

Remembering a beautiful conversation as counterpoint to what went on before

The date is January 23 2020, a Thursday. Our appointment at the Community Health Centre in Albury , NSW, is for 11am. Meeting with us are Dr Albert*, psychiatrist, and Anna* (my case manager) of the Albury Wodonga Older Persons Mental Health Team.

Why? And How? .. did this come about. This is my story.

The previous year, 2019 was memorable for both the right, and also the wrong, reasons. The former included the delightful marriage of niece and Goddaughter Trish* to Bob* and the news of her longed for pregnancy. Successful shoulder surgery and uncomplicated closure of a hole in the heart for my husband were also definite plusses.

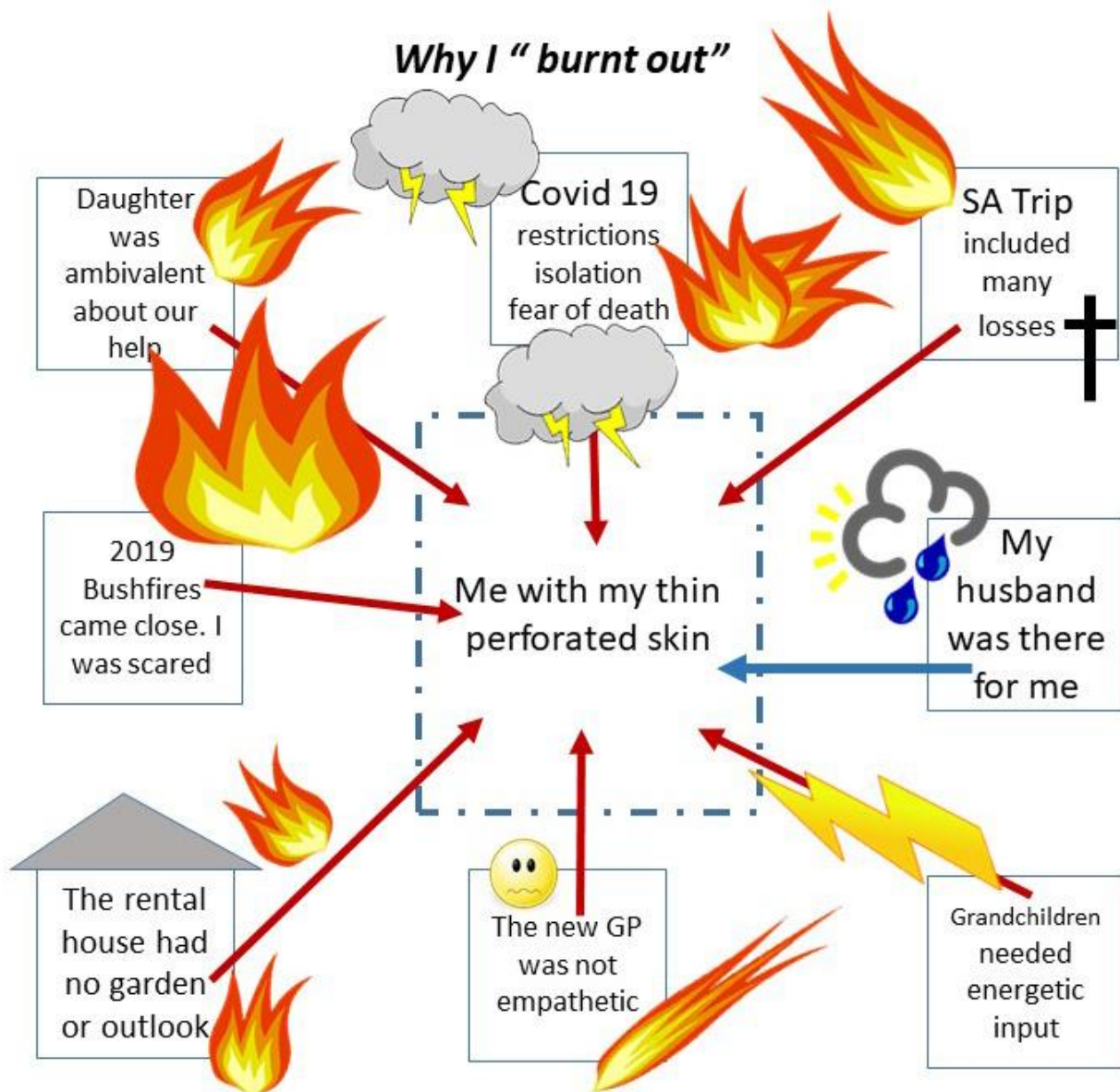
On the down side was a phone conversation with our adult daughter during which she disclosed serious thoughts of self harm. She lives in the Riverina and we on the Mid North Coast, so face to face conversations were few and far between. Concern for her emotional wellbeing had been on the agenda for a while, both preceding, and after her decision in 2018 to leave a very unhappy marriage. In June that year, with some help from me, she had finally moved out into the old, shabby house they had previously rented. Now, a year later, sharing care of her three small boys (the youngest being only 5 months old at the time of the move) with her ex-husband, and working part time, was proving almost too much. She was at breaking point.

