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**Introduction**

Like most people I have had a varied career path. Unlike most people I have been fortunate to have had four career paths.

I left school with the advised number of ‘A’ Level passes and embarked, as most boys of a certain age did, on an engineering apprenticeship, which ended up with me as a Logistics Director with a wife and son some years later. When the company I worked for relocated, I found myself being made redundant.

What to do? My wife was pregnant with our second child and had always had a desire to run her own company with the intention of helping people change their lives. So, we swapped roles. I became a house husband and she started Advance Performance.

When both our sons went to school, a friend asked me to join him in enrolling on a counselling course. I was hooked and three years later I was a fully qualified counsellor.

Advance had progressed a long way in that space of time and I had been on a number of her courses including Peak Performance. It was, and still is, an eye opening experience, and has a positive effect on all who enrol on it.

Seeing the difference it made to people’s lives I decided that I would try and help those less fortunate than me, sorry for the cliché. I had undertaken to do my training in a prison so the natural step was to carry on there, which I did.

Adapting the theory of Peak Performance to fit in with the counselling I was fortunate to work in prisons for 14 years where I met a varied group of people. Many of them benefited and as inspiration I decided, with a push from quite a few people, to relate their stories and their progression in life.

All the stories are true and all the people mentioned are aware that I have written this. However, I have changed all their names.

I truly believe that as the stories prove anyone can change.

**Tony**

Even after 14 years of being a prison counsellor, meeting someone new is always a little exciting.

In a prison, it always carries the air of heightened anticipation. Who is he? How long will I able to see him for? Are we going to get on? Questions that rush through your mind as you wait for internal movements to commence, the general daily hubbub as 200 men are let out of their respective cells and proceed to whatever routine they are on. Workshops offering mundane to advanced engineering products; tailors who make a vast array of goods from curtains to clothes; laundry, which accommodates hospital linen as well as the prisoners’ own clothes; kitchen duties; gardening; education; health care or chapel.

When you train to become a counsellor you’re never totally prepared for what a prison environment throws at you. The calm serenity that you are encouraged to promote when counselling goes flying out of the window. In fact, I would say that in a vast majority of cases it was never in the room to start off with!

In general sessions are between 8 and 20 weeks. This is fine in the ‘normal’ world but prisons are (and have to be) run on a different level. You have to get used to the fact that there is always the possibility that whoever you might be seeing could quite easily be moved, at a moment’s notice and without any warning. In some cases, this can make it very difficult to handle and monitor guys with long term problems. Often, you have to treat each session as possibly being the last one you may have with them.

The role of counsellor can turn into or run in parallel with being a mentor. Very few of us realise the hardships that some of these guys have lived through both physically and mentally, and ordinary things such as how to communicate, how to pay a bill, how to be a parent are major problems for them. In some cases, the actual act of doing any one or all of these things becomes too much so they ‘run away’ - generally back to their life of crime where they’re doing what they have always done because it is easier for them to handle. Why is it so much easier for us to do these things when these guys cannot (or some may say don’t want to)? What makes our life of holding down a job, running a home and family life, taking a holiday, etc. so much harder for them to achieve?

Many people, not just those who are in prison, are stuck in a rut and find themselves unable to escape the mundane daily routine (that becomes too easy or creeps up without anyone realising what or how it has happened.)

Years before I became a counsellor, I attended what was the first Peak Performance course run by Advance Performance. It was probably the reason I re-trained to become a counsellor in the first place. I had a desire to help people realise that they can do whatever they want to do, achieve whatever they want, and not be restricted by what they have been conditioned to think, believe and behave. The effect of this conditioning is huge, and it is only when the shackles of our belief system is removed that we can finally begin to achieve our full potential.

So, on that sunny Monday morning I awaited with anticipation the arrival of a guy called Tony. I only knew that he was serving a three year sentence and originated from the South of England. With all my clients, I refused to listen to the prison staff who wanted to tell me, what they were in for. As my strategy was always that if the counselee wanted to tell me that was fine and if they didn’t that was also fine.

I understand that most people would find it very unsettling to be placed in a room with a convicted criminal, however I soon learnt that other people’s observations are clouded by their own fear or their perceived prejudices. I remember once being almost physically sick when led to a padded cell and told that this guy was very dangerous. However, I found that, when I accepted him on equal terms, the guy was fine and very soon the situation was defused.

The one thing I knew for certain was that Tony wasn’t going to be transferred to another prison as he was on a course which was unique to the prison. The course was part of his sentencing plan which finished two weeks before his official release date. Even more relevant was that he had asked for counselling himself rather than being told to attend. Self-referrals are always slightly easier as you can usually skip over a few preliminaries because you don’t have to overcome the awkwardness of someone who has been told to attend. Or those who just don’t want to be there or have just turned up for the free coffee and biscuits! Biscuits are a big thing in prison; if they want biscuits on the wings they have to buy them and generally they don’t come cheap! It was a well-known fact that if you wanted a good turn out to a course, play, talk, or even the annual Christmas Carol service, just let it be known that biscuits or (manna from heaven) cake would be served, and the place would be filled to the rafters!

Tony was an easy guy to get on with. I found that he had been speaking to another guy whom I had counselled and whose attitude had changed and in his words,”…..wanted to try a bit of that!” He was a 28 year old guy who had a long term partner called Anne and a beautiful three year old boy called Liam. He proudly showed me some pictures of them which he carried everywhere with him. They lived in Stockport and visited every week whilst building a stable home for him following his release. He had a sister who lived just around the corner from Anne and everything would be just hunky dory when he got out. Or would it?

He spent the first two or three sessions settling down and getting used to me and the sessions. He was always very upbeat and life was just brilliant - but it seemed as if that was what he thought I wanted to hear. Thankfully it wasn’t too long before he trusted me enough to allow me to start the delicate job of trying to establish what the real problem was.

This is a brief summary of what he told me over a six week period:

His life had not followed the ‘norm’. He and his sister (18 months his junior) had lived in a small two-bed terraced house. They shared a room because his mum entertained lots of men and needed her own space. His biological father kept popping in and out of his life up to the age of about four when he disappeared for some considerable time.

He remembered times, not necessarily happy ones, when his dad would take him and his sister to the pub for a treat. Tony would have a glass of lemonade laced with either beer or whisky, whatever was his dad’s tipple at the time. He never remembers being taken home but used to wake in his bed, which was usually wet, with his mother shouting at him and calling him all the names under the sun, but his usual name was ‘trouble maker’. It was also the favourite name his dad called him.

From the age of five, his mum would disappear for days, sometimes weeks at a time, leaving him to look after himself and his sister. As there was never any food in the house he would steal to keep them alive. I asked him why he never told anyone about their situation such as a teacher or neighbour etc. The answer was always that he didn’t want to be split from his sister.

Tony struggled through school, not because he wasn’t bright or keen, but because he always had to fend for his mum and sister. His teachers weren’t perhaps as aware as they could have been and he soon became labelled as a troublemaker, forever being told that he would make a mess of his life and would never become anything other than a mistake!

It was at this time he met a guy called Tom, who appeared as one of his mother’s friends. Unlike the other men, he took to both Tony and his sister, trying to ensure that they both had food to eat, taking them out and just generally being with them and encouraging them both to learn. This was fine until his mum found out after Tony foolishly asked her if he and his sister could go and live with Tom. His mum threatened to tell the authorities that Tom as a child molester (a total fabrication) unless he moved away. Tony was told again repeatedly that he was stupid and a troublemaker and he was to blame for Tom leaving.

Life became generally worse. His mum stayed away for ever increasing lengths of time. He kept taking longer and longer breaks from school, initially to look after his sister and then becoming mixed up with lads who were not the best influence on him. There were numerous police visits, and from the age of 12 small periods of detention. At 16, he developed a passion for guns and cars (not a good combination) and the periods in prison increased. The guns and cars situation worsened mainly due to the prisons he was placed in and his desire to seek out a role model.

On one of his brief periods out of prison, he met a young lady and they had a couple of children. This seemed to calm him and he thought of settling down, but the only problem was that he didn’t believe or think he could do anything. He found his way back into prison and whilst there, his children’s mother decided she had had enough and left without warning, taking the children with her. Tony found out and escaped from prison which put him on the run. He tried to track them down only to find that they had left with one of his mum’s friends. Tony slipped back into his old ways, the cars continued as did the guns now combined with cocaine and heroin - anything to make money.

Finishing a prison sentence, he met Anne who had a calming influence on him, and shortly after she found that she was pregnant. Tony tried to make a fresh start away from the life he had known by moving up to Stockport. Together they took on a flat and at the same time, his sister, who was now married, moved up as well. All was progressing well until his mother decided that she wanted to move in with them. Tony refused and so she told the police that he had been involved in a robbery for which he was convicted and sentenced.

That is when we met.

In listening to Tony’s story I soon realised that he didn’t need counselling long term but he desperately needed mentoring. His need for a role model to advise him on how to live life was paramount; he really wanted a father figure. Whilst I could not be a surrogate father to him I could act as a mentor.

Here’s how our conversation went ….

*‘What do you say to your son, Liam, when he comes to see you, Tony?’*

*‘Come here, little trouble!’* he said with a certain amount of pride.

*‘Then what do you say?’*

*‘I tell him to go and play over there where the toys are’*

*‘Do you tell him why?’*

*‘So I can talk to your mum.’*

*‘What do you think that tells him Tony?’*

*He looks at me blankly. ‘That I err……’*

*‘Do you ever hug him?’*

*‘What?’*

*‘Do you ever hug him?’* I repeated.

*‘Why?’*

*‘Why not?’* I ask.

*‘What do you talk to Anne about?’* I say. *‘Not the personal stuff* ‘, I add as a proviso.

*‘Well, I generally tell her what to do and what she can’t do’*

*‘Why say that to her?’*

*‘Well, she’s forever asking me what my days have been like and it’s the same old thing and she would get bored of hearing that.’*

*‘Let’s stop and think here for a moment. Why do you call Liam a troublemaker and why don’t you hug him?’*

*‘That’s what I got called, and it’s the way they showed affection wasn’t it, and my dad never hugged me, in fact men don’t ever hug.’*

*‘I hug my kids all the while and they’re teenagers who are into fitness.’*

The look on his face betrays his incomprehension that this could happen.

I thought about the Peak Performance course and explaining about dendrites and the taxi driver and electricity, but realised it needed to be more basic than that.

*‘If you get called something for long enough you brain will think that it is true and make you believe it.’*

*‘What!’*

*‘Why do you think you got into so much trouble, Tony?’*

Then the realisation seemed to hit him.

*‘You mean to say that because I was called that name years ago that’s what I have become!’*

Stunned silence.

*‘You mean to say that all the stuff that was done to me and I got called has made me what I am!’*

Stunned silence.

At this point I told Tony a story of someone who jokingly called her daughter a ‘little bastard’ and was horrified when someone else had asked her who she was, and the daughter replied, *‘I’m a little bastard*!’

*‘You mean to say that Liam will grow up thinking he is a troublemaker if that’s what I call him’*

*‘Most probably.’*

*‘Oh s…! Oh ….!’*

Next session and he’s hardly through the door ……

*…. ‘Does that mean I can hug him without him thinking I’m soft or making him soft as well?’*

*‘I would recommend it! In fact, if I could bring my two lads in I would, and you would see that they’re definitely not ‘soft’ ‘*

*‘What about Anne?’*

*‘What about her?’*

*‘What should I tell her?’*

*‘What she wants to hear, what your days have been like.’*

*‘Really?’*

*‘You bet!’*

This scenario was replayed numerous times during our meetings over the following weeks.

Once Tony had had time to take this information in, the more receptive he became. It was as if I had suddenly opened this floodgate and he couldn’t stop ‘stuff’ coming out. The thought that he was treating his son the same way that he had been treated almost made him cry. The idea that he was putting his son through the same thing he had been through was abhorrent to him. The way he spoke to Anne was what he had heard the never ending trail of guys in and out of his mother’s life speak to her.

At times I wondered if I had done the right thing or if it had been too much. Two or three weeks later I had a call before Tony’s session started. It was from Anne. She wanted to thank me, *‘Whatever you have done it has worked. Liam actually wanted to come and see him now whereas he had begun to not want to go. Tony’s stopped accusing me of stuff now and talks to me. Thank you.’*

Then an officer from Tony’s wing rang and asked me how I had changed him as he was now beginning to act responsibly. I explained to him and was surprised that he thought I was talking tripe, but if it worked for Tony then that was ok! And could I encourage him to become a leader and mentor for some of the younger guys who were struggling!

When Tony came for his next session, I approached the possibility with him of taking a more hands on approach on the wing. Compared to recent weeks he appeared a little subdued so I asked him what the matter was.

*‘Well I was telling some of my mates what we had been talking about and one of the guards heard me and told me you were having me on and I was just a stupid little …. And I would never be anything other than a troublemaker.’*

*‘Ok so what do you think about what we have been talking about?’*

Silence.

*‘Well, Anne says I’m 100% better, and if I don’t continue she’ll leave me. Liam loves coming to see me and we hug and play trains in the visiting room and there’s a bit of me that feels freer so I think what you say is right. I just wish other people didn’t want to keep knocking me down.’*

Here was a classic representation of a terrorist in an organisation. Someone who fuelled the misconception that all men in prison were bad and would always be bad so that when they were released and came back he thought he looked good by saying the eternal ’I told you so.’

To explain this in detailed terms would have been a bit deep for Tony and we would be going off the path to his recovery so I opted for:

*‘Does it matter what the guard thinks of you working towards making something of your life?’*

He thought about this for a while. *‘So he probably has issues that he can’t resolve so he just lets them out on people who can’t answer him back.’*

I replied ….

*‘Beware of throw away comments. You never know how someone else’s mind might process them; others behave according to their self-image, and you have to behave according to yours. That guard, when he spoke to you, was promoting his self-image and his comments. You were picking them up and trying to fit them into you. The uncertainty was with your ‘old self’ recognising your new ‘self’. There will be a lot of people who will try to knock you down. Keep true to what you believe and move forward – which brings me to the next point, I think you should go for the leader/mentor’s job on the wing.’*

He didn’t need a lot of convincing as he saw it as a way of proving to people that he had changed. With the proviso that I carried on seeing him and helping him along the way.

*‘It will be easy after what you have been through. Lead by your own example. Just remember a couple of things when leading a group. As you found with the guard, remember not to throw away comments as you don’t know who will pick them up. Listen to people who are around you and try to see the self-image they are giving you and the others in the group. Always wait before reacting to a situation or comment as the immediate emotion will dissipate, or as some people say, put your brain in to gear before you open your mouth! To help with your own confidence, keep your mind on the things you want and away from the things you don’t.’*

Tony seemed to take to it like the proverbial ‘duck to water’. After a shaky start he grew in self-confidence, and after a comparatively short time the tutors were allowing him to take the sessions on his own. He did have the advantage of being ‘one of the guys’ but his enthusiasm was infectious.

The next step I felt was for Tony to start setting goals for himself - to give him a point to aim towards. Positive self-talk was something that was new to him but, again, he embraced the whole ethos. It took a while for him to understand the concept of self-talk - that it is everything that you think, feel or say. He soon understood that if you woke up feeling gloomy and didn’t do anything about it the chances are you will remain like that.

*‘What a waste of a day!’*

Afterwards, we tried some mind mapping sessions, which he thought was great and of real benefit.

*‘You mean I can put everything I feel or want to do on a piece of paper and no one will tell me off? Wow!’*

He grasped the context that in order to change his behaviour he had to change his self-talk as it was this self-talk that built his expectations. He saw that he was a product of his enforced belief that he was trouble and would never achieve anything.

He had many goals ranging from six months to 10 years. Inadvertently, this also helped him with his exit plan - all prisoners have to complete a plan of action for when they are released and the timing fitted in perfectly. The main ones for him were to gain some qualifications and to keep his family safe. He had been working in the gardens at the prison for a while and the guards had been encouraging him to take his SVU (a recognised certificate) - what better way to start!

Within three weeks he had put in for his SVU, taken it and passed with the highest mark possible! The next step was equipping him for a job. Simulated interviews are held at the prison but sometimes the people running them are not as up to date as they could be so they end up being a bit of a farce. I intervened here and asked a close friend of mine who holds interview training in schools to come and help prepare him.

Now cast your mind back to earlier in this piece regarding people possibly being uncomfortable with criminals…. Unbeknown to me at the time, my friend was more than a little apprehensive at being in a prison and all that that entails. Thinking I was being helpful I showed her around the room and ended with the innocent comment of ‘*Oh, and there’s no panic button in here*,’ (every office in a prison should have one in case of trouble!!!). Following this I left the room to meet with Tony and after introducing him left the room. Thankfully everything went really well. I don’t know what was said but the effect was brilliant.

Tony’s sentence was coming to an end and he was moving on. On our last session he was quiet and reflective. He was so grateful that someone had actually shown some interest in him and taught him about life.

He never lost his enthusiasm for cars and owning one was on his goal list. He loves guns and is quite an authority on them. He wanted to know if I thought it would be ok to teach Liam to shoot.

*‘As long as you do it correctly and join a registered club and wait till Liam is old enough.’*

Mondays seemed much quieter for a while following Tony’s release, but true to his word he keeps in touch. We talk every few months and he knows I’m at the end of a telephone should he need anything. Following an interview he secured a job as a builder with a special interest in landscaping. He has also managed to put down the deposit on a house not far from his sister and as a family they are doing it up. They plan to marry soon after Anne has given birth to their second child and he now mentors young guys through the local police.

He refuses to have anything to do with his mother now although he did manage to track down Tom and they see each other a couple of times a year.

He also is in the process of getting visiting rights with his older two children.

**Mark and Judy and Pete and…………Me and You.**

Depression can be explained in various ways, but for this story, here’s the description that best fits the parameters:-

*“A mental disorder characterised by feelings of gloom and inadequacy”* from *Collins English Dictionary.*

Based on this definition it’s difficult to choose just one person that I saw over the years. Whilst considering this, and my own situation, I decided to be a bit controversial and include different people because I wonder if we don’t all suffer from some form of depression at some time in our life. Continual sadness, irritability, frustration, focusing on the small things, inability to have fun, insomnia or always feeling sleepy, overeating or having no appetite, anger, fatigue, the feeling of worthlessness, crying, guilt, the list goes on. In some cases, it can go further when the thought of suicide and death are prominent

Depression is much more than just feeling sad. It is a mood disorder that can interfere with everyday life. According to medical experts there are six different types of depression including depression with mania known as bipolar or manic depression. Having untreated depression can put your life on hold for months, if not years.

