

Preamble

This started out as a personal diary - just a warts-and-all record of where I was at and a way of keeping tabs on my own journey. It was never meant to be read by anyone other than me. It's not pretty and it's very raw/unedited, but *so* many people have talked to me and contacted me about their own private struggles that I've published it so that anyone can see what I went through, how it affected me and the help I obtained - and I've published it in the hope that others may read it and see where they are struggling and know that they are not alone. If you're reading this and you understand my story a little *too* well, this might be the encouragement you need to go and ask for help.

There are people in many professions across the world in exactly the same position as I am. Some will soldier on, some will collapse and some will slowly die inside, but once it's there it's inexorable and unyielding. It never goes away on its own - it just sits there, gnawing at you and slowly eating you away, until it seems like there's nothing left. Just a husk of who you once were.

In retrospect I think one of the things I discovered was that you feel so unique and *so* on your own - and that no one else can understand - but actually the thoughts, feelings and reactions to most cases of PTSD are relatively similar, even if the *circumstances* that gave rise to it are different.

Irrespective of what caused your PTSD, the outworking of it can include nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance, hallucinations, anxiety, poor sleep, fear, depression, re-living it...I might not understand your initial experience, but I really *do* understand your symptoms...

For me, it was after many years in emergency ambulance services (since 1993), that I found that some of the things I'd seen and done had stayed a little too long and had become unwelcome overstayers. I've had some amazing successes but also seen and done things that no one should ever have to experience. I've helped deliver children, saved lives, mended bodies and comforted people whose worlds have been shattered. But I've held dead babies after resuscitation has been futile and seen carnage, broken bodies and hideous death in many forms. I've had to deal with the emotions of those people left behind now desolate, destroyed, distraught.

Those negative experiences, no matter how stoic you are, eventually catch up with you; little fragments of each one break off like tiny shards of glass and stick in to you. You don't notice them at first but then gradually, like an ever growing mass, they surface until one day there are so many of them that you can't shut them out any more. You feel like one more shard will make you explode; you run scared of what the next call is - just in case that's the one that is going to destroy you - that is going to reduce you to a shell that either can't cope, or that copes by exploding or by shutting down completely. You lie awake at night terrified of what the next call might be...will it be your nightmare?

I succumbed to PTSI and needed over a year off and nine months of help from a clinical psychologist to get back to a stage where I could return to work healthily again. I did actually hand in my notice – but in hindsight that was just to make everything stop; it was the only way to escape the pain. I needed to get out while I still could. When you look down at your foot after sports and see a mangled broken mess that isn't there...when you're too scared to go into the woods at night to go hunting (or even to have a pee at the side of the road) because you're petrified of how many people have hung themselves from the tree boughs...when you see road kill in your car and instead of a dead possum you see human body parts – then you know that you're not dealing with things.

I couldn't do it any more – not without permanently damaging myself and my family so I ran away. I didn't have another job. I didn't really have another skill. I didn't know where our money was going to come from. But leaving was more important than staying and everything else was secondary.

I should say that, at around the point where I began to keep a diary, I had told ACC (NZ government funded legal entity that pays for/supports all injuries etc.) of my predicament and they promised to look into my case. They would pay for treatment, psychologists, psychiatrists and help with costs associated with my injury. They would also split sick leave costs with my employer. Most importantly they would allow the treatment process to begin quickly. They're obliged to stay in regular contact, make prompt decisions and enable return to work as swiftly as possible to minimise costs and long term sickness/dependence on the state.

I deliberately haven't allocated dates here – it doesn't matter. What's important are the intensity, the immediacy and the imagery. The rest will depend on the individual circumstances of each case – this is just *my* story with *my* reactions in *my* timeframes. There are no real rules or templates.

The Diary

DAY 1

Today I sent out an e-mail and Facebook messages telling people I was giving up work. No one knows what's been going on in my head which is why everyone seems so surprised – shocked, even – but I suppose that's the point: Robin Williams was a happy comedian but he committed suicide and everyone was astounded. He hid it all well. Just because you seem successful doesn't mean you don't have demons.

This is what I wrote:

I have been a full time ambulance officer for just over 25 years and in that time I have treated somewhere between 35 000 and 40 000 patients. Some of these calls inevitably have been fairly traumatic and some I will never forget - both for good reasons and for tragic reasons.

About 18 months ago I realised that I was gradually being more and more damaged, not only by past memories and events but also by new experiences. I began to be scared of the next call - not about the practical treatment, but about what I might see that would disturb me; what tragedy I might witness that would hurt me; what pain I would experience as another call etched itself into my brain. More and more often I began to see things that weren't there, dream vividly or have irrational fears - remnants of all the crap that I've never been able to properly deal with.

Thanks to my manager, earlier this year I saw an excellent clinical psychologist who said I had early PTSD. He also said that this isn't something that goes away and that, if I continued to work in my environment, I would just feed the PTSD and I would fairly quickly deteriorate.

A good boxer knows to retire when he's won his last fight, not when he's been knocked out with a brain injury after a string of losses. I've done a lot of medical 'boxing' and I know it's only a matter of time before I do actually end up on the canvas.

I've had the most amazing ambulance career and feel so privileged to have made a positive difference to tens of thousands of patients and hundreds of ambulance staff. I've worked in the busiest ambulance service in the world, participated in three major incidents, served on duty in the Queen's back garden at Buckingham Palace, given presentations at international ambulance exhibitions, been nominated for awards and received honours. But now it's time to move on, give back the uniform and see where life leads me next.

I'm looking at leaving the ambulance service in December/January (I'm flexible, dependent on the needs of the service) so I'll be working for a little bit longer...

One last thing: I'm not the only one who has struggled with my choice of career and there is a huge temptation for ambulance staff globally to just carry on absorbing stuff and coping. If I can help anyone (confidentially) by talking through anything, I'm happy to be very honest about my experiences and early PTSD with anyone who feels that would be useful...

DAY 5

First shift back since sending out my missive. You could tell some people didn't really know what to say or how to act but others were fairly straight out. Everyone was very supportive, bar a couple of idiots who either took the mickey (trying to be funny but failing miserably) or who told me how their lives were also miserable because their partners weren't listening to them and were far too indecisive. Talk about missing the point. A few (not noted for their wisdom but quite good at talking about themselves) offered sage advice, using phrases such as "If I were you...", "You should do this..." and "It's time you...". Well meaning but utterly unhelpful. It's funny how, when faced with a situation that they either don't understand or are powerless to control, people try to *do* and *fix*, rather than just *listen* or *be*. Come to think of it, it makes me angry that people can be so crass. Comments such as "You want to start worrying when we *don't* make fun of you", or "Mocking you is just our way of accepting you", or "Yeah I was depressed once" really aren't at all helpful.

DAY 6

Opened my e-mails – and WOW! Interesting, sad and scary all at the same time. It would appear that I am not alone in my thinking and feeling and it would appear that I might have struck a significant chord with a lot of others.

DAY 7

OK during the day but I was on a night shift later. We had some good jobs where we helped some people and made a difference but then it quietened down a bit and I got to shut my eyes for a bit. All I could do was worry about what the next job was; what I didn't want to go to; what I didn't want to see; how I would manage if it was 'that' job – you know, one of the ones in my nightmares. I must have eventually drifted off somewhere but I woke busting for the toilet and the whole process started all over again. I was glad to go home.

DAY 9

Day off. Terrible night last night – maybe I'm beginning to come to terms with leaving and my brain is just starting to process stuff. Crumbs, if it wants to process everything over the last 25 years I'm in trouble...

'Course I woke up early and tired which hasn't helped at all. Spent the whole day either close to tears or feeling really down but not for any specific reason – just because my coping mechanisms are stuffed. My wife was really supportive but she can't really help solve anything.

When I got home, someone had come to visit and I just didn't have the energy for socialising (I mean, I'm an anti social old git at the best of times). Of course I grinned and pretended but all I really wanted to do was disappear (or ask him to). But you don't do that, do you? You just make polite conversation and wait for your visitor to leave – but I felt the energy draining away from me and, with it, the ability to deal with all the crap I have in my head at the moment. Today is not a good day.

ACC sent some paperwork to be completed which I did straight away – the sooner they accept my claim and organise some help, the better.

DAY 10

Woke up feeling I'd had way too much to drink and gone to bed way too late. No idea why as I'd had one glass of wine and gone to bed pretty early. Maybe recovering from yesterday? Anyway I'd slept deeply...I think I dreamt a lot. Felt a bit better but all my emotions are heightened.

Someone came round to help decorate the house and we were just chatting but I noticed the hammer on the side. I had these really weird feelings about picking up the hammer and...well it was REALLY scary where my brain went. Have you ever stood at the top of a really tall building and wondered what it was that actually stops you from just...well...jumping over the side? Nothing is physically stopping you from doing it (the barriers are easy to jump over) – so why don't you? It scares me how free we are sometimes – that line between 'doing' and 'not doing' seems terribly narrow sometimes.

Anyway all this was flying through my head as my friend and I chatted – he oblivious to the crazy violent thoughts in my head and me desperately wanting to walk away and up the street in case I did pick up the hammer...

...am I going completely mad? Does PTSD turn you into a mad axe (hammer) murderer?

How on EARTH can I tell *anyone* any of this? Pretty lonely place, is this one.

Of course I didn't do anything daft and the local Policeman got to finish his cup of tea completely unaware of the potential call he may have had...which might have been the trigger for his own mental nightmares. What a strange reality we all have.

At tea time my nine year old asked a great question: "Daddy, would you still be leaving work if your brain wasn't broken?" I had to just let that settle a bit while I composed myself...

In the evening we watched 'Cool Runnings', which made me cry.

DAY 11

Back to work – not too many challenges but a bit of a blip while I was driving to hospital today. It was on a long straight and I imagined myself back on my motorbike haring down the road. Then I thought about going too quickly and meeting a tractor with a bucket on the front coming towards me and being cut almost in half by the edge of the bucket. Then I saw myself treating myself (or some kind of surrogate form of myself) with the blood all over the lip of the bucket and dripping onto the floor. It was only fleeting but I remember the bucket being green and yellow and I remember the reticence I felt at having to maybe do this job in real life. Crumbs, I'm a mess.

DAY 14

Day off – pretty good day, except that I did have a bit of a brief low for some reason in the morning. I told my wife, but the problem was that she also wasn't on top form and reacted badly to that. This really irritated me at first until I realised that that was just part of the selfishness of my condition. I was burdening her with my issues in addition to whatever she was feeling and it wasn't fair of me to expect her to be able to deal with all my crap. Except for me that's quite a lonely place to be.

No one really thinks about the other people involved; no one wonders how the people dealing with the 'obvious' sick person are coping and managing; *very* few people ask how *those* people are doing. The support for the carers and family is often sparse to non-existent.

I had an invite to go to the pub in the evening with some mates and one of them invited a new person. I was going to bail out because I wasn't sure I had the energy for it all but my wife

said I should go and so I did – and had a good time. We just talked rubbish about nothing in particular and drank beer. I can be a normal person, after all.

