

My complex PTSD and how I recovered from it

Written and illustrated by Michael Davitt



The following story describes Michael's initial experiences of living with complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (complex PTSD), how it was diagnosed and how he started his recovery.

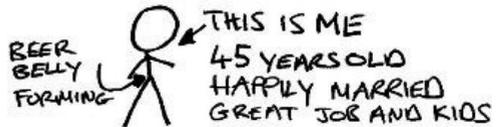
Michael was born in Cardiff and raised in the seaside town of Porthcawl. He is an independent author, writing under the pseudonym Luke Pemberton.

He kindly shared his story for PTSD Awareness Day.

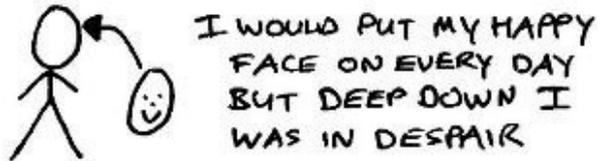
Complex PTSD is a condition where you experience some symptoms of PTSD along with some additional symptoms such as feeling very angry or distrustful towards the world, among many others.

Please note: the following story includes a reference to suicide.

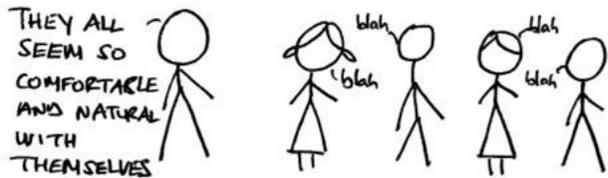
The story starts in about 2015:



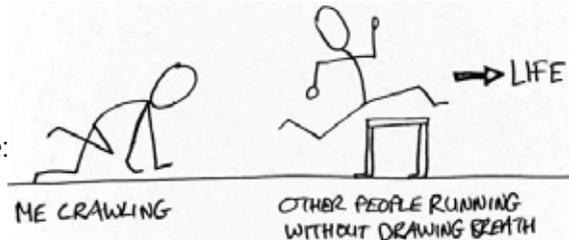
But I had a secret:

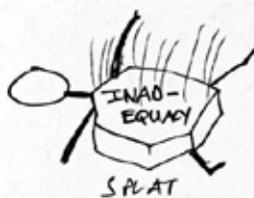


I almost always felt the following:



Life felt a bit like this to me:

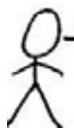




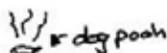
I OFTEN FELT CRUSHED BY A SENSE OF REAL INADEQUACY



I WAS SLEEPING RARELY VERY OFTEN. I WOULD REGULARLY HAVE BAD DREAMS AND I FELT PERMANENTLY ANXIOUS AND EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE AND INSECURE. I FELT EXHAUSTED, ISOLATED AND VERY INSECURE. HOW COME EVERYONE ELSE SEEMS REFRESHED, EARLY CONFIDENT AND RELATED?



- I should not that



I WOULD OFTEN HAVE DISTURBING THOUGHTS

Some of these thoughts were of an X-rated, adult nature and were very disturbing and upsetting.

SOMETIMES THESE WERE OF A SAD-MASOCHISTIC NATURE



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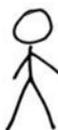


"I'm going to Australia for three months on my own, bye!" (MY BEAUTIFUL WIFE)



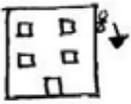
IN SHORT, I WAS VERY SAD, CONFUSED, EXHAUSTED AND IN DESPAIR

My general approach to the problem at the time was as follows:



I FEEL PHYSICALLY UNWELL
→ GO SEE A DOCTOR
→ TAKE MEDICATION
→ REST AND TAKE IT EASY

 I FEEL IN TOTAL DESPAIR
I KNOW, I WON'T SEE A DOCTOR AND I DON'T
WANT TO READ ABOUT MY ISSUES
→ I'LL JUST GO TO THE PUB MORE OFTEN
AND GET REALLY SMASHED

 ONE DAY I SUDDENLY
HAD THE URGE TO JUMP
OUT OF A HIGH WINDOW

 SOS, HELP!
I REALISED I HAD TO DO SOMETHING

 ACKNOWLEDGING THIS
WAS A BIG STEP

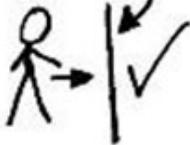
Google

So I went online...

