whole sense that gender, sexuality, or self fixity and consistency is something to be aimed at, or somehow superior over flexibility and fluidity. All of these things can – and do – shift over long periods of our lives, and we also experience and express them very differently in different situations and relationships. Think about how you behave with the store clerk, a loved one, and a child, for example, or how you feel at this conference, out for a drink, or last thing at night.

One note of caution I would add here though is that we don’t flip the binary such that we privilege fluidity over fixity and regard that as, in some way, superior. Most of us experience some aspects of our selves, our gender, our sexuality, and more, as relatively stable, and other aspects as more changeable. I’d like us to get to the point where all of this could be equally respected and supported as somebody’s lived experience of themselves, rather than there being attempts to fix what is fluid, or to change what is stable.

Trainings often fairly uncritically reproduce cis and heteronormative value systems – so that the lens through which we’re taught in the psychoanalytic or psychodynamic model is often devoid of exposing how systemic structural issues impact on clients. Why is it important for us to explore gender with all clients, not just with those where it might seem an obvious issue, such as trans and gender expansive clients?

It’s very troubling to me how little most therapy trainings include considerations of social structures and cultural messages when we know these things are hugely impactful on people’s emotional well-being, and cannot be disentangled from individual life experiences. There’s a real danger in therapy that we reinforce a sense that mental health should be understood and

addressed purely at the level of the individual and their interpersonal relationships, when it's the wider societal systems and structures that are the problem in so many ways.

So yes I would say that heteronormativity and gender norms impact all clients, not just trans and gender expansive ones, and that it's a vital part of the picture to unpack with clients who may not have considered normativity and how much it is part of their distress. Just to give a few more examples to the ones I've given already, the **NATSAL** survey finds that over half of people consider themselves to be sexually dysfunctional in some way. Clearly the issue here is with the narrow cultural view of what counts as (hetero) sex rather than half of individuals having this individual problem of sexual dysfunction. Few men manage to resist the cultural messages that they mustn't show vulnerability or seek support, and we know the toll this takes in terms of their impact both on others and on themselves.

It's very important that therapists are able to mirror, accurately, people's sense of their own gender, given that many people will have experiences of only certain aspects of their gender being affirmed by those around them, if that.

In your writing on gender you say that we can't really understand gender without taking an intersectional perspective. What does that mean, and how might we work with clients in this way?

Intersectionality is an idea from the Black feminist **Kimberlé Crenshaw** to capture how we are all impacted by multiple axes of oppression, and how these intersect. An example that I like to give was when I did a bisexuality training in a workplace context. People there were sharing their thoughts on being out as bi. A couple of white bi women said that it felt like an accepting environment to them. Some black women shared that there was no way that they would be out as bi there. They were already sexualised and harassed as black women, and to be openly bi would exacerbate that to intolerable levels. Here we see the intersection of the treatment of black women as hypersexual – and their bodies as the property of others – with the understanding of bisexuality as promiscuous and available to all. This creates a unique experience for black bi women which neither white bi women, or straight black women, had.

I think intersectionality is hugely important in therapy with all clients, because we have to understand how our clients are uniquely positioned in relation to these axes of oppression to have a full sense of their experience. To give another gender example, the experience of considering embarking on a trans journey is very different depending on age (a teenager versus a 50 year old), disability (having to downplay disabilities to access trans services and vice versa), sexuality (whether transitioning will involve you now being read as gay, for example), and race (whether transitioning will involve you now being read as a race/gender combination who is seen as dangerous and/or subject to violence, for example).

Your co-author, Alex Iantaffi, just published a book called *Gender Trauma*. How might we see gender as a form of historical, intergenerational, and/or developmental trauma? What are the implications of this for trauma-informed therapists?

Alex's book is a must read for all therapists I would say. Although the focus is on gender it takes this intersectional view whereby all of those axes of oppression can be seen as having a traumatising impact. I find this understanding of trauma useful: that it is historical, cultural and intergenerational, as well as being developmental and/or resulting from specific traumatic experiences over our lives.

Alex points out that gender is a form of historical trauma in the ways that attempts have been made to eradicate certain genders through settler colonialism. We could also consider the ways in which white western understandings of gender and sexuality have been imposed on colonised countries, and the ongoing legacy of this, and the gendered sexual violence that was involved in slavery. All of these historical forms of gender trauma pass down through the generations, and linger in damaging myths, norms, and stereotypes.

Gender can be seen as a form of intergenerational trauma in the way that gendered ways of behaving are passed down through families – the kind of thing that Goldener was referring to. Gender reveal parties could be seen as a recent example whereby kids are assumed to be all kinds of things because of their genitals, even prior to birth. Consider the impact of this on intersex kids, on gender expansive kids, and on all kids who don't entirely conform to the ideals of genders their families expect, or who might not if such rigid expectations were not imposed from so young.

When it comes to developmental trauma, we could wonder about the gendered ways in which babies and children are treated in relation to their emotions, from a very young age. Developmental trauma occurs when kids aren't soothed when overwhelmed, or supported to learn how to emotionally regulate themselves. I think we could see this, for example, when boys are punished for expressing emotions other than anger, or when girls are expected to care for others' emotional states, even as infants. I was so struck by the documentary *No More Boys and Girls*, where 7 year old boys could not come up with words for any emotions other than anger, and all the kids agreed that boys were 'better' and that girls' main aspiration in life should be to be 'pretty'.

Much of your writing these days is about plural selves and parts work. How does this concept relate to gender, and to attachment, and what are the implications for potentially working with all clients as plurally gendered?

For me personally, it was my journeys with sexuality and gender which eventually led me to an understanding of plurality. Initially I was aware of having several different sets of sexual desires, and enjoying sex or play the most when I could sink fully into one of these different headspaces. Then I had a sense of being non-binary, which could enable me to hold the feeling that I was masculine and man without letting go of a sense of knowing that I was also feminine and woman. These explorations eventually led to a realisation that I have a vivid experience of multiple parts, who certainly have different gender expressions and sexual – or asexual – desires, but who are about much more than that.

