



'I HAD A GOLDEN LIFE, SO WHY WAS I FALLING APART?'

Eton, Oxford and a millionaire by the age of 30 – psychotherapist Benjamin Fry had every advantage. But when he suffered a breakdown and all treatment failed, he had to delve into his childhood to unlock its cause

Photograph CHARLOTTE MURPHY

Your life looks fine – even enviable – on the surface. But underneath you are more stressed and anxious than anyone realises. You've been called 'oversensitive' or accused of 'overreacting' because the setbacks and stresses that other people seem to take in their stride can knock you for six. You've also been told that you are attractive, bright, full of potential, yet somehow you have failed to find real success in relationships or work. You are not weak or lazy or self-pitying. You are overwhelmed; stuck in a state of anxiety and distress that has been massively misunderstood and wrongly diagnosed. The good news is that there is a radical and transformative new way of understanding it, and of getting yourself unstuck, for good.

I know what this feels like. I was 'stuck' myself for years until, in 2008, I suffered a complete breakdown. I looked like an unlikely candidate for a breakdown. I was a trained psychotherapist and a privileged person in many ways. I grew up in a wealthy family, went to Eton and Oxford, my first job was as a teenage model for Mario Testino and then I became a successful nightclub entrepreneur. By 30 I had made my first million, married a wonderful woman and was living in a big house with a much-loved child, the first of five. It looked like a golden life, but inside I was falling apart. I trained as a psychotherapist, treating patients in my own practice and working on TV programmes such as *Freaky Eaters* and *Spendaholics*. But I always felt as if I didn't properly 'belong' with my colleagues. Many of my patients generously told me that I had helped them, but the truth was that I understood them because I was exactly like them, full of anxiety, unhappiness and isolation.

What was wrong with me? I had lost my mother, who died from aplastic anaemia when I was

11 months old. For the next two years I lived with family friends while my father rebuilt his life and career. He would visit me regularly, and after he remarried he took me to live with him and his new wife. Our early years are fundamentally important in our emotional development, so I was always aware that my mother's death had scarred me, and that early experience had contributed to my anxiety. But I loved my father and went on to have a successful life, so though I was never glib enough to say I had 'got over' that loss, I believed I had survived it.

By 2008, my golden life was unravelling. My wife was pregnant with our fifth child, and I was in deep trouble. I had made a series of property speculations in Greece that crashed badly and ruined us financially. We had to leave our home, rent a smaller place out of London and beg my father to bail us out of our huge debts. Poor me,

eh? I know that this isn't the worst problem someone can have. I had the privilege of a safety net, and if I'd made money before, maybe I could make it again. But I didn't see it that way. It felt utterly overwhelming and devastating and sent me into a spiral of worry which led to serious clinical anxiety and depression, and finally into a suicidal

despair because nobody could help me recover. Only the thought of my children stopped me from killing myself.

I tried everything: my doctor, the NHS, church, the Priory – I even tried a faith healer. Nothing worked. I was well-informed

and well-connected, but I discovered a massive failure in our therapy system, which repeatedly misdiagnosed me, or just medicated me, which often made me worse. Finally, after a series of therapeutic failures and disasters, I found myself at Melody House in Arizona, where I discovered what was really wrong with me and what had ►

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THE SYMPTOMS OF FROZEN TRAUMA

FEELING OVERWHELMED Do things that you used to cope with now feel too much?

REPEATING BAD RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS Are you having the same problems with different people?

OVERREACTING Later, do you think the reaction was bigger than the problem deserved?

ISOLATION Do you feel lonely, but safer when you're alone?

RAGE A form of overreacting, but

linked to the fight-or-flight response.

ANXIETY Is your 'threat response' on all the time, even when you're safe?

DEPRESSION When your system crashes from being 'always on' (anxiety).

OCD Keep checking things? You haven't 'completed' your response to something that was dangerous.

ADHD Can't sit still and focus? No one can if they feel under threat.

SELF-MEDICATING Do you use drugs, food or alcohol to calm yourself?

◀ been wrong with me all my life. I was suffering from post-traumatic stress. The death of my mother at such a young age had sent me into deep trauma, and rather than recovering from it, it had 'frozen' inside me.