Someone said that…“*It’s like being in hospital and you’re in real pain. The painkillers are on the side table just out of your reach. 50% of the time you believe that the pain relief will work so you grimace and as the pain increases you reach for the pain relief, take it and you are ok. The other 50% of the time you don’t really believe that they will work so you crawl down further under the sheets and let the pain take hold of you.”*

I remember being shocked as Pete told me this, but this is what it must be like for some people, this is how it feels for them.

It is only comparatively recently that depression has been “outed.” People in the public eye were suddenly prepared to admit that they suffer from depression and they started to talk about it. Stephen Fry was lambasted by the critics when he walked away from a performance of a play in London and disappeared for several weeks. *“Why did he do it, didn’t he think of the other actors and especially the people who have paid to see him!”*

After appropriate help he improved remarkably, and later he invited, and welcomed, the cameras into his personal life as they followed him in his daily routine and continued filming when he suffered the start of an episode. More recently he has admitted to feeling suicidal.  He is now, with help of medication, in control of his illness. He has recently been a huge success on the London stage, and as well as his hugely successful television career, got married and been voted the man most of us would like to be marooned on a desert island with.

Ruby Wax has battled depression for years and is now a Mental Health Activist as well as a top selling author. Her book “*Sane New World – Taming the Mind*” is a thought provoking study that is both very funny as well as informative. She begins: “*1 in 5 people have dandruff, 1 in 4 have mental health problems. I’ve had both.”*

Other famous sufferers are Winston Churchill who used to call his depression *‘The Black Dog’, and* Sarah Churchill, the British author and columnist.  Whilst studying Sylvia Plath (the American poetess and author who was believed to have suffered from depression) for her PhD, Churchill said she was constantly parrying the question about why she chose to study someone as depressing as Plath. She replied: “*I didn’t find her depressing,  her story was more tragic certainly but her art was not: her poetry is by turns funny, touching, raging; her novel The Bell Jar is about depression and suicide, but is also a blackly hilarious social satire.”*

Does that mean that it is disrespectful to find fun or see the funny side of things if you are a sufferer? When the news broke of the tragic death of Robin Williams a lot of ink was printed. It is disheartening, to say the least, to read social media asking: “*Given his wealth and success* w*hat had someone like Williams to be depressed about.* Such questions are symptomatic, not only of a profound misunderstanding about the nature of mental illness which does not arise from external causes, but also from our society’s crazy faith that anyone should find salvation in money or fame.

The world as we know it doesn’t escape as our society suffers from depression too. The Great Depression started just prior to World War II. Unemployment in some countries reaching 40%, prices fell by up to 60%, (and with few, if any, alternative jobs the future was grim). Most economies started to recover in the 1930’s. We’ve had numerous other recessions, but nothing comparable to the “Great One”; we suffered one recently but we come out of it. Perhaps the same can be said for most forms of depression if we have the correct means to tackle it.

I have encountered what I called ‘moody’ people many times. I used to enjoy amateur dramatics for many years and the profession seemed to be full of ‘moody’ people who we tended to call ’Divas’.  But I suppose I became more fully aware when I started counselling. You undergo treatment programmes when training but I never felt that they went far enough. After studying Person Centred and then Transactional Analysis (both types of counselling models) and then attending the Advance Peak Performance course, I believe there is a way to help people to be more in control of their emotions.

Mark and Judy both worked in the chapel at the prison with me and both suffered from depression. I believe that they both fed off each other, picking up each other’s moods and emotional swings. This is very similar to the “Identity Players” that Advance use for companies and a counselling technique called “The Johari Window” which highlights our current state of mind.

Many mornings I used to go in and find the staff not talking to one another and I became the go-between. Things had to change, especially after one day finding Mark on his own looking very serious inspecting a note book. Thinking it was a plan for some meeting, I asked how things were only to be told that he was planning in detail how he was going to kill himself! After a long talk, I managed to retrieve the book from him and focus his mind on something more positive.

Clearly this could not go on so I took the initiative and tried to help Phil and Judy, and the rest of the staff as well as some of the prisoners – understand that negativity spreads like wild fire. The trigger was an event that started most mornings. Mark’s wife continually moaned at him before he got to work, complaining how bad he was at everything. When he finally reached work, he was so fed up he became angry towards his colleagues and especially Judy, whose desperate need to please everyone, including Mark, just fuelled his emotion and invariably ended in tears.

His colleagues didn’t realise that he found it impossible to rise from the mood as he knew that when he went home he would more than likely face another roasting from his wife. Interestingly, Mark didn’t know who he was angry with, just that he was angry. The rest of the staff chose sides and unfortunately poor Mark, because of being continually undermined at home, was not the easiest of people to approach. He used to get the cold shoulder from most people including his boss - basically because they didn’t understand him, or his unfortunate situation.

I talked with him and he acknowledged he needed some help. After talking with his wife on her own, then as a couple, the undermining stopped and his moods lightened. After talking to Judy and working through her need to please everyone I suggested that they have a group prayer time before work. The whole situation eased considerably, most importantly for Mark and Judy. Prayer can be a great strategy, particularly if you have faith. However, if you are uncomfortable with the idea of prayer, a time of meditation is also a proven positive healing strategy. It isn’t a cure but if it makes it easier then surely that has to be better?

Cures are perhaps a long way away and miracle cures even longer. At the end of the film “*Awakenings*” Robin Williams delivers a speech that has now acquired a terrible resonance, as his character explains what seemed a miracle cure: *“Now we have to adjust to the realities of miracles. We can hide behind the veil of science and say that the illness itself has returned…..The reality is we don’t know what went wrong any more than we know what went right.”*

Sadly the world may never find a complete cure. Any company who invents one will earn a fortune!

Pete was a really nice guy who had suffered from depression for a long time. He came to me one morning ready for a fight. He had seen counsellors before and they were all idiots.

After a long, rambling tirade which included threats of suicide and self-harm he ended with some caustic comment and went quiet.

*“*So you won’t want to see me again now will you?*”*   His last statement almost dared me to say yes.

*”*I would be happy to see you again if you would like to come, and I promise I won’t ever try to talk you out of killing yourself, however I will say that it would be a tremendous waste of life.”

That’s it, I thought, he won’t come again. Next Monday there he was and he never missed a Monday after that until he was discharged two years later.

The basis of his problem and the source of his depression was a father who continually undermined him and told him he would never make anything of his life, and a wife who only wanted him when she wanted children or money; the rest of the time she wouldn’t allow him in his own home

“Why did he stay?” I hear you exclaim. He stayed because it was the only place he found any kind of love at all, so he held on to it for as long as he could. He did, at the beginning of our sessions, believe that his father was eventually pleased with him because he ended up in prison, just like his father told him he would – self-fulfilling prophecy or what!

I believe a massive part of trying to help someone is to try and understand the process that depression takes.

In Pete’s case it was multi-layered. Sometimes he could feel his mood change and he knew he was heading for a *“downer”* as he used to call them. Other times he would go to bed fine and wake up “*in the pits”.*  The time he spent in these periods could last anywhere from a few days, weeks or even months. During these periods of his life, the effects could be devastating. Pete would cry for no apparent reason (not ideal when in a male prison with a couple of hundred macho men!) He couldn’t sleep and when he did he had the most horrendous nightmares, he couldn’t eat, he would be ratty and worry over the most trivial of things like where was his black pen whilst the more important things like workstations and visits got forgotten. He couldn’t concentrate on anything and in the longer sessions he questioned why he was even alive. Wayne was also very aware of the effect he was having on everyone else and there was a part of him which really enjoyed seeing people hurting like him. Supporting the theory of the Identity Parade or the Johari Window mentioned earlier.

When not in his ‘downer’ he used to say that in reflection it was like looking at someone else and he sometimes had difficulty in recognising himself.

Then the million dollar question ….. did he want to get out of it? His answer was “*Sometimes!*” To some people that might sound silly. How could anyone enjoy being in that state of mind? Why would he not jump at the chance to accept a solution? We need to remember that in that situation when all his senses and emotions seem to have shut down and left him, it seemed easier for him to stay where he was because the remedy was too painful to take, so he thought, *“I’ll just stay here thank you very much.”*

I also found out that Pete had worked for a period on the oil rigs and in a large steel plant in Germany. It was interesting that while he was there he didn’t suffer any episodes of depression. He was always with people, always doing something and was always needed for his input.

So that was the answer, keep him busy!

(If everyone who suffered from depression were kept perpetually busy I had found the miracle cure, I’ve made my millions! If only it were as easy as that!)

Looking at his self-talk seemed a good starting point. I used Advance’s Self Talk Circle which considers your beliefs which in turn equates to your performance and behaviour which again in turn fuels your self-talk. The best place to start was his belief (fuelled by his father) that he was useless. He had a younger sister who was the one person who was always there for him and believed in him as best she could, despite what their dad said. Unfortunately she suffered from ill health but she never let it stand between them.

Pete was a very talented artist but was always afraid of producing anything in case he was told it was bad. I encouraged him to start a couple of easy sketches that he could sell as cards to some of the guys on the prison wings. This was a huge success and very soon he was running a small side line, all perfectly above board, making cards and drawing pictures of the guys or their families. Even the staff asked him to design cards for them. He donated some of the cards for varying charities that the prisoners support.

*“I’m not completely useless am I?*” he asked one morning.

His depression didn’t disappear but the periods of him staying “down” decreased.

There was a national contest in British prisons for paintings by inmates. The staff and I supported Wayne and encouraged him to enter. He designed a multi picture of Ayrton Senna which took him about three weeks to finish and the end result was stunning. He entered his picture and won the national competition! We couldn’t persuade him to go to the presentation of the awards, but it sat in his window for the remainder of his sentence.

Very soon a group of other like-minded artists got together and it wasn’t long before he was giving lessons, both on the wing and in the Education Department.

We went from, ”*I’m useless*”to “*I’m not bad really, am I*?”  What a great improvement!

As with most ideas, you only need a push to get things rolling then you watch it gather speed. And gather speed it did. He enrolled on a mechanical course and because of his knowledge of rigs and metal work he soon obtained his certificates in Standard and Advanced Metal Work. The staff who ran the workshop asked Pete to design and make a set of ornamental gates for the gardens, and with his team he completed the project. The gates were a fine example of craftsmanship and are still admired today.

It wasn’t all plain sailing. There were some mornings when it was just too hard for him to maintain his new-found zest for life and the old memories would come flooding back. Nothing of note triggered them but something clicked in his mind and he went into shut down for a while. He never stopped seeing me during his down times and those sessions were some of the more painful for him as he recounted long forgotten memories.

The positive self-talk continued and the times when he believed he was useless were far outweighed by the belief “*I’m not too bad*.” I really wanted him to reach the belief “*I’m brilliant*” or “*I’m feeling awesome*” but I had to rein in my enthusiasm. The lesson I repeatedly had to learn from all the guys I counselled was that progress had to be in their own time not mine.

About nine months before his release, Pete received some news which I thought would floor him. His sister had developed a kidney disease which in the long term would necessitate a transplant. Her blood type was a rare one but as soon as he found out he asked to have a test to see if he was compatible. A few nervous weeks passed before he found out that he was a suitable match and was told that once he was released he could donate a kidney to his sister. He suddenly realised that he had a purpose in life. Those last months seemed to drag for him with the realisation that his sister could die before he was released. However, his resolve never wavered and the depression was much improved.

Now his first thought of the day was the welfare of his sister, not *“Oh \*\*\*\* another day.”*  I asked him if he was afraid of the operation but he had no fear.

His mood continued to change from being erratic to being somewhat calmer. His painting never stopped and he was now sending them out to his mother and sister who were delighted that he was getting his life together. He stopped listening to music that reminded him of the past and embraced Bruce ’The Boss’ Springsteen. I know Springsteen won’t work for everyone but some music that takes you away from the past certainly helps.

The time came for him to leave, and generally our last session is about completion and the journey. However, Wayne had other ideas! He knew I liked the artist Jack Vettriano and in particular the picture “*Birth Of A Dream.”* Pete had painted me a subtle copy of it which I have to say is stunning. I really didn’t know what to say. He then told me all the ways he had changed and how he believed I had helped him to achieve this. He listed all the things he was going to do with his life, how he believed he could achieve his dream of being self-sufficient with his art and how he was going to start inventing simple ‘stuff’ that would help people who were on dialysis. He was also working on his ultimate dream to buy a house and turn it into two flats, one for him and one for his sister so that he could look after her. He told me that I hadn’t seen the last of him, gave me a hug and left. The print is now framed and on our breakfast room wall at home.  Most people who see it believe it to be an actual print.

Pete knew only too well that his depression would never totally disappear. But the difference now was that he knew how to manage it without the use of pills. He was always against taking any type of tablet so was really pleased that he could do it without medication.

I should emphasise that in some cases medication is necessary, and some forms of depression may only respond to medication as in Stephen Fry’s case. Some cases though can be managed by our actions. This necessitates doing things that will mentally hurt, like getting out of bed in the morning, opening the curtains and putting on some upbeat music. It may hurt as every part of your body will scream at you to leave it alone. Rather than doing nothing you have to do something even if it’s just a small step, find a hobby that will keep you engaged. This won’t stop the depression completely but it will make it easier to handle. There are many excellent *TED TALKS* on the Web that will uplift you and they are only about five to ten minutes long. We all have a few minutes in our day to squeeze them in.

So, what happened to Pete?

Well, he and another friend he met in prison have opened a Gallery on the East Coast. There is a house attached to it and they are renovating it into three flats, one for Pete, one for his friend and the other for his sister. She had the transplant and is doing well. He suffered a little more and was in hospital for a lot longer but is now on the road to recovery, although from our last conversation he is a little bored as he needs to rest for longer that he wants. He stills follows his routine of only trying to listen to positive things and people and his ‘downers’ are not as intense, not as long, and nowhere near as frequent.

**Remember, Remember…..**

*“I can’t remember anything at all - I’m absolutely hopeless” I* have heard this said by so many different people over the years and I hate to admit it, but I’ve said it myself – (I put it down to age creeping up on me!) All of a sudden my mind starts to go completely blank, which is really embarrassing when you’re in a counselling session and suddenly you can’t remember what you were going to say and the client is looking at you expectantly.

A friend of mine is struggling at the moment as his wife is suffering from Alzheimer’s. Some sufferers and their carers call it “*The Long Goodbye*”, because that is exactly what it is. The first thing that happened to her was her short term memory started to fail and she would forget what had happened recently, places she had been to, and things and items were suddenly lost. What was not lost, however, was her long term memory, which is as sharp now as ever. She can remember things, places and people from 30, 40 and even 50 years ago as if they had happened yesterday.

‘Stuff’ in our short-term memory needs constant reinforcement so that it sticks into our memory banks (dendrites). If it doesn’t, we can tend to forget it very quickly. Hence, in my friend’s case, because there has been no chance for reinforcement due to the illness, her short-term memory is disappearing very quickly.

Our long-term memory has been reinforced over many years and consequently is deeply embedded. Unfortunately, we all give ourselves negative reinforcement on a regular basis:

*“I can’t do that …. It’s too hard ….”*

*“People like us don’t do things like that.”* This was a favourite with my dad when we tried to get him to try a glass of Champagne or fly to Jersey for a holiday! Sadly he died before we could persuade him to do either.

*“I can’t possibly stand up and talk to a group of people.”*

In the Advance Peak Performance course a key area for me was the discussion regarding memory, dendrites, and negative and positive reinforcement.

We have all had negative (and positive) reinforcement which can stay with us all our lives, unless of course we do something about it. Unfortunately we also give out negativity at times without thinking.

I remember years ago when on holiday with my sister and my niece and nephew. My sister has always had a fear of heights and walking on slats that she could see through. I was going to take her children on the Big Wheel at the fairground and her first words were, “*Don’t go up there! You’ll hate it*!” At this point they both looked at me as if I was about to lead them to their doom!

A compromise was agreed, my niece who was older, would come on the Big Wheel if I held her tight. After a lot of “faffing” we got on the ride, with her holding me so tightly I thought my arm would fall off! Up we went and at the top she looked around and suddenly relaxed realising she loved it.

Next turn I took my nephew on and he loved it too!

Another time we went to Blackpool and watched one of the many pier shows. It was at the time of Peters and Lee (for those of us who can remember that far back!), and as we set off to walk down the pier, my sister grabbed my arm and refused to let go or look anywhere other than straight ahead. We arrived early and just as we got to the theatre, Peters and Lee also arrived. She had always been a fan and as soon as she saw them, all fear seemed to have been forgotten and she rushed over, asked them both for their autographs. She managed to re-join us before the realisation of what she had done hit home. Well done her!

After talking to her over the years, I think her mum (my stepmom) didn’t like heights and she kept telling my sister over many years that she wouldn’t like heights. She isn’t quite as scared now but I still can’t get her up onto the Big Wheel - it’s still a work in progress!

Returning to my original point – “*I can’t remember that* ….”

Mick was a class act in claiming to have no memory. I never really understood why he thought that, but I think that it originated from his early school days and being slightly dyslexic. I imagine possibly a teacher who obviously struggled with him told him that his memory was bad, the rest of the class heard her say it, picked up on it and away they went like an express train. Result - he believed that he couldn’t remember anything!

I’ve heard stories of men who are dyslexic and had difficulty reading being put to the back of the class whilst at school because the teachers didn’t understand there was a possible medical condition and believed that the individual was ‘playing up’. The further back they sat the more they ‘played up’ so they were always called bad lads and that whole cycle started.

As it turned out, Mike’s memory was quite good. His recollections of his childhood were excellent as he recalled many happy memories as well as a few sad ones. He was caught in the drug trade in his late teens and managed to run a successful business - which he certainly couldn’t have done if his memory was as bad as he claimed it was! He could also tell you with amazing clarity what was going on in the Wing! Even though he believed he was useless and couldn’t remember a thing.