DAY 15

Day off – a good day. Felt pretty normal, did normal things and had a great tea time with the family laughing the entire time about stupid stuff. Real quality family time. Watched ‘Black Hawk Down’ with a bit of trepidation (it’s quite graphic and ‘real’, including a guy who loses his entire bottom half) but nothing happened – although Ridley Scott is an excellent director.

DAY 16

Day off – I don’t know if it’s just me, but I seem to be losing my temper and being far more impatient than I used to be. I worry because it’s not fair on the kids – my wife is really good about it – but it concerns me.

Quite emotional today for no particular reason. There was an article on the news about a fatal car collision locally and I was really glad I wasn’t there. The problem is that, if I’d been in attendance, I would have functioned and been the best Paramedic they could have had – but that’s the point. I would have *had* to have been there, coping, all the time hating being there and suppressing my real feelings, desperate to escape. And THAT’S what makes you worse, what digs in, what destroys you that little bit more: having to be there when every fibre of you wants to run away.

Someone came round to say hello and asked how I was doing and I said I was fine – which was apparently the right answer as the conversation moved on very quickly from there. I think people ask because they think they ought to, or are being polite but don’t really want to get too involved for various reasons. It’s all very superficial and follows social acceptability. In other words, I’m pretty much on my own.

ACC sent some vague acknowledgement/we’ll-be-in-touch-with-you in-due-course e-mail. I hope they hurry up.

DAY 17

Extra day off but yesterday I’d forgotten that and was worrying about going to work again. However, a stay of execution. I was a bit subdued all day but managed to stay active. In the evening I was really short tempered with everyone (which I hate) but I think it was the thought of going to work tomorrow. I’m finding that I spend the last day off kind of thinking about the next day at work and worrying about that a bit...

DAY 18

And so here we go again. Slept well, startled by the alarm, put on the uniform. In the car I left the radio off and just thought about what might happen today on the drive in...would I be OK? What jobs would I get? It feels a bit like I’m on a tightrope, desperately balancing for the next few months until I leave, hoping that *that* job won’t come in and knock me off the wire. If all I do for the next three months is stupid little jobs (unlikely), I’ll have survived intact – I’ll have come through it, finished, and able to regroup. However until then I’m always alert, always thinking about dodging the next bullet. It’s quite tiring.

Part of me wonders if I even *should* be still working if I’m thinking like this. Shouldn’t I be off, protecting myself? But there’s a lot of sickness and a few people off with long term injuries so I need to step up and support the service, at least until staffing improves a bit.

We did a call to a very simple job where someone had injured their leg...yet when I was there it felt like I was numb...removed...not present...almost like I was watching myself from above. I'm glad my colleague was a good practitioner because I'm not sure I'd have been on top form if the patient had deteriorated. That's a bit worrying.

I read somewhere about the recent fatal car accident but not a flicker – it was literally just a dispassionate story. But then I was reading a fiction book that had one sentence about a hanging and I went cold – withdrawn. It's weird what affects me and what doesn't – and there doesn't seem to be much pattern to it either.

Later on I went on the helicopter for a gorgeous flight to Wellington. Sick patient, good job, great flight, good patient outcome - job done. It's times like these that are dangerous: you've coped this time and had a good response from the patient...surely it's not *that* bad that I need to leave?

DAY 20

Had a really good talk to my wife about how I am. She says I'm more impatient, less focussed and more selfish. I'll come home and disappear on my own because it's what I need to do but it's not fair on her or the kids. I'm kind of aware that I do that but it's worse than I realise because I'm actually there, wrapped up in it.

The night shifts have been very kind and not busy at all, for which I am grateful.

DAY 21

Day off – really nice family day that allowed me to forget all about the work stuff

DAY 22

Day off. My wife said that she wonders each day when I come home from work if I'll walk through the door and say that's it – that I've done 'that' call that has finished me off. It made me worried about what she's going through. And I've realised I'm that fed up - really fed up – with living just this side of 'the edge'. It's why (yet again) today my emotions feel so frayed. I'm consistently apprehensive, slightly afraid, of what my next call will be; of whether I'll survive the day; of this tension between that fear and the (self imposed) pressure not to let the ambulance service down. I want it to end. I want some peace.

Nothing from ACC.

DAY 25

Not back at work as planned today as I have something far more fun planned. I'm due to have a biopsy of my prostate as it's a bit too big and a bit too granular on the MRI – so I'm off to be anaesthetised and have multiple needles shoved into my perineum to remove tiny parts of my prostate for a lab to investigate. It's only a 4 hour stay...

...All in all I was quite scared but it went OK and I just felt a bit groggy. I ended up with a catheter in as my bladder bled a bit. Great.

Went to bed when I got home and stayed there.

DAY 26

The catheter hurts. I've had a rubbish night's sleep but it comes out this morning. Haven't really been thinking about anything other than this huge thing sticking out of the end of my willy

The specialist removed the catheter...it's HUGE! No wonder it hurt – my urethra isn't that big!! Anyway it's all over, the biopsy was a success and we just wait to see what the lab find. Just a bit fragile and tired - but on the positive side I haven't been thinking about work.

DAY 27

Nights tonight and that familiar feeling of 'what if...' is returning. I'm in more pain than yesterday and the bruising is coming out. Not sure how I'll cope with a long flight in the helicopter – the seats aren't very comfortable.

Yup – got a helicopter flight but it wasn't a long one and we fixed someone. Had a busy but good night helping genuinely sick people using some advanced skills and came away really satisfied with a good night's work. It's tempting to forget all the bad stuff and pretend you can carry on...until you're on your own when it's a bit quieter and you fret about what's next and everything inside you just wants to run far away so you stay safe.

DAY 28

Knackered from last night. Couldn't cope with the thought of going up to a show in Auckland tomorrow night because I wasn't sure about parking. I started panicking and decided I didn't want to go (normally I'd love this kind of challenge). I thought I was pathetic but my wife said it was just a symptom of generalised not coping and space in my head being taken up with self preservation. She sorted it all out as it turns out she already had a plan of what to do from previous concerts she'd been to there. A bit embarrassed.

DAY 29

Drove to Auckland and had a great time en route with my wife just talking through stuff. Her aunty died last night (expected) and she and her brother are the only surviving relatives. She's got a bit of money and 500 000 GBP house – that's around a million NZD. Could this be perfect timing?

DAY 31

Well that's a turn up. My wife and her brother get 5 000 GBP each. And that's it. My wife's aunt gave the house and all her assets to her vicar. I'm alternately numb, dumbfounded and angry and I'm choosing to believe the vicar hasn't played a very clever game. Yes, I know it's not my money and she can do with it what she wants, but we had a very good relationship and spent a lot of time in the UK with her and stayed in touch while in NZ. It's gutting and unfair.

I realise now that (rightly or wrongly) I had seen that money as my way out, a safety cushion and an ability to escape my current situation. I'm fed up with living with a consistent background level of anxiety at work; with always worrying about going back to work on my last day off; with lying awake at night and wondering if the next job is going to break me. My wife's aunt could have relieved all that.

But she didn't. Bitch.

DAY 32

Hideous flashback tonight – we were watching a film where a guy in a prison cell was reading a bible on his bed – it was just a simple scene shot from above – but it took me right back to a hanging we went to. I'll never forget it but it was very real again tonight. Checked my e-mails (in vain) for anything from ACC

DAY 33

Back to work and feeling really apprehensive about the day again. I had a good crewmate and that really helps. As it turns out we flew on the helicopter and the day went OK, but it's just so wearing always having that apprehension in the back of your mind.

DAY 34

One of those days that remind you why you do the job and one that I'll take away from this place. A patient with a stroke who we treated, took to ED/A & E, scanned, flew to a specialist centre in Auckland and watched the clots literally being sucked out of her brain. This instantly allowed her brain to go from having practically no circulation (and therefore very sick/potentially fatal) to completely reperfused with a high probability of complete recovery, all inside of 5 hours. Amazing.

DAYS 37 and 38

I've lumped these two together because they seemed to just roll into each other. I was permanently on a really short fuse for no particular reason. Just snapped at everyone, in a consistently bad mood. I think these were a couple of days when I realised that I'd just had enough. What-could-have-been from my wife's aunt's will from her estate also played on my mind.

DAY 39

Doing some painting outside and in the distance I could hear school children shrieking and playing in the distance. The problem is that I didn't hear school children playing, I heard school children screaming in terror, in pain and being attacked; my mind went to a perpetrator hurting the children and what I heard were their cries of anguish. It was *really* disturbing and one of my worse moments recently...

DAY 41

A weekend so I was on my own in a fast response car for both days – which I actually quite like because I can be on my own. Well...I like it when I know I can first respond but there are ambulances backing me up. I *don't* like it when they send me to first respond and there *isn't* anyone else available and I'm stuck at the side of the road with a motorcyclist who's fractured their pelvis.

Every now and again I also get pangs of 'what if they send me to a really crappy job on my own?' I know the answer: because it's just me, professional pride will insulate me from any kind of lack of coping – but afterwards that'll be it. Permanently.

Surely ACC will write soon?

DAY 42

A great day – gorgeous weather, helicopter flights over the Mount Taranaki, picking people up, helping/mending/administering stuff in the middle of nowhere or in a really sticky situation. This is what I'm supposed to be doing, not worrying about what's coming next. I supported less qualified crews, backed up other people with my extended skills and generally made a difference. If only I could guarantee that every day could be like this.

DAY 43

Because the days have been so good, I'm not concerned about the nights. It's kind of lulled me into a false sense of security which worries me because if something does happen, I'll be less prepared for it.

DAY 47

It's interesting how people react when you try to be honest and tell them where you're at. They often try to find reasons or solutions that suit *their* understanding. I talked to someone today who couldn't understand why counselling hadn't helped; who thought it was bit odd that, if I'd done my job for 25 years, why it was a problem now; why I hadn't developed coping strategies; why I hadn't become harder/less involved/more distant from the calls I've attended. It just reinforces how, unless you've been there (or you're an exceptionally empathetic listener), you'll never get it – not even close.

DAY 48

This has been a really weird few days. Nothing has been awful, but lots of little comments and silly asides have really dug deep and hurt me: passing comments about a situation in a film; a sentence about how someone might end up doing something to themselves; a joke about someone's incapacity to function in some way...all utterly stupid, insignificant and benign chat but somehow all little darts that hurt. Maybe it's just that, where I'm at mentally, I'm going to be hypersensitive at times?

DAY 49

A bad start and generally a 'not good' day. No idea why, just depressed, down, disengaged. It's possibly self protection from fear of what I might encounter today (first day back nerves?) but I don't like it, whatever it is...