Campaign Against Living Miserably



Therapist's door



GOING THROUGH THE DOOR
THE FIRST TIME MEANT
ME SWALLOWING MY PRIDE

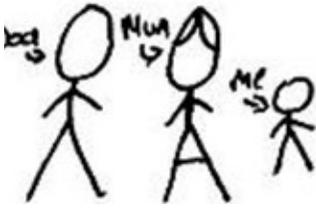


ACTUALLY DOING IT
IS ONE OF THE MOST
IMPORTANT STEPS IN
THE RIGHT DIRECTION

After a few sessions with my
psychotherapist:



I REALISED I HAD
DEEP EMOTIONAL
INSECURITIES



I REALISED QUICKLY THAT
IT ALL HAD A LOT
TO DO WITH MY PARENTS

After discussion and a fair amount of reflection, I started to realise that deep down, my relationship with my mother was not as I had always thought.



I ALWAYS FELT I WAS A
BURDEN TO MY MOTHER AND
THAT I WAS MAKING HER SAD



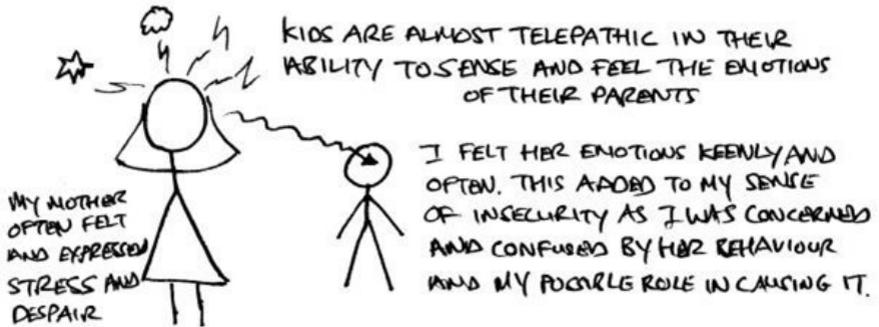
SHE OFTEN SEEMED EXASPERATED WITH ME
BUT WOULD NEVER EXPLAIN WHY?



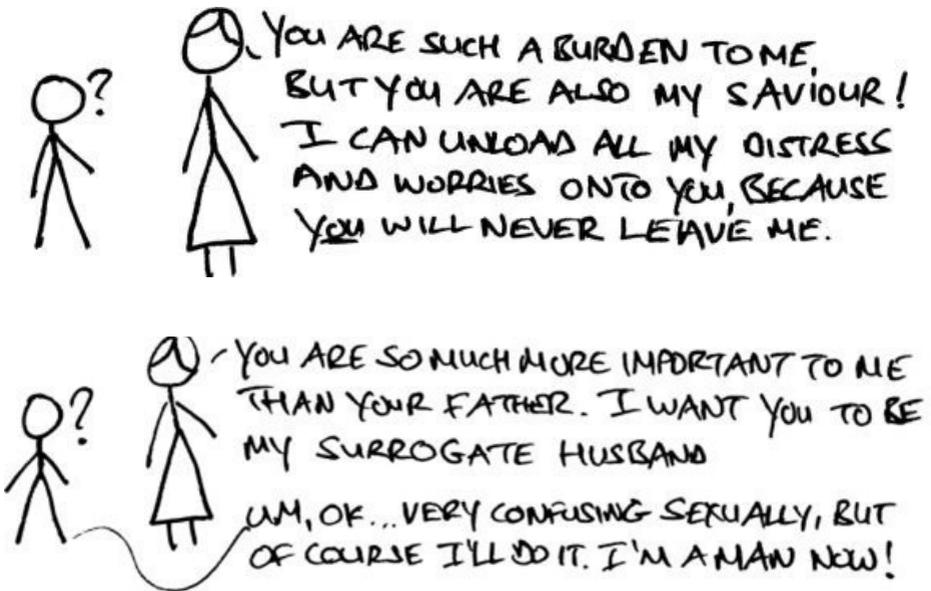
THIS LED ME TO FEEL A DEEP SENSE
OF SHAME FOR MANY YEARS, WITH
NO WAY OF KNOWING EXACTLY WHY

This caused me to feel intense shame. Shame is very different from guilt. Guilt is, 'I have done something bad', whereas shame is, 'I am bad'. Shame is the key emotion, and we'll look at this closely a little later.

