

‘The day I buried my demons’

I have been suffering from OCD and other anxiety disorders since 1971, which all started with germs and worries about my health. The OCD started getting worse in November, 1974 and May, 1975. It came on really bad with intrusive thoughts. I could not make them go away and found them very distressing. I felt enormous guilt and I was afraid to tell anybody about them. I carried on the best way that I could and I went around thinking I was a bad person for years. In the summer of 1978, the intrusive thoughts came on really bad again and I thought I might lose control. I went on holiday to Southern Ireland in August that year and was bombarded with horrible thoughts, during the two weeks that I was there. I did not get any peace from them and felt enormous guilt. I remember travelling back to England and had thoughts that I might lose control and hijack the plane.



In the summer of 1982, I was referred to a psychiatrist to be assessed and I was put on medication. This helped a little bit but did not get to the root of the problem.

I was also referred to a neurologist, as I was having involuntary movements in my arms and legs. They carried out tests but they came back negative. The problems can only be anxiety related.

In January 1999, my father died and this made my anxiety problems worse. The following year, spring 2000, I was referred to a psychiatrist and a psychologist. I was assessed and my medication was changed. In the autumn of 2000, I was assessed by another mental health team and was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. They put me on the waiting list for exposure therapy for a year and in the autumn of 2001, I started having exposure therapy. This involved evoking the thoughts three times a day, giving a score on a scale of one to ten. I responded well to the treatment but in January 2001, I started having setbacks. My medication was changed and I started to feel depressed.

In August 2002, my mother died suddenly and my whole world fell apart. I had to move house and my OCD and anxiety went through the roof. I became more depressed and I used to go to bed, hoping not to wake up. I was also overestimating danger and had severe phobias. I telephoned the Samaritans, No Panic helpline and talking to my staff counsellor on a regular basis. I had a lot of guilt in me and was constantly beating my self up over past mistakes, thinking I was a bad person. I was a complete wreck, with low self esteem and loss of confidence. I began receiving bereavement counselling and this lasted for ten months. The counsellor's name was Debbie; she was very helpful. And at the end of the counselling sessions, Debbie gave her opinion on me and told me I was a very nice person. She also told me I was a good person and wished me all the best for the future.

In the summer of 2003, things started improving; I started enjoying life again. I had a few setbacks but kept going. In April 2004, I took a ten week course at South Thames College, Tooting in South London. This was an introduction to counselling, with the possibility of me becoming a counsellor and at the end of the course, I decided not to progress with it.

In May 2007, I became a volunteer warden for the National Trust at Box Hill, Surrey. My role was to assist the full time warden with the duties on Box Hill and Headley Heath. This was to litter pick the area and check on the cattle and sheep. I really enjoyed my time there. On one occasion I was sent by the duty warden to look for one of the sheep that was unaccounted for. I managed to locate the sheep but sadly it was dead.

I dealt with the situation calmly by first radioing the duty warden. She came and we both got it down the hill and into the Land Rover. We then drove back to Warren Farm, with the carcass in the back of the vehicle. After that, I just carried on as if nothing has happened. The duty warden was very impressed on how I handled the situation, knowing that I suffer from OCD. I also volunteered as a warden at Osterley Park, West London. This was a big turning point for me, giving me enormous confidence.

In October 2009, I took a three month course at Merrist Wood College near Guildford. This was a course on countryside crafts and estate skills, in preparation for a career change. This involved skills such as fencing, sheep handling, coppicing, hedge laying and tractor driving. The tractor driving was amazing. We had a day of it and I really enjoyed it. The tutor said I done very well and I thought it was not bad for somebody who cannot drive a car.