In terms of **parts work** I'm weaving together the work of people like John Rowan, Hal and Sidra Stone, Richard Schwartz, and Janina Fisher, as well as what I'm learning with people within plural communities. My sense is that everybody – to some extent – disowns parts of themselves and foregrounds other parts, in order to conform to their family, community, and culture, for example. Significant developmental trauma is not what causes people to be plural, but it does seem to result in more significant splits between the parts, such that some are inaccessible, unknown, or dissociated from.

My own experience is that I created a pretty well functioning feminine self in my teenage years, in order to survive. I experienced myself as purely that self for many years, but often with a confusing sense of incongruence that this person who was all about fitting in, helping others, and being independent, fairly regularly made it their business to tell uncomfortable truths in public, suddenly leapt into relationships and communities, or became overwhelmed by shame and fear when tough stuff happened.

So, for me, plurality is entirely interwoven with gender and with attachment, given that other parts of me hold gender-related behaviours, attachment styles, emotions, and survival strategies, which were too dangerous for me to hold or express as a child. It was confronting, for example, to realise that there's certainly a needy 'anxious preoccupied' part when I would probably have checked towards the avoidant end of the attachment spectrum. It's also been helpful, and painful, to finally be in touch with a 'fight' survival strategy that was almost entirely turned in against myself for much of my life.

With a plural understanding we could usefully explore how gender, attachment styles and emotional experience are highly interrelated. For example, boys are generally encouraged culturally to be at the avoidant end of the spectrum and to express feelings in the form of anger, disowning more dependent attachment styles or fearful feelings. Similarly girls are still generally encouraged to be highly relationally oriented, even dependent, and to express emotions as distress rather than anger. These things do not come together for all people, of course, given our specific family systems and life trajectories, but they are bound to be linked to some extent in terms of what we disown and foreground in ourselves in order to survive.

In addition to bringing all parts forward, and to improving communication within the system, I find the concept of earned secure attachment extremely helpful here. For me this is the idea of creating and developing inner parents, or containing parts, who can hold and hear disowned or traumatised parts, building trusting relationships with them which can – over time – enable them to feel safe-enough in the world, and to grow from the traumatised places they have been stuck in.

For me the vital thing is what Bonnie Badenoch calls ‘radical inclusivity’, Janina Fisher ‘no part gets left behind’, or Richard Schwartz ‘no bad parts’. It’s about welcoming, befriending, and forming loving relationships with, and between, all aspects of all parts of ourselves. The aim is not a kind of integrated singularity – the cultural norm – nor is it reaching that sense of consistency that Goldener warns against, whether on gender or attachment style or anything else. Rather it’s about helping all parts to be in the world, to bring everything that they have been holding and to share it, and to continue to grow and become, as a vital part of both inner and outer systems.

Holding multiple possible stories through our experience

Back in the early days of 2020 I met up with a friend for coffee to talk about whether I might support him in some writing projects he was considering. As always these days I suggested **consent** as a starting point for thinking about **writing**. Did he *really* know that it was okay *not* to write? Could he allow that all other activities are also equally valid – whether or not they feel as productive, have such an obvious output, or follow the cultural script for what makes an individual successful?

Over the course of the conversation it emerged that he was going through a vital personal process at the moment. A fellow Buddhist and therapist, he described how he was spending much of his non-working time engaged in spiritual practices. Frequently what was coming up in these was excruciatingly painful, and deeply challenging, but he was being helped through by his teacher who reminded him that this is exactly the process described by most Buddhist – and other contemplative – practitioners as the path to awakening. By the end of our conversation he had decided that this process was what he wanted to focus on for the foreseeable future, rather than any writing project.

I walked away from this meeting in a bit of a daze. The process he had described was something very similar to what I was going through, myself, in the early days of what I have mostly been describing here as dealing with post-traumatic stress. We were both experiencing overwhelming emotions, intrusive troubling memories, and confrontation with the aspects of ourselves we most struggle with. I walked home feeling much lighter than I'd felt during my journey out to the cafe. This heavy trauma story I'd been telling could be reframed as something very different: a sacred process, the path of a **spiritual warrior**.

Holding multiple stories

Following that time I've sunk far deeper into my process, as regular readers will be aware because I've been documenting – here – what I've been learning along the way. Throughout this time I've found it useful to hold *both* those potential stories about what I'm going through: trauma and spiritual awakening. This is reflected in my reading, my practices, and my writing.

Nearly every day I read – or listen to – some Buddhist teachings (usually my main go-to, Pema Chödrön), and some trauma literature (the kinds of books and videos that I've been summarising here). I've also been weaving together practices that I've learnt from Buddhism with ones from the trauma literature, for example bringing bodily/environmental grounding into my sitting practice, using brief meditation as a form of consent check-in, and working with a Buddhist trauma-informed therapist. I hope that my writing reflects this synthesis. While writing about trauma I've endeavoured to hold onto the sense that there is a spectrum of traumatic experience, that we're all impacted by historical and intergenerational trauma, and that the ideas about how to navigate triggering and reactivity are valuable for all of us.

It occurred to me that there are actually four different stories which I'm telling myself about my current experience:

- Shame story: The story from within my trauma is a shame-saturated one where I am a bad person who harms people with their habits. I need to retreat substantially from the world in order to address these habits and make myself safer for others in close relationships and in my work, if that's even possible. This is the story I tell myself, each time trauma feelings hit, which any amount of intellectual knowing-otherwise struggles to shift.
- Trauma story: The trauma-informed story is that I'm a person who has gone through several periods of trauma in their life: for a year or two each decade following school bullying and family struggles in my teens; rejection by my university friends in my twenties; and workplace bullying, public shaming, and sexual assault in my thirties. I'm now understanding this as post-traumatic stress, and its roots in intergenerational and

developmental trauma, and applying a trauma-informed perspective to this process in my forties, instead of withdrawing from the world and looking to a partner relationship to rescue me as I did those previous times. Hopefully this will mean that I heal or recover to some extent, or at least that the fifties version of me who goes through this again will be better resourced when they do so.