In addition...



My mother also used me for emotional support when I was very young. This was very confusing to say the least. This is known as **maternal enmeshment**.





I FEEL LIKE I NOW EXIST WITHIN HER, AND I HAVE NO ROOM INSIDE ME FOR MY OWN EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT. I FEEL TOTALLY INTERTWINED WITH HER EMOTIONS. IT'S A REALLY UNCOMFORTABLE, SUFFOCATING AND HUMILIATING FEELING. LET ME OUT!

It felt like this all the time: my mother and myself emotionally bound together.

AFTER
A
WHILE

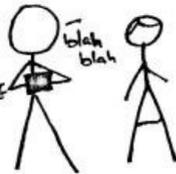


I'M STILL NOT HAPPY, YOU HAVEN'T DONE ENOUGH FOR ME. ANYWAY, I PREFER YOUR YOUNGER BROTHER NOW SO I'LL JUST IGNORE YOU, BYE...

↳ NOW, I'VE JUST BEEN 'DUMPED' BY MY OWN MOTHER. I FEEL HUMILIATED, EMASCULATED AND TOTALLY BETRAYED

This sense of betrayal at an early age stuck with me, and had rather comical effects later in life.

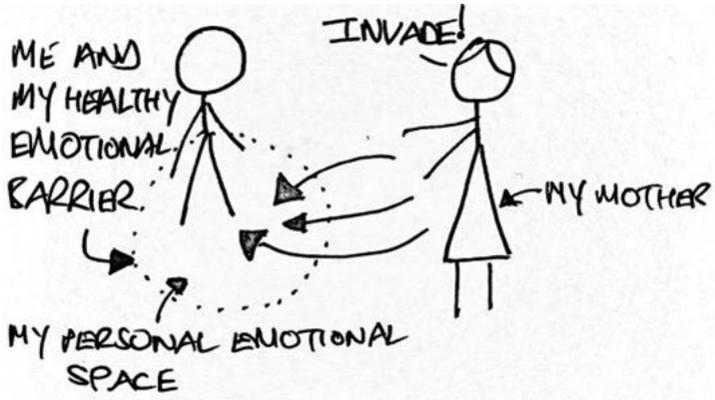
LOCAL MAN SELLING HIS 'BIG ISSUE' HOMELESS MAGAZINE AND THANKING A LADY FOR BEING HIS MOST FAVORED CUSTOMER



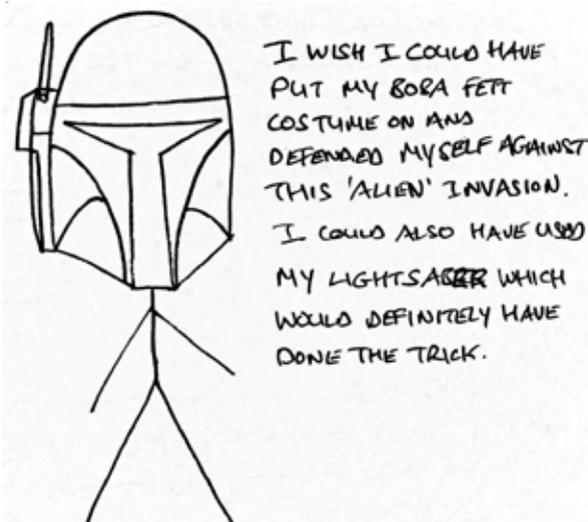
blah
blah

! ME OVERHEARING THIS AND BECOMING INSANELY JEALOUS AT BEING 'BETRAYED' BY THIS LOCAL MAN AS I THOUGHT I WAS HIS FAVORED CUSTOMER

