

TURNING OFF THE ANXIETY TAP

Words by Will Van Der Hart

My family had rented a small cottage in Brittany and we were heading off on a coach trip for the day. I don't know if it was me or my older sister, but one of us turned on the hot tap to wash our hands just before we left. The problem was, that the tap refused to turn off. A jet of boiling hot water was pouring into the sink and the bathroom was filling up with steam. My dad assumed we were just messing about, but as hard as he tried, he couldn't close it off either.

The Anxiety Tap

There is so much about that scene which relates to the challenge of dealing with anxiety. For me personally, despite publicly appearing to have 'overcome' GAD, I still have to deal with anxiety on a daily basis. This has led to me describing the flow of adrenaline in my body in terms of a tap. Most days the tap is closed and I don't consciously think about it. Then there are periods of infrequent flow that interject into my day, like a flash, jolt or a falling feeling. Finally there is my "L'eau coura" experience where the adrenaline tap seems to be stuck in an open position. This can leave me feeling wired, shaky, sleepless and jumpy for a few days at a time.

If I am honest there is linked progression between these three states and when I am paying attention at stage two I can get things back before the tap gets stuck. Sometimes though, I just push on and hope for the best, which rarely works as a strategy! Anxiety tends to steam up the room and makes calm and strategic decisions harder to choose. When it comes on, I also want to catch a bus somewhere else, which lends intolerance and unhelpful urgency into the mix.

So, here are things I have learnt about turning off the adrenaline tap.....



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1. Attempts to escape your anxiety are futile and only propagate it. Accepting that the tap is running is the first step to changing the flow.

2. Anxiety always forces you to see a catastrophic future: 'You will never sleep again, never feel peace again, never have an appetite.' All of these things are untrue and will lock the tap open. Stay in the present moment and coach yourself positively and calmly.

3. Look back at the journey into anxiety for clues about how to walk out of it. Have you been over-working, under extreme stress, had a big family event, been sleeping poorly? If you can see the pathway in you can often see what you need for your recovery out.

4. Talk to people who are kind. Knowing that other people understand how you are feeling breaks the isolation and fear that anxiety can propagate.

5. Look out for stimulants. Some people find that too much coffee, fizzy drinks, chocolates or new medications all impact their adrenaline flow. As soon as the tap gets stuck reduce all your caffeine intake and review any medications with your healthcare provider. I usually avoid all caffeine from 3pm in the afternoon or switch to herbal completely.

6. Practice physical stress relief exercises. I do Pilates on a mat in my sitting room. It helps me to stretch out my body and improve my breathing all at the same time. I often find that relaxing my body has a dynamic impact on reducing the anxiety in my mind.

7. Visualise calm. It has taken me years to get this bit working for me, but having a visual image of calm in my mind helps me to slow everything down and reduce anxiety, especially before sleep. For me it is an image of casting a fishing line into a slow-moving river.



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8. Be patient. Rushing recovery only extends it. It may have taken 3 weeks to get the tap stuck open and you should expect it to take the same amount of time to close it.

9. Pray (but not for escape) thanking Jesus for his presence with you in this period of anxiety it deeply powerful and healing. Knowing you are not alone and welcoming him in to these feelings will make a massive difference. (Just try to avoid using prayer as a quick fix. You may be healed but leave that bit to God rather than driving for it yourself.)

10. Laugh. I hate having an anxiety problem but being negative about it only makes it worse. Keeping a sense of humour and practicing gratitude for all of the blessings in my life keeps anxiety in proportion and stops it stealing more of my joy.