So to try to prove to him that his memory worked just fine, if he used it, I tried the Journey Method of Memorising with him. My wife had tried this on our kids at various stages of their development with tremendous results. When our oldest was taking Chemistry at school she asked him to memorise the whole of the Periodic Tables. She encouraged both children to remember all the books of the Bible, and with our youngest when he was about 13, she taught him to remember all the American Presidents. This was a real talking point last New Year as our oldest son brought his American girlfriend to stay and she was most impressed, as she hardly knew any of the older ones!

The technique is really very easy. On any of the his routine ‘journeys’ to school or on walks that they knew or even around their bedrooms they highlighted various things and associated them with the name they were memorising.

For example, when visiting my in-laws (about a half hour journey) we pass many notable places: police headquarters, car sales lot, restaurants, businesses and each one was ‘given’ a President. Each time we made the trip, my son would recall the names of each President, and within a week or so he could recite them all without having to physically make the journey. He’s eighteen now and can still recall them all!

So, with Mike, we had to devise a slightly different approach. He was a keen boxer, with particular interest in the World Heavy Weight Boxing Champions. It was these that he claimed he could never remember and me being a clever “so and so” kept saying “Well if you keep saying you can’t then you won’t!”

So here was the deal: if he could remember the title holders and repeat them from memory in six weeks’ time I would get him a copy of the monthly magazine *Boxing Champions.* Apparently since the Championship started with John Sullivan gaining the first title in 1885 there have been over 168 Champions. To remember all these seemed rather daunting for him so we compromised and decided to go for the 68 that started with Mike Tyson in 1990 going through to Ruslan Chagaev in 2012.

What did he do routinely every day that we could work with?

From getting out of bed and his enforced daily routine which involved going for breakfast, to and from work, or education or the chapel, the places he visited and the things he saw, we worked out a good ‘journey’.

**Week zero.** Mike produced a list, neatly written, and we worked out the scenario for each one based on the things he did or saw. When we reached Chagaev it was a bit of a challenge but as luck would have it, he could hear the morning and afternoon train in the distance so he came up with “*Choo Choo Chagy.”*

Mike told his girlfriend about this exercise and she thought it far-fetched so promised to bring his young nephew to visit him if he managed it. She thought it was a safe bet especially as it can sometimes be a little difficult for children to have permission for Prison visits and be passed by security. The young lad worshipped Mike but the family were a little concerned about the effect of seeing Mike in a Prison scenario, so they weren’t exactly happy about the promise. It later transpired that his family, like his girlfriend, believed that it would never happen so they weren’t overly concerned. How about that for family negativity?!!

**Week one.** My goodness, Mike could moan but we managed the first five boxers without too much of a problem

**Week two.** Definitely better, Mike made a big leap to 15 and he seemed quite proud of himself. He was getting a bit of backlash from some of the other guys who couldn’t understand why anyone would want to do something so stupid (not the exact words I have to say), and even some of the Prison guards weren’t as complimentary as they could have been.

**Week three.** A small leap this week to recalling 22 in total. He was becoming a bit deflated and the inner negative critic, “I told you I couldn’t do it”, was rearing its head. After some discussion about how he had improved he began to see the positive side and left with renewed energy.

**Week 4.** Mike had seen his family and they were getting worried. He had moved up to 38 and he amazed himself and the visitor in his near vicinity, when he listed all 38 starting with Mike Tyson. His confidence grew as he began to realise that it was all working in his favour.

**Week 5.** Yes! All 68 with a slight falter three quarters of the way through the list. No matter because he was there, the list was there and that was the main focus of the exercise.

**Week 6.** What he hadn’t realised was that I had asked all the staff who were around in the Chapel if they would listen to him. They were quite used to my ‘off the wall’ approach as they referred to it at times, but they couldn’t argue as most things worked. They also knew that for this, or anything to work, the guys needed to be totally committed so they were almost looking forward to it.

So Mike came in for our session, and after a quick, “*How’s things*?” I took him into one of the other rooms where there were around 20 people waiting. I said a quick word about what Mike had done and why we were doing this and turned to him.

*“Ok over to you! Let’s hear it.”*

If looks could have killed I would have been dead! But he took a deep breath and started. Absolutely no problem! Mike recited from Mike Tyson to Ruslan Chagaev without a stop. He received a huge round of applause, a cup of the best coffee and some cake.

Mike was really pleased with himself and delighted at what he had achieved. His whole attitude seemed to alter and his confidence grew over the following weeks. As promised, I purchased the magazine and he was thrilled with it as I don’t think he really thought I would do it.

His girlfriend, true to her word, arranged for his nephew to go in and see him. Mike was thrilled to see the boy and it seemed to give him a boost for his future following his release and the desire to stay away from drugs. Deep down, Mike knew that the lad would follow him anywhere and most probably would end up with a habit. This he could not allow.

He made the decision to try something else and started to take an interest in physical training, in particular boxing training. He had done some training whilst at school but the drugs took over his life and it fizzled out.

With the added pressure that his nephew was idolising him, Mike told all the family that he was going to train him in the boxing ring. They thought that the boxing ring had less disastrous results than the drugs and they backed him fully.

Mike spent a further six months in Prison and he used this time for studying. Every week he would recite the list before we started our session.

As was the way of the Prison system, I went in one morning to find that Mike had been moved to a Prison nearer his home so he could be released from there. Sadly, I never found out if he achieved his dream but it wouldn’t surprise me if one day I see his name in a newspaper as a trainer for an up and coming young boxer.

**Goal 1**

Nothing can ever truly prepare you for the horror stories you hear in a prison. Each time I thought I couldn’t hear anything worse, something else came along. As Counsellors, we are trained to leave all baggage at the door so that you are open to whatever is going to be said. We are also trained to leave all the stories we do hear in the room so that we go home without taking our clients with us. All very well in theory, but I sometimes wonder if the academics who set down the ‘rules’ ever worked in a prison.

I am usually able to forget about my clients when I leave work. There are, however some exception, such as Nicky.

Nicky was 23 when I met him. His life to date had been terrible. In fact one of the worst I think I had ever heard. His mother had walked out on the family when he was eight and his sister was ten, leaving them with their father. Their home life deteriorated almost immediately. His father didn’t want to work so Nicky was taken out on ‘shopping expeditions’ and taught how to steal while his father distracted the staff.

He became an expert and was sent into town to find something they could cook for breakfast or whatever meal was missing and soon his sister was going with him too. All went reasonably well until one day they were caught. Their father managed to get them off by claiming their mother’s departure was cause of their stealing. It was at about this time that he told Nicky and his sister that their mother had in fact died (a blatant lie which they found out years later) and they were both severely chastised by their dad who blamed them for getting caught. To make matters worse, there was no food in the house, and until they worked out a way of getting some they would go hungry.

At the age of about 11, and in an effort to distance himself from his dad, he took to running messages at the local market and he soon became a regular there, working at the stores and generally making himself useful. He also was ‘noticed’ by one of the market holders, which ultimately ended up with him becoming a victim of sexual abuse.

This then led him into becoming a rent boy for anyone who had the money. Nicky became very confused. Although he hated what he was forced to do, he did find the affection he received infinitely better than the lack of interest he received from his father. The money he was given enabled him to help his sister with food and clothing. This situation carried on for some considerable time and, unfortunately, the abuse escalated. The turning point came during a particularly violent abuse session when his father walked in, looked at what was going on and told the perpetrator, “Make sure you leave the right money this time”.

Nicky then walked out and moved in with his sister who had managed to get a Council flat with her boyfriend. Things began to improve slightly. Nicky was able to settle down at school and was offered a place at a local boarding school which he desperately wanted to attend. The only drawback was that they needed a signature from his father, who said in no uncertain terms that Nicky should move back in with him and earn some money!

To make matters worse, his sister’s boyfriend sustained an injury, was unable to work, and inevitably the bills started to escalate. In an effort to help, Nicky went back to ‘offering his services’ to anyone who would pay. Being young and good looking he managed to keep things going although to this day his sister never found out what he did, as he had told her that he had secured a job cleaning after school and at the weekend.

At the age of nineteen he found himself in a flat with some friends and life seemed to be good, at least his interpretation of good. However, some situations arose which resulted in him trying to kill himself and ended with him serving a six year prison sentence.

He needed to learn some self-worth and to trust people which became the start of our journey. The story above, which I have briefly summarised, I heard from him over a 12 week period.

For me the priority was to improve his psychological state so that he could be released and live a relatively normal life. He was a bright lad, but unfortunately he was an emotional train wreck. Firstly I worked towards the point when he could comfortably stay in a room with me, as his memory of men in a closed room situation wasn’t good. His prison officer helped and instead of Nicky coming to visit me in the chapel, I went onto the Wing where he was relatively content. We progressed slowly and after about eight weeks I managed to persuade him to leave the Wing and be in a room where we could talk privately and uninterrupted.

He needed a purpose in life, one that would help him with his self-confidence. I asked him many times what he wanted from life and he didn’t really know apart from the ‘usual’ home, family etc. That, in itself is no bad thing, but in his case home wasn’t the normal, and deep down he knew that if things became bad for him again he couldn’t go back to obtaining money in the only way he knew how. He needed a goal, a reason to survive.

One of the prime motivators at Advance Performance is Goal setting. It is an important part of feeling great and having an amazing self-image. My wife and I have always tried to instil this in our two boys from an early age with some success. This has been reasonably easy and they are now very goal orientated. Finding goals had been easy with them and it wasn’t too long before they were coming up with their own, both short and long term.

How to set about it with Nicky was more of a problem as he had no aspirations of any sort. So let’s start easy. Nicky loved to read, but had never moved on from children’s stories from school and since being in prison hadn’t picked up as much as a leaflet. As luck would have it, this was the time of the emergence of the phenomenon known as ‘*Harry Potter’.* With help from his prison officer we managed to get him a copy of the first book.

*“I can’t read that, it’s too long.”*

*“Well, at least try it.”*

*“No.”*

Another track had to be found. He was fond of guitar music and in about four weeks a fairly well known celebrity was coming to play a small concert in prison as part of an outreach programme. I had to call in a few favours and managed to get Nicky on the attendee list.

Now all I had to do was to persuade him to read the book!

*“Hey Nicky, did you hear about the forthcoming concert?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Great – how do you fancy going?”*

*“Yes, that would be brill - but I’d never be able to get my name on the list.”*

Right, it was now or never!

*“Ok, so as your first goal I want you to read Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone and as an incentive I’ll get you on the list.”*

*“What’s in it for you? What else would I have to do? You can forget that straightaway.”*

*“What’s in it for me is that it would help you achieve a goal that you claim you can’t do. All you have to do is read the book and tell me about it, and the place is yours.”*

*“Honestly?”*

*“Honestly.”*

*“Ok then, but any funny business and it stops and I get you done!”*

*“Fine! You have four weeks.”*

His officer knew what I had done and he kept an eye on Nicky. I found that Nicky had a crafty streak and went to one of the other guys on the Wing who had read it and asked him to tell him the gist of the story.

Next session in he comes and promptly tells me about the story. Great, except for one thing. The guy he had asked had tried be clever and, thinking Nicky would get into trouble gave him the story of *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets!*

*“So what did Professor Quirrell teach?”* I asked.

(For anyone who doesn’t know he taught defence of the dark arts and is only in *The Philosopher’s Stone*)

In a very cocky way Nicky asked, *“Who’s Professor Quirrell?”*

*“Have you actually read any of the book, Nicky?”*

*“Yes,”* he replied sheepishly.

*“Are you sure about that Nicky?”*

Even more sheepishly he said, *“Well you see, I was a bit busy so I asked someone else and he told me the story. But I will read it! Promise!”*

*“Well you see Nicky, he’s told you the story of The Chamber of Secrets which is the second book, and there’s only three weeks till the concert so we may end up having to give the seat away.”*

I thought he was about to cry

*“Ok I’m sorry, I just don’t think I can read it.”*

*“Why?”*

I found out that as a rent boy he had been told that he would earn more money if he was a ‘child’ so he had been given children’s books to read to create the illusion, and in his mind he was trying to please me.

*“I don’t want you to please me, I want you to do this for you because you can.”*

*“Really?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“You want me to do it for me and you think that I can?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“All right. Can I start again?”*

*“No probs.”*

I was 90% sure he would, but to help things on their way, his officer made sure that there was only one copy on the Wing and that Nicky had it.

Next session I asked him how he was getting on with it only to be told that he would tell me when he had finished it.

Next session he bounded in and told me the whole story. I handed Nicky the pass that would get him into the concert.

He hadn’t wanted me to know that he was a bit unsure of his reading ability so he had asked one of the Chaplains during their Wing trips if they could listen to him. They stayed for a while listening to him read and slowly his confidence grew so that he finished it without too much trouble.

*“I’m going to read the others now,”* and he hesitantly added, *“Is that ok?”*

*“Brill, sure it’s ok. You can read what you want, you don’t have to ask for permission.”*

**Next session**

*“How was the concert?”*

*“Fantastic, really good, but can you explain this goal thing again, and does it really work?”*

Over the next four or five sessions I explained to him that for him to succeed in anything he need three things:

Firstly goals and the challenge.

Secondly desire, which is driven from motivation and results in benefits such as happiness

Thirdly, belief that everything and anything is possible.

It took him a while to absorb this information. He then began to realise that in his past and, recently with the book, when he succeeded it was because he was focussed on what he was doing. We then went on to talk about the fact that our brain will provide us with the energy and drive to succeed overcoming obstacles in the way.

He started to realise that, when he thought he didn’t have time to do something, it was really because he want to do it but as soon as he decided to ‘go for it’ the time suddenly became available. Also the desire to go to the concert made him realise how much he wanted it.

I decided that short term goals were the best for Nicky to start with and surprisingly he came up with some that were easily ‘do-able’ in a prison system.

He aimed for simple things which had a long term positive effect on his life, and would help to gradually rebuild his self-confidence, and ultimately instil in him that he can do anything he really wants.

He knew first thing in the morning was his worst time. His routine involved lying in bed for as long as he could (which used to infuriate the Guards who had to get over 100 men up, fed, and on to work/recreation in a relatively short time), he kept the curtains closed and played the most dreary music imaginable. Quite often he had told me that he couldn’t understand why he felt bad for the majority of the day! After that start – Really Nicky?!

So goal number two. A new routine, within  six weeks he would get up when the Guards opened the Wing, he would open his curtains and find some upbeat music. The music was the hardest thing to find as music is very limited inside so getting something upbeat seemed a challenge. We made a compromise and agreed that Chris Evans’s radio show would be the best choice.

Goals need a reward.  He liked dark chocolate (which was very expensive in prison) so I agreed to buy some for him if he achieved his goal. Unfortunately he would have to eat it in the Chapel but he was ok with that.

Three weeks later I was stopped by his personal officer and asked what I was doing with Nicky as everyone was commenting about what a different guy he had become. I also noticed a positive change when he came to our sessions. He wasn’t as morose and down, he had a smile and a laugh. In week six he finished the challenge and his ‘new routine’ was the only one he followed. In week seven I watched a couple of bars of dark chocolate disappear in front of me in one sitting!

The next goal was a real surprise. His new found love of books had exhausted the Wing’s library so he set himself the goal of increasing this library by writing and asking for donations of books. He wanted to treble the amount of books in 12 weeks.

Every time he had some spare cash he spent it on stamps and very soon he had written and dispatched around 30 requests. I was a little apprehensive as I wondered what the effect would be on him if he didn’t receive either a reply or a donation.

Thankfully the letters had the desired effect and almost to the goal’s set date the Wing library had so many books donated that another room had to be found to house it. Nicky was ecstatic. He saw this as something that he had done and it had exceeded his expectations and that of his goal. For the remainder of his stay he became Chief Librarian of the Wing and he was the envy of all the others. He even resisted being transferred when some of the guys of other Wings wanted him to do the same for them.

During the following weeks his mood remained positive and his outlook on life was enthusiastic. It was during this time that he admitted to everyone that he was gay and this again seemed to lift his mood and outlook. Unfortunately it did have a downside as he was suddenly being pursued by lots of older men. One in particular became a real problem resulting in us having to get the guy transferred.

We were really sailing along. Nicky was coming up with his goals now, all I needed to do was to be there and watch him grow in confidence.

It was during one of his more adventurous goals of staging a Panto for the Wing when he took a huge hit. One of his few close friends, his first real love, was killed in a hit and run accident. When he found out he was inconsolable and for a time we went right back to square one. Chris Evans was swapped for music that sounded like a funeral march, the curtains were never opened and he would hardly ever get out of bed. The library never opened despite books still arriving by the box full.

As the friend wasn’t a family member, he wasn’t allowed to attend the funeral, so the Methodist minister held a small service for him in the Chapel. Nicky wasn’t a religious person but the service seemed to ease his mind and slowly the new Nicky returned.

Thankfully Chris Evans returned in the morning much to everyone’s relief. The Wing staff were also relieved when he opened the library again and Nicky spent several afternoons re-categorising his system, making sure all the books were accounted for and the appropriate thank you letters sent.

I thought the next step was to try and encourage him to think longer term. The problem was that the effect the abuse had had on him was catastrophic. The only thing he saw in the future was his past.

*“How could anyone really like me if they found out what had happened to me?”*

More important, was the immediate future. When he was released he would have to go back to the place he left and the guy who had abused him. How could we encourage him to look forward and overcome the huge obstruction that was so unfortunately a big part of his life? I told Nicky that he needed to write a release plan detailing what he would do when he left prison and talking to his parole officer, he agreed that may be these things could be used.

In the Advance *Peak Performance* notes there are Top Tips for each section. The ones in the *Success Lessons* seemed to be a great starting point.

‘List the things you have always wanted to do but have never done. Write down and think about them on and off for a couple of days. Ask yourself honestly on a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you believe you can do it.’

*“What have you always wanted to do Nicky that you have never done?”*

Silence.

*“Come on, there must be something.”*

Silence.

This went on for ten minutes or so.