- Human story: The human story is that this is just what people go through. I'm neither especially bent or broken (as the shame and trauma stories might suggest), nor am I going through something particularly special or meaningful. I'm neither wholly the small fragile person I feel like when I'm in trauma, or the big strong person I feel like when I allow that I'm brave to be doing this work and to be sharing it this way. What I'm going through could be framed as the kind of existential crisis which most of us hit at some point when we're forced to evaluate how we've been operating in the world. It's the stuff of so much of the fiction I'm reading and watching because it's so common. This story humbles me and connects me with others. How different am I really to the stereotypical 'mid-life crisis' guy who makes sudden life-changes and is completely thrown when everything crashes down around him? Perhaps I can find compassion, rather than criticism, for all of us caught up in these moments.
- Sacred story: The sacred story frames what I'm going through as a spiritual emergency. I feel like the caterpillar who went into the chrysalis, became goo, and is slowly *emerging*, impossibly fragile, with damp wings which need to dry in the sun before they're able to fly. There is no going back, and what emerges is radically different from what was there before. During the toughest times I thought of what I was going through as 'goo-life': everything fallen apart, everything being reconfigured at every level of my life from my neural pathways to my place in the world. On the other side of this I will be more awake to myself, to others, and to the world. I'll be committed to a spiritual path as the main purpose and practice of my life. I'll have far more to share with others, and I'll be able to do so in more grounded, compassionate and containing ways. I'll be able to welcome my death when it comes because I'll finally know that I can accompany myself through anything.

Setting down these stories was reassuring because, in some ways, it doesn't matter which one I tell. The answer is the same. Whether I'm a harmful person, a traumatised person, a messy regular human being, and/or a spiritual warrior, I need to retreat sufficiently to give myself enough space, I need to build enough support around me to hold me through this, I need to learn enough self-compassion to be able to take a clear, honest look at my habits and patterns, and I need to do the *slow, steady*, work of shifting those habits that can be harmful to me and/or others.

Holding multiple stories is also helpful for reminding me not to cling too tightly to any one of them. In the break-up chapter of *Rewriting the Rules* I explored how this sense of multiple stories can prevent us from falling into the polarised stories of good and bad, right and

wrong, which so often circulate within us – and in the wider world – following a relationship ending.

Here, for example, the trauma story can remind me to go slowly and treat myself gently given what we know about how nervous systems respond to trauma. The human story can help me to feel more connected to everyone else around me, at a time when it is easy to feel isolated and alienated – like others couldn't possibly understand what I'm going through and like I should hide it for fear of troubling them. The sacred story can give me the courage I need to turn towards my demons instead of away from them, each time they arrive. The sacred story also helps me to weather the days spent desperately trying to welcome feelings I would so much rather avoid. Instead of a flailing mess, I can visualise myself as the warrior getting back up off the arena floor time and time again (Captain Marvel is my go-to image for this).

Even the shame story is helpful, if held lightly alongside the other potential stories. It reminds me that all of us have the capacity to hurt others with our actions, and that it is important to look at this honestly and openly, and to do something about it where we can. It also connects me with all others who are steeped in shame, perhaps those whose actions have been even more devastating in their impact than mine. If I can hold that they are redeemable – that nobody deserves to be endlessly punished and tortured for their mistakes – perhaps I can hold that for myself too.

I liked this exchange I recently read between a character and their therapist in the novel *Cousins*, by Salley Vickers. The character is beating themselves up for putting another character in danger with their actions. The therapist says:

You made a mistake... and the trick of life is to make the mistakes as fast as possible not try to avoid making them.

The character protests that the impact of their actions on the other person could have been really bad. The therapists replies:

It strikes me that the other person also made a mistake. You can't nab all the mistakes for yourself.

Multiple stories, parallel tracks

As well as these being multiple stories that I can tell about my life, they also operate as different tracks which are constantly playing through my everyday experience. Different

ones play louder at different times, but it is – perhaps – always possible to tune in to any of them.

I like this parallel tracks idea because it doesn't have the 'end point' which might be present in the idea of a story. It's easy to fall into the sense that the shame, trauma, human, or sacred stories have a linear narrative from beginning, to middle, to end. In the shame story I should eventually 'become a better person'. In the trauma story I should eventually recover or heal myself. In the sacred story I will 'awaken' or reach some kind of enlightenment. I worry that holding out for such a 'happily ever after' will become another kind of grasping which will keep me struggling. I believe that the truth of human experience is much more like a spiral where we go round and round the same themes many times, perhaps reaching a slightly deeper understanding each time.

This would certainly make sense of my decade-ly return to these particular kinds of struggles, challenging my sense that each one is a 'failure' because I didn't manage to 'sort myself out' once and for all.

While it is intense – and perhaps a bit self-punishing (hello, I'm MJ, have we met?!) – to imagine my fifties trauma/crisis before I'm even out of my forties one, maybe doing so is more helpful than hoping that this time I'm going to finally 'do it', whatever 'it' is.

I found it useful, in relation to these tracks, to think about the different Buddhist heaven and hell realms which I wrote about [here](#). Pema Chödrön, suggests that these can usefully be seen as states that we move between on a daily basis, all of which are possible in any given moment.

- The shame track is like the hell realm. I'm in torment, believing myself to be bad and worthy of punishment. I'm totally inward facing, I can't see anybody else through the fog of gaslight that surrounds me, telling me that I'm terrible, will harm/lose everyone, and should just give up.
- The trauma track is like the animal realm. I can't live anything like regular everyday human life. I have to be supremely careful about what I take on, what I do, what contact I engage in, because anything can quickly overwhelm me. It's just one day at a time, [slowly, slowly](#), doing the work I know that I need to do. It's still very inward facing and hard to be around anyone except very safe others, or to see other people and their stuff clearly.
- The human track – or realm – is like the gap in the clouds. I can see clearly again for a moment and it is wonderful. My nervous system is relaxed. I can feel excited about my projects again. I'm not mired in confusion and self doubt over every decision. I can

contact easily what I want and don't want to do. I can imagine a future. I can connect with other people. Turning outwards feels good.

- The sacred track – or heaven realm – feels utterly open and connected with myself and to others. I can even see clearly those who have hurt me and how it comes from these same places of shame and fear that I am grappling with myself. I can grieve for how we're all caught up in these dynamics together – and the damage they cause – at the same time as seeing the strange tragic beauty of it all. I know that the very things that divide us could be points of deep connection. Kindness for myself and others isn't something I have to work on, it's just the obvious response.

Again, recognising all four possible tracks, or realms, and their simultaneous availability can help us not to become too stuck in one of them. It's easy to desperately try to escape the hell and animal realms when there: to tune out the shame and trauma tracks. It's also easy to want to turn up the human and sacred tracks when we can hear those: to grasp hold of the human and heaven realms.

