

CHAPTER TWELVE

A client's perspective¹

Derek

(Endnote by James Macdonald)

I always felt that I experienced depression in a cyclical fashion and that I could feel my mood slipping over a long period of time before it “bottomed out” and started coming back up again. Sometimes, the transition was very fast, but on reflection I think that this is just the final stage of the mood drop and that the background change was still probably over a longish period—a bit like the funnel shape of going into a black hole—the last bit is the steepest. I also used to have what were probably manic episodes, especially when I was younger—I used to quite enjoy these periods of intense energy and drive, apart from the fact that you knew there would be the negative payback at some point. I’m sure I was probably hard to live with at those times too!

The most recent depressive episode was brought to a head when I was subject to fairly relentless bullying from my line manager and I felt that I had nowhere to go for support and that the backlash from taking formal proceedings would have made the process pointless. While this period was the trigger point, it was, I am sure, not the whole reason for the episode—I had been aware of feelings of despair or hopelessness for some time, the difficulty being that I was so familiar with this that I tended not to do anything about it and treated it as just the general default position of my life. Being depressed was a state of being and I managed it through sheer determination. I never took time off work, even when I felt utterly dreadful and continued to hold a responsible job. The main effects were a sort of nihilist attitude to life, devoid of colour, interest, and excitement and a deep, deep tiredness that permeated everything I did. I read a lot, as I always have, mainly as an alternative to living and getting out there and doing. It became a safe way of opting out. I didn’t make plans, think about going on holiday, or making friends. My main focus was to maintain my job and to be organised and in control.

After meeting with the psychiatrist at my local hospital as part of my regular routine appointments we discussed about my going for an assessment for a talking therapy. I was very

happy to do this. I had decided that enough was enough and that I was tired of being on the depressive merry-go-round and that really tackling some of the issues would be a useful thing to do. I was also tired of taking medication with all the side effects that they have—such as putting on weight, which made me feel bad, etc., etc. After the first assessment there was a long time gap and eventually I went for another assessment before starting therapy in the summer of 2009. My thoughts and feelings about going were mixed. I was excited at the thought of facing some of the demons that I knew I had been suppressing for many years, but there was also some anxiety about being in a situation where I would do just that! I remember being frightened that I would not be able to control the emotions that I might tap into and I would end up in a heap on the floor. I was especially afraid of unleashing feelings of anger that I had repressed for decades. Additionally, I had concerns about being taken seriously, or that the things that I felt were important would seem insignificant to the therapist and that I would be made to feel weak or a bit useless. As a child I had always been told that there were always people worse off than myself—which of course, there are—but the effect of this was to be trained to believe that whatever I felt or thought was worthless and irrelevant. From this perspective, it was a frightening idea that I would be put in a position where I would be asked to talk about issues which affected me in the full expectation that whatever I said would be diminished. However, my initial fears were groundless as I found that the first session went well, I was listened to and taken seriously. I had tremendous feelings of relief that I was going to be supported on this journey and that I didn't have to carry everything any more—writing this I feel quite emotional at the recollection of the burden being shared at last.

I recall [the most distressing] part of the therapy [sessions four and five, when Derek's symptoms increased] very clearly and I remember feeling dreadful for a period. The work we were doing was becoming challenging and was bringing up a lot of very old memories, impressions, and behavioural responses that were geared up to maximise the survival of a very lonely and frightened little boy. To revisit all of this, even in the very safe and supportive environment that was created during the sessions was extremely difficult. I think the hardest part was trying to approach the anger that I felt about events in my early years which still resonated in the adult me and the grief that I felt about the loss of "what might (or should) have been". I remember James saying that for some people therapy was not the right path to take and I felt very anxious and was afraid that he was going to give up on me, which immediately translated into my being unworthy of continuing with and so on. I think I expressed this and he saw my concern and stated very clearly that he would make sure that he didn't say things like that in the future—this certainly helped me to continue as I felt he was being supportive and interested in me. I remember crying a lot during this period, both in and outside the sessions and it seemed for a while that going to therapy was becoming driving off for my weekly howl. I do remember wondering if it would ever stop—for me it was very exhausting to be at this stage, and I used to leave after the hour ready to go for a rest rather than drive straight to a whole day's work. I do recall a turning point when the tears became real grieving—there is a different quality to them and the emotions seem to come from a very different part of you. It was very clear that I was reaching back into some very deeply buried feelings and that I felt much better afterwards—exhausted, but somehow lighter. I don't remember ever being ambivalent about the work we were doing—I knew that it was going to be tough at points and that to some extent it would get worse before

it got better. I went into the therapy with the very clear aim of making it work and that I was going to use the opportunity I had been given as fully as possible. I do think that I continued to “hold back” during our sessions, especially in the first eight to ten. I was still learning to trust James and myself—I also think I was afraid to let go, not knowing what would happen—being a bit of a control freak, I suppose.