*“I can’t look forward, there’s nothing there for someone like me.”*

*“Ok. Humour me and just fantasize for a minute. If you could do anything in the world and money was no object what would you do?”*

*“Teach skate boarding to youngsters.”*

He was a keen skate boarder and also a Capoeira student, his given name being “Tintin” (as part of this martial art each student is allowed to adopt a name that they are called whilst in a training session.)

*“And I wouldn’t mind teaching Capoeira – but I can’t do that.”*

*“Why?”*

*“I can’t - no one would let me.”*

*“Why do you think they said that you couldn’t do it?”*

*“Don’t know really.”*

*“Could it be that they were jealous or even that it was something that they couldn’t do themselves? Or perhaps they were saying no in the hope that you might do it but give up and they could turn to you and say ’I told you so’!’’*

*“Wow! Will people actually do that?”*

Turning to the Tool Kit in Peak Performance it highlights the effects our negative and positive words and thoughts have on ourselves and those around us.

Think about the effect you have on others and decide to be a positive influence on them.

*“Nicky, going back to what you were saying earlier - I know I said what you do is for you. Just this once, I really want you to do something for me that in the end will help you too.”*

*“OK.”*

*“For the next week I don’t want you to say ‘but’ at all, starting now.”*

*“No problem but I’ll……”*

*“Pardon?”*

*“This is going to be hard.”*

*“Yes, however you’ll feel far better in the end.”*

*“Ok but ..oops sorry.. what does ‘but’ do then?”*

*“Every time you say something positive and then say ‘…but….’  your brain will instantly come up with all the reasons why you believe you can’t do it, so you are in effect telling yourself that whatever you want to do, you cant.”*

*“OK.”*

*“Also, listen to the people around you and make a mental note of every time you hear ‘but’. You’ll be surprised.”*

*“To go back to the positive negative thing for a minute. When I used to not get up and played that music it was affecting everyone else. Is that why they are so much nicer to me now?”*

*“Most definitely!”*

*“So ‘but’ becomes the negative?”*

*“You got it!”*

**Next week**

*“I lost count after 200 times and that was just on the Wing. The Guards are as bad so I’m going to make it my mission to get people to stop saying ‘but’ all the time. The daft part about it is that it works.”*

I’m now thinking “*Oh great, the Guards are going to love me!”*

Some sessions later Nicky came back with his goals. It had been a struggle for him as one of the older guys on the Wing had started to groom him and he had to sort that out, yet he had come up with his list.

*“Firstly, I want to get a job in a factory as this will give me the funds I need to get a place to stay. Then secondly, I want to help young kids and try to stop them getting into trouble, maybe teach them skateboarding after school and at the weekends. Finally, for now, I’m going back to learn Capoeira, I mean the world hasn’t seen enough of Tintin. Oh, and I need a mentor when I get out. Can you do that please?”*

*“I’ll check with the powers that be and if it’s ok with them then I’d love to help.”*

There was nothing ground breaking about Nicky’s goals and they were certainly achievable and could also be used for his release plan.

We discussed the factory and he quite enjoyed the anonymity of working a lathe or packing. It was something that would give him the safety he wanted and also because he wanted to work nights it would be a lot easier to secure a position.

The skateboarding could also be achieved with the help of the police following a short period after Nicky’s release and the Capoeira Club was near where he wanted to be.

It wasn’t all plain sailing though and he came under a lot of grief from some of the other guys and, I hate to say it, some of the Guards as well but he never reverted to the old Nicky. His outlook was always positive and he always had a cheery disposition.

His father tried to get in touch with him which brought back a lot of bad memories. Thankfully however, Nicky wouldn’t have anything to do with him but it un-nerved him for quite a while.

He also had to deal with the police finding and prosecuting the hit and run driver who had killed his friend. The bloke was sentenced and sent to prison. Great! The only problem was that they sent him to this prison. He was put on a Wing away from Nicky but it was causing a lot of un-rest so after a petition to an excellent governor the man was reallocated. Thankfully, the Governor was strong, honest and fair. She assessed the whole situation and decided to move him to another prison.

The time for Nicky’s release approached and he started to really worry.

*“What will I do without you?”*

*“I won’t be able to do anything!”*

For me it was hard because I was the one who had made Nicky believe in himself.

*“Who did all the things that you have achieved?”* I asked

*Nicky replied, “You did. Well I suppose you’ll say that I’ve done them but….”*

*“Sorry, no buts!”*

*“You told me what to do!”*

*“I gave you the keys to unlock the door.”* Very prophetic, I thought.

*“Yes, but who’s going to tell me what to do in the future?”*

*“You will. I’ll give you some rules to follow and you will be fine. I really believe in you as do the others and I’m only going to be at the end of a phone line!”*

In the last weeks I gave him lots of tips that would help him. The *Advance Top Tips* were a great help

**Pick a book that you think you will like and put it in a place where you can relax and dip in and out of it.**

This was easy for him as he now had books all over the place.

**Make a list of the positive people you like spending time with and arrange to see them regularly.**

**Think about the effect you have on others and decide to be a positive influence on them.**

He really liked this as he wanted to do to others what nobody had ever done with him

**Write your goals and put them where you will automatically see them regularly.**

This was good for him as he was always writing notes about. Sticking them all over his walls wouldn’t be a problem.

**Our environment can often drag us down so we must make choices that will change our environment.**

This was probably the hardest for him as he was stuck with where he was sent following his release. He understood this but was not prepared for it to stand in his way. He had made a long term goal to move to Cornwall to live near his sister. He decided that he would go where they sent him but it would only be temporary and that within two years he would be living in Cornwall.

The day of his release came and all the goodbyes were said and I watched him walk out of the prison. I had been told I could mentor him, and having sorted the rules with Nicky he was quite happy when he left.

I had regular discussions with him over the following weeks including a visit at his request to the Hostel where he had been placed. As part of his release plan, Nicky was undergoing counselling and the person he was seeing was unfortunately making him worse. When I met with the counsellor, they unfortunately were not following ethical rules with regard to what they could or couldn’t do so I suggested that perhaps they would be better suited in a different role. I gave some questions that the Hostel should ask before they employed anyone else.

Nicky was doing very well. He had secured a night shift job in a local packaging company and had set in motion that within six months he would be instrumental in designing and building a skate park and helping local kids.

Initially I heard from him on a regular basis for about 12 months as his confidence grew and he learned to stand on his own.

Do I miss him?  Yes, in a way.

Will he be all right? That’s the million pound question.

I sincerely hope so. Nicky has the intelligence and likability to succeed in whatever he puts his mind to. My only real concern is that one day something in his past will show its head and it might just derail him. But he knows he can ring me.

**Hostage + Paranoia = Gestalt**

I am going to be technical to start. The *Gestalt Therapy* which is part of the learning process for counselling is also talked about on the Advance Peak Performance course.

In pure technical jargon, the theory behind it is, “*We need to trust and understand the laws of our ability to acquire and maintain meaningful perceptions in the chaotic world in which we live.*”

Or, “*Is our ability to stand aside from the usual way of thinking so that we can tell the difference between what is actually being perceived and felt in our current situation and what is residue from our past*.”

Or perhaps, I think the easiest way to understand it is, “*The goal is for us to become aware of what we are doing, how  we are doing it, and how we can change ourselves, and at the same time learn to accept and value ourselves.”*

Got it? Right, let’s forget that for the moment and introduce another theory which is used in both counselling and at Advance.

*Maslow Hierarchy of Needs:* Basically this means that for us to survive in our chaotic world we have five levels of needs.

1 Physiological needs - water, food

2 Security Needs - shelter, weapons

3 Social needs - we need others around us

4 Self Esteem

5 Self Actualisation

The first two are our basic needs and the others we need to grow.

Right, let’s see how they fit in with life in the fast lane.

We can interact with some cruel people. Are they being cruel to prove a point or to teach us a lesson?

I remember the first time I visited the Prison. People are sent to Prison for a reason. There is a certain protocol you have to follow that can be quite frightening the first couple of times you visit - some of the regime never really leaves you. It’s there for your safety, and in some cases for the guys’ safety, and I would never belittle or make fun of it as being unnecessary. Everything is done for a reason.

You have to be aware that at first you cannot go anywhere without having a Guard right beside you, there are innumerable gates, and each one, even those three feet apart, have to be opened and closed before you can move on to the next, and repeat the same procedure on your return. This is all done for our safety and is a necessary part of life that you get used to. It does, however, have a funny side.

Years later, I had arranged to meet one of my clients at the Station where he was taking the train following his release from Prison. We had a coffee, and as his train was called I got up and went on to the platform thinking he was behind me. After about three minutes he hadn’t turned up so I went back to check he was ok as his train was due. I found him waiting for someone to “unlock” the cafe door so he could get out.

He also found walking against a flow of people challenging and overwhelming as well as walking up a sharp incline or hill strange. In Prison you all go in the same direction and it’s all on the flat. If you spend ten years of your life always going in the same direction as everyone else and only walking on a flat surface to suddenly being faced with people rushing towards you and encountering hills again it takes a while for the balance in your life to return.

After I had been at the Prison for some time I would sometimes take my clients back to their Wing. I was doing this one morning and had reached a point when I had six gates all within around twelve feet of each other. I had a couple of guys with me and I was a bit paranoid in making sure they were all done in the right order and that each gate was locked before the next was opened. Added to this pressure was the fact the each set of gates had (a) its own key so you could have as many as six keys on your belt, (b) they were all very similar in design and (c) you had to keep them all out of sight of the guys to stop any possible copying.

So, we were all in the middle of the gates and I was panicking as I couldn’t seem to find the right key. In pure frustration I said, “*Aaaggh, they don’t want you lot to get out of here, do they?*”

One of the guys replied, “*You don’t say Sherlock!”*

Loud raucous laughter came from a group of Guards who had stopped and were watching me in my despair at not being able to find the right key.

Some of their remarks were unprintable, but I made sure I never mixed up the keys or got stuck in no man’s land between gates ever again!!

I digress, the other thing that hits you initially after the keys and gates is the smell. I don’t mean to say that they all smell in Prison because they don’t. There are as many who ‘suffer’ from body odour problems in Prison as there are outside. It’s just that it has a smell of its own, which seems to permeate everything.

I first entered as a Prison visitor. This is when you offer your services to visit, whenever you can, usually during the guys’ free time and just talk to some of them. There are many who are a long way from their families and they welcome someone new to talk to. I went in with the Chaplain one evening, and after introducing me to the Chapel staff he decided to throw me in the deep end. We went over to one of the more notorious Wings and I followed very closely his every move. I had heard a lot about what happens in the showers and watched many prison programmes on television!

We arrived at the Chaplain’s meeting room when he turned and said:-

“*Ok. There’s a guy here, who would like to see a visitor? Go back to the Guard station and they will sort you out.”*

With that he shut the door and left me outside in the middle of the Wing. I turned to find that three guys, who made Arnie look like Mickey Mouse, looking me up and down. How I didn’t scream and bang on the door of the meeting room to beg them to let me in I will never know. Deep breath and as I was about to say:-

*“Can I come through. please?”*

One of the guys, in the broadest scouse accent you have ever heard, said:-

*“Ok mate! Come with us and we’ll keep you safe.”*

I wanted to run anywhere.  I wanted to scream for mercy.  I had a wife and children at home who wanted to see me again - at least I hope they did. Perhaps they were in cohorts with the Chaplain and it was a plan to get rid of me and collect the insurance!

Deep breath and in the bravest voice I could muster, although I would have placed a bet and said that it was at least three octaves higher than it usually is:-

“*Yes, can you get me back to the Guards’ station, please?”*

“*No probs, mate! Follow us.*”

And, true to their word, that’s where I was taken. I was then shown into a cell with the guy who wanted to speak to a visitor. To this day I am ashamed to say that I cannot remember a thing about him - his name or what he talked about as I was reliving, what felt like, the last four hours of terror. Which in actual fact was about five minutes in total! I must have been ok because he asked if I could visit him again. I’m not sure whether he felt sorry for me or I was better than nothing, but I returned and soon saw three or four guys on the same Wing. The three guys from Liverpool always greeted me when I saw them, right up to their eventual release some six years later.

The next week when I went with the Chaplain again, I mentioned in passing the situation to him and he seemed genuinely taken aback.

“I thought you were ok with it, you gave the impression that you were fine!”

**Paranoia - how do we know what others are thinking or expecting of us if we don’t ask or tell them?**

Another thing about prisons that hits you is the size of the cells. A lot is written in the press about what a holiday camp Prison is. But I bet there aren’t too many people who would offer to stay in one. When you stand in the middle of one you can almost touch the walls with your arms outstretched. It contains a bed, chair, table, toilet, shower and sink.

Yes, they can have a television and games console but it has to be paid for and, if they don’t work, they don’t receive those “luxuries.” Not nice and not truly comfortable.

All of the offices are generally the same except in size and the lock is on the outside. The theory behind this is so that you can’t be overpowered by an inmate and get locked in with him.

Just after I started counselling, I was visiting one guy, I think it must have been the third or fourth session as I was just getting to know him. It was lunch time and the movement back to the Wings had begun. One of the Chaplains, being ultra-efficient, decided to lock all the doors, not thinking to see who was in the rooms. Movement in Prison is a very speedy affair to enable all the guys and the staff to eat their lunch and be ready for the afternoon or whatever the next movement was. Anyway, before I had time to shout, the place was empty with me and this guy locked in the room together. I didn’t know him particularly well and I hadn’t been there all that long and the paranoia returned. I was sure he was going to slit my throat and do whatever he wanted. In actual fact, he was more concerned about missing his lunch! Thank goodness for phones and the telephonists on a rota. Several minutes later, the Guard and a very apologetic Chaplain arrived with the key and let us out. The Chaplain had to go with the guy back to the Wing to explain why he was late and had a quiet word with the security chief. He never did it again and I had fresh doughnuts for weeks!

Also in the meeting rooms is a panic button. This is again for safety and is usually located by the desks.

Before you commence work in the Prison you have a briefing on security measures and one of the things they say is that response to a panic alarm is about forty five seconds. Impossible, I thought at the time.

I never sit behind the desk, preferring to sit with an open space between us. Not long after I started, I was seeing a client who was in prison for the first time and this was his first session with me. We were about half way through when I decided to lean back on my chair. I over-toppled a little and fell into the desk which jammed against the wall and as luck would have it against the panic button. The sound, as you would expect, was deafening.  I fell on to the floor and the poor guy looked as if he had wet himself when suddenly around six Guards arrived. Three of them rushed into the room knocked the guy flying and hauled me into the corner so tightly I couldn’t move or see what was going on. I gather that the other three came in and practically sat on the poor kid, holding him in restraining mode.  From the moment of the alarm going off to me being held in the corner and the poor guy in shackles took forty five seconds at most.

They manhandled him out and were about to take him to solitary when they released me so I could breathe and I managed to explain what had happened. They didn’t initially believe me but the Chaplain, who was there, confirmed what I said. This time it was my turn for a quiet word with the security chief.

I was never paranoid about safety again. Surprisingly, my client saw the funny side after three cups of coffee and innumerable chocolate biscuits. He decided to carry on with the sessions although he made sure that I sat well away from the table and the panic button.

Being a hostage, if only for a short amount of time, is a different experience altogether and certainly doesn’t help you in trying to establish Gestalt in your life. But it does make you aware of the need to understand yourself and you can appreciate the need for compatibility and harmony. It also makes you aware of the result when others are a long way from achieving it in theirs.

It happened a while ago, again when I had only been counselling a short while. As the saying goes, “You learn from your mistakes.”  I think I did, but if it happened again would I handle it differently? Would I, or should I, have told the Guards?  If I had done, it would have resulted in at least two other people being dismissed, a huge internal audit and a hefty increase in the guy’s sentence.

The big difference is, that I have learned to listen and I now do what I’m forever telling others to do which is to “put your brain into gear before putting your mouth into motion.”

I would not expect anyone to know what I expect them to do if I hadn’t told or discussed it with them. All too often in sessions, and outside them as well, clients become agitated when others don’t do what they think they should. The problem usually stems from the fact that the correct instructions or discussions have never taken place so how does that person know what’s expected of them?

Many times I’ve heard the Guards or one of the volunteers, who do a cracking job, get really frustrated when people don’t do what’s expected of them.

*“They’re supposed to have done this by now!”*

*“Why hasn’t …………. done this report?”*

*“Why hasn’t ………….. taken these people where they should go?”*

My response and their answer is always the same.

*“Have you asked them or told them what you wanted?””*

*“But they should know!”*

*“They obviously don’t, so at the risk of repeating myself, have you asked them?”*

*“Well no, but they should know!”*

*“How can they know if you haven’t told or asked them?”*

Getting anyone to admit that the cause of their problem is their inability to express what they need is hard. It is difficult to persuade them to see it and even harder for the person to actually admit that they were wrong.

The silly part of it is that we are all frustrated and unhappy when people don’t do what we expect of them. We also become frustrated when others berate us for not doing something that is obvious to them.

*“Of course I would do it but you never asked!”*

Finding harmony in our lives in ‘*this chaotic world’* is difficult most times. Learning to accept people as they are and not what you expect them to be can be a battle, especially our kids or people close to us. We want the best for them, we want them to succeed, and we need them to do all the right things. The only downside for us is that it has to be what they want, need and do. They have to do it themselves, make their own mistakes, and win their own battles. We have to empower them, encourage them, and pick them up when it goes wrong, which it does occasionally for everyone, and hope they learn from it. There is a well-known saying that Advance Performance uses in lots of their courses:-

**“If you always do what you’ve always done you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”**

A lot of us learn through this, but unfortunately there are some who don’t/ can’t, but that’s for a different story.

We can eradicate the following:-

*“Why does he never do this?”*

*‘Why can’t they ever do it right?’*

*‘Why doesn’t he ever tell me?’*

Tell them what you expect of them or ask what is expected of you then perhaps we can all stop becoming frustrated every time the same thing happens!

To return to being a hostage, I was newly trained and full of myself and of my own ‘importance’. Proudly showing off my badge which elevated me above everyone else. (What a prized idiot! Was I really like that? Unfortunately the answer is – yes, I was!)