ON THE SIDELINES - SUPPORTING SOMEONE AROUND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

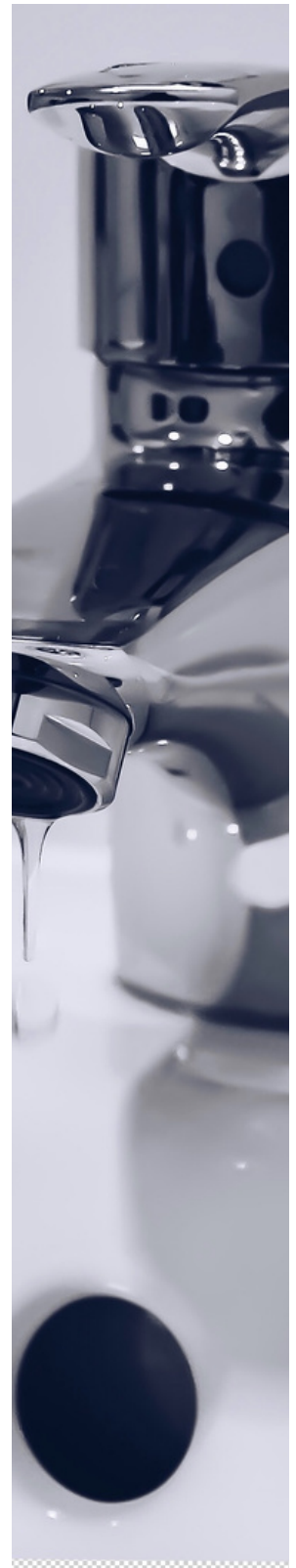
Words by Dr Kate Middleton

But it was in a radio interview with Alex that the parallels of his experience to enduring and surviving emotional and mental illness struck me. In the podcast episode of 'Don't tell me the score' in which Alex features ('Don't tell me the score' is a radio 4 podcast looking at heroes from the sporting world and was they can tell us about bigger topics - well worth a listen even if you are not a sports fan as such) he tells the story of a moment when he was free climbing another great peak - Half Dome. As he was climbing, caught on a particularly difficult part of the climb he found himself stuck and for a moment in the grip of doubt and panic. He hesitated and struggled, not sure what to do next and caught between the inevitability of his gradually getting more and more tired, and his fear of making the next move, almost overwhelmed by panic and the sense of the enormity of the pressure he was under and what he was trying to pull off. But all the time the rest of the world is tantalisingly close - normal life continuing oblivious to what he is going through and how his life literally hangs in the balance. He says:

'That's the whole thing with Half Dome - and this whole experience I was maybe 100 feet below the summit. And Half Dome is this crazy mountain where the summit juts out - its called the visor - and so you can occasionally see people's heads looking straight over the visor and they're looking straight down 1000 feet all the way to the ground. So I can hear people having a good time - and it sounds like you know a shopping mall or something above me. But I'm by myself having this crazy experience.'

He continues to tell of how he eventually does make the move - and finishes the climb, arriving at the summit - but still no one knows what he has just done - no one has seen, **no one understands the enormity of what he has just been through.**

The visual image of what he describes just made me think so strongly of what it is like to be fighting something in your own head - whatever that is - memories from the past, trauma, or the darkness of your own thoughts and emotions. The isolation people experience is a mixture of something self imposed - as everyday life becomes harder and harder the desire to retreat from it strengthens. Many people withdraw - whether in reality or just into their own heads as they struggle to keep going. But it is also often something to do with the particular nature of what people are experiencing and how hard that is to understand or to describe. Putting into words the kind of bleakness and cloud that can fall over your mind and your world is near impossible, and some particular circumstances such as past trauma or memories from the past surfacing makes that particularly hard.



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As you endure mental and emotional illness therefore, often the majority of people around you are oblivious to what you are going through - to the invisible fight behind the scenes, the reality of what it is like to face the things you are feeling, or remembering, or experiencing. You are - like Alex - clinging to a rock face, in the middle of the climb of your life, clinging on and desperately trying to fall. Gripped in your own struggle it can feel at times overwhelming, the battle to keep holding on and to keep climbing - and all the time the buzz of the crowd is in the distance as the rest of the world continue with their life. It is often said there is nothing more lonely than being in the middle of a crowd but still alone, and that sense of doing things on your own is a cruel pain when you are already fighting so hard.

That is why the role of those who love and care for you means so much. They take the time and care to see the unseen - to look below the surface and recognise what you are facing day to day. They take the time to ask - and care enough to really listen to the answers, whether they are actually verbalised or not. They hear what is unsaid, and are willing to sit and hold whatever you are saying - or not saying, when silence says a lot more than words.

In her book 'A spirituality of survival', Barbara Glasson speaks beautifully of the journey taken by those working through trauma and abuse - and how they move from life 'sous vivre' (french for living under) their experiences to life 'sur vivre' - literally living over (and of course the origin of our word survive) and above their experiences. She describes how people are drawn in - how when you are living under and overwhelmed by the pain of past trauma, you can effectively disappear from normal life, unable to engage with it, spectating on your own existence and doing the bare minimum to get through each day. And I love what she says about the vital role those who love and care for people in this place play in their coming through it, saying that:

'We are most likely to 'sur vivre' if we know that someone is searching for us, that there is a longing for us to re-surface among those who realise we are missing.'

So - this one's for all the carers - all those who realise someone is missing.

For all who notice someone is gone and miss the fullness of their presence.

For all who felt the clouds descend, but didn't walk away.

For all those fighting a darkness that is not theirs.

For all those holding hope against the weight of despair.