DAY 50

At the end of the day I ended up flying to a diver in cardiac arrest. On the way all sorts of things were going through my mind – I know what these things can look like and often it's not nice. I worried that this would be The One That Finished It. When we got there it soon became apparent that resuscitation attempts would have been futile so I was presented with a guy being winched towards me who was clearly beyond help. The person with him gave me the story of what happened and for some reason it was all OK. The diver had been diving, doing what he enjoyed and died following that pursuit. Maybe in my head I justified all that as 'poetic'...I don't know. I was fine allowing his companion time with the body and then gently wrapping it, putting it in the helicopter and taking him to meet the undertaker at the helipad. The hospital chaplain was there and said a truly moving prayer for the patient, the family and for us. And at the end of it, I was alright.

DAY 51

Everyone else was busy and we just spent all night chasing other people to back them up but not actually getting there. I had a real panic when we were allocated as back up to a crew attending a young person who had hung themselves. All my fears and nightmares surfaced and I secretly hoped that my colleague would drive slower so we might not get there. As it happened we were 35 minutes away from the call and the crew on scene stood us down as resuscitation had been unsuccessful. I thought about it all the way back, a bit shaken and knowing I'd dodged a bullet.

Then we were sent out to back up the same crew, this time to an elderly person who had had a cardiac arrest. Again, for some reason I secretly hoped to be delayed. We didn't get there as resuscitation had again been unsuccessful; I was very relieved to drive away from the shift and I didn't look back.

A few colleagues texted and rang to check up on me because they know where I'm at – which is nice and much appreciated – but really all I wanted to do was crawl into my hole and hibernate and deal with it on my own in my own way.

And I've got to go back tonight.

Still no contact from ACC

DAY 54

Had a *massive* fight with my wife after I had over reacted to something. It's not that I didn't have a valid point to make, it's more that my reactions and manner were more extreme than they should have been. Frustration? Lack of coping? Pressure of having to continue? Not realising that I need a break and I'm not getting it? At any rate we resolved it but it wasn't pretty and I do feel quite close to 'the edge'

DAY 56

I just felt sad, teary and slightly depressed all day. Nothing specific – just overwhelmed and down. Unmotivated. I got through it but I wonder if things are getting worse...

DAY 58

I was woken in the early hours of the morning by my wife who obviously couldn't sleep and who had left the bedroom door open as she went for a wander. I've been to a number of jobs where partners and children have woken to find bodies of their loved ones hanging after they had secretly got up so no one would disturb them in the act. The aftermath - and what we find when we're called - is tragic...horrific...awful. I hate it with a passion. I couldn't shake the idea in my half-sleep that this was now going to happen to me with my wife. It was really disturbing.

DAY 60

I feel really disengaged and remote and I just want to be away from everyone but I can't escape.

DAY 61

Watching a film where a place got bombed and they were combing the rubble of destroyed buildings looking for survivors and bodies. I got that familiar sense of dread at what I might see and then the camera panned to a female who looked very dead under a load of concrete block, covered in white mortar dust. You could only see her upper half. I didn't want to see it, had a flashback, gritted my teeth and tried to file it away with all the rest of my crap.

DAY 62

Terrible night's sleep – partly the film, but partly my general state. Sad all day. Just sad. My wife says we keep having arguments (well, I keep over reacting) and that she can link it to the days when I'm at work. I keep carrying on because I feel a sense of duty, but I suppose I need to work out when a sense of duty turns into a sense of self destruction (and indeed 'destruction' of those around me)

DAY 64

It's familiar now - slightly down, slightly apprehensive: work tomorrow. Not so bad this time (other times it's been much worse) but it's *that* feeling. Two months since I told ACC. Surely it'll be soon?

DAY 65

I was driving to work when, for the first time in 25 years - the first time *ever* – I seriously considered turning a job down if it came in. I was imagining a cardiac arrest being called in and just literally turning around and saying 'Nope, I'm not going.' It kind of put things in perspective, because that's just not me. Yes, I've moaned and grumbled when I've had absolutely no rest and then had that first drink interrupted, or started eating lunch at 16:00 and got another call...I've *whinged*, but I've always known the importance of responding. And today I could let myself down. Self protection? In the evening I had another big fight with my wife. This is getting stupid.

DAY 67

Actually a good night – busy, helped lots of people, backed lots of crews up – really satisfying

DAY 69

I've worked it out, after having had a really honest conversation with my wife: the reason she can link our arguments to my work days is because I put on a front at work. I cope, I do what I have to do (and still enjoy it), but I don't have to pretend at home so the mask comes off, the nerve endings become exposed and I let loose because I don't have to pretend any more.

DAY 70

My wife and I aren't getting on because I'm upsetting her (and the kids) and she's angry with me for doing that. All I'm doing is getting it wrong and making everyone unhappy so I might as well move out for a bit and get out of everyone's hair. I talked really honestly with my wife about this and she doesn't want that to happen. I think I need to go and see my GP.

DAY 71

Went and saw my GP and told him everything. How I would feel guilty for going sick; how I think I'll be letting everyone down; how I feel like I would be abusing the sickness system; how I don't want to let my boss down because he's relying on me. If this was a physical injury it would be easy – but it's not, it's an unseen, unquantifiable illness.

He said that I had every right to take a couple of weeks off and see how I went and signed me off. My boss was great about it (and has been brilliant throughout) so I'll go and have a proper honest chat with him about it all.

DAY 72

Watched a video on You Tube on why you should keep doors closed instead of open in case there's a fire. The video shows two rooms after a fire – one absolutely decimated after a few minutes and one (the one with the door closed) relatively unscathed. It was interesting but not at all traumatic – yet I felt very emotional watching the burnt out room. I'm not aware of any particular memories or jobs that have affected me, but it all felt very close to home and I wanted to look away.

DAY 73

Bit the bullet, so to speak. Went off sick for two shift rounds and we'll see how it goes. I feel a bit relieved that I've finally got a break from it all but it's all rather temporary. We'll see.

DAY 77

Less noticeable change than I'd thought – I'm in a kind of holding pattern. Now I'm off, I'm kind of worrying about returning; I'm already predicting what I *might* have to deal with and I don't like it. It kind of varies between that and numbness.

ACC correspondence still depressingly absent.

DAY 81

Just doing what I want and to having to worry about work. Well, I do because I find I'm counting the days until I go back but at least it's all stopped for now.

DAY 85

Talked to my boss again about where I'm at and how things are going. I have rostered leave in two weeks, but I'm due to work two shift rounds before that and I really can't/don't want to face them. He's agreed to allow me to take them off as sick leave, which means I get nearly two months off as a break from work. I need it. The break is long enough into the future that I don't have to think about going back and so I can forget work for a while. We have to go back to the UK to see a gravely ill close relative so I think mentally life is now on hold until I get back from the UK. It'll be good to be distracted, I think.

DAY 95

I can't think about anything organisational. Packing, sorting stuff out, how we do what we do in the UK – it's all too much. I'm not normally bad at this so it's quite unsettling.

DAY 107

Leaving for the UK. Flying away from all my issues here in NZ. Forgetting for a while. Hopefully.

DAY 110

Went in to London today and used the tube system. It's all very familiar to use, but I found that I spent the whole time looking over my shoulder and worrying if anyone was going to jump under a tube train. I hurried away from each platform just in case I was part of something that I didn't want to be part of, as I've seen and dealt with enough 'one unders'. It was weird – it's affecting me here too: that fear of seeing something and/or having to deal with something I don't want to. It was really uncomfortable and spoiled the day slightly – especially as I was more irritable and impatient with my wife and the girls.

DAY 114

Knackered – the jet lag is hideous. It's nice to have family time but we have no actual time on our own as we are either always with family or out. It's good to catch up but some alone time would be useful.

DAY 116

It's been a few days now and we are relaxing. Everything is on a bit more of an even keel but I know it's a false calm. This is a holiday and everything is still waiting for me, there in the background. Still, at the moment we're enjoying ourselves - and it's Christmas.

DAY 137

Back in NZ and I've already made the decision to stay away from work. Going back feels like I'm walking back into the lion's den and just asking for trouble. I'm worried because I've had a while off and, while it all got a bit less immediate, nothing has changed anywhere near as much as I thought it would. I definitely need more time – but how much? How long? Will it ever get better?

DAY 138

Saw an accident report in the paper about a fatal car accident locally and all the feelings of trepidation came flooding back.

DAY 141

A friend told me that he'd witnessed that fatal car accident first hand and helped on scene before the emergency services arrived. Apparently the car was an absolute mess and as he described it I could feel my reticence building up. He said he'd show me the pictures he took of the car but I *really* didn't want to see them. I mean I strongly reacted to even the idea of seeing them.

Really hanging out for ACC to contact me and utterly unable to get through to anyone despite e-mails, leaving voicemails and other messages. Even my GP is being ignored. I mean, what do I have to do...?

DAY 144

Saw road kill on the road today when I was driving and the bits turned into human body parts that had been hit by a car. Felt a bit shaken up.

DAY 149

There have been various times this week where I've had to look away from the TV in anticipation of seeing a scene that's going to disturb me. It's almost normal now that I expect to watch a (sometimes fairly innocuous) programme and have to look away at some point.

DAY 155

My boss rang to see how I was doing and for a catch up. I really didn't want to go anywhere near an ambulance station and he agreed to meet me at home. It seems that there have been some really grotty calls at work – some of which I would be guaranteed to have been involved in – and I was relieved not to have been there. Part of me would have liked to have tried to do some good in those calls as I still miss the difference I made to countless people – but I'm forever on this precipice of celebrating a good job done and preventing death/saving or improving life - and falling apart at the seams. IF the job went well then it would be OK but I just *know* I can't take another devastated family, or the emotion of a loved one's loss, or the sight of some hideous atrocity, or...

...the problem is I can't dictate what I see and go to which means I can't protect myself. I can't even tell you exactly what *does* set me off...

As my boss talked to me he said he could see that I wasn't ready to return to work. That set me thinking: if this had been a final welfare meeting prior to my imminent return to work, I'd have run away. Physically, I would have gone in a different direction and not turned up to work. I would not have been able to walk through those ambulance bay doors. It was kind of a crystallising moment. I'm really not very well.

DAY 170

I've noticed on a couple of occasions that I have over reacted to sudden noises. It feels odd because it seems like a total over reaction to the noise itself - and it feels a bit stupid to react that way. It's a bit embarrassing.

DAY 178

For the first time ever in my life (including when I didn't even know I was going to be Paramedic) I made a conscious choice to drive on when I witnessed a traffic collision. I couldn't deal with the scene, the stress, the choices I might need to make if I'd stopped. Anyone who knows me will say that that is just *not* like me. I felt guilty at not doing the right thing, but also relieved that I didn't stop. I didn't even check my rear view mirror as I sped away hoping that no one would recognise me...

ACC wrote to say they needed more time to make a decision and that it might be another three months before they contact me. *What happened to early decisions and getting people treated and back to work as soon as possible!?* It feels like I have nowhere to go with no support and no immediate hope of any meaningful help. It's been months. I'm just an

unimportant number who they're probably trying to avoid because I'm going to cost them money. There's no interim help. I'm losing hope that this will ever get properly sorted.