I remember finding the role play sessions difficult to start with, not because I am uncomfortable with role play, but it was difficult to visualise my parents and to keep them focused while I was talking to them. However, it was a very powerful tool which enabled me to confront all kinds of issues and be able to express how I felt about things that had happened to me when I was young. I most remember being almost goaded by James to get angry and really express it—which I found really difficult—and when I felt at the point of letting it all out it suddenly dissipated into nothing. I thought I would feel angry at not being able to express anger, but on reflection I think I was expressing the anger—but in a way I didn’t expect. I had no residual feelings of anger or anxiety afterwards and I was particularly surprised and moved to realise that I had sympathy for my parents and some understanding of what their angers and griefs may have been about. I felt that I understood them more and could forgive them for many of the things that they had caused—I didn’t condone it but I felt able to understand it and let it go. The release of pressure was huge and I think it was then that I felt I had turned a corner and was beginning to embrace the “me in the middle of me”, to allow myself to be an OK person—which up to then I had never thought I was. It was a very lovely awakening to see that I was—and am—a good person. At this point I was able to start being less hard on myself for every little error and fault and started to enjoy being me. I even drove all the way to [name of city] to buy an electronic keyboard and started to play the piano again, which I had not done for years—it will take time, but I will play that Beethoven sonata!

It was around this time that James and I started to talk about self compassion and mindfulness. I bought a couple of books and CDs and started to follow the meditations with very rapid and satisfying results—it was all so simple but effective and I continue to do the meditation (though not as often as I ought to) and recite the “may I be ...” mantra very often—I find it helps to centre myself when I get a bit stressed, or even do it when I am feeling fine as I can then enjoy the feeling of well-being that it brings. For me it was the combination of working through the sessions with James and being able to be proactive by doing things for myself outside them. Essentially, I was being given permission to be me, and for someone who had always lived for others and been moulded by their demands this was a wonderful revelation.

As I have mentioned above, I started to follow the guided meditations in mindfulness and to actively learn self compassion, catching myself when I erred and started to have negative thoughts about myself. I also spent a lot of time reflecting on the work we had focused on in the sessions by going through some of the role plays that I had done, and explored my feelings about these and thinking and feeling through the dialogue with James. The technique of feeling where an emotion was in my body and identifying what it felt like was useful in staying in the moment and really exploring the feelings that I was experiencing. I learned a lot about accepting my emotions as valid and human instead of being ashamed of them.

I have to say that I believe I was very fortunate to have James as my therapist. He made me feel comfortable immediately and was both very supportive and challenging as required—it

would have been easy for me to hide away but his experience saw all of those little strategies and made it easier for me just to be open and honest. I found the sharing of information reasonably easy as I don't feel that I am closed off or ultra-private in that respect. But of course the level of sharing is very high and there were times when I felt exposed and open to judgement or ridicule, especially in the earlier phase of the therapy. As trust developed it was easier to disclose information and to be comfortable about exploring it. Although I was very open to James and he was extremely supportive and warm towards me I always felt and knew that it was a therapeutic relationship. This didn't stop me from experiencing the warmth and genuine interest that James directed to me as an acceptance and permission to say what needed to be said, feel what needed to be felt, and still be held in positive regard. He did remove most of the elements of fear from the process.

The most useful part of the whole process was the regularity of the sessions, and that they were (most of the time) in the same room. The familiarity of both the person and the space was important in helping me to feel valued—it's odd, but if the room had changed a lot I would have felt that I wasn't being taken seriously and was just being fitted in here or there with little regard for how I felt about it. We were able to maintain the continuity of the sessions by planning any breaks well in advance and by my determination to attend, regardless of how difficult the previous session might have been. I didn't feel negative towards it at all and I think this mindset really helped me focus on the work that I was doing. The really interesting thing is seeing at the end of it all that the "solutions" are actually very simple, but as you are your own problem there is no way you can deal with them on your own—with James as facilitator and therapist I was slowly drawn towards the end of what had been a very long tunnel.

I still have days when I feel very down and maybe even depressed. However, I now accept these as part of the human condition as I do my realisation that I too am human. Learning to be kind to myself was a major achievement for me and I hold on to that whenever I get difficult times. I have always been kind and compassionate to others—I am now experiencing that myself, and it feels good. My relationships at work have improved enormously, especially with regard to one person, and I think my going to therapy has done him a wonder of good! I feel more confident and less likely to feel anxiety when things go wrong or if I have to deal with a difficult situation. I suppose I am more centred and although I always appear calm I actually am calm (or at least calmer). My piano playing continues to develop and I am trying to learn a lot of new pieces—Beethoven and Mozart are favourites at the moment. I haven't really got back into composing, though I did start a string quartet last summer—I may pick it up again this summer. My personal relationships are better and I continue to work at being both more assertive and more compassionate with my partner—as in any close relationship there will always be issues—I hope now that I am able to confront them before they get twisted out of all proportion and erupt in an uncreative and messy way. This is not always the case, but the percentage is getting better. I actually feel as though I have finally grown up. I am now able to fully acknowledge my responsibility for myself and those around me, and find that I don't blame other people or resent them for something that they should (or should not) have done. The role plays with my parents were highly influential in this in that I finally forgave and understood my parents more than I ever had before, and that I could now be free of the repression and unkindness that they had directed my way. I had learned to understand them as people from the perspective of