I had just seen a client and went with him back into the main body of the Chapel. This was mistake number one and two. The Guards had left to do the movement and the Chaplains had left me on my own with eight Prisoners and no two-way radio.

So there I was, full of my own importance, with eight guys and one of them was not having a good day. He was really brassed off at being continually moaned at, told off and disciplined for not following procedures. It had resulted in his family being turned away from a visit after they had travelled a long way.

I started to question him in what I thought was a helpful manner but he took it the wrong way and thought I was getting at him. He manoeuvred me and my earlier client into one of the offices and started to put stuff against the door so we couldn’t get out and no one could get in!

Not the ideal situation when trying to find harmony in your life. My earlier client who had only just come into Prison for the first time was petrified and started to cry.

Not a good thing to do.

Thankfully a couple  of the other Prisoners saw how this situation was panning out and started to talk to the guy as well as trying to shout for the Guards. The whole ordeal took what seemed like hours and hours to resolve with the security chief and the hostage negotiator on hand. Actually it was all over in approximately 20 minutes!  One of the Chaplains arrived back and was so mortified that they had left me alone and after finding out what had happened that they promptly went into shut down mode. A great help! I ended up consoling them, as well as trying to stop my client from screaming the place down.

Looking back now, it was quite amusing - really all I would have to have done would be to have pressed the panic button (and I knew the result of that action!)

Annoyingly, it could easily have been avoided by people down the line expressing what they expected from the guy.

I was off for the remainder of that week (I only worked three days) and when I returned the following Monday I admit I took a huge gulp of air as I went into the Chapel.

The protagonist had asked to see me so I went over to the Wing and had a long discussion with him. He was very sorry for what had happened and found it hard to understand why I hadn’t reported him. His main problem was that he had just come from another Prison where the daily regime was different and no-one had thought to tell him what he was supposed to have done.

I’ve been left on my own numerous times since then, thankfully with no adverse effects.

Do I have Gestalt in my life? Most of the time, yes I probably do, but it is hard to maintain. We all live different and hectic lifestyles. We interact with different people whose needs and their Gestalt are different. It can be worked out mainly by talking and listening to what is being said. We need to be aware of ourselves and learn to accept and value ourselves as well as the people we are interacting with.

Or perhaps I can arrange for you to go and visit in a Prison and I can even arrange for you to be…….  no there’s no need for that!

**Please Just Listen**

I’ve just seen the most amazing film – twice in fact, well, actually it was three times in as many weeks!

*American Sniper* is the true story of Chris Kyle who served as a Sniper during the Iraq conflict. I thought the film was so good that I bought the book and read it in one sitting.

He was a man’s man who put life in the order of:

1. God
2. Country
3. Family.

He was a real patriotic guy whose country was everything to him and he was prepared to do anything to protect it and its citizens. He would get really annoyed if the *Star Spangled Banner* was played and people didn’t take off their hats and sing with gusto. Good job he wasn’t in England at a football or rugby match watching some of the teams struggling to stand up straight or recall the words of *God Save The Queen!*

This caused certain problems for his wife, Taya, and interspersed in his book she has written her thoughts. A couple of these in particular stood out for me as a lesson in what we should all endeavour to do, and helped me recall many memories when I personally have done the right thing and the wrong thing, probably in equal measure. Hopefully now it is 90% the right thing!

He had many, many horror stories of what life was like out there, but very seldom talked about it at home, trying to keep his life in two compartments. However there was one time, after a close friend had been killed, when he rang Taya out of the blue.

She says, *‘I felt grateful that it wasn’t him, yet incredibly sad that it was any of them. I tried to be as quiet as possible as he talked. I wanted just to listen. There have been few times in his life, if ever, that I’ve seen Chris in such pain’ (1)*

And earlier after a visit home she says: *‘He had my unconditional support. Still he needed to go slow, to test the waters. I think he needed to know I wouldn’t look at him differently’ (2)*

So now for a show of hands ... How many of us have started to listen to someone and within two or three sentences have tried to either give advice or put  things right without just listening to what is being said?

It seems to be inbred in us that we must offer advice even when none is needed. We all seem to have this mothering instinct within us. We all seem to want to put right the injustice that we are being told. In some cases we consider our advice is basically the only advice worth having and the person would be a fool not to heed our words.

Like most people, I have been on both sides of this conundrum.

Back in 2013 my youngest son developed a blood condition that could have been fatal. Whilst he was in hospital my wife and I tried to tell the people we thought needed to know. Amongst them was a really close friend. I love him unconditionally and would do anything for him without question - but sometimes - oh dear! I hadn’t spoken three sentences when he, in a rush, told me to tell him: *“There are a lot worse things. People are coming back from the war and people with disabilities are working and he should look to the future! Think of all the things he can do and not what he can’t.”*

This was just after he had been told that all the things he wanted to do like playing rugby, joining the Forces, snowboarding, participating in Taekwondo contests, he was now not able to do. Although to be fair, she wasn’t the only person who told us that. People with the very best of intentions try to put things right.

Another example was some four or five years ago when we were, as many others were, going through some difficult financial times. I remember one morning going to see some close friends of ours and when they asked me how I was I just started to blurt out what was wrong.

Now, the same sort of reaction but slightly different. I had uttered maybe three statements when very cleverly they had turned the conversation around. I was being told about them and some people whom I didn’t know and at that moment didn’t want to know, who were going through something even worse! Don’t get me wrong I love my friends unconditionally and they would have given me the coat off their backs had I asked for it, but they felt they needed to put right the wrong, and that obviously meant telling me someone was worse off than me.

When I was starting out in counselling, despite being repeatedly told to listen, I couldn’t resist the temptation to jump in too, quickly offering all the advice I could muster because I truly believed that this is what my clients wanted.

Sometimes we need others to point out what we are doing as we do not see ourselves doing it or we genuinely believe that we are listening. Last summer, my youngest son came home from his part-time job (which he really loves and they love him) and he started to tell me all about this manager who had said this, and that guy who had said that. Being a parent I immediately went into fix mode, and before long I was telling him what he should say and do.

After a short time he said: *“Dad, I don’t need you to fix this! I just want someone who I can offload on to.”*

I haven’t made that mistake again, and thankfully he comes to me, every so often, has a gripe about one thing or another, and all I do is listen and he goes away happier than when he started!

When my oldest son was at University he sometimes used to moan about the tutors and as parents our first reaction was “*Let’s get this idiot sorted out!*” He only wanted a moan because this thing or the other was getting him down and he was generally a lot better after these rants. I have to say I wanted to put some of these tutors right on their view of the working place - asking one thing then marking them on something completely different, but don’t all parents want to do that?

In any sort of exchange with people, be it leadership, manager, mentor, counsellor, the prime objective is to be able to listen and then form a response. That is, initially listening, without prejudice (as the George Michael CD says), without judgment, without telling them what they should be doing.

I remember, early on, many clients who came to see me who fell into this category. For one guy it was quite an ordeal and it took numerous efforts to get him to come over to see me and then actually persuade him to talk to me.

He had experienced issues with family members always telling him what to do and how to do it. Consequently, he had never really thought for himself and certainly never embarked on trying to tell anyone how he felt.

The first session was a bit one-sided, as many are, as I tried to form some sort of early bond. Towards the end of the session he ventured to say that he was experiencing some signs of discomfort with the bed in his cell. “*That’s it*,” I thought, “*I can help him and he will be a lot better*”. When he left I raced over to the Wing and persuaded the not-too-happy guards to look into the problem and sort it out for him

Sorted!

Next week he didn’t show up. So I ‘phoned the Wing. “*Where’s ………..?*”

“*He doesn’t want to see you again.”*

“*What?!!!”*

The ungrateful so and so and after I’d helped him out too! Feeling rather incensed, I marched over most indignantly to have it out with this guy.

When I arrived at the Wing I realised what had gone wrong. He had already made inroads into sorting out his problem and I had only made it worse with the Guards because they had it in hand. Worse still, some of the “macho” guys on the Wing thought that he had cried to me and couldn’t stand up for himself and were out to make life miserable for him. No wonder he didn’t want to see me! All this because I refused to listen I just wanted to put things right because I thought it would help him.

I apologised to the Guards and had a word with some of the inmates, explaining that I had done this off my own back and it was not at the instigation of my client. Finally, and most importantly, I apologised to my client.

He was extremely upset and I thought that this was going to be one of those terrible times where I could end up making him worse than he was when he came to see me.

The following week, the guy turned up and was ready to continue. Once again I apologised profusely and asked what had changed his mind. He replied, *“It was the first time that anyone had stood up for me or tried to help.”*

He then asked, in all honesty, that if I felt the urge to do something for him again in the future to ask him first.

That is another lesson. Sometimes people do need our help and it’s deciding when to act and when to proceed that’s the issue. My general rule when counselling or mentoring in or out of the Prison is to ask the client/friend what they would like me to do, if anything. You then have to stick to the answer they give you. You can’t go behind their back and do what you want!

There was an occasion in the Prison when I mentioned to the Chaplain that I seemed to be the saviour of one of the trainee counsellors in the Prison Health Centre! The counsellor was supposed to see prisoners for counselling but was a little picky about who she would and wouldn’t see. I also mentioned that she was actually doing me a favour as there were a number of interesting clients whom I may not otherwise have seen. In fact, I ended up doing my dissertation on one of these guys and continued to see him upon his release. The Chaplain chose not to hear the last bit and subsequently I found myself being berated by the counsellor and her boss for accusing her of not doing what she should have been doing!

The Chaplain who had ‘helped’ came in and very soon the whole situation was diffused. Surprisingly, after that I didn’t receive quite so many ‘referrals’ from her!

It is a lesson on how quickly these things can escalate out of control.

When I was a director in my previous career, I was responsible for 30 to 40 staff and I was amazed at how many of them were afraid of doing anything without my saying yes or no. This was a cause of real trepidation for me as I was about to oversee the building of a £1million office/factory/warehouse complex and combining three sites into one. The very last thing I needed was everyone coming to me asking if the carpets were right, how many loos we needed and whether they could have bacon butties in the morning.

This stemmed from the Managing Director who wouldn’t let go and literally felt he had to oversee everything - forever telling everyone how to do their job. Instead of listening, which he never did, he was always telling.

A manager’s job is to listen to what is being said and encourage those under their command. So, how did I and my fellow managers, who all got on really well, get over it?

We all agreed that if he let us have complete autonomy with the build and layout, and in doing so, if we didn’t increase production and decrease stock within 12 months of completion, he could dismiss us all.

He needed to take time out to visit our sister companies abroad and attend some high level meetings so he agreed  that he would leave us alone and would do the ‘Managing Director’s Job’ for a change.

So that’s what happened. We, in turn, gathered all the relevant people together and asked them how to set about re-arranging their areas. We listened and in 90% of the cases they were right so we incorporated their ideas into the plans. The plan was issued and agreed, and the build started with the usual photograph of the MD with his foot on the spade and within three months the shell was up. We then transported all the staff in groups to see the plant. This increased their interest and over the next three months the whole thing was completed. The transfer of the shop floor offices and the warehouse were completed over two weekends. The MD kept his word, although he did ask his PA for updates at varying stages.

The staff were tremendously proud of their new work place. The productivity increased as the previous hold ups on the shop floor were eased by the rearranged layout and the stock decreased as we started to make for sale not for stock because of the new layout.

The moral of the story again is all about listening to what is being said and realising that those that can - do.

The most challenging part for me as a counsellor was when the guys were released and asked if I would mentor them going forward. I’m a little sceptical sometimes as a fair few of the guys needed either a father or big brother figure, neither of which are in my remit. A vast number of them have had no role models in their life and in some cases the role models they did have weren’t ideal for basing life on, especially life out of prison.

These are the cases where you want to tell them what they should do or how they should act and behave and you have to be very careful that they, like children, learn how to stand on their own two feet.  There is a fine line between helping them stand alone and letting them let you run their lives completely. As parents we all know how difficult it is to see our children fail or make mistakes but it’s only in making mistakes that we learn.

With these guys, in a lot of cases, the mistakes are made and then they either find themselves out on their own being disowned or getting into more trouble as their role models are telling them to go and do it again with the general proviso that next time don’t get caught.

A couple of guys, Pete and Shane, in particular come to mind.

When starting mentoring, guidelines need to be established stating what the outcome should be and then at regular intervals they are re-visited.

Pete wanted to settle down and make a family home. His problem was that his brothers were drug addicts who would take anything they could get their hands on, generally Pete’s stuff.   Pete’s mother who had his brothers living with her, was always asking Pete to help her handle them. This usually resulted in Pete being drawn into fights and trouble. He knew that this had to stop and whilst he didn’t want them near him he didn’t want to cut them off completely.

So by listening to him and discussing the options together he devised a plan of action. He refused to tell his family where he lived. He saw his brothers under his rules, which was well away from where he lived and at a time that was convenient to him. He saw his mum every week or so but the rules which he set up stated that he would not discuss his brothers with her and if they were fighting the police station was only a mile away from her house.

The family tried many ways to break him but he stood by his word and now things are working themselves out. He has a family and a job. His brothers have tended to quieten down as they were fed up with the police coming around all the time and his mum has a lot quieter and peaceful life.

Pete and I have a coffee every month or so now and I listen to him, his problems are now mainly gripes and moans so he doesn’t need my input or advice on the options.

On the other hand, Shane is a ‘wide boy’, always into everything. His problem was he needed someone to tell him what to do all the time, basically so that he could absolve himself of all blame if it went wrong.

*“I told you so, I was only doing what you told me!”*

With Shane I used a different tactic. I just listened and asked him a few questions. He had to come up with the options and then what to do. He became quite angry with me when I refused to tell him what to do, especially when the first couple of times they ended up in disaster. We persevered and eventually he started to evaluate his options and he achieved better results. His life improved and everyone was happy.

We need people to talk to. We need people who will listen and not constantly advise. We need people who won’t decide that they will fix everything for us. We also need to be told occasionally, *“Dad, I don’t need you to fix this! I just want someone who I can offload on to.”*

*1. Page 285 ‘American Sniper’ Chris Kyle Copyright 2013 by CT Legacy*

*2. Page 156 ‘American Sniper’ Chris Kyle Copyright 2013 by CT Legacy*

**Goal 2**

Having something to aim for can make life so much more fun. It gives you a purpose, a meaning, a reason and makes life worth living. I know this may not be true for everyone but I find it a useful tool when dealing with some challenging situations. Self-harm is an addiction which every parent dreads entering their home. Parents of different guys in prison shared with me the same worries:-

*“Why us? He’s  had everything he needed. Why does he need to harm himself? There’s no point!”*

That seems to be the sticking point – there seems no point – to everyone except the individuals that do it that is.

Talking to other parents of children who thankfully haven’t found the need to self-harm, a favourite saying is:-

*“I see their point, but I don’t really understand the need. It seems so senseless.”*

To this I answer, in the nicest way possible, *“Well, with the greatest of respect, you don’t see their point.”*

The same thing can be said about suicide when people say, *“I see their point but don’t they think of the people they leave behind or hurt!”*

It’s all about seeing life from their perspective and having empathy in an extremely difficult situation. Take Arthur as an example.

To begin with he hated his name.

*“Why the \*\*\*\* did my parents call me that! What the \*\*\*\* were they thinking?”*

Me being helpful as always said, *“Perhaps you were named after an uncle or grandfather?”*

*“Hmm that’s all very well but they were born a long time ago when that name was ok but not today and definitely not for me!”*

Being helpful again, or so I thought, I suggested, *“What about Arthur Darvill I mean he was Dr Who’s assistant?”*

He is a big Dr Who fan so I thought this might help.

*“Yeh, but that’s fine, its looks cool on him (!) and he’s an actor so it’s ok for him.”*

*“So what you’re saying is that it’s ok for anyone, especially well-known actors but not for you.”*

*“Spot on.”*

He hated it so much that on a daily basis he used to call himself different names, depending on his mood. Never to the guards I might add, to them he was always “Arthur” or called by his surname. But to everyone else he could be Jim, Harry, Mick, Jason to name but a few. It would drive people mad, but generally because of his cheeky smile and twinkly eyes he got away with it and they ended up playing his game. I think the basis of these charades was not that he hated Arthur that much but that he was bored and needed to liven up his life, so mildly winding people up seemed to do it for him.

I remember discussing it with him one day and happened to mention that when my eldest son was born my brother-in-law put forward Rainbow or River – I kid you not! I mean Rainbow Wright or River Wright! Really!!!

He seemed to think that was really cool. I said that I didn’t think my eldest son would have agreed with him and that he would probably have done what Arthur did during school time as he went to an all boys’ school!

Arthur was about to be released and asked me if I would continue to see him and mentor him till he got back on his feet. I agreed and started seeing him on a weekly basis initially at the Starbucks in town.

The cutting began not long after he left prison. I believe it started through boredom, having no purpose or belief in himself. Arthur was nearly always happy and thankfully that never changed. He could always make you smile and girls liked him. He wasn’t what you would call good looking but with his smile and those eyes he had the girls eating out of his hands.

He never actually told me about the cutting. When he suddenly started wearing jumpers or hoodies in the middle of summer (after usually wearing t-shirts and shorts in most weathers) I put two and two together. That’s when I realised that this mentoring was going to be for a lot longer that I originally thought.

He assured me that it was just the odd time.  So,  as with most things,  we came to an agreement that if he continued to want my help and found the need to cut he had to a) use a clean cutting implement, b) have all the necessary plasters bandages etc. and c) he must not do it anywhere other than at his home.

A lot of people may be shocked to go along with it but I have counselled a fair few similar cases of both sexes and shouting and screaming and telling them they mustn’t do it does not work. Believe me.

We have a close friend who is a leading Psychiatrist and who instigated a women’s holding facility in Southern England. She dealt daily with self-abuse and she was an advocate that the only way was to *supervise* the action just to ensure that everything is kept as clean as possible. She had studied the concept and believed that in a lot of cases it seems to follow a two to three year cycle. She now lives in, and advises the New Zealand health board on many problems in particular women’s prison, and self-harm is one of the areas that she deals with.

Arthur started attending a local voluntary job club where they tried to advise young people, especially ex-offenders, about work, CV’s and interviews and did their best to help them gain work. They knew I was mentoring him and had my phone number.