DAY 187

The St John health and wellness nurse came to see me for the first time today. Again, they rang yesterday and asked to meet and my instant reaction was 'not on the ambulance station'. She was nice and took me through my journey and at times it was quite emotional. She wants me to get reassessed by a clinical psychologist (clin psych) so I guess I'll have to. I don't really want to relive it all but she thinks this is a progressive thing so who knows? She did say one helpful thing though: she didn't think I was depressed (and I agree) but she did think I had anxiety - which is a fear of the future. That was interesting because I do worry about what might be - what might be if I go back to work; what might be if I watch that film; what might be if I see situation X. 'Scared' is a word that seems to sum up some of my issues. I have no idea how to stop that, but sometimes withdrawal and hiding do seem very attractive options.

She talked about being made to do certain jobs or returning to work to do certain things in order for St John to keep paying my 20% ACC top up and I reacted really violently (inside) against that - I surprised myself with the strength of my reaction.

DAY 195

A colleague texted me with well wishes and kind comments but for some reason his text made me realise that this is a much longer, deeper process than I had ever understood. I'm not sure if I've even scratched the surface and that worries me. How much more of this crap is there to deal with?

DAY 197

World news: lots of people dead in a mass shooting in Christchurch. Live streamed on Facebook by the gunman. Terrible, awful, tragic and a hundred other descriptions. But I felt nothing. I knew I didn't want to see the video (now all over the internet) but I had no emotion at all that I could fathom. It might as well have happened on a different planet. What's wrong with me?

DAY 199

Really violent disturbing dreams and I think I've been having them for a while because sometimes I wake up quite unsettled and I get tiny glimpses of something dark. Not sure what.

DAY 208

Went for lunch with some friends and they mentioned that a well known local teenager had been found by his family having committed suicide. I don't know exactly how he did it, but I went cold and all the hackles on my neck raised up. I felt a bit sick. I would have been called to that and probably would have seen more of what I really don't want to and experienced exactly the type of third party grief and anguish that I'm running away from. Recently I had been daring to hope that time was maybe beginning to heal some stuff - but this kind of put me back to square one. Well, not quite, because I know I'm relatively safe because I'm not currently going to work and therefore not liable to see it again (in the normal course of

events). But the idea is that one day I'll go back (I think) and that's just proved it's not in the picture at the moment.

DAY 209

Watching a Police detective drama series and there was a guy who put the barrel of a shotgun in his mouth and blew the back of his head off. It sent me straight back to a job on the coast which was really similar – except my guy used a high powered rifle which blew the top of his skull off. I remember looking inside his skull where his brains should have been. I can look at it somewhat dispassionately except that my job, instead of being a distant memory, has become a vivid flashback.

DAY 211

Went and saw my GP today at the request of work's health and wellness nurse. It was just a follow up 'what's ACC doing and where are we going' meeting but it was all a bit emotional and I didn't want to face any of it. The thought of having to open up and revisit this stuff does not fill me with any kind of joy – I'd rather just bury it and let it lie. The doctor likened it to an abscess: it hurts when you lance it but it needs to be done in order for healing to take place and to get rid of the poison. The problem is that ACC appear to be utterly incompetent/ineffectual/disinterested/disconnected and work want me to seek further counselling but I really don't want to see half a dozen different people to allow boxes to be ticked. Counselling (*proper* counselling) is going to take a long time and is going to cost a bit of money so ACC need to sort their **** out, make their minds up as to whether they're going to accept the claim and invest in this process or not. Four sessions with EAP (work based counselling) is not going to make a jot of difference – and will actually just add to my wounds; I want one dedicated person who is going to see this through with me...

DAY 213

That shooting job keeps revisiting me; I just keep seeing it.

DAY 221

My boss 'phoned and asked for a meeting as ongoing communication and support. He asked me directly if I was going back to work and I kind of hesitated. Despite everything I don't want to leave. I made the decision to meet at the station – just to see how I feel and react. Who knows – maybe it'll go OK and be part of my healing?

DAY 230

Meeting went OK – it was really just about staying in touch but clearly he was sowing some seeds using words like 'redeployment', 'moving on', 'professionalising' and 'updating CVs' etc. I stated that I wasn't making any decisions or promises until ACC actually decided what they were going to do with me – accept the case or not. If I hadn't had the external support I'd had so far I could have had six months of hell with absolutely no support from ACC at all and none (apparently) on the horizon. *When* they decide they'll invest in my case is when I'll be able to make some forward plans. I wonder what happens to people who don't get support at home or who are clinically depressed. How many lives are ACC guilty of abandoning to such an extent that those people do something stupid...?

Going away for a week which is going to be really welcome. I hadn't realised it but I'm quite relieved that I get away from NZ for a while: I won't see the ambulances that remind me of work; I won't hear the fire siren that reminds me there's a call going down; I won't be in the country where my pain is.

DAY 232

We were walking to restaurant when a car drove past and we heard a loud pop – a bit like a small balloon bursting violently. Then we saw a frog that had clearly just been run over from tail to head and everything had burst out of its head. Really disturbed and saw human body parts on the road. Couldn't get it out of my head.

DAY 243

There was a request from a sports event for medical cover, stating that if you wanted experiences treating fractures and dislocations of limbs it would be good for you (often volunteers crave a 'good' job for their experience base). It made me react quite strongly inasmuch as I definitely did *not* want to see another angulated arm, or bone sticking out of a leg. It made me feel quite sick.

DAY 251

My youngest daughter said she saw a possum out of the car window that had been run over. She described how its back had been split open along the spine and she could see the bone. It kind of freaked me out – sent me backwards a bit.

DAY 265

My boss rang to ask where everything was going re. ACC (still nothing). I hate ACC with a passion. Then he started making noises about becoming a casual employee (i.e. not on a contract so not costing St John money) and talked about how St John are struggling financially – especially with the current ongoing industrial action. In other words *his* boss was getting fed up paying my 20% ACC top up with no obvious progress. I said that the St John intermediary for me should be hassling ACC as it has now over EIGHT months and they have barely acknowledged I still exist.

I put the 'phone down and I was angry. This is not my fault, I don't want to have to chase people to support me and I've heard nothing concrete from anyone at ACC. It stinks.

DAY 267

We were talking about the 'phone call a couple of days ago and my wife said I still wasn't right...I was better but still not right. I'm still telling people that my long term goal is to return to full duties as fully functioning Paramedic (and that's true) but at this rate who knows how long it's going to take?

DAY 270

I've realised how angry I am at that 'phone call last week. I'm supposed to be being supported, treated – or at the very least *not* left in limbo wondering whether some nebulous organisation is going to accept my case or not. Just because ACC can't get their act into gear does not mean that that should become my problem. I'm trying to run away from it all, for heaven's sake.

DAY 278

Watching a programme with my wife about restoring old English heritage houses. There was a huge stone (Georgian?) thing that was magnificent – but it was just like the building where a patient had tied three mountaineering ropes around his neck and jumped out of the third floor window, stopping violently outside the first floor. His neck was so stretched I don't know how his head hadn't come off. Cue all the familiar feelings of déjà vu, slight sickness, fear...

DAY 281

I've plateaued. Time has dulled most things (bar the flashbacks) but I'm not going forward in any way. There's no proper progress and I feel like I'm now at a standstill. I need ACC to stop being so utterly crap and sort themselves out so I can get on with sorting this stuff out once and for all.

DAY 284

Just a bad day – no particular reason (that I can think of). My boss rang my mobile but I wasn't up to talking with anyone so I ignored all incoming calls and screened the ones at home with the answering machine. In the evening I did text him and apologise for ignoring him and saying he could 'phone tomorrow. He seemed OK with that.

DAY 285

Nothing from my boss all day. Then at 19:30 he 'phoned, briefly asked how I was and said that the ambulance service were fed up with ACC not contacting anyone so they were going to pay me half pay from next week (four days time!) and then nothing at all in two week time. His boss had apparently sent me a letter yesterday so I looked it up. They've given me TWO DAYS – from yesterday's date - to get representation and a reply to them. The letter also says they can sack me if they want but counselling is available if I'm upset. I felt sick to my core, kicked in the guts and extremely worried. This is utterly unfair (and being appallingly managed). Spent the rest of the evening firing off e-mails to work, solicitors and ACC. Talk about being kicked when you're down.

DAY 286

I feel sick and worried. I can't fight a huge organisation like St John – they'll always win. I mean they have whole teams of solicitors waiting to destroy anyone who comes up against them. But it's SO unfair: my work caseworker had tried to contact ACC, my GP has tried to contact them, I've tried to contact them. What else can I do – this is not my fault!

Late in the afternoon I had a call from my boss's boss saying that the letter they sent wasn't ideal and that they'd extend the period by two weeks while we try to put a plan in place. He apologised for the tone of the letter which was decent of him – but he signed it and it's his name at the bottom of it. I'm pretty angry my boss didn't challenge it and was prepared to make the call he made telling me the letter had been written – it doesn't seem like anyone actually read the thing before sending it. And they're still cutting me off at the knees by deciding not to pay me.

DAY 299

So here we are, still no replies and no progress. My boss's boss is due to call later this week and I'm going to have nothing for him. Again. And then what? Stuff it, I've now got nothing to lose, I'm going to write to the NZ Herald. I know St John won't like 'cos they're *really* sensitive about any kind of bad publicity - but they're looking at stopping my pay anyway, so what have I got to lose? And it might actually make ACC buck up their act. Here's what I did:

Open Letter To ACC

This is a last act of desperation – an attempt, after six months of stalling, to get you to actually engage with me and talk about my case. I know it's a difficult but as an Advanced Life Support Paramedic who has done his best for around 35 000 patients over a quarter of a century in two countries, I don't think it's hugely unreasonable to ask that you reply to my e-mails and do what you say you will do.

You see I've seen and done too much. There was that one job that completely destroyed me and now I'm not coping. I've kept a diary and a clinical psychologist called it early PTSD and my doctor called it stress – but either way I've asked for your help and you're ignoring me. I've sent you all the paperwork you've asked for; I've filled in all the forms you wanted; you've sent me standard letters promising contact but it hasn't happened. That one where you said you'd be “in contact by definitely 1st May” (*it was now nearly end of June*)? Still waiting. The messages my doctor left for you to ring back? Still waiting. The e-mails my work liaison officer sent you? Still in the ether, it seems.

And now my employer (St John) is planning to stop paying me because you won't talk to them either and they can't afford my sick leave. Imagine how that helps my state of mind.

I'm fortunate to have a good doctor, an understanding boss and an amazingly supportive family – and I've kept myself occupied helping my wife renovate a house - but for anyone as damaged as I am (and believe me, there are lots of us) six months in silent limbo is crushing.

I'm not asking for much – just help. Help to stop seeing human body parts when I see roadkill; help to overcome the fear of dead a dead body when I go out in the dark. Help to, maybe, just maybe, get better and go back to doing the job I love.

Is that too much to ask?

Mark Belchamber
Advanced Life Support Paramedic
New Plymouth

DAY 300

I was e-mailed by a reporter from the Herald who was very interested in following up my case (rather than just publishing my letter). She wants to talk so I'll wait for her call...

