Sally and Greg FEBRUARY 2021 SN - DEPTH - 37 MINS

[MALE RESPONDENT]

[Other comments: Interview via internet where some words were unclear due to variable sound quality and some signal breaks.]

**[Music and voice-over: Hello and welcome to the BACP Therapy Today podcast.]**

**Hello and welcome to Therapy Today podcast. Today I'm talking to Gregory David about how therapy helped him overcome addiction Greg describes himself as a well-travelled nomad, having lived in many places including Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Kuwait. He's currently based in London; he's an ex-entrepreneur; he's an accomplished sax player and a regular busker at Shepherd's Bush Market as well as an artist, a charity blogger and a recently published author. Welcome, Greg.**

Hi, Sally.

**Greg, you told the story of how therapy helped you overcome addiction in Therapy Today, and I'd like to first start by thanking you for your openness in sharing that story. What was interesting for me is that overcoming your addiction was almost a by-product of the therapy for you. You went in for another reason. Can you tell us a bit about that?**

Okay, firstly I'll talk about me engaging with the therapy and then a little bit about how the therapy helped with addiction, because that's a big issue. Obviously, I'm interested in how as a male I engaged with therapy and thinking about that. I have met a lot of men in my life, but I've never met one who's had any sort of therapy. The problem you have as a male is that it feels like a submission. Culturally, men don't speak out, and this is the problem that we are starting to overcome more recently - that guess what, males have emotions and feelings too. Not only that, but particularly we are allowed to share them and talk about them. That was the first thing, and the second time I spoke out about the fact that I was feeling depressed was when I'd fairly recently arrived in London and I had another problem with my arm. I don't particularly go to the doctor's ever - another factor about being male. In the doctor's, we talked about the arm and as I was leaving it was like what they call now the doorknob consultancy, when you're just leaving, and you say the real problem, because I was just about to go and actually just burst into tears.

Now, I never cried at all, but I had been a little bit - up until that point - and the doctor, she - perhaps significantly - said, 'Okay…' I said, 'Look, everything should be just fine. There's nothing I can get any traction on that's causing me any problems just now, but I am just wanting to sob all the time and feeling so sad.' She said, 'Do you want to speak to somebody?' I said, 'You know what? I'll do it. This is it. For the first time in my life - tell you what, throw me the rubber ring. I need help here.' She offered me 20 sessions then with an experienced therapist that was changing - she calls it her modality. She was retraining in another aspect of psychotherapy and doing a master's, and part of that, she had to do a certain amount of sessions with people and had a room actually in that surgery. There I was, starting having - but I was really suspicious of the whole process. I must say, I walked in partially thinking, you know what, jump - hold your breath, hold your nose, and jump and get in there.

The other half was sitting there cross-legged, thinking, yeah, really? You're really going to get inside me? Also, because I was a survivor of childhood - I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and one of the big features is trust. The problem is trust is wiped out of you at a very early age. The abuse was happening in the family; the father was the abuser; the mother knew about it, so there is no safety or trust in that construct. That's how I've gone through life, basically. Then we started digging around, and then the fact that the depression and all these other issues I was facing started to surface. Like the symptoms, but we started to dig into the fact that yes, they were very probably caused by having been sexually abused and being in a neglectful, abusive childhood. That's how it went. Does that kind of answer…?

**Absolutely. You talk about trust, but I wondered how quickly you were able to open up to the therapist or whether the therapist was able to ask the right questions or create the right trust between you for that to feel okay. Was that just a decision on your part, as you say, to jump in?**

That's a big, complex question. I wasn't aware of how paranoid I was, in effect, and distrusting of others. This was a big issue I've had to get past. My father was a chronic narcissist, and he was an alcoholic and an abuser. For me to get past the trusting was very, very difficult. I jumped in because I'm fairly impulsive and a high risk-taker; that can be another feature of being an abuse survivor, that you go for high risk. I'm the high-risk variety, so I go in and go in for high risk and then later pulled back and started - hold on, hold on, hold on. How far am I going in here? Who am I going in with? What do they know? I almost then set about investigating the therapist and finding more about them. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! What have I done here? Yes, building that trust, it's got to be a really difficult process for some therapists with some clients particularly and a very, very, very important feature, massively so. Of all the things you've got to really alloy and protect, I would suggest that as a therapist would be primarily the numero uno, the trust, yes.