One day I had a call from them. Arthur had gone to the club as usual cracking jokes but after about thirty minutes his mood changed and he just got up and walked out without speaking to anyone. This was highly unusual so they called me and asked if I had seen or heard from him. I hadn’t but promised that if he called I would let them know.

I tried calling him but, no surprise, no answer. I took a gamble and knowing how much he liked coffee and the corner chair in Starbucks I went to see if he was there.

Thankfully with an enormous cup of cold coffee in front of him Arthur was in his favourite chair and clearly agitated. After what seemed an eternity he started to tell me the problem. He wasn’t having much luck on the job front which was getting him down but the huge thing was that he had almost run into two guys at the club. This had brought a string of emotions flooding back and although they hadn’t seen him it had clearly unnerved him.

It transpired that a couple of years ago these guys had jumped him coming out of a night club and had raped him. Bumping into them again was clearly a huge shock and sent the young guy right down into some hidden depths again. Coupled with that he had cut himself and blood was getting everywhere.

So first things first, I went (into mother mode – really! Ahhhhhhh) and got some first aid stuff and as best we could sorted his arm out. Then with a fresh cup of coffee we talked over the options. He told me the same story I heard from a lot of other young people. He felt alone and was mentally hurting and the only way to take away that hurt was to physically *hurt* himself. The pain caused by the cut, albeit momentarily, allowed him to forget the mental anguish he was feeling.

There are lots of different forms of “self-harm” which seem to appear and disappear. Cigarette burns to the arms; kids on the school bus, through boredom, using aerosol cans spray; the game called 100 (I think) where lads wanted to see who can last the longest whilst hitting themselves with pieces of string or sticks up to the count of 100. This is a million miles away from guys who do it for attention because it gets them noticed and those who really want to end their life.

This is totally different from someone who is trying to escape from some internal mental pain. Arthur needed a purpose, a reason to live.

I rang the job club and briefly explained the situation. Straight away they put the two guys on a different day so there would be no more unexpected meetings and they thought that they might have a job for him. Great.

Second thing …

*“What about the girls who seem to follow you around?”* I asked*.*

*“They don’t want me for me they just want me to make them laugh or they want to laugh at me.”*

Third thing …

*“What about the flat? I thought you liked it.”*

*“It’s ok, it’s just a mess at the minute.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because I can’t be bothered.”*

*“Ok. I can’t help with the girls but the flat I can.”*

So we left and went back to his flat which, although it was in a bit of a rough area, wasn’t that bad. When he said it was a mess he wasn’t kidding.

Years ago I heard an interview with Quentin Crisp explaining that he never bothered washing up but just used to wipe the plates clean with bread (I think it was - I hope it was!) Then at the next meal he used to smell the plate and decide what would go with the smell and that is what he would eat. (I kid you not honestly!) He also advocated that there was no point in dusting as all dust reached a certain level and that was fine. Arthur clearly advocated this although my wife and mother-in-law would disagree!

Well, now you have the image that was Arthur’s flat. Clothes were everywhere and looked as if they hadn’t been washed in months and we won’t even go to the bedroom! On top of that he hadn’t been keeping his side of the bargain as there were bits of dirty plasters and such all over the place.

Lots of soapy hot water later, a couple of trips to the launderette, vacuuming and it was habitable again.

Time for some hard love. This is where the goals came into their own.

*“This has got to stop, Arthur.  It wasn’t in our agreement and I can’t help you if you don’t try to start helping yourself.”*

*“I know.”*

*“So what happens now?”*

*“Don’t know really.”*

*“Well I’m going to tell you. This flat is never to get into this state again.”*

I suddenly had Deja vu. How many times had my mother said that to me and how many times had I said it to my kids concerning their bedrooms! I can’t turn into my mother - I just can’t and that’s that!

*“As long as you need to cut you must keep some clean plasters and such and use them then throw them away properly.”*

Ahhhh I can hear my mother again!

*“And lastly, when I see you again I want to hear some goals that you want to achieve.”*

We had spoken at length whilst he was in prison about goal setting and at that time he was doing well.

I know Advance Performance wouldn’t have put it quite like that but, as the saying goes, “needs must.”

And then, horror of horrors, as if by magic my mother appeared again.

*“And I will pop in unannounced to check that you are doing it or else.”*

He looked at me as if I was possessed and then had the gall to say, *“You sound just like my mother!”*

Arthur was a lot better at our next meeting. My mother had long gone thankfully so I resisted the need to ask how his flat was fairing, and we sat and talked about the situation. The goals had definitely helped him in prison, it was just that he had got out of the habit and his routine was a lot less regimented now so he had allowed things to slide. Following his release, the cutting was a means of coping as things seemed to be getting on top of him.

The first and most important goal at that time was that if he continued to cut he had to make sure that everything was clean and as sterile as possible, and that he would only do it at his home. He knew the sense in that so it was easy for him.

The second goal was to carry on with the job club and make every effort to get some sort of employment.

Thirdly he needed a daily routine. A time to get up, make sure everything was clean (go away mother) and find something to occupy his day.

Although Arthur was very nervous, his first trip back to the job club went very well. They had organised an interview for him and he was looking forward to it.

He started to visit the library and museum as he loved to read. He also volunteered at the local RSPCA, just cleaning and such but he loved it. He saw the results almost immediately.

We also came up with some sayings and thoughts about the future that he wrote on cards and “stick-its” putting them on the walls of his flat, by his bed, on the fridge and some he carried around with him in his wallet.

Following a pep talk from me, Arthur attended his interview. It was for warehouse work with a local firm including a mixture of day and night shifts, but that didn’t seem to worry him. He had some references and it seemed to go well.

Two days later he heard that he had been accepted for some part-time work. Great! Things were going well, and life was generally looking bright. The cutting didn’t stop but became a lot less frequent.

Life was suddenly busy for him so we re-scheduled our coffees to earlier in the day so that he could fit in other things that had come into his life. He met a young lady at the warehouse and life seemed to be going really well. I must admit that I resisted doing what my mother would have done and I didn’t go back to his flat uninvited. I felt certain that the young lady would have sorted that out - here’s hoping anyway!

I now thought that some long term goals were in order and we should discuss these when we next met. It was very hard to encourage Arthur to think long term. Basically because he had never had any dreams as  he, as had a lot of people, always been told that whatever he wanted would never happen.

His new girlfriend was due to go to France and Spain in the new year for a year on secondment with her job so I suggested that perhaps one goal was for him to either go with her or arrange to go for the last month of her trip.

He said that he would think about it. He also had this idea that he would like to work with disadvantaged teenagers but didn’t know how to go about it. So already we had two possible goals for him.

At our next meeting he was more excited than I had ever seen him. The Spain idea was obviously the one. He’d spoken with his girlfriend and she thought that it was a good idea as she believed that it would help him. She thought that France wasn’t the time as she had a lot of work to do and didn’t want to make any mistakes but Spain was far better.

She was leaving in March and he would go the following February for six weeks. She set him up with a computer and installed Skype on it so that they could talk whilst she was away. The day arrived for her to go. There were a lot of tears, I was later told, but everything started out ok.

Another of his goals was to see how far he could go without cutting.

We started with weeks first then kept adding up the extra days. We also agreed that when he reached each date he would have a reward. He needed new clothes, especially with his break in Spain on the horizon, so those were his goals.

He did well and the weeks seemed to speed forwards. His wardrobe increased in size and the scars on his arm and legs started to fade. As we reached summer he started to wear t-shirts and shorts again. The scars were there and he couldn’t hide them so in his mind it was better to be open about them. The job continued to go well, as did his volunteering with the RSPCA. He talked to his girlfriend most days and both seemed to be looking forward to seeing each other again.

As his six month goal approached his mood was buoyant. Life was good for him. He had the opportunity to do some work through the job club to talk to young kids who had issues with self-harm. He asked what I thought and we explored some scenarios that he could talk about. On the day, he was a big hit. The kids loved him and found him inspirational, and he was asked to attend regularly.

Arthur then hit a problem that I thought would throw him. He was unable to get insurance to travel abroad and was also denied a passport. This was due mainly to his prison sentence and also because he was still under supervision from his parole officer.

At the same time his girlfriend had an offer to extend her stay in Spain for two further years. They both decided that a long distance relationship was perhaps not the way to proceed and decided to call it a day.

They remained friends and talk occasionally but no romance.

I had to admire Arthur as he handled it well. He said that from the beginning he didn’t think he would be able to go to Spain because of his time in prison, but decided that it was something he could aim for.

As time went on the volunteering with the RSPCA and talking to the teenagers were taking a bigger part of his life. He believed that was where he should focus his attention. He didn’t start self-harming again thankfully as we approached the year point - a significant landmark.  The scars had almost faded but were still there and he viewed them as a necessary part of his life. He used them when he spoke to the kids.

A few months earlier a long lost sister (who he didn’t know much about) contacted him. She lived on the South coast and wanted to meet. He was due some holiday and a reward for the twelve month achievement, so arranged to go down. They met and hit it off really well. She had some contacts where she lived and suggested that he might like to move and make a new start.

We, or rather he, talked about it for a few weeks. He was confused but delighted that he suddenly had a family he didn’t know too much about and that frightened and thrilled him in equal measure. He was scared about not having me around and the possibility of leaving his jobs, the kids up here and millions of other things.

I encouraged him to write down in two columns the pros and cons of going - he did this and he realised that the pros far outweighed the cons. So he decided to make the move.

The self-harming bothered him as he realised that during the tough times of the previous weeks he had desperately wanted to cut again. He knew it was an addiction and that it would always be there in the back of his mind. A sort of *release valve* as he put it.

We talked about what the cutting achieved and the end results. Also, if he was to do it again he must stick by our original rules that everything must be sterile and clean.

The day arrived for Arthur to leave. I took him to the station and watched as he sped off in the train. It was a bit like watching your kids go off into the unknown. Parents with children at university will know what I mean. You have done your best for and it’s now up to them.

He rang a couple of times and generally life was good for him. Arthur said that the goals helped and they would always be there stuck on his fridge, in his wallet and on various books that he was reading. He had managed to persuade his sister to plan for herself as well and her life seemed to be taking off in new directions. Both realised that the goals were a huge part of their life, as for them it meant there would always be something there to aim for. They knew that some goals were achievable and others would be changed as their lives moved forward.

Unfortunately I never found out what became of Arthur. The calls dwindled as he moved on with his life and I moved out of it, to hopefully be replaced by someone else, just as it should be.

Thankfully, my mother never made an appearance again. I resisted the need to tell him to be careful and not mix with the wrong sort of people and make sure he did his washing and make sure he rang me and ……. and………….. I also never went to his flat again – honestly I didn’t!

**What’s in a perception?**

The answer I think can be found in the basis of how we look into ourselves and how we view others. Most of us approach situations in our lives with preconceived ideas of people. How often have we heard people saying or ourselves saying:-

*“Well that’s not what I was expecting.”*

A story I heard a while ago is rather disturbing to say the least and highlights in just twelve words how parents influence the way children view people. Her daughter was an airhostess at the time for a well-known airline and used to work a lot of long haul flights. On one trip she was standing welcoming passengers on to the flight when she overheard a father talking to his son who were sitting right behind her.

“You don’t have to thank her, son, she’s part of the ticket!”

What is that telling the son about the airhostess and how do we know that it won’t affect his perception of women in general?

When I started to work at the prison I had a couple of, well three to be exact, instances of people’s perception of what they thought I was like. In one case I thought the people knew me, in the others they didn’t know me at all.

The first case was I think the first time I went into a prison.  I had to wait outside whilst the guards sorted out my pass and find the person who was showing me round. The prison gates were bordering a main road, and I soon realised that many people passed me and looked at me with a *poor soul* expression. Two groups of people in particular went past, a young couple with two kids and an older couple.

The couple, in an effort to chastise their children for - well for being children I presume, said in a loud voice, “If you don’t behave you’ll end up in there and I’m not going to be like that poor man waiting outside to see you.”

Within minutes I heard the older couple say, in what I presume they thought was under their breath but just loud enough for me to hear:- “If he’d brought them up better he wouldn’t have to spend his time waiting to go inside. Serves him right.”

The second case was with people who I thought knew me. I was waiting to pick the kids up from school  one afternoon when I began talking to my youngest son’s friend’s mother as you do in the playground, when I mentioned that I was starting working in the prison.

‘’What! What on earth is someone like you doing going into a place like that! I thought you were more intelligent than that!”

I was amazed. What sort of person did she think I was and that she thought I was more intelligent than what? There was an amusing incident, sort of relating to this.  I was seeing clients in prison and my wife was away on business. My youngest son chipped his tooth playing, as kids do, and the school needed to contact us according to health and safety rules. My youngest son proudly stated to the headmaster that his Daddy was in prison and that his mum was away! The school didn’t know what to do and when I came to pick him up it took a while explaining our working commitments but, more importantly, I was surprised at the school’s perception of me after they knew I worked in a prison.

The third case was a greeting I very often received when meeting new clients, right through my time in prison:-

“What is someone like you doing in here?”

And more incredulously when they found out that I was doing it for nothing:-

“What?  You’re doin’ it for free? You’re mad!”

Mad. Perhaps I am. Who knows? Perhaps some people’s perception of me is that I am mad.

I believe that in lots of cases we try too hard to encourage people to like us that we forget who we are and we forget how to be ourselves.

One of the many exercises you embrace when training to become a counsellor is about people’s perception of you. One of these exercises became a cathartic moment for two of us.

We were a group of twenty and we each had a list of twenty questions such as:-  *Who would you take to an important meeting? Who would you go to a party with? Who would you like to be deserted on an island with?* Against each statement we had to put one of our names that would best suit our needs in that situation.

The results were interesting and informative. It mainly concerned me and one of the other guys who just happened to be an ordained minister whom I’ll call Pete. As part of the remit to his job he needed to be there for his congregation, and therefore needed to be all things to all people. However, it resulted with the nineteen of us splitting him between just two statements. *Going to an important meeting and keeping a secret.* He was devastated as he believed he should have been in more people’s minds for other things.

On the other hand I found that I was the only one in the group who had a tick against everything. In other words I was perceived as being everything to everyone, in fact, in the debrief about half the group said that they would have put me down for each item.

Pete realised that because of the way he had perceived a minister’s job, it had in fact pigeonholed him into a narrow band and had made him seem almost aloof. He admitted that he was really unhappy and whilst there were parts of the job that he really enjoyed there were amounts of the job that he hated. I kept in touch with him for a while after we had graduated and he was continually struggling with himself and his perception of the job. Thankfully after much soul searching he applied for, and was successful in gaining a job as a minister in the far reaches of England where the pressures weren’t as demanding and he could concentrate on the parts of his job he liked and was good at. The last report I had, he and his family were very happy and contented.

On the other hand, it hit home to me that I had spent the best part of my life, for lots of reasons, trying to persuade people to like me so, hence that’s what they saw in me and I was deemed suitable to be everything for almost everyone.

This is a daunting responsibility as it’s almost impossible to be that person without losing yourself as the person.

In the prison, there were myriads of people who were allowing their perceptions to run their lives and a fair proportion of them were there as a result of trying to live up to them.

The staff were also not immune from this including guards, chapel staff, psychologists were all at the mercy of perceptions in their work and home life.

Over the period I saw many men who were tied up in trying to achieve their supposed position due to others’ perception.

1. Dave was a northern guy who through circumstance changed the way people viewed him. As a young lad he was large and as such was picked on in school, mainly fights and name calling (*Lardy* was one of the favourite apparently). When his younger brother started school Dave saw the same kids pick on him, not because he was large, but because he was the younger brother of *Lardy*. He realised that because of his size he could use it to his advantage and suddenly the bullied became the bully, a common occurrence. (Overnight he became the guy to be wary of, the guy that would pick a fight with anyone and always won. He realised that he liked this new found status because it bought him respect, mainly because people feared him.

He decided to quit school at fourteen as no one could teach him anything and much to his parents’ dismay very soon rose in ranks to the leader of a feared gang who believed their own publicity and thought they were invincible. People’s perception was that they and Dave in particular were to be feared and avoided at all costs. He started to live with a young girl who was seduced by the big gangster syndrome and very soon realised that living with him was not champagne and roses but black eyes and bruises and dirty nappies.

This perception had a treble effect.

Firstly, Dave as this feared gangster.

Secondly, his brother soon realised that being the brother of a gang leader was advantageous and he played on it. Very soon people believed that although he was not in the same league as Dave, he was to be avoided at all costs. They suddenly treated him with respect (in fact it was fear of reprisals) and it pushed to want to join the fraternity. This was disastrous as he became involved in a fight and was sentenced to a long stretch for aggravated assault.

Thirdly, it affected his parents. They were a hard working couple who had many friends and colleagues. As time went on these friends disappeared because they were seen as the parents of the two gangsters and there must be something wrong with them to make the kids turn out in that way. Later they said that it was a trying time but  it made them appreciate and realise who were their real friends.

Dave’s notoriety increased but he fell to earth rather quickly when he took some mixed drugs which almost destroyed his liver and kidneys leaving him with a life on prescribed drugs. He was also sentenced for an aggravated assault and sent to prison where I met him. Encouraging him to see the cycle of events wasn’t difficult and he soon realised the enormity of his actions and was mortified when realising that people’s perception of him and his family was all based on an incident at school.

He is now on parole and is working for his father in another part of the country. He regularly goes to see his brother and is helping him as much as he can but mainly through letting him see how much he has changed. He now sees his son and helps support him and his partner, although whether she will ever have him back is a work in progress.

Thirdly, the *Teddy Bear* as I used to call him (I was really privileged as I was the only one who was allowed to call him that), or Will to everyone else was a Liverpool guy through and through. His perception of himself came from his dad.

His dad was a local legend who could get anything for anyone no questions asked. He liked his food on the table at the right time and each day had its regular menu and lo’ and behold, if his wife bought or cooked something different!

(At the time this reminded me of a Christmas episode of *The Royle Family*. They were going to a holiday camp as a present and staying in caravan in the middle of winter when everything was closed. When they arrived and settled in *Barbara* had a shock and started to panic when she suddenly realised that there was no chip pan in the caravan so how would she cook *Jim* his tea?)