Buddhism has this paradoxical idea that it's important not to prefer Nirvana to Samsara. It's not about transcending our human lives to reach some eternal enlightened state. Most of the great religious figures had a moment of choosing not to retreat into blissful solitude, but to return to the world with others, even though they knew how painful that would be and how they would be dragged back into messy human struggles, even be overwhelmed or destroyed by them.

If we can allow each of these tracks – or states – without trying to cling to them, or escape them, when they are present, perhaps we can flow through them more easily. There is as much – if not more – to be learnt from accompanying ourselves through shame and trauma as there is through our beautiful, complex everyday lives, or through our moments of transcendence.

Back to writing

Returning to the story I began this article with – about my friend who was considering writing – curiously, a number of the people I mentor with their writing have come to similar conclusions of late. They've begun with a parallel personal and creative process, and have eventually dropped the creative element entirely, or shifted it into something more private and unconventional, that may or may not ever see the light of day. For example many are exploring forms of doodling, collaging, crafting, zining, or small-scale playing with words and

stories, rather than the more standard novels or memoirs that they began with in the hopes of getting published.

One of my own challenges – through this time – has been to let go of the sense that I should be working on some ‘big project’ – probably a book – as I’ve mainly been consistently doing for the last decade. My shame story about this sneaks back in occasionally, but what has actually felt right – during this time – has been to only write when it feels absolutely consensual, and to focus on these short (for me!) dispatches from my trauma recovery / spiritual awakening.

Another friend got in touch recently to ask how I was fairing through lockdown. She said that her romantic idea of me was that I was hunkered down working on my masterpiece. After a brief flicker of shame I laughed because I think that I very well might be.

It and Intergenerational Trauma

Last night I went to see the new (2017) movie version of Stephen King's *It*. I have a long history with this story so I almost didn't go. I was nervous that it might take away from something that was precious to me, as film adaptations sometimes can. The opposite was the case. Watching the novel that I've read so many times brought to life so perfectly enabled the penny to finally drop for me (pun intended). I finally got what this story's all about, and why it's resonated with me so much over the years. This is my attempt to explain *It* and how it relates to intergenerational trauma.

Disclaimer 1: Obviously this is just my reading. Many other readings are possible.

Disclaimer 2: All the themes present in It are also present in this piece, so don't read it if you don't want to be spoiled, or find those topics too troubling right now (bullying; family physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; bereavement; violence and murder; structural and systemic oppression including racism, misogyny, and homophobia).

Disclaimer 3: There are also some scary clowns of course.

TLDR: I love Stephen King and I think It is about intergenerational trauma.

Horror books

Libraries were a focal point of my childhood, just as they are in *It*. A key moment for me was when I graduated from the kid's corner of the library to the whole wild open expanse of the adult books. One section in particular drew me to it as surely as if it'd been marked out by the presence of a floating balloon.

I remember the thrill of browsing the covers of the horror books. Some of the images were enough to haunt my dreams without me even cracking the pages. There was a rebellion too in picking these books: disapproving glances from the librarian; bafflement from friends; a shake of the head from my English teacher when I chose to review pulp horror rather than literary fiction. I never understood why these books were somehow regarded as of lesser value. I just knew they were immensely valuable to me, although I doubt I could've explained why at the time.

Eventually I got a part-time job at the library. One of the perks was that I got first dibs on the books they were selling off for 10 or 20p. I soon amassed my own horror collection with

laminated covers and the library pockets still stuck to their front pages. For my favourite authors I saved my pocket money for the glossy new paperbacks at the big WHSmith in town.

A non-horror fan looking at that section of the library probably wouldn't be able to discern much difference between the books. They'd just see shelf after shelf of equivalent paperbacks with nightmare titles and dark covers embossed with gruesome images: as identical to one another as the Mills and Boons over by the door.

For me though they were very different. I knew that I was more drawn to the current authors than the classic ones, although I later developed a fondness for M. R. James. I also filtered out most of the books based on movies or supposedly true stories as not particularly inspiring. Finally I learnt to distinguish the writers whose work seemed to be about something more than simply frightening the reader with the nastiest things they could imagine. The latter books did nothing for me apart from disturbing my mind, but the former got my attention and eventually my devotion.

An enduring memory from my teenage years is of sitting on the floor of my sloping attic bedroom, my back propped against the radiator for warmth. There's a packet of plain digestive biscuits by my side and a mug of hot chocolate. Erasure and George Michael are playing on the stereo. The walls are covered with hand-drawn pictures and posters of my favourite film and TV characters. There's probably an incense stick burning. I'm wearing a baggy sweater and jeans. In my hand is a thick Dean R. Koontz, or a James Herbert, or a Stephen King. The spine is cracked. I'm lost in the story as the sky darkens outside. I know I won't go to sleep till I've finished the book. Somehow that would be letting the characters down: letting the evil win.

Stephen King

King is the only author from that period who I still read. Returning to these authors as an adult Herbert is a bit too inconsistent: meaningful stories interspersed with just plain nasties. Koontz can get too sappy for me, although I retain my copies of *Watchers* and *Phantoms* because those are proper good.

But I've come back to King again and again. Certainly there are periods of his writing that don't inspire me, and occasional books that are complete misses to my mind. But overall there's so much to love, and his recent stuff is just as good as his early works. He's a master of the short story, and I regularly return to those collections as well as to the handful of novels that seem to give more on each re-read.

It is one of those books for me. I remember the first version of the paperback that I got out of the library. It had a black cover with the grating of a storm drain on the front and a set of glowing eyes down there. I made it a couple of chapters in and couldn't get any further. It was too scary.

I got it out again, a year or so later, and the same thing happened. The book called to me, but it was too much. I wasn't ready.

Then my Dad went to the US for a conference. He brought me back a present, probably without knowing my history with the book: a copy of *It*. Quite the departure for my Dad who usually focused on trying to get me to crack the books that he believed everyone should read such as *Moby Dick* or *Metals in the Service of Man*! This was a more appropriate gift. The TV mini-series must've just come out in the States because the cover had a picture of Tim Curry's version of Pennywise the clown on it.