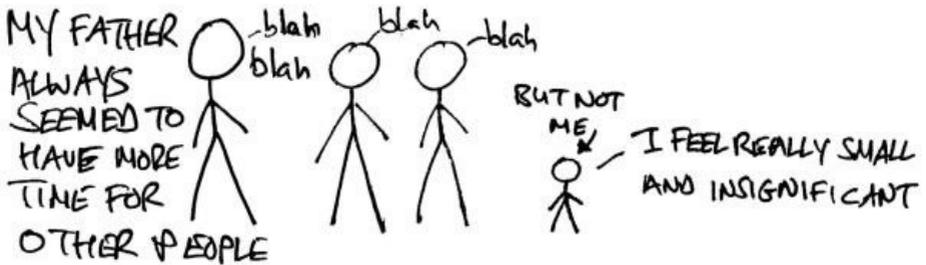
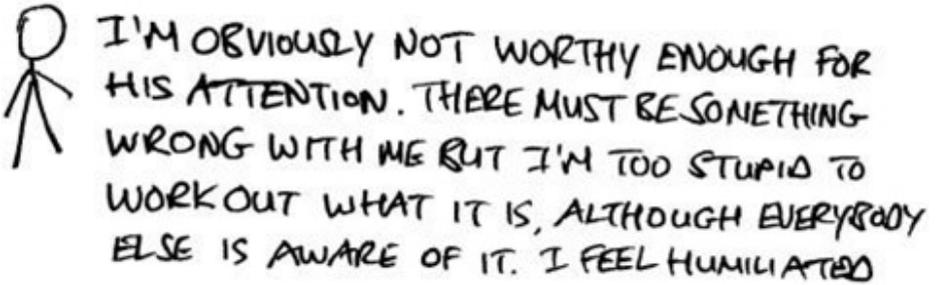
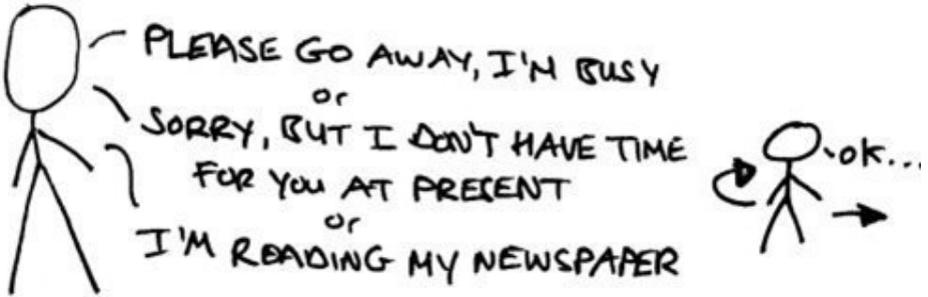
Additionally, my emotional barriers were never really developed and were trampled upon by my mother, meaning I became very emotionally vulnerable and unable to properly protect myself emotionally.



However, looking back...



In therapy I also discussed my relationship with my father. My experience with my mother meant I was somewhat more vulnerable to feeling rejected by my father. It didn't help that, as a child, my relationship with him was characterised by the following types of exchange:



Or...



I 'IDOLISED' MY FATHER.
THIS ALLOWED ME TO SUB-CONSCIOUSLY
CONVINCE MYSELF THAT HIS APPARENT
LACK OF INTEREST IN ME WAS BECAUSE
HE WAS SO IMPORTANT AND BUSY. IT
ALSO ALLOWED ME TO FEEL IMPORTANT
MYSELF PURELY BY ASSOCIATION
WITH HIM.



...sorry, I'm
busy at the
moment



me,



next
me,



next
me



next
me



next
me



next
me



next
me

low,
rejection

low,
rejection

low,
that
hurt

low,
pain

ow,
ow,
that
really
hurt

ow,
pain

I kept trying to get my father's attention like a
submersible poodle. It was 'death by a thousand cuts'



I ALWAYS FELT LIKE
I COULD NOT CONNECT
WITH HIM. THIS TURNED
OUT TO BE 'CRAZY MAKING'

It reached a point where I would create fantasy stories...