DAY 301

Spoke to the reporter this morning – she was very interested and got straight onto ACC for comment...TWO HOURS LATER I had a senior claims manager on the 'phone apologising and saying they were going to pull out all the stops. I was fairly tough with him – I mean all they've done is initially send me a few forms and ignored me (and everyone else) for over five months; the last communication *of any description* was early February – and it's now end of June. They also said that, because it was their cock up, they now had to accept my claim as they had not sent a letter out in a specific time period so legally they had defaulted. Later on they sent me the letter they should have sent – and it was declining my claim!! So all in all a positive result – and my ACC claim manager e-mailed an apology too. So she should have – but this was more than one person's mistake – there are massive organisational errors that allowed this to all happen.

I'm feeling pretty angry but also, for the first time in a *very* long time, vaguely hopeful.

DAY 302

Had a 'phone call from my boss and his boss on speaker 'phone – they've had a long list of questions from the reporter. They didn't sound too impressed but I told them I was getting nowhere and it had yielded results. I think they grudgingly saw my point. I feel REALLY unsettled – like I don't want to face it all now but also like I'm not sure what the future holds. ACC's letter said they were accepting my claim from the point where they *should* have sent me another letter but it also says that they'll only pay until they make a final decision so I'm still in limbo. At least I know they're investigating actively now though...

Veering between positive and negative thoughts. I hate this.

DAY 303

Oh. My. Word. Front page, full spread on the front of the New Zealand Herald and also on their website:

<http://www.markbelchamber.com/ACC%20NZ%20Herald.pdf>

I really didn't expect that, but it's a very kind story and certainly makes my case well for me. A few people have seen it and are very supportive but I'm sure (I hope) ACC are wincing a bit.

DAY 306

Communication from ACC verbally confirming that they're paying me on St John's behalf and that they'll pay back St John for the last few months. At least that'll make St John happy...

DAY 310

Follow up from a senior ACC bod – they do seem to be moving things along now, which is good. Apparently the organisation of psychological support and assessment is going to take a short while but it's in motion. Not sure how I feel about that – it's easier to ignore it and keep going with the odd blip, but I do know that won't work forever...

DAY 312

Read the news headlines and the first story was about a body being found at a local school. Now I know that usually this means that someone has found a quiet spot in the school holidays, knowing the place will be empty, and strung themselves up from tree. It took me straight back to a previous call I'd been to where I nearly just walked away and never returned. Everything was so vivid again – raw, unwelcome, real. I felt sick.

Also had a call from a colleague in Christchurch apparently a lot of staff own there are really struggling as they've had a lot of really crap calls and fairly major incidents down there. One of his mates tried to kill himself and others are just not coping. I'm not sure what St John's strategy is but apparently the Police have a really good support system in place, whereas ours is widely regarded a pretty poor. We really only have Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and have three one hour sessions with people who mean well but are woefully underskilled for the serious cases...

DAY 320

I've been on a really short fuse recently. I think it's because there's a real chance of me having to face up to some stuff and deal with it – which I don't want to do 'cos it's going to hurt. I'm in a bit of 'self protection' mode.

DAY 321

Driving home there was a 'school bus turning' warning sign and for some reason I saw the bus being broadsided, bursting into flames and all the kids being burnt alive. I felt sick.

DAY 322

Met with a local ACC guy who seems to be sorting out my case and putting some things in place. He's not sure it's going to be a quick fix and neither am I...

Felt a bit strange for the rest of the day

DAY 325

Had an absolutely horrific dream, woke myself up by physically recoiling my head trying to escape it. The images were so real – really disturbing

Going to bed again in the evening I was frightened of shutting my eyes unless I saw those images again. They've been vivid all day...

DAY 326

OK night's sleep. That dream was still there but kind of faded. Every time I woke up in the night I was worried I'd see it again. Pretty down during the day.

DAY 327

Emotionally quite fragile – saw a program where a Policeman helped a mentally unwell person off a motorway hard shoulder and it brought tears to my eyes. There were a few other things that set of triggers – mainly of apprehension and a bit of fear.

DAY 334

Felt down all day – no reason, just slightly anxious. It might be due to a meeting I've got tomorrow with my bosses as I'm not sure where they stand with me at the moment...

DAY 335

Meeting went OK – they obviously want to know where they stand as my position is technically still open and unfilled but costing them money to fill temporarily. All pretty reasonable but there were more noises about what my plans were, would I return, what did I actually want. I explained that, because ACC were utterly useless in the first nine months, we really had to see the timeframe as starting from last month (when they finally had to accept the claim). So I'm actually now only really in week four or five of my return to work plan...

DAY 341

First day with the clinical psychologist. She's nice and I think we can work together – but the road might be long. At least she seems to be taking me seriously, and has a plan forward to help me. Wasn't sure about some of her ideas as I know it's all going to be a bit raw (wanted to say no and run away) but I do know she's right and it's for the best... Clearly distracted on the way home as I drove straight into another car's path and nearly caused an accident.

DAY 344

Flicking through Netflix there were a few trailers that made me look away. Nothing too obviously bad – just images that I'd rather not see: dead people (murder detective series); groups of people about to be shot (Nazi war film). It's more that I really don't want to see those and *have* to turn away, rather than just see them and know they're not right.

DAY 347

It might be apprehension about seeing my clin psych again, but spent all day feeling low, lethargic and generally out of sorts

DAY 348

Good meeting with my clin psych – she's really accessible and seems to be listening and tailoring our sessions to suit me (rather than just having a 'conveyor belt' mentality for all her patients). I had bit of a revelation that my fears and anxieties are as much about specific sights or incidents as they are about the stories and humanity that go with any incident. It's like I don't want to be hurt by someone else's emotion and trauma and so I shy away from it/try to protect myself from it.

DAY 351

I was on a really short fuse all day – no idea why. I'm not tired, I've been sleeping OK, haven't had any particular flashbacks...I'm not stressed...just really irritable and bad tempered

DAY 354

I've noticed that I'm getting a bit morose in the evenings. Maybe it's because I feel that I'm not getting enough done during the day and that frustrates/depresses me?

DAY 355

Clin psych again – told her where I'm at and she wants to go into my childhood next week. That was a bit scary. Otherwise it's beginning to feel like there is a protective/caring process that is actually going to do me some good

DAY 362

Had a really good week this week – no flashbacks, no dreams – it's almost like I remember what it is to be a normal person, although there is always something in the background niggling away. I'm not sure what it is but it's kind of like the top of waters are calm but just below the surface it won't take much to break them up again.

My daughter came in for a cuddle this morning because she had seen something on the internet that scared her before she could turn it off. It made me see that my problem was that not only did I *not* have the ability to turn my stuff off, I also had a job where I knew I was going to see and experience more of the stuff I didn't want to see and that there was nothing I could do about it. She can turn off her computer and choose to ignore that site next time, whereas I can't. That exposure and continual inability to control it is where the PTSD develops I suppose...

DAY 363

Woke up feeling strange – like I couldn't deal with the day ahead. The only description is that there was so much in my head that I felt completely mentally 'full' and so couldn't process or deal with anything else that might occur. It was like I was scared to get up in case something happened that stopped me from coping. It got better as the day wore on but it never really went away.

DAY 365

That feeling of having too much in my head is there again. It makes me quite irritable and short tempered and I haven't got a clue what to do about it

Wow. Just realised that it's been a year since this diary got started (and that's not even when the journey started). Not sure how I feel about that...

DAY 367

Bit of a flashback - very simply watching a Monty Python cartoon sketch and the figure was about to shoot itself in the head and I couldn't watch. Sometimes I feel stupid for being so fragile.

DAY 369

These clinical psychology sessions are really helping - she seems genuinely interested in me and appears to have a plan and a handle on where I'm at and where to get me to. She also says things that tell me she's listened to me over the last few weeks. I do feel hopeful that this might work but I also very much have to trust completely that she knows what she's doing and I'm not going to be left more screwed up than before.

I've had a bit of an epiphany: all this time I haven't been able to see forward, backwards or sideways - I've just been 'in'. Like a thick fog - you don't have any sense of direction, you're just in the fog. But I'm trusting in and relying on someone to take me out of it...

DAY 372

My daughter was in a short school production set around a railway station. At one point someone in the play became really disturbed for some reason and I thought she was going to act out throwing herself under the oncoming train. I couldn't look and didn't want to be there in case that was how the action went. I felt really uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

DAY 374

Driving into town with some mates, we were generally talking about stuff - someone mentioned a logging truck and how destructive a log coming off would be. I talked about some of the calls I'd been to in these scenarios - some quite devastating - with no problem. Then another passenger talked about something he'd seen and I wanted to get out of the car. I think I was happy talking about my stuff because I could control what I said but I had no control over what he might have said that could have triggered something uncomfortable. I felt physically uncomfortable and just wanted him to shut up.

DAY 383

In the middle of a meeting with my clin psych there was a noise that sounded exactly like the one that goes off automatically on station when there is an emergency call. Instantly I was transported to station and very briefly panicked about having to go out on a job. Almost immediately I realised what was going on but it left me quite shaken and emotional. I wasn't ready for that 'interruption'. It was a very surreal experience and not comfortable at all.

DAY 385

Thought I heard a dog injured/possibly stuck in a fence or something in our paddock. It was dark and I didn't want it to suffer any more so I went to investigate with a torch. I was scared as I had to pass a couple of trees and I worried that I'd see someone hanging themselves. The thought of an animal suffering spurred me on but I was on tenterhooks. I hated it. Relieved to discover that it was actually the sound of a dog yelping to get in the back door of a house on the horizon but that the sound was carrying because it was a still night. I rushed back inside without looking at the trees too closely - faced forward and just got to safety.

DAY 396

Really violent dreams last night. I think that some of the programmes I'm watching on TV, whilst completely benign in themselves, are triggering things subconsciously that I revisit in my sleep. Quite disturbing though - it's horrid.

DAY 397

Told my clin psych about the dreams and used words like 'panic', 'disgust' and 'revulsion' which she says are quite extreme things to say (and therefore the events are having a significant impact).

She also said she was leaving for good in a couple of months and that she will pass me on to someone else. I smiled politely but I felt stunned – I don't want anyone else as I've built up a rapport with her. I really don't want to go back to square one with someone new – it's too hard...Gutted.

DAY 401

Had a bit of a wobble watching something but it was almost as if I switched off before it happened. Not sure if this is a good thing (dealing with it?) or a bad thing (getting better at avoiding it and therefore suppressing it)

DAY405

Another little wobble. It's almost like something is trying to ignite but is fizzling out before it can take hold. It's not a good feeling.

DAY 406

My clin psych told me to go and visit/sit/relax in one of the areas that caused me stress and where some of my fears lie. One of those for me is a wooded area where, at night, I can't go because I'm scared I'll find dead bodies hanging from trees. She said I had to go during the day (when it's 'safer' for me) and let the fear come and then subside. This may not be easy. She also said that it wasn't a 'silly' fear when I said it was a dumb thing to be scared of. Apparently that's my way of dismissing it and therefore avoiding it.

