

How to Put a Troubled Past Behind You

A FRESH* drawing-based approach

(*Find help, Record your feelings, Examine your fears,
Sketch your thoughts and Harvest your success)

This blog offers a short, step-by-step approach to overcoming deep-seated insecurities and fears. It encourages readers to be brave, explore the repressed feelings that so many of us still hold within us, and then get them out of your head and onto paper, where they can be better managed and overcome, by drawing them in the most basic terms possible. No artistic ability is required! It's a process I call the **FRESH** approach. This blog is structured around this 5-step, FRESH, approach.

- 1) **Find** a suitable, qualified therapist (if you are not already seeing one or have not already seen one). This step is a simple one, but it requires courage, and is vital.
- 2) **Record** all your feelings by writing them down. Recording your feelings can be as simple as jotting down whatever is in your head in the most rudimentary manner (just scribbling down key words can suffice). No writing ability is needed whatsoever, just a willingness to carry a small pad of paper and pen with you, or to have a notes app on your phone, to allow you to jot down whatever comes to your mind. The writing I propose you do is for you, and for you alone, and there is no right or wrong way of doing it.
- 3) **Examine** your anxieties, fears, insecurities and doubts in detail (this is where much of the hard work is done, aided by familiarising yourself with some basic psychology themes). What is more important than anything is the courage to ask yourself some difficult questions and to look for their answers or explanations with the appropriate guidance.
- 4) **Sketch** and draw your thoughts to clarify and solidify your progress. Please note that anyone can learn to draw their emotions using very basic methods. I encourage you to use very simple stick figures, some speech bubbles, and subsequently perhaps use some basic objects such as the outline of a house, a tree, or a mountain. Please remember that any drawings you make are for you alone and do not need to be shared with anyone. A bit of childlike sense of fun can go a long way to helping you here.
- 5) **Harvest**¹ all of this information until you feel good about yourself

Please note that any consideration of past traumatic events should always be undertaken under the care of a trained and accredited therapist.

To become *FRESH*, you need to desire recovery, have the courage to be honest with yourself, be ready to extract and process painful emotions, be patient, and have the time and energy

¹ 'Harvest' in this sense means collating and harnessing all your recovery efforts to nourish you for the future.

to do so. The benchmarks are simple, small, daily realisations that you are a much better and worthy person than you ever dared realise, culminating in robust self-respect and a real sense of achievement.

The first step is a simple one, but requires courage.

1. Find a suitable, qualified therapist

If you are in any way like me, you need to give yourself the proper, personal attention that you have, no doubt, denied yourself for too long. I had decades worth of feelings and emotions within me that I understood very poorly. All I knew was that there was a plethora of emotions inside me about to erupt like a volcano. The first task, therefore, is to try to understand these emotions by talking about them with a therapist. So, find a good therapist that you click with (you're likely to recognise this when it happens). This may involve a few trial sessions with different therapists. Finding one with whom you feel comfortable makes the whole process of recovery easier and quicker.

There are different types of help available. I underwent psychotherapy which is often understood as a more long-term version of counselling. Whereas psychotherapy involves digging deeper into one's past, counselling involves addressing more current issues that a patient is perhaps more readily aware of, without the need for 'deep diving'. Psychotherapy is, therefore, more time intensive and costly. Because my issues were rooted in childhood experiences, psychotherapy was the only realistic route available for me.

For those of you in Wales, a first port of call should be the NHS Wales Traumatic Stress website at <https://traumaticstress.nhs.wales/>

2. Record all your feelings by writing them down

To complement talking about your feelings, I urge you to get into the habit of writing down, in brief form, what is going through your mind at any one time. This can, and later will, include some initial thoughts regarding what might be driving these particular thoughts. In my experience, such a practice doubles the effectiveness of recovery by solidifying emerging explanations of why you feel the way you do with how you have evolved into this state. In essence, you must get your feelings out of your head and onto paper where you can see them in a clearer light. Unfortunately, the mess is in your head, and only you can sort it out. So, ruminate, ponder, muse, contemplate and get it out onto paper. In short, it's much easier to deal with your past once it is in black and white in front of you, than when it is piled up in a mess in the recesses of your over-burdened mind.