My primary school teacher



me making up stories about what a great weekend I had just had with my father, and what amazing things we had done together.
(a bit tragic really...)

But she knew I was making these stories up because she was a good friend of my parents...

Then I thought that I had worked it out...



I'VE WORKED IT OUT! IF I CAN PROVE MYSELF TO MY FATHER, THEN HE'LL BE PROUD OF ME AND ACKNOWLEDGE ME

I KNOW, ONE DAY I WILL WIN THE BRITISH OPEN GOLF CHAMPIONSHIP



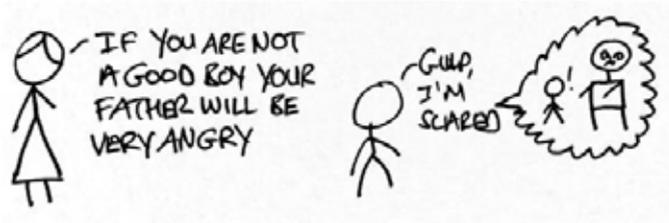
MY FATHER, FULL OF PRIDE RUNNING TOWARDS ME

OR PERHAPS HE'LL NOTICE ME AND LOVE ME IF I BECOME PRIME MINISTER



MY FATHER, FULL OF PRIDE RUNNING TOWARDS ME

My mother added to the unreality and inaccuracy of my image of my father – this rather alien person who would on occasion suddenly appear in my life – by sometimes using his image to threaten my siblings and me.



As a result, I created a very distorted and threatening image of my father in my mind. He looked a bit like this to me:



Apparently I would often scream and refuse to be in the same car as him when I was very young.

On reflection...



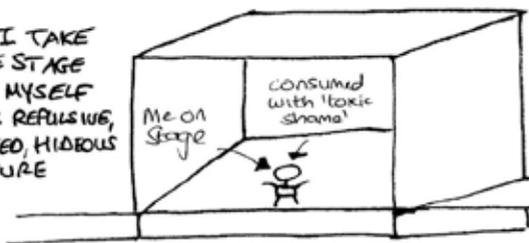
I ALSO WISHED I HAD USED MY LIGHTSABER TO ZAP AND DESTROY



THE NEWSPAPERS THAT MY FATHER ALWAYS SEEMED TO BE READING (BUT IN REALITY I HAD BROKEN IT TWO HOURS AFTER OPENING IT IN AN EPIC BATTLE WITH MY BROTHER AND HIS LIGHTSABER)

An image of being on a theatre stage in front of my extended family and others often came to my mind.

WHEN I TAKE CENTRE STAGE I SEE MYSELF AS THIS REPULSIVE, DISTORTED, HIDEOUS CREATURE



THIS IS A VERY 'KAFKAESQUE' IMAGE FOR ME.

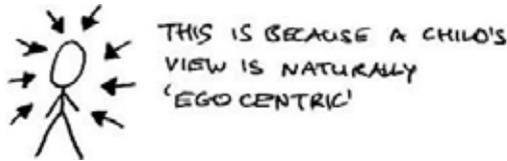
THEY ARE ALL EXPECTING ME TO PERFORM MY 'LIFE SCRIPT' TO PERFECTION



MEMBERS OF THE SEATED AUDIENCE, PRIMARILY FAMILY MEMBERS, PARENTS, AUNTS, UNCLAS etc.

MY FATHER IS SO DISGUSTED BY WHAT HE SEES THAT HE FAINTS AND HAS TO BE CARRIED OUT OF THE THEATRE BY AUNTS AND UNCLAS WHO BERATE HE FOR DOING THIS TO HIM.