**Absolutely, and I'm guessing as part of that is a sense that your therapist was able to hold the things that were coming out and was not going to be overwhelmed by it, and she could cope with what you were telling.**

Yes.

**She wasn't going to be appalled or shocked or judgemental.**

No, that's right, that's right, and able to - in some ways you feel like they'd hacked this track once already, that you weren't alone in the jungle. There was - some of that feeling did come over me, that being deposited in the jungle and the helicopter had then left me with no map or resource. That's possibly something to do with the process, which was - and this is an interesting point for me intellectually about therapy - it's the 'you've got to find your own journey' versus someone holding your hand and saying, 'Hey, come this way. This is the way for you.' That has got to be a very difficult balance, right, because I had two lots of therapy. The second one was more prescriptive, and it was yes, fine, you're doing good, but hey, that route's going to lead you to prison, for example, that sort of line of thinking, if you take that to its nth point. Whereas there is some space here - what about doing it that way? Ah, you're right. It was more pragmatic. The first one was, yes… Very difficult, though, and I could write a book about both in terms of the nature of them. I would say, for me, I think it's about the therapist and the relationship with the therapist rather than any kind of philosophy or modality behind the therapy.

**Yes, absolutely, and I think most therapists would agree with you on that, and actually there is quite a substantial amount of research that backs that up. Obviously, your presenting issue was essentially your addiction to marijuana.**

Yes.

**How closely is addiction linked then with childhood sexual abuse, from your experience?**

From my personal experience, and that is having attended a numerous number of groups now - well, four particularly, on a regular basis, and having met all sorts of people, really absolutely all sorts of folk from every denomination of humanity imaginable and those that would identify as male, female and others - yes, a high proportion of us have had addiction issues and still have addiction issues. In fact, I need to read something from a book that's put out by a charity called One in Four, oneinfour.org.uk. The One in Four pertains to the number of female minors that get sexually abused as children, which is a monumental number. It's said to be between, say, one in six to one in nine males, which if you actually stop and think about that actual number, the gravity of the issue within society that goes across all cultures and all countries, is monumental. It is woven into the fabric of humanity and it's something we all seriously need to do something about.

Anyway, this booklet, which I'm a contributor to, is called *Numbing the Pain*, and it is directly about - stories written by survivors of childhood sexual abuse that have dealt with addiction issues. The forward is written by a chap who had 32 years - it says, 'As someone who has worked with people with substance misuse, dependency or chronic addiction for 32 years, I have been struck by how high a proportion of my clients have suffered some form of sexual, sexually dysfunctional or traumatic experience as a result of childhood sexual abuse. I would place that figure in the high 70 per cent to 85 per cent. I do not believe it to be the cause of the addiction, but it is a significant factor amongst many that combine to make someone so ill at ease with themselves that the anaesthetic benefit of drugs and alcohol is like a siren call.' I wouldn't separate just the drugs and alcohol. There is gambling and a number of others as well like pornography, sex addiction. My goodness, you can become addicted to anything.

He says, 'I would place that figure…' Okay, we've got that bit. The other bit it says - this is just in pragmatic cost - 'The cost of failing to treat the trauma of childhood sexual abuse in [signal breaks up 00:12:14.8] immense, leaving survivors vulnerable to relapse. Public Health England estimates the economic burden of alcohol-related harm done approximately £25 billion to £50 billion each year. In 2014 the National Treatment Agency estimated the overall annual cost of drug addiction was around £15 billion, £14 billion due to drug-related crime, half a billion to NHS costs for treating patients.' One last one: 'The number of adverse childhood experience studies have found that adverse childhood experiences such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect and growing up with domestic abuse, increase the risk of addiction.' Felitti et al, 1998. Individuals who have experienced more than four ACEs are seven times more likely to become addicted to alcohol, ten times more likely to be at risk of intravenous drug addiction, and 12 times more likely to have attempted suicide.