My memory is that I finally managed to read the whole book when I went into hospital for one of the minor surgeries on my ears that punctuated my childhood and adolescence. That copy of *It* was the only book I took into hospital with me. If I wanted distracting from the scary situation I was in, that was all I had. I read it till they came to wheel me to the operating room. It was there on the bedside table when I came around from the anaesthetic. Back home it saw me through my recovery, taking me away from the pain of my sore and bleeding ears.

A couple of years back I made a decision to revisit *It* as I went in for surgery for the first time as an adult. It was a meaningful choice as the operation in question was top surgery to flatten my chest. Here I was in my forties making the decision to reshape my body in the way I longed for as a pre-teen. The nostalgic reading material made a lot of sense. It intrigues me now that my two main memories of reading *It* come from around the same ages as the child and adult versions of the characters in the novel.

During my recovery I also re-read several of King's other novels. The main thing that struck me, which I hadn't noticed earlier in my life, was what a legend this guy was. Right back in the 1970s and 1980s he was writing books where convincing women were the main characters, while so many male authors had no female characters, or ones that were poorly drawn and only served as victims or convenient motivations for the heroes. He was similarly awesome on class. Also the horror in these King novels frequently took the form of things like domestic violence, sexual abuse in families, marital rape, or bullying. If supernatural forces were in there at all, they only served to highlight the real human horror of such things.

The one novel that I didn't re-read because I still can't get past the first chapter was *Carrie*. That one is still too frighteningly accurate in its depiction of the horrors of girls' bullying and what periods are like for somebody who hasn't been prepared for them. I'm eternally grateful to King though for understanding and expressing the horror of those experiences.

It

Going back to *It*, somehow I didn't put this novel in the same category as those other books (*Carrie*, *Rose Madder*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *Gerald's Game*, etc.). Sure *It* had something to say about childhood and bullying, but mostly it was a more standard horror book about the ancient evil haunting the town of Derry.

I figured I was drawn to *It* because it told the truth that childhood is a horrifying time for many of us, and because I was wistfully drawn to its depiction of a group of loser kids who bonded together and found friendship with each other. I longed as a kid for a world where losers recognised each other and found friendship together. In my experience they either shunned each other for fear of being bullied more, or hurt each other if they did ever become close because they were too bruised or broken to handle the intimacy. I would totally have braved a sewer and an evil clown if it meant the possibility of getting a group of friends like Bill, Mike, Ben, Bev, Richie, Stan, and Eddie.

I was blown away watching the movie adaptation because it enabled me to see something in the story that I just hadn't spotted before. I'm not sure whether it was the way this film captured the feel of the novel so perfectly, and/or the fact that I've finally understood these themes in my own life, but finally I got *It*. Several times during the film I found myself in tears. It felt like I was cracked open and someone – or something – was seeing into my soul. At the end I wandered out of the cinema in a daze. I walked along the Thames trying to make sense of it. Finally the phrase 'intergenerational trauma' came to mind. At that point I hopped a tube to get home quickly to my journal. I'll try to explain what I wrote here. I'll focus on the movie version of the story because that's freshest in my mind right now.

Pennywise or not?

So the monster in *It* is an ancient evil force that lies dormant under Derry. Every 27 years it awakes and terrorises the town, taking the form of Pennywise the dancing clown. *It* entices kids down into the sewers and feeds on their fear. Pennywise will win as long as it keeps the kids separate and scared. If they band together and face their fears then they can beat it.

But Pennywise isn't the real monster here. If we took Pennywise out of the picture entirely this would still be a terrifying movie. Before *It* even comes into their lives, the kids are already going through some deeply scary shit.

Ben is the new kid in school, alienated for his weight and his newness. He's the target of the town bullies who threaten to 'cut his tits off'. **Mike** has lost his parents in a traumatic fire. His uncle attempts to 'make a man of him' by teaching him how to kill farm animals, and tells him that if he doesn't become a man he'll end up being one of the sheep in life and get shot. **Bev** is living with a father who is either sexually abusing her, or is poised to start doing so, and she is shunned by all her peers who spread rumours that she's a slut. **Eddie's** mother keeps him trapped and anxious with all of the health-related fears that she projects onto him, gaslighting him into believing they're real. **Stan's** dad makes it clear how disappointed he is in a son who seems unable to follow in his footsteps. When *It* does come into the picture, **Bill's** parents can only deal with their grief over his brother's death by disappearing into themselves and attacking Bill when he tries to express his grief. We don't get to see the reasons behind **Richie's** 'trashmouth' but in the novel we find that similarly tough things are going on for him at home. Like Eddie and Bill, he's also a target for the local bullies due to his disability.

I don't know about you, but thinking about the kids I knew growing up I could point to at least one who was going through the equivalent of each of these things, and more. And that's from a time when most of this stuff was kept well hidden. The childhoods that the people who I'm friends with now had make the home and school-lives of the kids in *It* look pretty average.

Intergenerational trauma

Let's think about the 27 year period that *It* hibernates for. 27 years is about the time it would take for the children who were targeted by Pennywise in one generation to become adults and be having kids themselves. So the parents, guardians and teachers of the main characters would've been the children themselves 27 years ago. And their parents, guardians and teachers would be the kids of the previous 27 year Pennywise moment, going all the way back to the founding of Derry.

My theory is that Pennywise is a metaphor for intergenerational trauma. If the kids in one generation don't face their demons, when they go on to have kids themselves those kids are doomed to be confronted by the very same demons. In this case the demons are both the evil clown who they literally have to face and fight, and the trauma, abuse and neglect that they experience at the hands of their parents, guardians and teachers, and the other children around them who've been damaged by their own parents, guardians and teachers. For example, we see in the movie how the main male bully, **Henry**, is constantly punished

and put down by his father, and how one of the female bullies has a father who's creepy around teenage girls.

So it's the intergenerational trauma inherent in both family and school systems that's the real monster here. Not only do parents, guardians, teachers, and other adults hurt kids with their actions and inactions, they also create the bullies who terrorise the kids. Vitally they also refuse to see the pain the kids are going through. No adult intervenes to help even when the kids are clearly distressed. The avoidance of the adults is captured in the scene where a couple drives past Ben as the bullies surround him. The couple deliberately refuse to look at Ben. Later Bev's father can't even see the blood all of the bathroom: adults are so oblivious to what is going on.