being an adult, not carrying the childhood memories and impressions, with all their faults and imperfections being accepted. During the progress of the therapy I felt as though I was growing into myself and becoming more aware of my ability and viability. It's a bit difficult to describe, but it felt as though I was finally, properly, inhabiting my body and mind in a real way and that I could be proud of that, of who I am and the things that I have done and continue to do. The main achievement is the lessening of fear and anxiety—about anything and everything. I can approach life and its challenges in a more level-headed, calm, and confident way, knowing that there will always be “stuff”, but that it is nothing to be afraid of—I actually laugh at it much of the time now and find that any anxieties usually fade away pretty quickly. I have a much better sense of the future and although it is likely to be difficult in some ways over the next few years due to elements out of my control I find that I can imagine a number of alternative scenarios that are comfortable and will bring along with them a whole new world of challenges and surprises. Therapy is an ongoing adventure and although the sessions came to an end some time ago, I find that I use the strategies that I learned all the time and that I enjoy being a work in progress.

Endnote (by James Macdonald)

Derek is in his mid-fifties. He has had a successful career and currently holds a senior job in his employing organisation. Derek reported a twenty-year history of recurrent depression, and one brief hospital admission following an overdose twenty years ago. Derek had been assessed by another clinician and had been waiting for treatment for one year before starting therapy. I work as a clinical psychologist specialising in psychotherapy. I trained in EDT between 2006 and 2008 and have a long-standing interest in experiential approaches to therapy, having spent six years training in Gestalt therapy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. My use of EDT with Derek involved working collaboratively to identify emotional conflicts through, for example, mirroring defences, underlying feelings, and anxiety, helping Derek to regulate guilt, shame, and anxiety about his feelings, helping him identify and experientially confront Superego/self-attacking processes, supporting an attitude of self-compassion, and supporting him in emotion-focused restructuring of his internalised relationship with his parents. The work was done within the UK National Health Service and was limited to twenty sessions.

Several months after his therapy had ended, and with his agreement, Derek responded to the questions presented in Table 1, to provide his perspective on his therapy.

Table 1.

Questions put to Derek by James several months after the termination of his therapy with James

Derek, could you say something about the nature of the depression you suffered, what it felt like, and how it affected you?

Could you say something about what it was like to come to therapy for the first time, what you expected, what you noticed, and what your initial impressions were about what would be involved, and so on? How did you feel after the first session(s)?

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Questions put to Derek by James several months after the termination of his therapy with James

The session-by-session symptom scores during the therapy show that you actually were feeling considerably worse—more anxious and depressed—around sessions four and five. I guess at this point we were working on feelings and memories that were very painful. I wonder if you could describe how you felt in the therapy at that time and how you experienced the work we did? What did you find hardest? Were you able to fully let me know how you felt at that time? Were you at all ambivalent about our work then? Were there any other times which were particularly hard?

Also, I'm wondering if there was a tipping point for you, when it began to feel as though you were going in the right direction and you started feeling better? Was there anything we did together that sticks in your mind as being particularly helpful? Did your motivation fluctuate during the therapy, and if so, were there any elements of our work together that influenced that?

Could you comment on what you did outside the sessions to support the work we were doing? Generally, I was thinking of the things you did to make the therapy work between the sessions.

It would be great if you could reflect on the therapeutic relationship, for example, what it felt like to share so much of yourself with a therapist? What different impressions about the relationship crossed your mind? How you experienced my interest in how you were feeling? Any moments that were especially difficult or especially helpful, and so on.

What other aspects of therapy did you find more helpful?

Finally, how are you now? For example, any persistence of difficulties, your well-being, relationships, work, creativity, and so on. It would be great if you could say something about the impact of the therapy on your life now. How things have changed in your life? Any differences you are aware of in relationships, how you handle conflicts or stressful situations, how you feel in yourself, your sense of the future, etc.? Also perhaps any limitations to what we were able to do in the time we had.

Note

1. The present chapter evolved from collaboration between the first author, Derek, and his therapist, Dr James Macdonald, who emailed several questions to Derek about his experience of a therapy that had terminated some months earlier. The questions and background information are presented in an endnote for the interested reader.