So it was, that after difficult discussions and with heavy hearts, we devised a plan to help her and our grandchildren over this horrible hurdle. It was clear that we could no longer provide the necessary support long-distance. We needed to be closer to them. We proceeded over the next weeks to put our precious home and Australian Native garden in the hands of an estate agent to rent out for the next year. We would relocate to Albury with enough furniture for a small house and we hoped the substantial costs involved would be covered by the rental of our large house. Fortunately this part of the plan worked well.

However, as I now reflect on that time from the safety of three years, I see that the concurrence of several unforeseen events changed the plan, and with this, the course of my life. By January of 2020 , I desperately needed the help of Dr Albert and Anna just to stay afloat.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have represented these events as safely contained in neat boxes in the image below. For the sake of truth I have also included cartoon images from the public domain to convey the emotional dimension to the words. Your imagination will link them to each other. They pervade my fragile being at that time through perforations in my skin.

*Pseudonyms are used for names throughout this piece.



My world was topsy-turvy. I returned from a long trip to my previous homeland of South Africa completely drained. I was shocked and depressed with life there. I missed my close cousin who had recently died. In a surprising turn of events I had managed to make contact with the daughter of my closest childhood friend who had died from an epileptic seizure when this child was only three. I was shocked to learn that her childhood had been very unhappy due to an emotionally distant father and an uncaring stepmother. I felt angry and grief stricken. In turn we had stayed with a nephew in his 50's who was struggling with serious blood pressure problems and had lost contact with a son who was losing his battle with addiction. Sorrow and heartache was everywhere.

Not surprisingly, my health had taken a dive while we were away but on our return to Oz I expected things to get back to normal. Not so. The contributing factors are on the chart.

Life was scary and painful and I knew I needed help, and soon. We were now in Albury for the next year and we had to find a house to rent and a support network of friends. Our temporary accommodation was some 45 minutes' drive from Albury so the settling-in process was slow. A new GP was essential. I ended up on the books of a young woman who liked things to be tidied up easily and without fuss. I needed to bawl my eyes out! The SSRI medications she ordered gave me intolerable side effects. The constant anxiety about everything screwed up my gut and I was becoming desperate. The idea of a psychologist finally came up and the doctor gave me some names. At the same time my daughter helped me contact the Older Persons Mental Health Team in Albury and I self-referred to them. Progress at last!

This government-funded multidisciplinary team worked from the Albury Community Health Centre in a gracious old building on a tree lined street. The receptionists were welcoming and respectful. My husband and I met first off with Abbey* who made the initial assessment. She was kind and a good listener and made an appointment with the psychiatrist to discuss my medication difficulties. I saw him a couple of times and was so relieved to find him open to questions and my need for quite lengthy input. He clearly understood my plight and seemed confident something could be done. Over time my confidence in this was justified by a reduction in my anxiety levels. At the meeting with which I started this essay, I was well enough to look ahead and bravely ask "do you think I will ever get well again?" The answer from both the Doctor and my case manager was a resounding "yes."

The positive sensations I experienced through interaction with this team of multidisciplinary professionals can only be described as overwhelmingly hopeful and joyous. I felt totally accepted and just so comfortable. We sat in a circle to talk, although there was a desk if needed. They showed real interest in the creative work I had brought with me and there seemed to be no real barriers between us. I consider this as one of the most wonderful and authentic experiences of my life and with it came a sense of confidence that indeed, I would be OK again. Three years later I am indeed, OK again, although older and definitely wiser!