And of course the trauma is intergenerational because the adults only behave in these ways towards the kids because the adults in their lives behaved in similar ways towards them, right back to the start.

The legacy of survival strategies

What broke my heart watching the film is how understandable it all is. As vulnerable children we just want to put our heads down and survive the horror. If somebody else is getting targeted we're relieved that it takes the heat off us for a while. The last thing we feel capable of doing is standing alongside that person and putting ourselves back in the line of fire.

And as adults we don't want to confront the demons of our childhoods. In fact, as we see in the novel of *It* (and presumably the sequel to the movie), it becomes way more hard to confront our demons as adults than it was when we were kids. We push all the memories and feelings down and pretend that it wasn't that bad. That often means that we're oblivious to what the kids in our own lives are going through. This is because we've taught ourselves not to see those demons, because it seems normal and no worse than our own childhoods, and because it's so intolerably hard to accept that we might be implicated in their horror ourselves.

Our short term strategies of survival (as kids) and denial (as adults) seem like the best ones to keep us alive and sane. But like so many short term strategies they're the one that put us – and the people around us – at greater risk. If we employ these survival strategies as kids we grow up traumatised and capable of hurting others because of the patterns we develop in our attempts to avoid further trauma. If we employ these denial strategies as adults then we keep repeating the patterns, and we risk losing our connection with the next generation in one way or another. If we want to ensure that the intergenerational trauma doesn't keep coming back we have to face our demons.

Why we love a bogeyman

It also demonstrates how we create bogeymen to help us to deny our own capacity for hurting others. We see this playing out on a cultural level all the time. We're obsessed by extremely rare criminals like serial killers and rapists, and stranger child abusers. We consume a vast amount of fiction about such criminals as entertainment. And real stories about them are considered to be the most newsworthy, with crimes that don't fit that preferred narrative rarely hitting the headlines. Statistically though, people are far, far more likely to be killed, raped or abused by someone they know.

The greatest risks to kids in terms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are within the home and the school. Way more kids die at their own hands as a result of bullying and other abuses than ever die at the hands of stranger murderers. Many more make it through to adulthood with parts of themselves deeply damaged by such experiences. People clamour for lists of paedophiles to protect their kids from, while telling them that the abuse they experience at school is just a normal part of childhood, or even a positive thing to prepare them for adult life. Interestingly the [very first article I ever had published](#) was about exactly this point!

So Pennywise can be read as a very helpful bogeyman for Derry. It keeps everyone's attention on the evil outsider abducting their kids so they don't have to think too carefully about what those same kids are going through in their homes or schools.

Normativity as intergenerational trauma

The role of cultural norms in all of this is also clear in *It*. The 'losers' who attract the torment of their peers – and the punishment, disapproval or smothering of their parents or guardians – are the ones who are 'different' or marginalised: they're all disabled, fat, black, Jewish, or female. Tellingly they also all challenge normative cultural gender roles. The boys are frequently called 'faggots' for being weak or showing feelings, and punished for any perceived femininity or lack of manliness. The one girl in the group is attacked for being too slutty and for being too boyish.

Again we're all implicated in the intergenerational trauma of passing on [the systems which oppress and marginalise 'others' like this](#): ableism, fatphobia, racism, anti-semitism, misogyny, etc. For example, there's a huge investment in maintaining restrictive gender rules down the generations, despite it hurting both those who try to fit it and those who're alienated by it. Many [TV shows](#) and [books](#) demonstrate the damage this does to people in general, and many statistics point to the [appalling suicide rates](#) of gender 'non-conforming' kids. However people still respond to attempts to loosen the rigid gender system in schools

and families with cries that it constitutes 'child abuse' and 'social engineering' and goes against science (**it doesn't**).

Look beneath the surface of *It* and it's pretty clear that the roots of the intergenerational trauma that run through Derry lie in settler colonialism, structural racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Each time *It* awakes, it simply whips up the human forms of hatred and fear that are most prevalent at the time. Thus the disappearance of the first white inhabitants of Derry is blamed on indigenous people. In the 1930s the Black Spot nightclub is burnt down in a racist attack by white supremacists. In the novel, the homophobia of the AIDS crisis is the form of hatred and fear that *It* particularly draws on during the 1980s.

It's trying to divide us

The moment in the film which brought me to tears was the point where the kids fought over whether they were going to face Pennywise or not. Bill wanted them to follow him to confront *It* but many of the others were too scared, blaming Bill for the danger they'd already been placed in. Then one of them said *'It's trying to divide us. That's what It wants.'*

Replace 'It' in this sentence with any or all of the systems of power and oppression that I just listed and that statement is a punch in the gut. Over the last month I've seen LGBT+ activists burnt out by battles with each other, feminists physically attacking each other over divisions between them, a black woman fired for describing the realities of living under structural racism. Meanwhile... Well I don't really need to recap what's been happening meanwhile, suffice to say that capitalist, colonialist, white supremacist hetero-patriarchy (or whatever you want to call it) seems relatively un-dented.

Facing our demons together

So what does *It* teach us that we need to do if we want an end to this intergenerational trauma? We need to stop hiding behind bogeymen and actually face our demons.

We need to recognise what happened to us growing up and the impact that had instead of conveniently forgetting, denying, or glossing over it. We need to acknowledge the systems, structures, and dynamics that hurt us – and those around us – and commit to not simply reproducing them for the next generation.

We need to look at the demons we inevitably have inside ourselves as a result of being part of these systems and structures. We need to face the damage that we – and the systems we're implicated in – have done, and commit to start doing things differently. It's terrifying

work for sure, but the alternative is that we continue to be the monster. Pennywise is just our own reflection in the mirror.

The other message of *It* is that we can't do it alone. It's too much. It's impossible. We have to band together despite our differences. We have to resist the tendency to divide into 'us' and 'them', shunning 'them' until there's only ourselves left, alone and exposed.

We need to recognise that this ancient evil hurts us all and that we're all implicated in it. And then we need to band together with all the other losers and get down into those sewers to face it. Are you with me?