DAY 407

Didn't go to the woods. Too busy

Day 408

Thought about going to the woods but didn't

Day 409

It was raining so couldn't go to the woods. Well for most of the day anyway, but it was still wet on the ground. Thought about how I was going to tell my clin psych that I hadn't done what she'd asked and the excuses for that.

DAY 410

I was due to see my clin psych again but at the last moment her office called to say she was sick. I felt a bit let down and unsupported because that was my next 'waypoint' and the goalposts had been changed on me. It felt a bit lonely.

On the positive side I don't have to face her about not going to the woods. Perhaps I should go today. Or tomorrow.

DAY 411

Had another dream last night, a slow motion one. Saw a large calibre bullet exiting a gun barrel and travelling through the air towards someone's forehead. Then in the dream I kind of imagined the impact as it hit the forehead and the skull slowly swelled as the kinetic forces began their destruction. It stopped before it got too graphic but I knew what I would have seen if the dream had continued, which seemed sort of as bad as seeing it. Managed to get back to sleep but the image was still there when I woke up

I didn't want to go to the wooded area on my own but as a family we all went down because the kids wanted to go rabbit shooting (how ironic). We deliberately went through the area that scares me at night and I lingered in amongst the trees on purpose to see what I felt. It was OK, but I know deep down I need to do it again on my own.

DAY 413

The clin psych sessions began to directly address and revisit some of the jobs that haunt me – apparently we're in the 'exposure' part of my treatment. It's not pretty but I get why we have to do it. It all feels very raw afterwards.

DAY 414

Back to the woods during the day but this time on my own. Deliberately went the place where I felt most discomfort at night and sat in the glade. I found myself actively looking for places where I'd see bad things and pre-empting where not to look if I went when it was dark. During the day it wasn't that bad though – slightly perturbing but not unbearable. There's a consistent slight undercurrent of what I talked about with the clin psych but she said that would happen and to try to allow it to come and go.

DAY 416

Drove out of the driveway to see two possums that had been run over. One of them had head trauma and I felt repulsed and had to look away and I imprinted a human onto the image again.

DAY 417

I really didn't want to go and see my clin psych today – I knew what was coming: revisiting calls I don't really want to go back to in every detail; giving me things to do that I don't want to do; challenging my brain that it's 'wrong' in its perceptions about stuff when, actually, it's easier not to have that fight.

It was a long session and although it wasn't easy, she did make it as bearable as possible. Obviously it was tough, emotional, uncomfortable, but it was always going to be I suppose. I also have to go home and face the things that I turn away from, starting with those possums. I have to go and stare at them and tell myself that it's just a dead possum. It might sound dumb but that's hard.

I also have to go to places where I'm scared in the dark – where I 'see' things – and sit there until the fear subsides. I have to challenge my brain that my thoughts are irrational and that the world is just normal. There's a graduated level of challenge and exposure but I can't see me getting to the end of it. Baby steps.

DAY 418

Got a Facebook message from someone whose husband has also been suffering PTSI as a Policeman (for longer than me and I think it's coupled with depression/anxiety etc. too). We've spoken before but we kind of encouraged each other, which was nice. It's so important to have support on this journey. Reminds me of how angry I was – with good reason – at ACC's handling of this case. They really do have an awful lot to answer and apologise for. I wonder how many people without support they're responsible for letting down - and who may have even done something stupid?

DAY 419

So I did it – I went out, in the dark to one of the places where my nightmares are. I checked my pulse several times to see how fast it was going but I did what I was told I had to do: let the fear dissipate. I was frantically trying not to imagine dead bodies and people hanging from trees and I walked through and near where the fear and images were worst. It was kind of OK. I deliberately took my time, trying to convince my brain that there was nothing to worry about. I think it's going to take more than one attempt at this though – and I still can't see me getting to the end of the process where my darkest places are

DAY 420

A couple of pretty dark dreams last night – and I know they're based around what I did last night. One of them woke me. It's like my brain is fighting back against me.

DAY 421

Another day with the clin psych – she says she's not surprised about the nightmares and that they will eventually go. We talked about all the words that seem to sum up where I'm at: fear; control; anger; horror; violence; justice; judgement. It's so important to be able to trust her – if that fell over I'm not sure what I'd do; I'm taking everything she says at face value and doing whatever she tells me, no matter how hard it is.

Later in the night I went back out to the trees and did it all over again. It wasn't comfortable but it was possibly a bit easier. On the positive side the possums aren't bothering me any more.

DAY 422

Another hideous nightmare and I *know* it was because of going out in the dark last night again. The dream was nothing to do with anything I've seen or done, but the images and fear in the dream was identical to everything I've experienced previously. I can still see the images and I hate it. I really am in two minds about all this: is it worth all this exposure and challenge just to get paid back in nightmares, or should I just give up because it'll stop the pictures in my head at night? I'm going to keep going, but I don't want to...

Couldn't face going back out to the trees. Also didn't want to go to bed because I could still see the images of my dream from last night

DAY 423

Still couldn't go out in the dark. It's just too hard.

DAY 424

ACC had a psychiatrist's appointment booked for me. He was honest and professional but, given my experience of ACC, I'm pretty sure it's their attempt to cut me loose and stop costing them money. The psychiatrist was fine and even gave me a few pointers, but I worry that ACC will actively look for ways to stop supporting me by picking out bits in his report out of context. I'm MOST worried that they'll stop my treatment before it's finished as that would screw me completely.

In the evening I went back to the trees. It was a bit better – still not completely comfortable, but more doable with less fear. Progress hopefully. I hope the nightmares don't come back.

DAY 425

Not *too* bad a sleep. Certainly not what I'd feared, but a few nasty visions when I woke in the middle of the night. Disturbing but not unbearable.

DAY 427

One or two half flashbacks...someone on a TV programme was wearing an anorak very similar to one worn by a patient who shot himself which was a bit disturbing; also some half-formed flashback concerning a child but it never really fully materialised – it was just an uneasy feeling in the background...

DAY 430

Went to the trees again, this time with no support at home (my wife had gone out). It wasn't as frightening as it has been and it did feel more bearable – which is the whole point of this exposure stuff: you gradually normalise what was once scary and re-train your brain that, actually, it's been over reacting to stuff and all that avoidance has just reinforced the over reactions. I was pretty jumpy at unexpected noises (cattle running away from me, the sudden click of an electric fence igniter unit) but that's to be expected as I was not in a comfortable place and therefore hyper-sensitive. I still can't see me getting down to the woods on my own in the dark, but I guess it's a long, gradual process.

DAY 434

Went back out to the trees. The moon was out and it was quite bright, which made everything relatively well lit. I thought that was maybe cheating – but maybe it just saved on torch batteries. The trees were OK – I was a little bit hypervigilant but I felt more comfortable than I expected so I decided to venture on to the next part of my exposure: further down the race to the woods. I definitely felt my pulse raise and I noticed every little noise – I was constantly assessing whether the noises were 'safe' or not. I got to a few trees and jumped at the shape of one of them for no apparent reason. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind there was a 'danger' but I had to rationalise it. I continued on to a 'scary' shed which I went into and just stood, waiting for the fear to subside. I got to a state of calm and slowly - more slowly than I needed to because I didn't want to run from the fear – walked back out of the shed, past the scary shaped tree and back up the race. I had to turn back round a few times because having my back to the 'threat' made me vulnerable, but I tried to calm myself and walk back home. The copse suddenly didn't seem too bad because I had new worries from new exposures...but my clin psych said that's what it's all about: breaking

down the irrational fear one bit at a time until, eventually, you end up able to face the biggest fears you have. But getting deep into the woods does still seem a long way off.

I got home and my wife asked how it went. You do feel really stupid and pathetic – I mean why is a grown man scared of a few trees in the dark? It's dumb. Except it's not. It's a representation of all the stuff you've suppressed for decades, all the crap that a human being shouldn't have to see and do - and all in the name of helping other people.

I don't regret any of that, but I do wish some of it could have been different.

DAY 436

Saw a documentary on the TV about a man who had shot himself. There were some striking similarities between the pictures they showed and it sent me back to the job that started all this off. I was surprised because, although it felt a bit odd, the feelings had changed. I didn't have to look away; I didn't get sweaty or agitated; it wasn't as raw. Yes, it bothered me slightly but it wasn't unbearable. Maybe things *are* getting better and this treatment might just be working.

DAY 437

Another very slight flashback to a hanging we did – I think my first one ever. I had to blank it out.

DAY 442

Talked to my clin psych about the hanging flashback and I suddenly understood something that she's been telling me for ages – but that I haven't properly realised. It's OK to not want to see something, to be shocked by images, to be appalled by the sight of a violent death and to never want to see something ever again. *That's just being human!* The distortion comes from what I've told myself: that I always have to deal with it; I always have to keep it together; it's my job to cope; it's my professional duty to not be affected by what I see and do; other people are relying on me to lead; burying stuff is the best way of coping; black humour is OK. I've allowed myself to believe that I have to be immune to everything - that I can't be affected and I don't have the luxury of emotion in any given situation. I've told myself I have to turn off the natural human part of me that *should* be upset, revulsed, appalled, upset and told myself that that's not professional.

DAY 443

Went out again. Went as far as I'd been before but felt able to go further. The moon was full and bright so I had a bit of natural light which helped. I kept going until I was at the edge of the woods and that was OK so I took a few more steps...and then a few more...until it was worse to turn back and *not* know what was in the woods than it was to keep going. The moon shone brightly and I made sure I was always in its glare – but I made it. I actually went to the far end of the woods and stood, shining my torch into it and not running away. Every shadow was a threat, every shape that I didn't recognise had me on edge, but I stayed until the fear dropped. I could feel my pulse race and every noise startled me. But I stayed. The hypervigilance was intense.

After a while I slowly backed away but I felt a mixture of elation and fear. Elation that I'd actually got to this point but fear of...well everything that I could imagine. I knew I didn't

have what it took to actually walk through the woods and amongst the trees – but I also knew that, having come this far, I would be able to soon.

I was a bit of a mess walking back – the sound of a stream made me jump; walking towards the moon and being slightly blinded by the moonlight was scary because I couldn't see where 'safe' was; every stumble over the rough ground frightened me.

I knew that this was really only possible because it had been by the light of a full moon. I'll have to do it again in the dark – and I may well not be able to go as far – but I know I've done it now. It's not easy and it's not something I'd choose to do, but at least I know I *can* do it.

DAY 444

I was expecting some real reactionary nightmares/vivid dreams as a result of last night but I only had a few murmurings.

DAY 446

Got a bit of a surprise: I saw two young lads cycling down a hill and briefly worried about what would happen if they were run over by a vehicle. I didn't want to hang around to find out and worried about what I might have to do. I was surprised because this kind of thought hasn't been around for a while and I thought that maybe my treatment had sorted it out...but I suppose this just goes to show that I'm not there yet and I still need to learn about my coping mechanisms. I was a bit disappointed that I was still feeling like this – however I guess it shows the complexity of the journey I'm on...