Some practical tips include always having a small notebook and pen handy, or a notes app on your smartphone (I used a pen and paper to begin with, but I now use the notes app on my phone). I used to have a dedicated writing time where I would go out, find a quiet corner in a café or a pub, and write down my thoughts for the day. This could be for 5 minutes to an hour, depending on the circumstances. I recommend you do the same by trying to commit to writing something down every day, even if it's for five minutes between chores. After a while

I noticed that thoughts would come to me without much reflection and at greater speed, so I now type stuff into my phone at all times during the day, and regardless of what I'm doing or where I am (this sometimes necessitates a quick trip to the toilet to avoid looking odd). I would also suggest having a pen and paper next to your bed to note down any interesting dreams you might have or anything thing that comes to mind when you wake up in a fresher state of mind. Please remember that the notes you record are for your own use, and not for anyone else's, so grammar, spelling or punctuation are largely irrelevant.

3. Examine your fears through introspection

To further complement your recovery, you'll need to examine your psychological and emotional history in more detail, through introspection. You are studying yourself and this requires attention and inquiry. This technique goes hand-in-hand with talking to a trained therapist and writing down your feelings.

For some time now, I have been working on being more introspective. I am always on the lookout for anything that's troubling me, such as any of the following:

- a distant memory from the past;
- an innocent remark from my wife that has somehow caused me unwarranted upset;
- a recurring dream;
- an intense feeling of shame, insecurity or anxiety;
- a pang of hate or deep frustration;
- a sudden realisation or different interpretation of a formative event from my past;
- any overblown, irrational fears that occur to me;
- trying to understand why I feel so anxious about an upcoming event, such as a school reunion or meeting a friend from the past;
- reliving past traumatic experiences and seeking alternative ways to interpret what happened and how I reacted at the time;
- what I am yearning for emotionally at any given time;
- why certain types of people make me feel insecure;
- the origin of some seemingly dark or distorted desires (including sexual ones);
- exploring my seemingly bottomless sense of personal, toxic shame;
- any secret desires to inflict harm on myself or others;
- the impact of many years of rather strict religious teaching in childhood;
- what would make me feel better about myself;
- my strange behavioural traits.

I'm trying to drill down and pinpoint exactly how I feel at any given moment, taking note of the troubling and upsetting images that regularly cross my mind. I hope the above list is of use to you during and between sessions with your therapist.

You may find, as I did, that many of the notes you make are repetitive and seemingly insignificant. But keep going. I have found note-taking a good way to express some deep-seated emotions that needed more than one pass to get to them.

A note on dreams. I am a big believer in the power of certain dreams to reveal my subconscious thoughts. I almost always write down intriguing dreams and then tell them to and discuss them with my therapist.

To enhance this process of introspection, and to clarify more specifically what I am feeling, I often use a thesaurus to unpack and pinpoint the exact emotions I am feeling in the moment. For example, if I feel a strong sense of deep shame for no apparent reason, drilling down into my feelings may also unearth the coexistence of feelings of humiliation, helplessness, anxiety, fear, self-blame, vulnerability, and so on. I keep going, aided by the thesaurus, until I'm satisfied that I've captured and written down exactly what is bubbling up inside.

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

Once the therapy sessions and writing are well underway and, with the support of your therapist or counsellor, you've started on the work of careful introspection, you can make your recovery process even more effective by converting your newfound wisdom into drawings. Talking and writing are great, but to really crystallise and get a grip on your past you need to become more creative. I have found that drawing what I am going through to be a very effective way to achieve this. You might prefer painting, writing poetry or some other creative form – so long as it forces you to capture the essence of what is inside you.

Needless to say, the more therapy sessions you attend, the more regular you're writing and introspection, the easier it will be to understand your newfound insights by converting them into drawings. Thinking about how best to represent your feelings and psychological state of mind in drawings helps you to clarify, specify and determine what you really believe deep down which, until now, has likely existed as a vague, abstract and perhaps disparate collection of repressed, painful feelings. In this sense, the most basic of sketches can help you to start forming a rudimentary understanding of the formative experiences in your past.