Fighting or Feeding Your Demons? It and Facing up to Historical and Intergenerational Trauma

Last night I saw the sequel to *It* and obviously I have many many thoughts and feelings. You don't have to be familiar with the film or book to read this article because I'm going to use it to make more general points about what to do with our demons: specifically whether fighting them or feeding them is a better idea, and how this links to the themes of [historical and intergenerational trauma](#).

I will be talking about the ending of the film though so have a spoiler alert for that up front. TLDR: It's better than the giant spider in the book, but not much. However at least there was an ongoing joke though the movie about horror authors who write bad endings.

Historical and Intergenerational Trauma

When I saw the first movie of this Stephen King story I wrote [this article](#) about intergenerational trauma because the film did such an excellent job of demonstrating how we pass trauma down through the generations. While I enjoyed the sequel immensely I feel like it lost the powerful message of the first movie, as well as missing an obvious opportunity to say something helpful about how we can face demons and prevent these patterns from repeating themselves.

To recap on my first article, the story of the first *It* movie links historical and intergenerational trauma and demonstrates how these things will just continue down the generations if we don't address them. The first film focuses on the children facing *It* – in the form of Pennywise the clown – in the small town of Derry 27 years ago.

In terms of historical trauma there's a sense that the monster in *It* came into being around the time of settler colonialism and the genocide of indigenous Americans. In that way *It* can be seen as a reflection of human evil: holding up a mirror to the violence we do to each other, to other species, and to the land. The monster in *It* reappears every 27 years and the horrors it perpetrates relate to the human evils that are present at the time. So we see *It* whipping up racism and white supremacy in the 1930s and homophobic hate crimes in the latest incarnation. There are also scenes relating to violent patriarchal treatment – and sexual and physical abuse – of women. In this way there's a clear message that historical trauma unfaced will just find new forms and continue. Some bodies and lives will always be valued less than others, subject to oppression and violence. We can see this vividly at the moment in the way that the current **trans moral panic** echoes the 1980s moral panic against gay men.

In relation to intergenerational trauma, each time *It* comes back it preys on children, and each time the parents are oblivious to what is happening. In the first movie this is clearly related to the way each generation of parents perpetuate the traumas that happened to them on their own kids: from ignoring school bullying, to physically punishing their kids, to emotional neglect, to over-protectiveness and controlling behaviour, to the sexual abuse of a bereaved father. The message is that if we don't look at what happened to us – and do our work around it – then we won't see what's happening to the next generation. Even worse we may well go from victim to perpetrator: acting out the same abuses ourselves.

Confronting our Demons

In the second movie the kids who battled *It* in the first film are all grown up. *It* returns to Derry and they are called back to face it again in the hope of eradicating it entirely this time, rather than just sending it away for another 27 years.

There's a huge potential in this film, then, to address the question of how we – as adults – might acknowledge historical and intergenerational trauma and their impact. What ways might there be to put a halt to these recurring patterns rather than continuing to act out the very violences that were done to us? The metaphor of the demon who keeps returning presents a powerful opportunity to address what we might do with our own personal and cultural demons.

What the movie does do well is to be clear that we have to go back. Choosing not to engage with the past – and to pretend the pain of the present is not happening – simply isn't an option. Others will be hurt and – in the end – we will also be hurt a lot more than if we did face our fears. Choosing not to engage is choosing a kind of death, or at least a life of remaining asleep rather than waking up to reality and doing something about it.

The adults in the movie all have to revisit the most frightening moments of their pasts as the first step towards battling Pennywise. Again this is a great message. Unless we can fully face – and feel – the impact of these traumas upon us then we can't acknowledge how they've shaped us: the survival strategies and habits they've left us with. Without that understanding we won't be able to shift those patterns and we'll simply be doomed to repeat them: hurting ourselves and others in the process.

My sister also pointed out that the movie has a smart metaphor for the mechanisms that often prevent us from facing the past and its impact on the present. The characters have all forgotten the details of what happened to them in childhood. We could see this as a metaphor for the kind of cultural and familial gaslighting which many of us experience: a strong message that it isn't acceptable to question the power dynamics in play or their impact; that we must protect the status quo, and other people from the painful truths of the situation.

The forgetting, dissociation and confusion experienced by the characters is reminiscent of the impact of receiving that strong cultural/family message that it isn't safe to question, and that if anybody is suffering due to social structures or family dynamics then it must be their individual fault and responsibility, not a flaw in the society or system. Hence we see Bill blaming himself for Georgie's death, and other characters being held – and holding themselves – responsible for the bullying and abuse they received.

The Demons within Us

However, where the second film falls down – in my opinion – is that it never gets the other piece of the equation. We see how the adults have to revisit their childhood traumas and look after the victim/survivor sides of themselves back then, acknowledging the impact that it had on them. But the adults in *It* are all presented as pretty good people, maybe a little flawed. We never get the sense of how they – as adults – have become the generation who are now *doing* the damage. This was clear in the adults in the first movie, but not in the second.

Also, in the second movie, we learn that *It* was some kind of alien monster which arrived from another planet to wreak havoc on humans. To me this takes away from the sense of *It* being something caused by human evil and reflecting it back to us.

The film quickly becomes a battle between the good guys (our group of loser kids all-grown-up) and the bad guy (Pennywise). All they have to do is to face it and beat it and then all the intergenerational and historical trauma just goes away.

Fighting Our Demons

From this simple good vs. bad perspective the end of the film makes sense. The group confront Pennywise and they fight it using the Ritual of Chüd: an indigenous American ritual which Mike says was used to banish *It* before (the stereotypical depictions of indigenous Americans, and Black people, in Stephen King books and movies is an issue here, of course). When this doesn't work entirely they come up with their own plan which is to shrink it down to size by making it feel small: shaming it and denying *It* any power by showing how they're not scared of it. Once it has shrunk they can destroy it.

I think this gives a terrible message. It suggests that we can fight our outer or inner demons and just eradicate them. There's no sense that the characters have to acknowledge humanity's own role in creating this ancient evil and the damage it's continuing to do. Nor do they have to acknowledge the demonic within themselves: their own potential for hurting others through their unacknowledged patterns and habits.