If you multiply that by the one in four and do some sort of mathematics, the probability of someone sitting in front of you that has an addiction or addiction problem, of being abused in childhood is - I don't know, at a guess, 70 per cent chance. The other thing is - and I was listening to a YouTube thing the other day by a chap that's written some books on addiction and childhood abuse. He was saying that just dealing with the addiction itself is rather like trimming the branches on the tree - I love this analogy - whereas if you're digging down to the abuse, you're finding the cause of the addiction. It's about getting to the roots of the problem. That's what happened to me, that we've dealt with the root of the problem and the addiction faded away. In a lot of ways, I wanted to get to that in that story. I don't know whether people picked that particularly, but it talks about my conversations with [?Carl 00:14:23.1]. There's this chap that I happened to meet on the banks, walking down the river one morning, and we got talking straightaway.

It's interesting how survivors of childhood sexual abuse or abuse that have talked about it and had therapy will pick each other and we can talk about these things really quickly, and we did. I was amazed; within minutes we were talking about this, and that we were both coincidentally marijuana addicts. Now, it's almost like a secondary drug, and to actually say, 'You're what? Addicted to marijuana? Yeah, cocaine or heroin, I get it, but marijuana, how can you…? - but you are. There's a lot of people that attend meetings on a regular basis that would stand up and they'd shout, 'No! It is possible to get addicted!' His approach was the chopping of the branches, if you like, which was just going out in a military fashion, regularly attending meetings and just beating it down and changing his habits and just using pure, utter willpower and the support of the people in the 12 Steps programme. It's a 12 Steps programme. I did 12 Steps programme too, which I get that, and that's like a top-down approach really.

That is something you can do for yourself; it's taking a disciplined approach and willpower and a commitment with a map, a guidance system, and I like that. As a man as well, I guess perhaps - I don't know, I like the idea of having a plan and a programme that I could adhere to, although the one I went to was mixed. Although I was about the only one that did the blinking programme, but he did his without therapy. We talked about his abuse a little bit in his childhood, but he hadn't especially made that connection between the two.

**Interesting.**

Yes, and I wondered - he's out of my life a little bit now, though we're still in contact because I love him dearly, but I wondered how he gets on in terms of his relationship. I often feel that people then have to be aware of it all the time and on guard and have to measure themselves continuously - you know, I've been clear for this long. Whereas now, my relationship with marijuana's just changed completely from being a compulsion where it was threaded completely into my life, knowing - well, I wrote a story about it. Whereby I caught myself at three o'clock in the morning lying on my side, lifting up a wash- [signal breaks up 00:17:01.3] one arm when you're lying down, with a bent piece of cardboard, which I'd fashioned, because I'm scraping underneath the washing machine and then pulling out all the fluff and everything else. I'm sorting through the fluff to pull out marijuana. I'm 51 years of age! What am I doing? At three o'clock in the - it's that, there, Greg, you're an addict, mate. It wouldn't occur to me; it wouldn't occur to me now to even buy the stuff or even if someone offered me a joint, thinking oh, I'm not putting that soggy thing in my gob thank you very much! It's…

**We are left with this bit of a chicken and egg situation, though, aren't we, in terms of many therapists will shy away from actually working with a client who is still very active in their addiction. For reasons, obviously, in the sense it might then help the cli-, it might make the client spiral even further into addiction, so there can be that feeling of get clean and then come to therapy. For you, what would you say to therapists who feel it's not safe to be in therapy until you've overcome your addiction? Your therapist was obviously okay with it and it worked for you.**