Day one:

In July 2010, I took a four day course on basic tractor driving. This was again, at Merrist Wood College. This was a four day course and on my first day, I did not get off to a good start. I was given a choice of tractor and I chose a John Deere, which was green with yellow wheels. The tutor asked me if I had any experience in tractor driving and I mentioned the one day workshop, on the countryside crafts and estate skills course the year before. He asked me if I wanted to drive the tractor out of the shed and into the training area. This would involve driving across a private road, within the college grounds. On that occasion I declined, so the tutor drove it over to the training area himself. I then got straight into the cab and then, he showed me the instruments and controls; my anxiety levels were up that day. I then switched on the engine and he got me to drive slowly, to touch the end of a traffic cone. I did not do too well to start with but after I had lunch, I started to improve and my anxiety levels were down. I was instructed to touch the end of a cone and reverse back, carefully touching the cone, with one of the three point linkage arms, situated on the back of the tractor. After two hours, I then drove it back and parked it outside the shed. The tutor was very pleased with my progress.

Day two:

I was shown three DVD's on what could happen if tractors or other agricultural machinery are not used correctly. It shows reconstructions such as a man trying to board a moving tractor, after failing to apply the hand break. He then falls underneath the tractor, fatally injuring himself. The DVD then shows a doctor talking through the

autopsy, in great detail; explaining the details of the injuries. I was shown other reconstructions, involving tractors and farm machinery. After watching those three gruesome DVD's, undeterred, I went straight to my tractor, carried out a pre start check, and the tutor drove it over to the training yard. I carried out several manoeuvres including hitching up to a trailer and driving around the circuit and backing the trailer up and unhitching it. The tutor then got me to drive the tractor back to the shed, which I did without any problems.

Day three:

I did the usual pre start check and drove the tractor to a short distance be refuelled by the tutor. After that, I drove it over to the training yard to practice hitching up a trailer and other agricultural equipment. I then drove around the training area at commercial speed, with the trailer attached. I then backed the trailer in a straight line and unhitched it. I then practiced hitching up to agricultural equipment with a PTO shaft and after the practice sessions, I drove the tractor back to the shed and parked it outside.

Day four:

This was the day of the test and I was feeling very apprehensive about it. I got there before nine o'clock in the morning and met the tutor. The test began with me doing the usual pre start checks on the tractor. I then drove it out of the shed and straight over to the training yard. I then hitched up to a trailer and drove off and I had to



reverse it into a tight corner. This had to be done with out touching the curb otherwise I would have failed the test. Then after that, I drove back to the spot where I hitched up to the trailer and unhitched it. After that, I drove over to some other agriculture equipment and hitched up, using a three point linkage and PTO shaft. After hitching up, I drove around the yard and back to the spot to unhitch. I then drove back to the shed, carefully backing the tractor into a tight space in the shed. The theory test on tractor driving and safety followed after the practical. I passed the practical, subject to a restriction on my licence. This is because I am inexperienced with tractors. That will mean being under close supervision, with someone checking that I have hitched up the trailer and other agriculture equipment correctly. That was better than failing altogether and I got eighty seven percent in the theory test. The tutors told me I done really well; I was very pleased with myself. That was the proudest day of my life.

Going back to 2002 and 2003, I was a total 'wreck' and I did not have any confidence in myself. For someone who used to overestimate danger, getting into a cab of a tractor and qualifying shows how far I have come. Back in 2003, driving a tractor would have been light years away. For someone who has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety Disorder and had severe phobias, this is a fantastic breakthrough, giving encouragement and hope to other sufferers. A lot of people were very pleased with me, including Jean from No Panic, Sutton and Merton and Alison from Southgate OCD group, as well as the people who attend these two groups. Also, Colin from No Panic and Joel from OCD action were very pleased too.

When I took on this four day tractor driving course, I took on the anxiety and won. When I was in the cab of the tractor, on the day of my test, I was not only doing it for my future career, I was doing it for my fellow sufferers and I was determined not to let them down. I now volunteer at Merrist Wood College, working with tractors for future employment. This is using annual leave from my current job, which I face redundancy in the future. I have just got an NVQ in customer services, level two, which is equivalent to five GCSE's. I hope other sufferers benefit from my achievements and become successful themselves. I believe there is no such thing as "I can't" and I believe you can if you think you can.

Gerry McEvelly