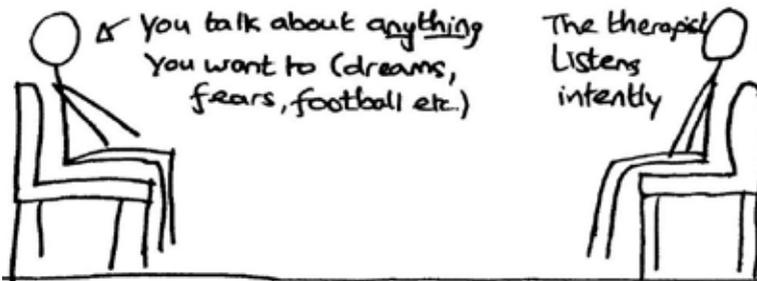
A child's view is naturally 'ego-centric', so I blamed myself intensely for my parent's apparent disgust of me.



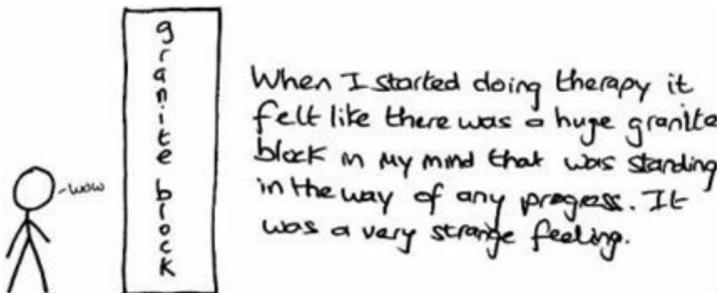
How I manage it and how depression links to it:

I undertook **psychotherapy**, or 'talking therapy', which is based on a patient's unconscious thoughts and interpretations that developed during childhood.

You talk about anything you want to (dreams, fears, football etc) and the therapist listens intently.



When I started doing therapy it felt like there was a huge granite block in my mind that was standing in the way of my progress. It was a very strange feeling.



This granite block now feels about this big. It took a lot of effort but it was so worth it.



Some of the issues and emotions I discussed in therapy included the following:

- approval
- consent
- confirmation
- independence
- personal authority
- affirmation
- jurisdiction over one's self
- autonomy
- belief
- legitimacy
- hope
- belonging
- endorsement
- self-respect
- a voice
- assent
- self-compassion
- love for self
- courage to overcome existential fear
- permissible
- affirmation
- acceptance

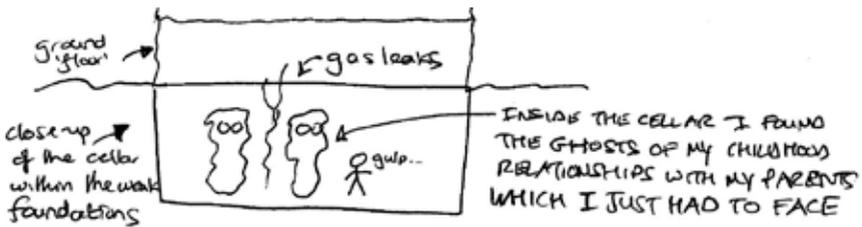


And...



I used a house as a metaphor for how I was feeling at the time, with a view to 'rebuilding' it on much more solid foundations, from the cellar all the way up to the attic.

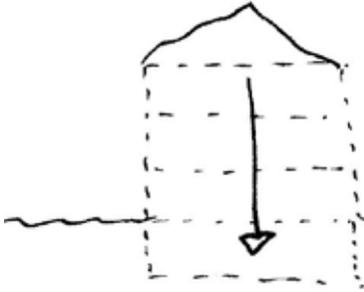
Inside the cellar I found the ghosts of my childhood relationships with my parents which I just had to face.



These ghosts and other fears / 'gas leaks' often came to the upper floors during my life and 'haunted' me.



The idea of my therapy was to drill down through all these 'floors' and then dig up the foundations and rebuild from the bottom up.



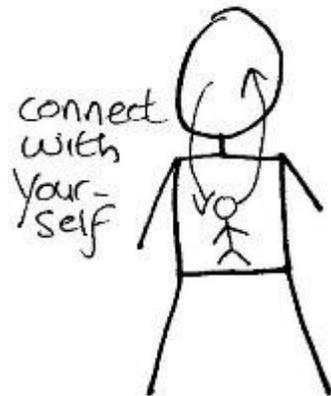
THE IDEA OF MY THERAPY WAS TO DRILL DOWN THROUGH ALL THESE 'FLOORS' AND THEN DIG UP THE FOUNDATIONS AND REBUILD FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Anything else would have been like repainting the rooms without fixing the 'structural' problems.