My drawings tend to cluster around a number of concepts:

- describing my suffering to myself in a way that helps me to understand the depth of my insecurities and fears
- story-boarding emotional experiences from my childhood to better understand where these insecurities and fears come from
- applying basic psychology and self-help concepts to my own experience, in order to integrate them into my recovery
- more positive, forward looking drawings about the recovery process, thus giving myself an 'exit strategy'.

You have all the material you need for expression inside of you

Anyone who has gone through some form of traumatic experience, particularly in childhood, will have at their disposal a wealth of material waiting to be expressed in some form or other. It is likely to be bursting to get out, if you can find the courage to release it.

Basic drawings

Basic stick figures

I started by drawing simple stick figures of myself with some simple text describing my feelings and I recommend that's how you begin too. The beauty of this simple approach is that you can focus solely on how you feel and not worry about any artistic notions (I have none that I'm aware of anyway). The idea is to focus purely on how you are feeling. So, grab a piece of paper and a pen, or a tablet, and let's start.

To begin with, I suggest you draw your face. An oval or a circle will do for now. Don't draw it too small, so that you can add some facial features.

Now, add how you are feeling. I've drawn a range of emotions at the bottom of the blog below. Just copy whichever one suits the emotion you have in mind. I've also included some stick figure shapes for reference.

5. Harvest all your thoughts to build a complete picture of your past and future

Through a process of finding a psychotherapist with whom I clicked, recording all my feelings, examining and getting to know my insecurities and fears, and then sketching and drawing my thoughts, I was slowly able to move on to the next and final phase, namely, harvesting these new insights and, making the most of them to solidify my progress. This involved the following.

Continuing to record and write down my feelings and realisations

The more I undertook the first four parts of my FRESH approach, the more I was able to harvest my burgeoning understanding of my psychological past and turn them into positive lessons. This led me to draw some valuable lessons from my work. These lessons included:

- It took a lot of courage to admit to myself, and then overcome, how dreadfully I saw myself. It also took a lot of courage for my inner child to accept that my parents never really had my best interests at heart (partly because they were themselves emotionally damaged during their own childhoods).
- The process was about finding the courage to speak truth to power. As a child, I lacked the ability to address the cause of my trauma and to process its effects on me. I had no choice but to accept the abuse and the accompanying sense of humiliation. Therefore, as an adult, I still felt like a small child, in fear of standing up to my parents. The only way back to respecting myself was to speak truth to the powers that had dominated me in childhood, largely in my imagination. Almost exclusively, I had to focus on and fix my dysfunctional relationship with

my parents, as this relationship defined to a very large degree how I saw myself and all my subsequent relationships.

- I had to become an expert of my own psychological past and especially, my childhood. It was important for me to get to know, in intimate detail, objectively and without wallowing, my childhood pain, suffering and trauma. Only by intimately knowing my subject matter could I hope to become its master.
- I needed to answer all of those long-lost internal phone calls from myself, which I had ignored at the time and had diverted to my subconscious answering machine.
- I found out that real personal growth occurred when I focused on the most painful emotional and psychological experiences from my past, and that brutal honesty with myself was the best policy.

Happy drawing!

Michael Davitt, October 2021



Aggressive



Agonised



Anxious



Apologetic



Arrogant



Concentrating



Determined



Disappointed



Disapproving



Disgusting



Distasteful



Exasperated



Exhausted



Frightened



Frustrated



Grieving



Guilty



Horrified



Hurt



Innocent



Lonely



Miserable



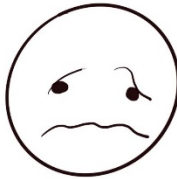
Negative



Pained



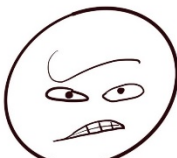
Regretful



Sad



Shocked



Surly



Shocked



Withdrawn