Yes, this was kind of news to me in terms of the code. You're right, it is, to an extent, chicken and egg. The first thing I would say to the therapist - and I've talked to someone that was an ex-addiction therapist and just finally gave up - is that dealing with addiction is very, very tough, but it is purely the responsibility, at the end of the day, of addict. I think that that's something that the counsellor or therapist has to take on board and be prepared to walk away and almost make the agreement, perhaps - I'm just looking for a way forward. Perhaps, if I was a therapist, I'd say, 'Right, okay: 1) You recognise you're an addict, hands up.' 'Yes, I'm an addict'; 2) 'You recognise that you want to do something about it.' 'Yes.' 3) 'You recognise that it is your responsibility, not mine. It is your responsibility to get past that addiction.' 'Yes.' Okay, and then look to see how far you can dig into putting a poultice on them in terms of sapping out what the cause of the addiction is that way.

It's potentially doable but it's more than a 50 per cent journey for the addict. They have to - for me, in recovery from childhood sexual abuse and the recovery from addiction, addiction was 20 per cent of it, if not less. The recovery from childhood sexual abuse and being in an abusive childhood was monumental and dealing with addiction was only a small part of that.

**Yes, and you talked about how difficult it is for men to talk about this. Do you feel that means they are impacted in a different way by experiencing childhood sexual abuse from, say, women?**

I've thought about this and I would say the answer definitively, for me, would be no. On the basis that I've met in groups that haven't been facilitated especially by a professional, so they are relatively free-form and by agreement of survivors, both all-male groups and mixed groups, and I've turned up to some groups where I've been, as it happens, the only man, and I would say that no, there is a pattern. I could see a clear pattern myself in terms of the causes of what symptoms that the abuse survivor suffers, and they are - there's a big correlation. There's the basics, like lack of self-worth, lack of trust, shame, guilt, and then further on, serious anger, depression, which can [?implode 00:21:18.4]. Obviously, depression, anxiety - there's some fundamental ones that they in varying degrees all have, that are seriously magnified by having been a childhood sexual abuse survivor, both people that would identify as being male and those that would identify as being female, for sure.

The problem is the reaching out for help, because back to the whole thing - there's no escaping the fact that males will not reach out. For example, my friend wrote a book about his experience being lured into a paedophile ring and being severely sexually abused many times when he was a boy. He wrote a book about this and bravely went on the radio and talked about this. This slot they gave him was not - because we talked about it afterwards - was not aimed at females particularly. It didn't have particularly feminine issues at heart; it was all things, if you like. Then he bravely put his email contact at the end, saying, 'Look, talk to me if you want to,' and listen to this, Sally - he got over 400 responses which…

**Wow!**

He dutifully responded to all of them, which was amazing, but that's - he's an amazing chap. Of those 400, how many would…? Most of them were people saying, 'Thank you for speaking out. I'm a sexual abuse survivor.' How many, given that one in four females and one in six males have been sexually abused, how many of those 400 were men? Pause - two.

**My goodness, wow!**

Yes, two. They won't speak out, and my mates, we've run groups, my mates have run groups, and even if they come and talk to you, they back away again. There's a massive amount of shame associated with being - because if you dig down, then it's perhaps - and I'm not really qualified to answer this - but it's culturally, men will not - still imposed with these constraints of having to be the hunter, not to be the victim. There's those things, that you're showing weakness, that you're showing emotional weakness, that you've got to hide these issues and get on and be tough, and all those dreary old-fashioned stuff that we're finally kind of getting through. There's that, that you're carrying that, and I carried that around big time. Then there's the aspects, the fact that sexual abuse on the whole is perpetrated by men, and so there's the sexuality aspect of the fact that you have been [signal breaks up 00:24:14.1] to a man's sexual will, so there's that.