Anyway, his dad’s prowess as a man was well known with all the locals, as he had slept with most of the women and had numerous kids with them who were running around the local area while his wife just accepted it as the norm.

Again, in Dave’s case, it started with him being bullied for being large. The difference was that his dad told him to man up and not be weak, so he started to fight back. With the fights came an added respect. Will grew up in this atmosphere believing that the man could do exactly as he liked, and coupled with the ever more aggressive fights, he would be respected for it. He slept with most of the local women and had children with many of them. This caused another problem – how did he know he wasn’t sleeping with a girl who could possibly be his sister? The more bizarre the action the more the wide spread the perception and he revelled in it. It was as if he was re-writing his own law. People saw him as being invincible, Will was becoming what he believed they wanted him to be. It could be said by some people that he was living their dream, their perception of him was what they wanted to be.

Will believed his own publicity, which was fuelled by others perception of him. When the down fall came it was quick. Even with his mum going into the witness box to lie for him, because that is what mums do to save their children even if they know it was a lie. He was convicted of supplying drugs and assault.

In prison his *fame* preceded him when he arrived as the godfather and he was treated as such. Everyone, the guards included, seemed to perceive him (and for once quite rightly as his fame included assault without asking questions) as this hardened thug. The change came when Will met a young lad who was being bullied quite badly. It was as if a lightbulb had gone on in his head and he saw the whole of his life being played out for him to watch and he hated it.

After long talks with him he started to see the whole scenario playing out before him. He suddenly realised how he had become the person he was and he didn’t like it. The young lad helped Will, encouraging him to take charge of his life and how to stop people taking advantage of him without it ending up in a massive fight. Will started to learn to accept people without having any pre-conceived ideas about them and in his own words:-

*“It was like being introduced to a different race of people.”*

I would be lying to say that he had changed his life completely because, in the short space of time that I saw him, unfortunately he didn’t.

However, Will stopped having preconceived ideas about people and waited till he got to know them before passing judgement. That may not sound like much but it was a big change for him. Previously, Will had always thumped first and asked questions later. If someone had a grudge about anyone they would go to Will and spin a tale about what he was like and then Will would act and that poor person was knocked out on the floor or worse before questions were asked.

A lot of people are now safer and Will isn’t as volatile. He says his life is a lot calmer now, he hasn’t gone back into prison yet mainly because his views of people are now different - and he still lets me call him *Teddy Bear.*

How many of us act in a certain way because that is how we think people want us to behave?  I always used to act the fool because I was positive that the group of people with whom I associated would expect me to act.

“*Let’s invite Martin, he’ll make us all laugh.*”

And that’s what I used to do. I still used to play the fool but with the onset of marriage and kids it eased off, but that day Pete and I had that awakening was the day it stopped totally. I can’t, and neither can any of us, be what we are not, and if we have to become something that we are not to be accepted then surely we are mixing with the wrong groups of people. Now I am myself as the saying goes *what you see is what you get*, and I feel a lot more in control of me.

I’ve met lots of people who act on their perceptions of what people want from them. As a steward in my local church some years ago, one of the duties was to take care of the minister. One guy in particular was a genuinely nice man full of positivity but the minute he stepped into the pulpit he changed. His accent and his precise and clear diction exploded into a broad Irish brogue and it was all doom and gloom! I asked him why he did it and he said that is what people wanted so that is what he gave them. Unfortunately that wasn’t what the people wanted as a lot of them used to come and giggle at his antics. Where that perception came from Heaven only knows and unfortunately, I now no longer see him as he retired some years since so I will never get that chance to find out.

Counsellors unfortunately aren’t immune from this although they should be. Some suddenly change when they start a counselling session. Why? Because a lot of people’s perception of a counsellor is of this deep intense person asking continually:-

“How does that make you feel?”

*Please*. If any of you go to a counsellor who does this leave immediately!

Another disturbing case I came across was with a client I had some years ago. I have worked with victims of abuse including women who have been abused by their husband/partner, and, men who are abused by their wives and partners. This particular case was of a guy who had been married for some considerable time when his wife started to mentally abuse him, then it turned to physical abuse with fists and finally with whatever came to hand. For obvious reasons it is far harder to get men to admit to being abused basically because they are generally thought of as being physically stronger than women.

He put up with the abuse for some time and passed the bruises of with stories for football and rugby “accidents.” Eventually, he persuaded her to go to marriage guidance counselling in an effort to try to save their relationship. All was going well and they were about six sessions in when the subject of abuse came in to the discussions.

Immediately the counsellor turned to him and, with deep anger in her voice, berated him for some time about how he was a man and stronger than her and he was despicable and lots of other superlatives. Eventually she stopped and his wife turned to the counsellor and admitted that it was her that was doing the abusing. The counsellor didn’t know what to say. She saw them for another three sessions and then told them she couldn’t help them anymore. At no time did she ever offer an apology to the guy, almost treating him with disgust. He said it felt as if at first when she thought it was him she was saying he wasn’t a man because he hit women the when he was the victim what sort of man was he  who let his wife hit him?

This was a person with responsibility to others letting her perception affect her judgement and not too dissimilar the father and son on the plane.

This correlates with the tree, in the Advance programme, and beginning to understand ourselves and where our actions and thoughts come from.  Let’s spend a few moments and not prejudge others. Let’s wait until we know them. One of my famous sayings is a familiar one:-

“Let’s put our brain into gear before we open our mouths!”

Others listen to what we say, especially our kids, and we never know who some of the listeners are, and more importantly, the effect hearing what we say has on them.

I think sometimes that I would like to go back to that mother in the playground and tell her that I have met some really nice guys in prison, (I’ve also met some nasty ones as well)  some of them are now friends for life and most importantly they have reinforced in me that preconceived ideas of from their point of view as well as mine would have stopped us meeting I believe we would have both lost such a lot.

**Motivation**

There are a couple of sayings that for me encapsulate self-motivation

***“Whether you think you can or think you can’t – you are right.”*** *-*Henry Ford

And

***“It’s not the mountain that we conquer but ourselves***.” - Sir Edmund Hillary

Like it or not we all suffer stages when our self-motivation goes out of the window. It can be like facing a mountain where the summit appears impossible to reach. We climb and climb and struggle and fight and it’s as if we take two steps forward and one step back.

Then the self-doubt pops its head up and we tell ourselves that we can’t possibly do it - and we are right - we can’t do it! Keeping the thought “*I can do this*” in our heads is that mountain we climb. We can’t do right for doing wrong and as Henry Ford says:

***“If we think we can***(we’re right because we can do it no matter what) ***or think we can’t*** (no way can we do that) ***– we are right****.*”

Isn’t that just fantastic because, whatever we do we win in our own minds. So that’s all right then!

What happens though when children aren’t introduced to motivation, or who unfortunately are raised in an atmosphere when they are told:-

*“You can’t possibly do that.”*

*“Whatever were you thinking?”*

*“Don’t be silly.”*

*“You’ll never do that.”*

*“You’ll never amount to anything.”*

And that list goes on and on.

So where do we start?

As early as possible, I would say. I don’t think I am the best at this, in fact catch me off guard on a bad day and you have a real grump, but  I console myself by knowing that everyone has days like this.

I recall when my kids were at primary school and I, wanting to show support, volunteered for the PTA. Amongst the numerous activities and duties, helping at school sports day was, in my view, one of the highlights. It entailed taking a team of around six children around the course that had been set out for them. The children I had on this one occasion were aged six and a little nervous about what was expected of them. Nothing new there then.

We usually had a small group of parents follow us around the course cheering on where appropriate. There were around seventy children in total, and we attacked the course in groups of twelve split into two groups of six with an appropriate adult for each group. That’s the maths over with!

So off we went. My group seemed to be the most hesitant and some of the parents were shouting:

*“Come on! You can do better than that!”*

*“Don’t be silly!”*

*“Good heavens, your baby sister could do better than that!*” (These kids were six for heaven sake!)

I soon realised that if we were going to get anywhere a different approach was needed. The next activity was throwing bean bags into a circle and hoping they landed somewhere near the target. With parents scrutinising their every move the kids seemed to be nervous of moving in case they did something wrong. I couldn’t tell the parents to keep quiet, so a quick word with the kids was needed. We gathered in a huddle, and although they were well aware that they must not hit or throw things at people I explained that just this once I wanted them to see if they could hit me with the bags.

So I stood in the middle of the circle and we started again. Up came the first girl, she looked at her parents (was that a “Do it right” look?) and then at me. I smiled at her. She threw the bag in my general direction and I stepped out of the way at the last minute. The bag dropped right in the centre and the kids started shouting with joy. Result!

Well, sort of. Now some of the parents were worried that they were making too much noise. Really?! So being Mr Diplomat I explained that it was quite alright for their kids to shout and cheer and I tried to encourage them to do the same. After that we had a great time. I got the kids doing a miniature New Zealand-style ‘Haker’ before each activity and encouraged them to high five each other, whether they were good or not.

Before long we had attracted quite a crowd of people following us and surprise surprise, they were laughing. We completed the course and although we didn’t win, (they came second I think), the kids were very pleased with themselves. They had achieved something that they didn’t think they could. Some parents said that they had never been able to persuade their children to do anything like that at home as they were always so quiet and timid, and they hoped that all the staff were like me, even commenting to the Head Master.

I said at the beginning I’m not the best at this by a long way but to show parents that with a little bit of positive encouragement and fun, even when their children don’t win, can work wonders.

Some years later, when my youngest was leaving the school and I was standing down as a PTA member, a young girl and her dad came up to me. He thanked me for helping him change his outlook on how to motivate; she thanked me for helping her first sports day to be something she would remember and to say that she had just received a sports scholarship. That sports day had made such an impact on them both that they changed their outlook on life. It helped them realise that they could do anything they put their mind to and that to encourage everyone, even when you don’t win, is a vital part of life.

The number of guys in prison who had no self-motivation or didn’t know how to motivate is unbelievable. Even those in some sort of leadership or teaching role didn’t appear to have the knack of just basic motivation techniques. One guy’s favourite expression was:

“*I’m your manager. I’m not here to be your friend, I’m here to bust your b…..!*”

And he expected everyone to succumb to this mentality.

A knock on effect of these guys having no motivation was the effect on their kids:

*“Do what you want, just don’t ask me!”*

Early on in my time in the prison I was asked to help with what they call *Lifer Days*. This is where guys who are serving a life sentence have the chance to spend a day or part of a day with their families. It was surprising how many of them didn’t know how to interact with their own kids. Kids who hadn’t seen their dad for some considerable time were being side-lined into just playing with the toys that were allocated to them. This was generally accompanied by:

“*Don’t make too much noise.*” or

“*Have a good time*!”

I had been asked to help one guy in particular interact with his family, especially his kids, so I asked him beforehand what they liked. He hadn’t a clue - basically I think he didn’t talk to them because he didn’t know what to say. So I suggested as most kids liked kites I would take mine in and see what happened.

There were around 20 kids of varying ages there and very soon most of them were assembling it with their dads helping and although they weren’t allowed out to fly the kite, it’s surprising what you can do with a bit of string and a lot of ingenuity!

At the debrief a while later, I spoke to the dad about his inter-action, or lack of it. He had never had a dad to learn from so he was frightened of saying something that might harm his kids or in his words:

“*It might make them turn out like me!*”

It appeared that his ‘motivation’ was from a succession of passing uncles or his mum, and centred around what **Shad Helmstetter** in his excellent book ***What To Say When You Talk To Yourself*** calls *Passing it on*.

This includes sayings such as:

*“Can’t you do anything right?”*

*“You’re just like your father.”* (This was a common saying especially when they had done something wrong.)

*“You just don’t try!”* (Again, another popular saying especially with guys who were Dyslexic.)

“*I tell you to do something and you do the opposite.”*

I’m not surprised that this guy had doubts, his saving grace was that somehow he knew that what he had been told was wrong. With a little guidance he started to talk to his kids with just a general, “*How was school*?” and even if something had gone wrong a little encouragement was good policy. He was still rather reticent with them when I last saw him but he had made huge inroads into something resembling a conversation.

It is also hard to comprehend the number of guys who were unable to read. The way that they had been taught in the schools that they attended was pitiful and it reminded me of similar experiences I had witnessed in my early years.

Children who are dyslexic have trouble concentrating because they are unable to follow the teacher, especially when they are writing on the blackboard as it was in my day. The easiest thing for the teacher to do was to put them nearer the back of the class which meant that it was even harder for these children to see so the *misbehaviour* increased until ultimately they were classed as disruptive and suspended or expelled. Hence the kids leave school after school following disruptive behaviour and unfortunately the road to prison opens up.

I don’t for a minute want to suggest that everyone who experienced this travels that road but unfortunately some will. The crying shame is that the simple remedy would have been to place them closer to the board and give more support and encouragement and a vast number of them would have improved substantially.

Thankfully now, most teachers know or understand the signs of Dyslexia and actions can be taken at the outset. Simple things can help such as giving them a coloured acetate to put over the page as they are reading. When I suggested this to one guy in prison he was both angry and overjoyed; overjoyed that he could read considerably better, and angry that no one had told him this before.

A similar thing happens when they come out of prison. The guys have been away for varying lengths of time and mum has been in charge. Dad tries to exert his authority and either the kids don’t like it or mum won’t allow it, either way can be destructive as the kids generally end up in the middle and are used as pawns.

Leon had that problem. He and his wife were used to an environment where praise and encouragement were in short supply. When they met in their late teens their stories were very similar. They were both fostered from an early age and thankfully both the foster parents understood the need for encouragement. Unfortunately both sets of parents died before Leon and his wife turned 16 so they missed out on the latter part of their schooling and ended up hitting the streets.

The couple married after about 10 months together and Leon was then found guilty of a crime and sentenced to 12 years in prison. His wife discovered she was pregnant following his committal so he didn’t have an opportunity to witness the birth or to spend time with her. His wife remained loyal to him going to each review and she and his daughter never missed a visit, even when he was moved some distance away. At each visit his daughter, whom he saw grow up in jumps of twice a month, was always a Daddy’s girl. She was always engaging with him and never left his side all the time they were together. When he was able he phoned home and always spoke to her always praising her for being good at school, helping her mum, or just being a good girl. Their relationship was as good as it could be bearing in mind the situation.

When he was eventually released and went home, the trouble started. His daughter thought she could rule the family, bearing in mind that she had never heard her dad shout or chastise her. When he started to tell her ‘*No’* she didn’t like it and rebelled with behaviour that said, “I’m the parent here.”

She had to learn very quickly that the situation had changed. She was an intelligent girl so they were able to sit down and explain things to her. She had to realise that their whole lives had now changed and there needed to be period of readjustment for them all.  Dad was in their lives all the time now and mum and dad needed time together, most importantly they were now a family unit. He and his wife never stopped praising her for all the good she did but there were now boundaries which had to be observed.

Thankfully it all worked out fine, and the constant praise helped. She is now a well-grounded intelligent young lady. Make no mistake she is no pushover and is quite able to stand up for herself and her parents when it is called for. She is also the sister to a lovely baby brother whom she adores. She gets a bit annoyed at the sleepless nights that go with the baby, but don’t we all? Most importantly she encouraged him, even when he didn’t fully understand her, but as he grows up, he and his sister will never be short of motivation from parents who understand the need to encourage their children.

Steve had a different experience. He was sentenced to five years when his son Ricky was four years old. His wife didn’t like to discipline Ricky because she didn’t want Ricky to not love or need her. They never missed a visit date or a sentence review and were keen for Steve to return home.

I met Steve about halfway through his sentence and we discussed his family. He was always a bit dubious about what to say to Ricky as his upbringing had been disjointed in that he was shunted all over the place and he hadn’t had any kind of role model for parenthood. He understood the need for encouragement and after a short time started to talk to Ricky about his day to day life and asked what he was doing. It wasn’t long before Ricky started improving at school and always brought along any certificates he won to show his dad. As with Leon, Steve spoke on the phone when he could and the praise never stopped.

There was a small backlash as Steve’s wife was beginning to feel pushed out which caused some friction in the relationship. Steve arranged for his brother who lived nearby to look after Ricky a couple of times whilst his wife visited on her own and they talked about the situation. Steve told her about seeing me and his understanding about motivating Ricky so that eventually she started to see the difference in both Steve and Ricky.

I had to give her praise at this point because she could have flipped and left then because it was so different from her own experiences, but after a hesitant start she started to embrace this new “culture” and followed Steve’s advice by enrolling at college to study hairdressing. She had always wanted to do this and Steve had always told her she should so he was ecstatic.

When he was released he went home to a very happy family. His wife is now a qualified hairdresser and works from home. Ricky is about to enter a local senior school and is a very polite and courteous young man. Steve works with his brother in their decorating business and the last I heard they were all doing brilliantly.

So, to return to where we started, you can never start praising and positively motivating too early. Both of our children have lived with this philosophy all their lives and we believe that they are better and more rounded individuals for it. We have always encouraged them to try whatever they wanted and for us and lot of others it has paid off.

I know I cannot be 100% all the time (although I’m always being told by my wife that I should be and the annoying thing is that she is right!)  but having these two sayings as mantras help and I have passed them on many times.

***I know it’s all up to me. 100% every bit of it. All of it is how I look at it and what I do about it. That’s what winning is. That’s why I am a winner.***

***I keep my chin up, my head held high. I look, act, sound, think, and feel like the winner I am. Anytime a problem starts to get me down, I get myself right back up. I tackle problems and I solve them. When frustration or defeat threatens me, I just become that much stronger, more positive, better organised, and more determined than ever.***

*Page 197 and 198*

*Harper Collins 1986 Shad Helmstetter -****What To Say When You Talk To Yourself***

**Oh what a day!**

A couple of the excellent daily quotes that Advance Performance send out struck a chord with me. One because they reminded me of a couple of my friends, the other because of something my youngest son said, and both described lots of guys in prison:

“*Either you run the day or the day runs you.” –* Jim Rohn

and

*“A mother is not a person to lean on but a person to make leaning unnecessary.” –* Dorothy C. Fisher

Prison is an odd place. It feels a if you are visiting another planet. Everything is done to a timetable which helps the running of it easier and more efficient. After all, it is a prison there to do a specific job (not the holiday camp some believe it to be).