ANYTHING ELSE WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE REPAINTING THE ROOMS WITHOUT FIXING THE 'STRUCTURAL' PROBLEMS

Through therapy and self-reflection I realised the importance of trying to connect emotionally with myself, and especially with the small inner child within ourselves that everyone has inside of them.



During this process...

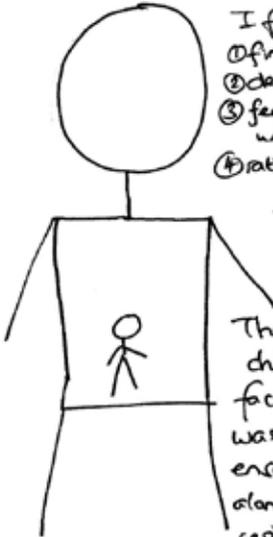
I often felt like the film character Jason Bourne in the 'Bourne Identity'

Me as Jason Bourne →



I need to find out who I really am, and move away from this version of me formed so much by negative experiences at a very formative age. (a bit different as he was brain-washed as an adult, but you get the idea).

Through therapy you bring all the repressed emotions, feelings and memories from your subconscious back to your conscious self where you can re-assess, re-interpret, understand and re-frame these in a proper and rational manner. It's a bit like recalling data from a computer's hard drive into its memory, where it can be used and processed.



I found it helpful to

- ① find and connect with the specific fear
- ② describe the fear
- ③ feel it fully and imagine facing it head-on until it has dissipated
- ④ rationalise it away

It's relatively straightforward, with courage to do this, and you become quite expert at it.

Then I would imagine me as the child me inside me / me as a child facing the same fear head-on. This was a lot more frightening but it ensured that I brought the 'child me' along with me during the process, resulting in a new, confident enriched me.

I put my father on a huge pedestal when young, imagining he was this perfectly confident person who had no doubts or weaknesses. I had to gradually 'de-construct' this image of him in my mind to build a realistic one.

This took an awful long time and a lot of mental effort to resize my image of him so that I eventually saw him eventually on an equal footing with me.

I then imagined confronting my parents about my fear of them and frustration with them, and mentally practised asserting myself towards them.



If you are annoyed with me, then tell me why, you stupid woman, or treat me with respect



FIRST IMAGINE ME AS AN ADULT CONFRONTING AND ASSERTING MYSELF TOWARDS MY MOTHER

THIS SHAMING OF A CHILD IS EMOTIONAL TO FOR A CHILD WITH LIFE LONG DAMAGING



If you are annoyed with me, then tell me why, you stupid woman, or treat me with respect



AND THEN, MORE DIFFICULT AS A SMALL BOY (IMAGIN THIS REQUIRES A LOT OF COURAGE BUT IS VERY RE



If you are disappointed in me, then tell me why. This silent treatment is driving me crazy



AND THE SAME FOR FATHER, FIRST A ADULT, THEN...

Imagining doing it as an adult is relatively easy, but then I found I had to imagine myself as a small boy again, confronting them when I was younger, all those years ago, as a scared child.

This was a lot more difficult but also very rewarding and liberating.



If you are disappointed
in me, then tell
me why. This
silent treatment
is driving me
crazy



...AS A CHILD

THIS SILENT TREATMENT FROM A FATHER
IS EMOTIONAL TORTURE WITH LIFE LONG
DAMAGING RESULTS

My observations, experience and treatment of it

As you can see, I find it really helpful in drawing what I went through and what I am going through.

I am well on the road to a proper recovery. I have even developed my own acronym and five-step process, which I call the **FRESH** approach:

Find a suitable, qualified therapist (if you are not already seeing one or have not already seen one). This step is a simple one, but it requires courage, and is vital.

Record all your feelings by writing them down.

Examine your anxieties, fears, insecurities and doubts in detail.

Sketch and draw your thoughts to clarify and solidify your progress.

Harvest all of this information until you feel good about yourself