That can affect your sexuality - you question your sexuality - and causes a lot of sexual dysfunction, but that is not to say two things: one is that women don't also massively endure sexual issues because they were sexually abused. It's a given, but also that men - and this is another aspect now coming to light - the fact that there's female abusers of young boys out there, and this does cause issues, but this is just not recognised. The question is: how can a male be sexually abused by a female? Females are seen to be the nurturing and caring side; they have that cultural pressure on them, or label. Therefore, they are not abusers. This is not true. It is happening and the effects of the abuse are as devastatingly debilitating - because I know some survivors of abuse by females - as debilitating as it is by males. They have the slightly in a way different view of being allowed speak out about it at all and being taken [?seriously - signal breaks up 00:25:34.5]…

**Being taken seriously, yes, absolutely. Part of that - you're doing your bit. You've compiled a booklet of stories about male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and I know you're interested to hear what therapists want to hear, so what therapists will find useful to hear from survivors. Can you tell us a bit more about that and how therapists can contact you if they want to contribute?**

Yes, certainly, I'm happy to hand out my email address. I'm privileged and honoured to be part of a couple of - well, three groups now of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and I'm very keen to get some voice out there. What I want to do is enable front-line people that are dealing with men with mental health issues and raise the awareness of the effects of childhood sexual abuse and find out from you guys what you want to know from us. I'm putting a booklet together and it's something that's going to be [?owned - signal breaks up 00:26:46.9]. Rather than it just being therapy for them talking about their issues, but something you can read and think oh, okay, I get that. It could be about engagement, building trust, I don't know. It'll be probably something that's useful to you guys and that's what I'm trying to…

**Great question. Well, I would say I want to know, are there red flags that we should be looking out for in a male client who perhaps is presenting with a different issue? Whether that is stress at work, difficulty with relationships or whatever, anxiety. What are the red flags that we need to look out for? If he's determined not talk about his abuse, he's buried it somewhere very deep, are there any signs that we could be looking out for?**

Well, I can pick another survivor within minutes. You'll get experienced at it. Actually, I hark back to my first therapist, because I've got to say, I picked her as a survivor, and she was fantastic and taught me how to deal with my feelings. This was key to me, because having feelings was a new thing and also, she saved my life a couple of times. I'm choking up now. She saved my life, absolutely saved my life. What would be the red flags, what to look for? Oh, you've got to do some research to find out what the symptoms of a childhood sexual abuse survivor has, but let's face it, the first thing - you can almost assume that they are a childhood abuse survivor if they're sitting in front of you, they're a male, they're having mental health and emotional issues. Look at the percentage; therefore, the chances of them being an abuse survivor of some sort is high. Yes, you can't plant it in their minds, but you will see it. I suppose I guess if they - that's a very difficult question.

How you draw it out of a man to talk about it is very, very difficult. I've talked to a few guys I know have had abusive childhoods and they are dealing with difficult issues, and I've said, 'Look, this is Greg here. This is Mr Macho Man. I was sexually abused by my own father.' That's something you really just - a man just does not want to declare. You have this ideal of who your father was and that's the big issue you've got to get past, that you have an ideal of your family, an ideal of your father, and you have to break all that and reconstruct what the truth was. Going to them and saying, 'Look, I'm vulnerable; I did this. You can talk to me about it. You know me. We are friends. We are close. You can trust me,' but will they? Whoa! They still won't - their heads go back in their shell. It's a collective effort. We've just got to keep chipping and chipping and chipping away at it, but to answer your question, I don't have a specific answer for that but if you're looking for it, I think there's a 'should' in there.

I think there's a should, a big should. As a therapist, they should be looking for it and waiting for it and have mechanisms whereby you can start to say, 'Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? Can you tell me a relationship - does anything stand out in your mind as being a difficult…?'

**Sure, thank you, and finally, I know you're in the process of writing a book, a 'How to' book about recovering from trauma.**

Yes.