DAY 455

Went shopping with my wife and idly wasting time while she was trying something on. Saw a belt that was an exact replica (from memory) of one that a guy had used in the UK to hang himself with. This was one of the jobs that had been affecting me and that the clin psych and I had pulled apart, faced, dissected and repackaged. I expected to feel really crap but I didn't. I looked at the belt, picked it up, touched it and imagined it being nailed to a door like the one in my memories was. I didn't turn away, I deliberately challenged it – and it was OK. Maybe this treatment really is working...

DAY 458

Meeting with my bosses, who basically want a definite answer concerning my plans about returning to work. I can't blame them – they've supported me for a year (should have only been six months but ACC took aeons to actually get their act into gear...but I'm not bitter...) I'm seeing my clin psych tomorrow so we'll see what she says. If I'm honest it would be nice to walk back in to work, perform well again and then leave on my own terms, having beaten the hell that has been the last few years.

DAY 459

Last day of face to face with my clin psych. We've made really good progress but it's not over yet – she's moving but we're staying in touch via Zoom for another few months. I do feel a bit apprehensive as having her local and available has been a bit of a safety net – but I guess this is all part of becoming independent: I can't keep relying on someone else to sort

my stuff out for me, I have to use the tools and strategies she's given me to sort it out for myself. It's the whole 'give a man a fish/teach a man to fish' thing...

She said in another couple of months, after a few video linked sessions, she would be happy for me to return to work and that we would continue our sessions after the first day I return and then around every couple of weeks, just to see how I'm doing and how my coping strategies are holding out. The fog might be clearing.

...although I still haven't quite managed to go out in the pitch black, to the woods and walk around in them. Like I say, not quite over yet...

DAY 461

At a barbeque and found myself talking with other people about medical stuff and the job I (used to) do. My wife said that it was the first time that she had heard me talk about work with a passion and enthusiasm for a long, long time. Maybe...

DAY 472

A cartoon came on the TV that I wasn't expecting – it involved a joke about a comic character that had a noose around its neck. I surprised myself because I had no reaction at all – positive or negative – and I normally would have baulked quite significantly at any kind of image like that.

DAY 477

Had a fairly dark day for some reason. I think I'm just thinking about the potential of going back to work and the impact that might have. Currently I can organise my day and my time as I like and, if there are any stressors, I can take time out as I need – but if I go back to work there's much more of a regime and a commitment that I have to follow. Maybe I'm just coming to terms with the ramifications of that?

DAY 479

Went to see my GP about returning to work. He gave me a bit of a grilling (in a good way) but has agreed to sign me as fit with certain provisos – the upshot being that I'm cleared to return to work in a couple of months time. Wow.

DAY 480

In a really bad mood all day but I think it's a reaction to knowing that I'm actually going back to work – almost a self protective fear response to what-might-be and situations I may not be able to control...

DAY 485

Woke up really early with loads of thoughts running through my head. I think I *am* worried about returning to work but not in the way I was a few months ago – more in a way that I have to fit into a new pattern now and can't just do what I want to each day. Part of me wants to do something new but I know I have to at least go back and then leave on my own terms. From an unselfish point of view it might also be really helpful for others to see that I've been damaged, had to leave and face up to my demons and then go back to normality again. Almost to demonstrate that it *is* possible to feel like there's no hope and no escape but also that you *can* turn that around and resume where you left off, having seen it through. It

might be that that will give someone else some hope that whatever they're going through is fixable too...

DAY 488

Got up in the middle of the night and 'saw' a body hanging from my toilet window. Pretty shocked as that hasn't happened in a while but I told myself it wasn't real and went back to sleep. Not entirely comfortable, but nowhere near as incapacitating as it once would have been.

DAY 496

Lots of people and not enough space in my head to deal with them. We've got family over to stay – and I love them to bits – but it's a case of never completely having your own space and, when you need a break, not really being able to have one. Added to that we had people over to dinner and all of a sudden it just got too much. Of course I got through it and it was fine – but it was another test of finding a way of dealing with things when all you really want to do is escape.

DAY 501

On holiday for a short period in a remote house. The trees are all very close to the house and overhang it and it reminds me of some of the things I've been avoiding. So I deliberately went out to where the fear and anxiety was in the hope that that would dispel some of it. It wasn't easy, it wasn't perfect and I need to 'challenge' it again – but it wasn't awful. At least I was proactive about it.

DAY 503

Terrible, *awful* night. My father in law died recently so we're having to deal with that. My dog has gone from running around like a lunatic to having to be put to sleep due to inoperable throat cancer in the space of two days. My youngest daughter is devastated as they literally grew up together and it just kills me to see her so distraught. All night I just churned over thoughts of how my wife felt, how my daughter was, my own sadness and then the upcoming return to work which I'm still not convinced I want to do. Stop the world, I want to get off.

DAY 507

I've had really disturbed sleep for the last few nights. I'm consistently dreaming about my dog and/or going back to work and it's waking me up every night. My head whirls and my brain works overtime as soon as I wake so I lie awake thinking about everything, unable to them get back to sleep. Eventually I do drift back off but then I wake up tired and the whole thing keeps going...

DAY 508

Talked to my clinical psychologist. Ironically my PTSD stuff is all on the back burner a bit as everything else has come into play. I'm *so* sad about my dog; I'm worried about going back to work; we have to people in our space all the time; I can't support my wife as I should and she (obviously) isn't as good as she normally is at supporting me; I feel guilty that the death of my dog is more important than the ability to support my wife and the loss of her dad; life is currently one never ending mass of going away, kids' birthdays organisation, grief, stress,

other people, mundane things like mowing lawns... Everything feels like it's closing in and becoming so oppressive 'cos I can't see any end to it...and then my wife goes back to the UK for two weeks for her dad's funeral meaning I'm on my own and going back to work for the first time without her support. And then I'm back into shifts and tiredness and challenging PTSD as it comes up through the jobs I'm going to do again – it's just endless. My clinical psychologist was good at listening and offering a few tips for dealing with all this but, practically speaking, not much of it is moveable or alterable. I really do want to just go and hide in a hole somewhere. Having said that, I think six months ago this would have crushed me, but now, although it feels like all the walls are closing in and there's just too much to deal with, I'm not succumbing and I'm not giving up. Even though I want to run away, I'm not – which I suppose is a good thing.

DAY 515

Some good family time but then had a minor hiccup: one of the wheel bearings failed on the car we've bought for our visitors and it felt like everything was overwhelming. It's daft, but it seems like I'm *just* about dealing with everything. All my 'stuff' is bubbling around inside just below head height. In other words I'm just about keeping a lid on it all, but one small event – like the wheel bearing – makes everything boil over. It's not even the cost of, it's the hassle and the organisation and the extra head space it requires. I kind of go into 'it's-all-just-too-hard' mode and spiral a bit.

DAY 516

I've managed to sort out the car being fixed, which gave me a disproportionate sense of relief, so I'm back to being emotionally and mentally really full but not overflowing. It's a bit like one of those vending machines where you pull out the front can of drink and the next one drops in to where it was. That's what it feels like with my coping mechanism at the moment...just when I think I've sorted something out, the next problem drops down. It's really tiring.

DAY 524

My wife's gone back to the UK for nearly three weeks. Talk about crap timing.

DAY 526

Work have dropped the ball. I've been off for a year and I've asked for some training and updating from a clinical support officer before I go back on the road with a colleague. Turns out nothing has been organised as the clinical support officer is on leave and so they're just going to put me with someone who may (or may not) talk me through some stuff in between calls. Not ideal.

DAY 532

Well this is a bit worrying. Tomorrow is my first day back and I couldn't be more ambivalent towards it. Talked to my clin psych about it and I'm not sure of it's a self protection mechanism in case something affects me deeply, but I hope I last longer than a day...

DAY 533

So today I put the uniform back on for the first time in over a year. It felt a bit strange at first – and I had to think about where all my extra stuff and equipment fitted, whereas a year ago it would have been automatic – but after a while it felt normal again. Everyone at work was really encouraging and really pleased to see me. It was really just a re-introduction and re-orientation day but it was a good start and I had some good clinical discussion with my (*ad hoc*) mentor. It helped me realise where I was a bit rusty and where I need to brush up. Towards the end of the day it was like I'd never taken the uniform off and as I was leaving I was feeling good, positive and even looking forward to returning.

I felt a bit let down by my manager who, until now, has been brilliant. However he has found a new job and has completely 'checked out' - his only interest now is how many days he has left until he leaves (denoted by a countdown calendar on his office door). To be fair he has been very supportive until very recently so I can't complain, but I think any proactive thoughts on his part now are gone. Thankfully I no longer need anything from him and I can use all this to my advantage by telling him that I'm managing my own time and therefore not bothering him with rosters etc. - and just telling him my movements. That way I can choose which colleagues I work with and use for support and which I don't. ...it would have been nice to have just had that last bit of support and at least pretence that he was still interest in me but I guess I can't complain too much. I think he's a bit burnt out.

DAY 535

There was an article in the news about a bus driver who found a child dead on the back of his bus at the end of his round. It grated a bit – I'm now putting myself in a position where it could be me that goes to that call. It wasn't an awful feeling, but I was acutely aware that I would have to deal with it and wondered what that might look like for me...

DAY 541

Back for another shift round and I was approached by two people independently who wanted to talk about my experiences and some of the thoughts and feelings that they were having. It was good to be able to help others with an understanding of where they might be at, but it's a bit worrying that there are colleagues who are suffering in similar ways to me. Still, at least maybe I can give them some pointers - and by being open about my journey I'm definitely encouraging discussion and acknowledgement.

DAYS 543 and 544

A few patients – it was good to be able to get back into the whole treatment regime and to talk to patients again. Nothing too taxing.

DAY 547

Went to my daughter's swimming sports day at school and the principal started talking about water safety and children drowning. I suddenly felt really teary and emotional as he spoke about the day being about prevention and how too many children die in the water in New Zealand. I was quite surprised at my reaction – but it wasn't one of fear, it was one of sadness. It's like I just don't want to be part of people's tragedy and sadness any more...I don't want to know about it...

DAY 550

First obnoxious patient. We were called to a man supposedly not breathing after hitting his head, but on arrival it turned out to be a really drunk stag group. One guy had hit his head and did need attention – and to start with (once we'd driven away from the rest of the group) he was fine – but then he suddenly turned into an aggressive, foul mouthed guy who threatened (me specifically) with violence. My female colleague did really well to distract him, but it was very uncomfortable and my first test of sorts. It didn't bother me much (although it did make me angry and I reported it so there was a formal record of verbal abuse to an ambulance officer) and so bizarrely I found it an encouraging episode.

DAY 557

First day back on my own as the senior clinician and responsible for care (and another staff member). Turned up 30 minutes early so the night crew could go home and thought I'd wander in, have a cup of tea and relax into the start of the day...