Finally – as my friend Anita who I saw the movie with pointed out – the way the Losers fight the demon is to use the very tactics that were used against them: bullying and shaming. This reminded me of this famous Audre Lorde quote :

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

It seems to me that exactly what the group does here is to use the master's tools: the abuse, shame, bullying, and violence that were enacted against them, and that have been enacted against oppressed groups historically. In a way it would've worked well if they'd used this tactic at the end of the first movie, meaning that *It* inevitably came back and they had to find another tactic. But the message that this is the tactic that actually worked is a terrible one. They never do have to 'reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside themselves and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there'. They never have to acknowledge their involvement in historical and intergenerational trauma. They never really have to face their demons.

Feeding Our Demons

I found it fascinating that the ritual in *It* was called the **Ritual of Chüd** because it is such a similar name to a **Tibetan Buddhist ritual** which I've been adapting in recent years as part of my own work: **Chöd practice**, or feeding your demons. Intriguingly, Chöd practice explicitly offers an alternative to fighting – or using the master's tools – which is perhaps a better way of addressing our cultural and personal demons.

Briefly what you do in **Chöd practice** is the following:

- Locate your demon: Tune into whatever you're feeling, find it in your body, and visualise it.
- Visualise your demon: Take this visualisation and imagine it as a demon sitting in front of you.
- Ask your demon: What do you want? What do you need? How will you feel if you get what you need?
- Embody your demon: Move across to take the position of the demon, feel how it feels, answer the questions as the demon.
- Feed the demon: Return to your position, imagine yourself dissolving into some kind of nectar – or food – which gives the demon what it needs.
- Welcome the ally: Observe what happens to the demon. There's a sense that – on getting what it needs – it may well become an ally to help you instead of the demon that was making things so hard for you.

So I remember one time I did this ritual I felt this horrible tight clenched feeling in my chest. When I felt into it I visualised it as old rusty metal all around my heart. When I turned it into a demon it became a terrifying huge transformer-type robot in front of me with fire burning deep in its dark eyes and massive mouth. When I inhabited it, it felt exhausted and in constant pain. I asked it the questions and the answers were that it *wanted* to destroy me, that it *needed* rest because it was so ancient and tired, and that it would *feel* huge relief if it got that. I imagined dissolving into lubricating oil finally easing the rusted metal. It eventually all collapsed (rather like the house at the end of *It*) and in its place was a pool (again rather like the lake at the end of *It*) and some kind of being made of water emerged: a sense of cool, calm and fluid in the place of hot, tense and brittle.

There's a sense from this practice that our demons are the kinds of survival strategies we developed as kids. Over time they have become harmful to ourselves and others, but if we can face them and listen to them, they can morph into allies. In this way the practice is similar to embracing our inner critics, something I plan to write about here in more depth soon and touch on in my **Plural Selves zine**.

In the example I gave, I read this as the demon being the survival strategy of armouring over my feelings to protect myself, but there was the sense that this strategy got in the way of intimacy with myself and others, leaving me brittle and controlling in ways that risked damaging – or even destroying – myself and my relationships. The practice suggested an alternative pattern of loosening, or dismantling, the armour over time: becoming more vulnerable and fluid.

It: The Alternative Ending

So how would *It* have ended if the group had applied Chöd practice instead of the Ritual of Chüd: If they had fed the demon instead of fighting it?

What does It want?

It's very clear that *It* wants to frighten people, that it feeds on fear.

What does It need?

But what does *It* actually need underneath that desire for fear? Again the answer is pretty clear in the film. Several times *It* – in the form of Pennywise the clown – speaks of being unseen and lonely. It tells a small child that nobody will look it in the face and expresses distress at this. If we remember that *It* is holding up a mirror to human evil then this makes all kinds of sense. What it wants – from creating all this fear – is for the people of Derry to look at what it's showing them. Each time they refuse to look this hurts it terribly and it has to retreat into itself, alone, for another 27 years in the hope that the next generation might finally see.

It's clear that the monster wants the Losers to return to Derry. It goes to great lengths to bring them back, and to scare them – without actually killing them – as children and adults. You could read this as it trying desperately, repeatedly, to get its message across. But even when kids are disappearing and bodies are turning up, nobody pays any attention.

So an alternative to fighting the demon would be for the group to finally turn towards it, looking at it directly (instead of trying never to meet its eyes), and listening to what *It* has to teach them. This would involve recognising the historical traumas which we're all implicated in which just continue – and morph into new forms – through each generation instead of ever going away (colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, disaster capitalism, ecological crisis, etc.)

This would also involve the group seeing the perpetrators (or demons) in themselves as well as the victims/survivors. They would need to face up to their own capacity for evil and abuse, as well as being the victims of it. This would involve recognising that the only way not to reenact these abuses and traumas is to acknowledge them, and the strategies they left them with, and to continually work on shifting their patterns.

How would It feel if It got what It needed?

I would love to see an ending to the film where Pennywise could finally morph into an ally. When we face our demons and learn to work with them, instead of battling them, they can stop attacking us so violently in order to get their message across. If the group listened to Pennywise perhaps it would not have to keep retreating for 27 years and returning to cause chaos and agony. Instead perhaps it could rest, safe in the knowledge that this group would do the work of waking up Derry – and beyond – to historical and intergenerational trauma. Or perhaps it could remain within each member of the group as an ally they could keep returning to and talking with.

Interestingly there is a sense of this at the end of another horror movie, [The Babadook](#). In this film the main characters quit trying to fight the demon – who represents grief – and instead make it a home in their cellar and feed it and care for it. They recognise that this demon will always be with them, and only by acknowledging it and looking after it can they stop hurting themselves and each other.

Of course when the first *It* movie came out, social media decided to ship Pennywise the clown with *The Babadook* to great effect, so perhaps on some level we all knew that this was the ending we needed.

I can't think of a better way to end this article than the way I ended the last one on this topic. We need to recognise that the ancient evil hurts us all and that we're all implicated in it. We need to band together with all the other losers and get down into the sewers to face it. Are you with me?

Further Resources

You can find more of my own writing about trauma in my free books on plurality and consent on rewriting-the-rules.com.

The Consent Collective have an excellent two day online retreat on healing from trauma which gives a great overview of how trauma works, and what helps, with lots of practices to try: consentcollective.teachable.com/courses. Also check out the trauma therapist project podcast: thetraumatheapistproject.com. Here is a list of some of the key writers on trauma that I draw on:

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- Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From surviving to thriving*. Azure Coyote. pete-walker.com

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