Unfortunately this makes it almost impossible to allow anyone to run their day as they wish and therefore the “prison day” runs them. Some days it can feel as if hours and hours have passed when in actual fact when you return to your daily world it’s only been a short time. Conversely, sometimes it feels that you are there for only a short time when in actual fact it’s been several hours.

I’m sure that people visiting loved ones would always say that the couple of hours they are allocated isn’t long enough and I’m sure for them it probably doesn’t seem anywhere near long enough. That could be because a vast majority of them make very long journeys to and from home. One family made the journey twice a month via walking, getting a bus, then a train, and then either another long walk or a taxi ride and then repeating the journey at the end of the visit. I think they started out at about 7:00am and never arrived home before 8:00pm. They showed dedication and support and never seemed to moan about it.

The regime for the staff can be laborious as well. You have to wait for all the checks to be done before what they call “movement” starts and if they are short staffed it will take longer. Afterwards, the whole procedure is done in reverse. I valiantly tried to fit in three clients per morning session and two in the afternoon. That was providing they weren’t waiting for meds, or to see the doctor, or on a legal visit, or hadn’t moved either to another wing or another prison, or they just hadn’t got up!

Despite all the hold ups things went very well. I think in the whole time I was there I only had a dozen or so bad delays.

One of the main gripes of the guys was that the days ran them, and time was heavy on their shoulders due to the hours that they have to fill doing nothing. It was a huge challenge trying to motivate the guys into doing anything because of the length of time they spend on their own in a confined cell. A lot of them ran their lives around the soaps (Corrie beat EastEnders most times - sadly lots of them used to talk about them as if they were real life). Getting them or arranging something for them to do that clashed with their TV watching was nigh on impossible!

However, some of them did see the positive side of doing something other than following the goings on of the fictitious characters in a soap opera. Motivating them to read was a big step to overcome for a lot of guys. Suddenly a whole world opened up for them and whilst they took some stick from the other lads on the wings it developed a lifeline to their kids. J. K. Rowling has a lot to be thanked for. Not only did she re-introduce kids to the world of stories, it also opened the door to a fair few guys in prison, helping them to connect with their children.

From moaning about the fact that all their kids wanted to do was talk about Harry Potter to suddenly discussing with them the goings on between Voldemort and Harry was a revelation. Suddenly, a guy who was managing his day so that he could read and finding *that* reading helped him in his home life was brilliant for him and his kids. Their dad whom they didn’t get to see often could now discuss Harry Potter!

Some of them transferred to Shakespeare as their kids got older. Then I heard some very random comments!

“*Dad, why did Othello get up-tight about a hanky?!*”

And:

“*You should see the Leonardo DiCaprio’s Romeo + Juliet! It’s just amazing!*”

Unfortunately, I didn’t get to hear why they thought Othello got up-tight about a hanky! Pity that would have been interesting!

Painting was another pastime that gave them the chance to manage their day. Guys who suffered all sorts of mental and physical abuse found some sort of closure whilst expressing themselves with paints or crayons. Some of the results were excellent and are now hung in lots of different prisons. They started to plan their day so that they could concentrate on painting, in some cases, the more experienced guys helped the less experienced, small classes sprung up on the wings and homework was set. Painting can and does help people with deep routed problems or with those who have trouble expressing themselves vocally. Encouraging them to draw or scribble allows them to talk without thinking about what they are saying. They concentrate on what they are doing which allows them to talk without having to re-live, and that is very therapeutic.

I remember when I was training I had to attend a set number of hours of counselling myself and a friend who was doing art therapy asked if I would be her client (for her course), and I could use her as my counselling on mine.

I had always maintained that I would never draw for anyone and that as a rule of thumb couldn’t (or told myself I couldn’t?) draw a straight line even with a ruler. After a couple of sessions I really embraced it by learning about the processes and found it very therapeutic. Since then I have used it myself, especially with those people suffering from trauma and PTS.

Writing followed the painting and reading, which now included novels, plays, and vast amounts of poetry. It all helped the guys and some of the work was very interesting. I remember a pantomime that was put on for a therapeutic wing. It would never transfer to the West End but the guys loved it and it was performed many times even after the author had been released from prison. Novels were written about anything from science fiction/fantasy to semi-autobiographical. Poetry was a big pastime which a lot of guys found helpful. A vast majority showed insight and were even published in prison magazines, in two cases winning prizes, as did some of the paintings.

Small businesses started to spring up where the artist would paint or draw cards and the writers would compose the words to create a birthday card. Again, a lot of them were very artistic, and although no money changed hands, some guys’ waistlines increased considerably with the amount of Mars Bars that they consumed. In some prisons, the inmates and Governors have set up shops on the grounds of the prisons and the public can go and buy the produce from flowers and cards to tables and chairs with the money donated to local charities.

Self-managing their days was a great help to some of the guys as they realised that with a bit of pre-planning they could start doing activities which benefited them. The days did probably drag at times but overall their time was more effectively utilised and they found their health and moods changed for the better. This transferred to their families and the relationships improved as the visiting partners could see them trying to do something positive with their lives. John Rohn is right: ‘*Run your day don’t let the day run you’*.

In my experience, women and an increasing proportion of men are subjected to a similar situation when they give up work to bring up the kids. It can be potentially soul destroying when you have been used to a daily job to suddenly be thrust into the world of nappies, sleepless nights and everything else. Don’t get the wrong impression here, it is also very rewarding and I would encourage any men who are able to embrace the idea, but with all good things there is a downside to it. You go from being needed almost 24/7,  to not being needed at all as the kids grow up and  go off to work, travelling, university or whatever they decide to do. Suddenly your days seem to increase by 48 hours as the time seems to go so slowly. I mean as a man there is only so much cleaning that can be done!

The temptation to say stop, don’t go, stay here forever so that I can carry on this job is overwhelming. But they go and they create their own lives and do what they have to do and the job of nurturing them finishes and being there for them starts.

The friend I mentioned earlier is perhaps in a different situation and one unfortunately that we all have to face at some time. His wife sadly died around five years ago. They had been together for some 45 years and the loss was even more acute as there was no real warning. To be with someone for that length of time and then lose them is heart-breaking. After some months he described it as:

“*Counting the days until I die.*”

To make matters slightly worse they had hardly spent a day away from each other. Their whole life had revolved around each other and now all he saw was a day full of nothing. He got up, bought his paper, sat and read it then did the crossword whilst having his breakfast. This was what they used to do together. Then he just watched the day take charge of him, waiting for the time to cook his lunch, then his tea, then it was bed time. The next day was always the same.

I felt I had to release him out of this monotony. It was like watching someone grow old before my eyes. He had always been a religious guy so the first step was encouraging him to take a more active role within his church. With the help of some other church goers we nominated him to be a steward then taking on one of the many church roles of assessing and advising on building repairs. Slowly he began to realise that life carries on and how helpful social activities can be.

He still does the stewardship and buildings. He also goes and helps with the preschool drop-in, he joined the choir, and has now learned to conduct his local brass band. He still has his morning ritual, which is fine, but from about nine onwards in the morning he has taken control of his day and not let it control him.

I also know many guys whose mums cannot be described as someone who encouraged being leaned on or to be there to make leaning necessary, or even being there at all. In some cases, they dislike Mother’s Day because all it does is remind them of what they haven’t got or never had.

My youngest son comes with me most Fridays when I do the household shop. Although he and his brother disagree with the whole idea of sending cards to someone you see every day, he relented and decided to buy one. Then the trouble began. Some of it is probably my fault as I have been the parent who has been there whilst my wife worked. He thought that it was sexist that all the cards, apart from being ridiculously expensive, said:

“*Thanks for cooking.*”

“*Thanks for keeping the house clean*.”

“*Thanks for doing my* *washing and tidying up after me”*

You get the idea. He wanted to know why there was a distinct lack of cards that just said thanks for doing what you do and I love you - not too unreasonable. He eventually found a funny one which they both signed. I’m waiting for Father’s Day when none of the cards will say thanks for doing what you do every day!

With the guys in prison, it seems to be either guys being tremendously loyal to their mums or the polar opposite where they almost detest the name ‘mum’.

Where their mum is part of their life it seem to be that she is the mainstay of the family, she is the matriarch, the solid base which keeps the family together. She is the one person there for them above all else. There are some guys who go above and beyond. I have known at least half a dozen that have exaggerated the truth which has enabled their offspring to walk out of court. Surprisingly they seem okay doing it with the sons but not with the fathers! Perhaps it’s a case of the sons are just starting out and they want to try to keep them safe as long as possible whereas the fathers can almost fend for themselves. It begs the question of when do they stop protecting them? At what point do the sons become old enough to fend for themselves?

It works the other way as well. Most guys who have this protective blanket ask their mother everything. Every decision they make is passed by her for approval. I even had one guy who asked his mum if he should see me and what he should tell me or what to talk about. I‘ve been quizzed by mums, some nicely but also some not so nicely.

One of the saddest situations was when a mum wanted her son, Ben, to talk to me because, as I found out as we went along, she had been abused by the same guy who also had abused him. The abuser had been her father.

We had long discussions to build the belief that the abuse was not his fault. He had been continually told:

“*No one will want you after what you did.*”

Ben became a stronger person as he saw that it hadn’t been his fault and he managed to find and then use a positive mental attitude. He felt that he was ready to face the future when he was released. The first thing he did was to persuade his mum to seek help and after a couple of false starts she managed to face the past and they both decided to prosecute the abuser, who ended up going to prison for eight years. They were both able to be more positive about their future as the abuse had held them back with neither of them having spoken to anyone about it, including Ben’s father (her husband). He was tremendously supportive of them both.

After explaining the principle of the Advance Performance *Tree* to Ben he saw the effect the past had had on him and it enabled him to take his life forward. For years he had been living in fear of his grandfather who had broken him down mentally.

When he was released he decided to pursue his passion for the technical side of music production and now works for a small independent production company affiliated to a university near where he lives. He has met a young lady and they plan to get married when she has graduated. She knows what happened to him and is tremendously proud at how he has turned his life around. As a big positive, after years of refusing to think about marriage and kids, he is now planning a wedding and the possibility of having children when they are settled.

On the other side and also a positive reaction, his mum decided to go back to college and is studying to be a mechanic! She was always interested in cars and was a huge Formula One fan so why not! She decided to take charge of her life and do what she always wanted to do. They both manage their days now, rather than waiting in dread for their secret to escape. They attack each day with gusto and after many years, are finally enjoying life. Ben and his mum enjoy Mother’s Day together.

Craig hates it. In fact, when I first met him he almost detested the name Mum. He was the oldest of three and from as early as he could remember she was never there. He remembers that he and his siblings were always left with whoever she was with at the time and as he grew older he was left in charge. He never knew when she would leave or whether she would return.  She left him with strict instructions on what to say if anyone came to the door and where to go for food. He was always told that he was to say that his mum was ill and couldn’t get out of bed.

When he was older it became more difficult and in the end the school found out. They involved Social Services who placed the three children into a temporary foster home. When his mother arrived back she was furious. She concocted a story saying that she had left her boyfriend in charge as she was away doing a job. The boyfriend admitted it was his fault and told the Social Services that she was a good mum. The kids were allowed back and things took a turn for the worse. In a fit of rage she stood Craig in the bath, poured petrol over him and threatened to set him alight because he was such a bad boy and this is what happens to bad boys!

Luckily he had the sense to run out of the house and thankfully a police car was in the area which took him in. The kids were taken away from her and placed into permanent care. Before she could be prosecuted she disappeared.

It took a long time for Craig to settle at his foster home but eventually he did and remained there till he was 17. Unfortunately after his foster parents passed away he was left alone. After many scrapes with the law he ended up in prison.

Understandably, he hates his mum blaming her for his current situation. But after using the Advance Performance *Tree* he began to see that although his past was a major factor in shaping his life it didn’t mean that was how it was always going to be. He began to realise that he could do whatever he wanted to do and be whatever sort of person he wanted to be. He was the one person who could take charge of his future.

He was always worried about what he would do to her if he ever saw her again. I think at our early stages of counselling he really believed that he would kill her, but that changed as he started to take control of his life. He saw that action would have a terrible effect on his future life and he really didn’t want her to be the reason he would spend all his life in prison!

After he had settled down with his foster family he wanted to call his foster mum “Mum” but he thought if he did she would end up being like his birth mother and it was just too much for him. It was only after she died that he understood the reality of his beliefs and he regretted not calling her Mum. At the end of our time together he had started to call her Mum, but it didn’t come easily to him. Craig understood that she had taught him that although she was there for him to lean on early in their relationship she also made him see that leaning on her was not necessary in the end but that she had been there for him.

For a while I was a local preacher and I was fortunate to conduct a service on Mother’s Day. In our church there were a lot of young women who at the time had not married or had children but they were acting as ‘mums’ in the church setting and in Sunday School. It made me realise that Mums are all around us.

My own situation was not the best and my relationship with my step-mum has not run as smoothly as I would have hoped, but when I look back there were women who became surrogate mums and helped me through some tough times. They may not be our biological mums but they were as good as and in some cases better.

Using the strategy of the Tree to focus on the future, enables us to manage our day and to know that we don’t need to lean on mums or anyone for that matter. We have the ability to forge our own future and the future is brilliant.

**Addendum – Learned Behaviour**

There comes a time in everyone’s life when you know it’s just time to move on. I had been at the prison for around 14 years and I felt that I had done as much as I could. Yes, there would always be more guys with more problems and they would always need someone to help them through that particular stage of their life, but the prisons were in a phase of altering their procedures and the volunteering part of that was getting pushed to the back, so I made the decision that it was time to move on

Of course I had a bit of help, at the time my wife broke her foot and was in plaster so needed a driver to ferry her around for a period and then my youngest son developed a serious illness. So all in all, I felt someone was telling me that enough was enough.

My wife’s foot mended and our son recovered and so I was left in sort of limbo with nothing to do. With requests from some ex-prisoners I undertook some mentoring and was approached by friends of friends to do some private counselling work, so life moved along in another direction.

This year, my wife and I decided to do something we had never done in our 29 years of married life - we went on a package holiday without the kids! It was very strange to start off with, but once we had stopped looking for them we settled down. The weather and the amount of free booze helped considerably!

Whilst we were there, I did something that started the thought process of Learned Behaviour. I’m not a fan of swimming in deep water or jumping off a diving board something which my wife was blissfully unaware. One day, we went on a trip white water rafting which was brilliant fun. During the first part, our guide Hussain explained that we should ‘acclimatise our bodies’ to the water temperature in areas that were colder than the river we would be rafting down. This made sense so off we went. He took us up the side of a very large hill and then told us we would be jumping off the side. This was a leap of some 15 to 20 feet into a pool or what actually appeared to be black water without a bottom!

The first guy jumped - no problem. I have no problem with heights but the water really worried me. Next, a lady jumped and I was about to walk away when I remembered on one of Advance’s courses either John or Heather talking about “*taking a* *second of courage*.”

So, this was my second of courage. I walked over, nearly slipped, stood on the edge, thought *“What am I doing?”* heard Three, Two, One and jumped. What an absolutely brilliant experience! My wife was flabbergasted when I told her. But it made me wonder where that fear came from. Try as I might, nothing came to mind, so for me it will be one of those things that may never be answered.

Three examples among many that happened over the next day or so reiterated me to say that I truly believe that the whole concept of Learned Behaviour should be taught in schools and there should be classes for parents too.

We were sitting by the pool and I noticed a family not far from us.  ‘Dad’ handed a very small baby to ‘Mum’ who was in the water. The weather was hot and the pool was considerably cooler. Mum decided that the baby should experience the water so she lowered the baby in. Baby didn’t like this so decided to cry (understandably I thought) but what happened next was unbelievable.

Mum decided that the baby wanted more so she dipped him even further into the cold pool. The poor child was distraught, then ‘Aunty’ came to the rescue and decided that babies liked being thrown into the air. Poor crying child was then thrown into the air (well, why wouldn’t you!) a couple of times and allowed to have its legs in the water before being thrown up again.

Surprisingly this didn’t work, (I can’t think why!) so Big Sister (seven or eight) decided that she was better equipped to do this so Mum and Aunty willingly passed baby over. The throwing continued with the baby going further into the water as its sister was considerably smaller than mum or aunt. Thankfully, one of the women saw sense and took the baby and rested him on their shoulder where, because he was exhausted, fell asleep.

At this turn of events someone in the family shouted that if he slept now he wouldn’t sleep that night (bearing in mind we were at about 11am) so Mum, in her ultimate wisdom, chose to keep the exhausted baby awake.

Who in their family decided that very small babies liked cold water and being thrown in the air? What message was being given to any young girls about what to do with crying babies?

Working in the prison taught me a lot about learned behaviour and that it is probably one of the main causes of there being so many men incarcerated.

It is an argument that is hard to disagree with.

“*My dad did so why can’t I?”*

*“My dad and brothers do it, it’s what we do!”*

*“Being in prison never hurt them, it’s no problem.”*

We all live and exist and act with behaviour that we have learned. From tying our shoelaces, our table manners, the way we interact with others to bringing up our children, we learn it all from those around us.

The prison experience hits home when you hear that a majority of the guys in there learn their behaviour from their parents or those closest to them. The problem is the cycle continues without them realising.

If children are allowed to talk to their parents anyway they like what is the next step? If young children are allowed to swear at the parents what are their interaction skills going to be like in later life?

I’ve heard parents say that it is the teacher’s place to teach them right and wrong. Absolutely not, as parents it is our responsibility to give them the correct grounding.

We should push for Personal Development and the whole area that encompasses to be taught in schools and colleges. After all, we are looking at our future.

I suppose working in a prison has made me cynical in the way in which I view the world, and that may well be true. I also don’t believe that all our young adults are the same because they most definitely are not. We have many, many fine, courteous, extremely capable young adults and we are very proud of them.

I don’t believe any of us want to hear children swearing and being totally disrespectful to their parents or everyone else around them.

Let’s all push for bad learned behaviour to be unlearned so that all children have a positive view on life.