...however instead the night crew met me with an extremely sick patient who they'd been treating and asked me to take over. This patient looked gravely ill with shortness of breath due to lung disease and could easily have died at any point. I took a deep breath, reminded myself that this was what I was paid to do – and that this was actually a situation where I used to excel - and took the handover. Apparently my face was a picture, according to my colleague later. Anyway the patient got a bit sicker, I had to actively manage her (and the vital oxygen supply which was at this point dangerously low), but we got to ED/A & E and she recovered later. A bit of a baptism of fire but a good outcome and a good experience for me.

DAY 558

I'm finding myself worrying a bit about how I'm going to perform at the really serious jobs – not from a fear point of view, but from a competency point of view. I've done lots of revision and talking through stuff with peers, but I guess you never know until you're actually in the situation with the eustress and the adrenaline flowing. My nightmare is to underperform and undertreat or make a mistake – I would detest that and feel like I'd be letting myself, the patient and my colleagues down. Everyone is being really encouraging and the jobs that I have done (some of which have required some extended skills and bit of lateral thought) have felt comfortable. Maybe I'm my own worst critic.

DAY 559

My first night shift for over a year - and the last ones were full of fear, dread and foreboding, just wanting to run away. I actually feel OK and a bit curious about what the night brings and how I'll do. I guess that means the treatment has worked so far and that I'm ready to find out...

DAY 662

Found myself driving home past the same thicket of trees that I had stopped at many moons ago on the way home from work needing the loo. Then I had had to go and had rushed as much as possible because of my irrational fear of what was in the trees. This time I slowed down, stopped and turned the car lights off; I'd forgotten how dark it was. I got out of the car and stood in the darkness, in that same place where I had been so perturbed last time. I

allowed the noises of the trees and bushes to wash over me and then went into the trees in the dark. I deliberately looked up and then I turned my 'phone light on, challenging the fear that once was. There was the *tiniest* hint of worry, but really I managed to just stand there, knowing that everything was OK. I was genuinely surprised that I coped so well, given my complete fear response last time, but also really, really pleased.

DAY 771

Found myself just dipping into negative territory – began to wonder what I might go to and how I'd cope with the more potentially damaging things I might see. Not sure where it's come from - and it's not too disruptive – but I'm interested that it's reared its head. I forgot about it again after a while so maybe it's just me sorting things out subconsciously...

DAY 775

Discussions on station about how there are more suicides at the moment and how people are generally less positive. I felt uncomfortable at the prospect of the increased chance of attending a suicide and remembered the fear of a year ago. I didn't feel the same fear, but there was a slight anxiety about the future

DAY 776

Discovered at work that there had been two suicides overnight – one guy who had jumped from height and one who had hung himself. It all became quite real and more uncomfortable than it had up to now. I don't know if I'm getting to grips with the general (even serious) calls which is allowing my brain more space (because I'm not thinking about the basic stuff any more) to anticipate the calls that are going to challenge me. Again, not too intrusive and I tried to use the mindfulness tactic of noticing and acknowledging those things but not judging or reacting to them – which seemed to work. I also deliberately went and looked at some of the things and thought about some of the stuff that had I had previously avoided to prove to myself that I had overcome those things and that, pretty much, everything was still OK. I know it's only a matter of time and part of me just wants to get on with it and see how I do...

DAY 789

They were talking in the messroom about going to a job that turned out to be a dead body and I found myself worried about seeing a dead body again. I haven't seen one for a year or so and normally they didn't bother me so I was a bit surprised at my reaction

DAY 791

Worked with someone I haven't worked with before - she was really good and we talked for ages in the quiet times. She didn't know it but she hit a nerve when she said she was worried about going to a hanging - and she also described the face of a person she'd been to who had been dead for a few days. The conversation and her description scared me inside and I wondered how strong I really was.

DAY 792

Got called to a cardiac arrest and suddenly thought that I didn't want to see someone who was probably dead. I deliberately drove quite a bit more slowly to the call, hoping that I'd be

cancelled before I arrived but then I thought 'no, this is stupid – face it, try and deal with it and see what happens' - a bit like days 416 and 417. So I howled through town and got there just after the first crew, managed the scene, functioned well and we got the guy back (successfully resuscitated him). It wasn't as bad as my brain told me it would be. So now it was a bit more like day 421. Result. And that allowed me to have confidence for the next time a similar situation came up...

DAY 793

I've had a really good shift round. Some really serious calls, lots of backing up other crews, lots of extended skills used and even had a successful outcome from a cardiac arrest in a younger guy. The worries from earlier in the week seem distant now – but they are still nagging away slightly in the back of my mind...

DAY 795

Had a good discussion with my clin psych just to see if I was going backwards a bit with the feelings from the shift round. She surprised me by saying she was pleased with how I'd dealt with stuff and that I'd done all the right things, even though they weren't comfortable. She was especially pleased that I'd reached out to her for help and confirmation. I wonder if she truly realises how important her support still is.

DAY 799

Saw on Facebook that a British colleague (who I don't know at all) committed suicide at home. It hit me really hard – I was surprised by how sad I was that she had done that. I don't know if it was because I've been there and it could have been me (although I never had any true suicidal thoughts) or because she had obviously suffered and not found the support to help her. It made me angry at ACC all over again because of their nine months of doing precisely nothing to help me which could have been the difference between pulling through and giving up...

DAY 807

Another cardiac arrest but by the sounds of it not for resuscitation. This time I was OK (see day 792) and I actually raced my colleagues to get there first and deal with it on my own. Sure enough it was all too late for the patient, but I sorted out the scene, helped the Police move the patient and dealt with the grieving daughter. It was all actually OK.

DAY 816

Had a good set of shifts. I think all the challenges I've had over the last few months have helped because I've come through them all successfully. From the first job of the first shift, to all the cannulations (none of which seem to have been straightforward), to an intubation that another ALS couldn't get and that the anaesthetist said was one of the most difficult he'd seen in a long time, to a successful cardiac arrest resuscitation, to a reversal of a heart attack by dissolving the clot that caused it – all of these positives have made me stronger. So much so that now, if something goes wrong or I get a bit of a serious 'wobble', I might even be able to deal with it.

DAY 818

Called to a young teenager who had deliberately taken too many pills to kill herself. She eventually agreed to talk to me and went into her bedroom to change out of wet clothes – but shut the door and I heard the blinds go. It left me in a cold sweat as I was scared she was going to use the cords to hang herself – my anxiety levels went right up. I was hyper aware for a good five minutes but she came out and we had a really good chat. That was the most uncomfortable feeling I've had since last year's events.

Later managed to process my thoughts: I *don't* have any control over other people's choices; I'm *not* responsible for other people's pasts; it's *not* my job to save everyone; *had* she decided to use those cords to hang herself rather than just draw the blinds, that would *not* have been my 'fault'. All thought processes that I wouldn't have had a year ago.

DAY 826

Really, *really* sad call to a mum who had given birth to her baby at home at 19 weeks gestation. I knew what I was going to and worried about how this might be 'the one that undid all my progress' but duty propelled me and I wanted to be the best that I could if there was any hope at all. I am, after all, hugely experienced and good what I do. The little baby was so tiny and you could see that the parents were devastated. I just about held it together (although my voice did crack) telling them that their tiny, lifeless baby still attached to its umbilical cord had died almost instantly. You could see it was a perfectly formed being – you could even tell its gender. However I didn't break. I was sad, gutted for the parents, did the best I could for them and did everything in as dignified a manner as possible...but I was OK. I understood that life is sometimes s**t and that it's part of my job to be part of that. But I *understood* that – it wasn't something that I felt *responsible* for and I could rationalise it.

All these experiences are 'wins'; I don't wish for them, but when they happen they allow me to become stronger in my mind and thought processes – which makes me a better practitioner.

DAY 836

Had a really good job followed by a *really* bad job. The good job was backing up a colleague for some extended skills with an exceptionally sick patient who probably had a massive infection (and who we treated effectively). The bad job was to a young guy in a huge accident who, despite our collective efforts, died in front of me. I expected to be pretty shattered by that but, although sad, I managed to rationalise and keep the call in perspective. I was able to acknowledge the tragedy but not let it destroy me. I felt a bit guilty for *not* feeling worse about it but my clin psych said that was an unhealthy attitude and that my initial reactions showed how my resilience and coping strategies are effective.

Postscript

I think now is as good a time as any to stop writing things down. I'm functioning well and I've regained a balanced view of things, but most of all I have a plan and an ability to fall back on something when things start to become too much, or when I begin to lose perspective. I'll never be unaffected by things, but I think I'm at a place where those things can't break me any more. I'll never forget, but I know that remembering isn't going to cripple me. When I leave my profession, it will be because of a rational decision, not an inability to cope.

I've discovered that a situation like mine is interesting to people for a while, but the long term investment is often lacking. It's almost as if it's an exciting and new topic of conversation to begin with, but actually a bit boring after a bit and too much of a bother to actually become invested in, as that does actually require some effort on their part. This is a long term, gradual process that is slow and (sometimes) steady – not an instant hit, a cinema-style recovery where the protagonist suddenly bounces back and returns as a renewed hero.

Actually that's not fair – a few people do genuinely seem to stay in touch and want to check up on me, but the majority have fallen by the wayside.

The other thing is people's reactions. With the best intentions, you get responses ranging from 'take a concrete pill' to 'you should just get over it and move on' to 'if I were you I would...'. The Kiwis have a saying: 'Kia Kaha' (be strong) and use it as an encouragement, or a challenge before some trial...they'll say it forcefully or shout it out as motivation...but by the time you've got to where I was, it's not a choice any more.

'Being strong' is not a viable option. To be clear, NONE of the above is appropriate. I even had one person tell me that being off work and being paid for being sick sounded ideal. Sometimes it's just not worth the effort to do anything other than sigh and roll your eyes after they've gone.

You will never understand the workings of a mind that has been so damaged that rationality no longer exists. You won't be able to appreciate the fear, anxiety, aversion and revulsion of seemingly normal (to you) every day events, discussions and occurrences. You haven't hidden away, or shied from contact, or been engulfed in terror or horror at something that everyone else can just shrug off. *All* you should do is listen, empathise if possible, avoid pat answers or glib comments and admit that you haven't got a clue about where I'm coming from or where I've been.

The fact that you genuinely listen, even ask questions and are just supportive is what makes the difference. You don't have the first inkling of why I panic at certain sights, or see things that aren't there – and that's OK. Don't try to resolve my situation, just sit with me while I'm in it and let the professionals work the rest out.

I came through the other side after a really hard year of treatment. It's not always easy but there is help and there *is* always hope - and it's worth fighting for.

PTSD doesn't just leave you – I think it's always there once you've succumbed to it – but if you get the right treatment, it becomes a kind of early warning system. I will now recognise those uncomfortable feelings and know that I have to deal with them properly and promptly, using the strategies that I've learned from my clin psych. The mindfulness of 'noticing but not judging' particularly helps me – that, and knowing that it's actually *okay* to have slightly 'sticky' thoughts and feelings and that I can deal with them.

I may even be stronger precisely because I have an awareness of what broke me and have the ability to challenge it early.

Onwards and upwards. Bring it on.