**Would you like to tell us a bit about that?**

Yes, its working title is *Kintsugi: The Art and Science of Survival of Trauma (and Recovery)*. Kintsugi is this Japanese art of repairing pottery, whereby they enhance the broken pottery by using liquid gold, then put it back together, so make it better and more beautiful, in effect, than it was. This is the idea. This is not - I've stolen this idea. Picasso reckons all the best ideas are stolen, so I'll take that! I've stolen this idea, and it's about not seeing your flaws and the trauma as a weakness - as an opportunity to get stronger. That's the viewpoint; that's the over-riding philosophy about it. What doesn't break us makes us stronger. The other thing, embracing the flaws and learning and growing from those, but specifically - and this is, okay, my grief about therapy in general is that - and in all the books I've read about therapy and everything else, they'll… You're washed up on the beach; you've suffered a tsunami; everything's smashed to pieces; you're exhausted, and a therapist or the therapy will come along [signal breaks up 00:32:28.6] Look, this is why the tsunami happened or this is why the plane crashed or this is why you are here. What are you going to do about this? Well, I don't know.

My book is someone walks up, puts the book down in front to say, 'Hey, mate, I've been there. I've been exactly where you are. You want to kill yourself. You can't do this. You're in a wilderness of pain. This is what I did. Take it or leave it.' These are pragmatic things like going into therapy, accepting the idea that it is a woolly subject; there is no specific answer. My problem was, I walked in there and this is - the therapist was going to say, 'Yeah, I get this. This is the problem you've got. This is what you need to do.' Do you know? I was like - because I'd never been near therapy before and you don't know that. It's like [?feet up 00:33:16.6]. It's like an expectancy so that this is not going to be the whole answer. It took me a while to grasp that - okay, I need to do other things. There's therapy; there's that, and I know lots of people go to therapy and they keep going and going and going, expecting the therapist to take it away from them. They won't. They can only help you.

Talking therapy is only one aspect of recovery. You've got to grasp that, and that's the idea. I'm very much a big believer in the - is it the Nietzsche approach, which is it's your responsibility? Your life is your responsibility and with that there is the empowerment. Then it talks about group therapy, going into groups, what you can expect, because they can be bruising experiences. I know that and I've talked to other guys who've come away feeling bruised by them, but it's taking the good bits and leaving the rest behind, so you go in with an expectancy, if that ma-, and there's the therapy and there's all the TRE, which is tension release exercise, which is new. I'm a big believer - this is my thing - that trauma and therefore addiction - and I [?lashed 00:34:32.8] on top of that - is all held in the body. A big part of the therapy is I think it's got to shift more and more to digging it out of the body, because effectively to recover from trauma is about processing the emotions and getting the emotions out of the body.

I think you deal with the emotions first. The brain that chatter all sorts of nonse-, and I know through neuroplasticity and talking therapy will change your neuron paths, but the big one is to deal - to get to [?expulse/expel 00:35:06.7] it, vomit it out of the body, sob it out of the body, squeeze it out of the body, exercise it out of the body. It's got to come out. My physicality has actually changed through recovery; my physicality has changed, yes. [?They've gone and 00:35:20.3] dug it out - nuggets of all sorts of trauma and guilt stuck in my body. This is another big subject and I've written about that. It's in there and you can flush it out. My belief is that - this is very deep and philosophical - that the soul is born pure. This is my belief, and what you've got to do is take the stuff off and let the soul bubble up to the surface, yes.

**Wow! Thank you, what a powerful image to end on. I just want to thank you for being so open and sharing your experiences. I feel like it's massively helpful for us as therapists to hear from how it is on the other side and to hear about that journey. I wish you the best of luck with your book and also with your male survivors' project. Thank you very much for your time.**

Thank you, Sally, thank you so much for the opportunity. I really appreciate it on behalf of all survivors, thank you.

**[Music and voice-over: Thank you for listening to the BACP Therapy Today podcast. We hope that you enjoyed it. Remember, if you've got any ideas or suggestions on what we might include in future editions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Thanks again.]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**