

Surfing the Wave at Work

I started full-time work in the year 2000. I trained to be a Primary School Teacher for four years and I was full of enthusiasm and motivation. Not only was I going to earn some 'real money' but all those years of hard work were finally transpiring into something meaningful and exciting for me and my new students.

Twenty-four pairs of bright eyes stared up at me on the first day of the new term. I was as nervous as them, but of course they don't know that (all teachers prefer to keep that bit quiet!). I felt hope-filled and passionate about my children, keen to develop rapport and start teaching them all sorts of valuable gems.....

But soon a storm was brewing at the outskirts of the enthusiastic bubbly ocean. By term three of 2000, the tumultuous roar, the gusting winds, the powerful force of depression hit, propelling me into the eye of a terrifying tsunami. I was flattened. My life was flattened. I started to drink and take prescription medication to avoid the terrorizing feelings of hopelessness, despair and suicide. My willingness to face my class each day dwindled. I wanted to stay in bed each morning, run away from my life, disappear and die.

These torrents of emotions soon overcame my world and I visited my G.P and it was then that I was diagnosed with depression. It all made sense! I now understood why I was reacting in such self-destructive ways. I was literally drowning in a wave of emotions.

But I continued to work. I worked for another 3 years full-time. I pushed myself out of bed with tears most mornings. I painted on a smile for the teachers, parents and children. I acted happy, fun and bubbly and I told no one about the shadow of pain darkening my sunniest days. It was a double life. It was exhausting, petrifying and by 2003 I had had enough. I started self-harming. Cutting myself was a way of showing my internal pain on the external and a way to cope with the overwhelming emotions. I was then referred to a Residential Programme and that is where my life began to change. I was taught new skills to survive. I was given a life jacket and sometimes offered a life raft to keep me afloat on the humungous waves.

It's now 2009! I am married with a daughter of 3 years old. The life jacket is still required, but slowly I am learning to surf the tidal waves. I can now congratulate myself on a successful ride. I still work, but a manageable 2 days a week. During these 2 days I still need to use the skills that I have been

taught to manage my illness successfully. I like to group the skills into five categories. These five categories are the five senses.

The first skill is the sense of taste using my mouth. I always like to take a yummy lunch to work. The delectable anticipation to experience a new taste sensation at morning tea and lunch can, at times, reward me for making it through thus far. I try to be healthy and include my 5 plus a day, but I don't beat myself up if I stray and end up eating the odd sweet necessity. I have learned, however, that people with mental illness tend to have a diet high in sugar and this may affect the highs and lows in mood so I try to stick to more healthy alternatives.

I used to be a coffee junkie, often consuming 5-6 cups of coffee daily. I never once thought to connect anxiety and caffeine. After becoming pregnant with my daughter I made the switch to decaf coffee and over the months I began to feel the anxiety subside. To this day I can feel my body react to caffeine by experiencing shaking tremors, light-headedness and the anxious feelings in my stomach. Therefore, I drink herbal teas and water at work to prevent any unnecessary anxiety arising.

I've also begun to use my mouth in a completely foreign way for me.... I talk about my feelings! I choose one or two people that I trust in the work place and I am authentic with them. I am real and it feels good because I don't have to hide anymore. If I'm angry about something I am not ashamed, if I am sad I tell someone. It makes the work environment more comfortable for me and my potential tidal waves.

Breathing is very important to bring into my consciousness when I am bracing myself for a new wave. I tend to either breathe fast and shallow which leads to panic or I hold my breath which makes me feel like fainting. I have learnt to slow my breathing down. I can do this anywhere, anytime, privately or jointly with the kids. I practice yoga breathing with some basic yoga moves in the classroom or when I am on a break. I stretch my back and neck and shoulders, visualising breathing in fresh blue air and breathing out red, 'stressed' air. It is very important to maintain good breathing especially when a wave is about to hit! Steady and slow can increase the lung capacity for when you're under water thus increasing your tolerance for the inevitable 'big one'.

The second skill is the sense of sight. I make my work environment a pleasurable place to be, with pictures of animals, my daughter and other motivating images. I like to have positive affirmations crowding my classroom, office and my fridge at home too. I have success stories and cards from past students and parents reminding me of how well I have done in the past (as I tend to forget this when things get tough!).

The third skill uses the sense of smell! I have an aromatherapy burner in my classroom and often burn oils that are good for the mind and body. I often choose oils for the children to stimulate their brain ready for learning, but every now and then I will burn a calming blend for those particularly 'rough' days.

The fourth skill is the sense of touch. Once in a while I will seek out my 'trusted friends' and ask for hug. I often get lots of hugs from the kids and this gives me a boost when I really need it. I also choose one item from home that brings me fond memories of my family, like a shell from a holiday, or one of my daughter's soft toys and I will hold this item to soothe me and ground me.

The final skill is the sense of hearing. I feel this is one of my most important senses to look after at work. Sometimes my ears are very sensitive to noise and I can become overwhelmed with too much stimulation very quickly. I try to keep the class noise at a manageable level, for both myself and the children. I will often choose soothing music to listen to, particularly if I am stressed. When I am feeling sad or down, I will sing with the children and choose fun songs to get us up and moving and hopefully release some endorphins to achieve a natural boost.

The one skill that I need for all my five senses stabilising techniques is mindfulness. I need to practice all these techniques with a focussed mind. If my mind is not with me, but is stewing over a conversation I had with a parent or colleague that morning, then they won't work! And sometimes they don't work! I need to be mindful of my emotions, spot a wave from 100m and face the tsunami and say "I can do it!" Brace myself, grab onto a floatation aid or two, get support and wait. When the wave crashes I may feel like I am drowning. I can't breathe properly and at times my vision blurs. I may lose sight of which way is up and where the ground is and fight the wave with thrashing legs and arms. But when it's passed and I am scrambling up the shore, wet, weary and angry, I can say that I have survived another tidal wave. And with practice the surfing will come effortlessly and hopefully panic less. I will grab my surf board, hold on and steady myself for the next wicked wave.