Trauma is not a word most of us use about the bad things that happen to us. We think it refers only to extremes, such as soldiers in a combat zone. But so far as our minds and, crucially, our bodies are concerned, trauma means anything that causes us stress so overwhelming that our physical response to it is to 'freeze' – think of a rabbit caught in headlights and unable to move. This 'frozen' material is usually stored up in childhood and then triggered in adult life by a new stress, such as a bereavement, a break-up, a car accident or a redundancy – the kind of stresses that we'll all experience at least once in our lives. Most of us recover fully from our traumas, but some of us don't. Why some of us don't, what happens to us as a result and how we can heal is at the heart of the new science of trauma. Mellody House had created a radical new understanding of the causes of psychological distress that many therapists believe is the greatest leap forward in this field in our lifetime.

This new model of thinking was mainly pioneered by a man called Peter Levine, who spent years studying the habits of wild animals under

stress. Imagine a young gazelle, grazing peacefully with his herd, when a lion appears. We've all heard of the fight-or-flight response: when the threat is too big to fight, the gazelle runs for his life. As the lion bears down, Peter Levine noticed that often the gazelle would suddenly drop to the ground, as if shot, moments before the lion caught him. About to be caught and killed, he 'freezes'. But sometimes the lion keeps running – there are other, fatter gazelles to chase – and the gazelle would wake from his frozen state and escape. But before he did, he would behave in an odd way, shaking and twitching all over. Over time, Levine realised what was happening: the flight response floods the gazelle's body with hormones and stress energy to enable him to run for his life. If the threat is removed, that energy is no longer needed and the body discharges it – the gazelle would do this by shaking and twitching his body. All animals instinctively process their trauma. But humans are too self-conscious, too 'clever' to act like the frozen gazelle, who shook and twitched and shuddered his way out of the trauma once he came to. Our sophisticated brain tells us that this is 'crazy' behaviour, disturbing for us and for those around us, especially when there is no visible

'This "frozen" trauma is stored up in childhood and then triggered in adult life by a new stress'

threat in sight. Instead we push it down, take a pill, think or talk our way around it, and tell ourselves we're fine. We may have rationalised it, but that energy – crying out for release – is stuck.

Perhaps our first big stress happened, as it did to me, when we were very young and we simply weren't able to process it thoroughly. Or it felt so overwhelming, we didn't manage to discharge that stress energy fully. Having begun with animals, Peter Levine went on to test this theory with patients and found again and again that problems such as extreme emotional sensitivity, anxiety, depression, and many behaviours, such as obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline personality and eating disorders and other addictions, could all be traced back to a frozen trauma. If we think of our bodies as a measuring jug, that original threatening event filled us almost to the brim with stress energy. Any new stresses – even small ones – quickly cause our stress to spill over, which is why we can so quickly become anxious and overwhelmed. This kind of anxiety and stress are not just emotions, but physical responses trapped in our nervous systems. Peter Levine discovered that if he could

help his patients discharge that energy, he could reset their stress gauge and help them heal.

That was the treatment I received in Mellody House, where they had been pioneering this new model of trauma treatment in a residential setting

for more than seven years. It changed my life, and inspired me to set up a clinic in the UK to replicate that treatment over here. I've seen many examples of frozen trauma, and how it damages people's lives. Sarah, in her late 30s, came to our outpatient clinic in London because her second marriage was on the verge of collapse, and so was she. Only recently married, she was driving her husband away with her rages and 'withdrawing' behaviour. This had been a pattern for all of Sarah's relationships. She'd fall quickly and deeply in love, convinced that this person was her soulmate, and lavish them with attention. But once the relationship was established, she constantly tested this love with cruel behaviour. When he grew angry or distant in return, she'd despair, feeling abandoned and terrified. Sarah's mother had a difficult labour with her first child and she didn't want any more children – Sarah was an unplanned pregnancy. Sarah absorbed her mother's feelings of rejection, which continued during her childhood. Although fed and cared for, she never felt loved or wanted. This long-term lack of safety overwhelmed her system and so traumatised her, and that trauma had frozen. In adult life, she set people up to reject her, and



every new disappointment brought her closer to a breakdown.

My clinic uses several methods for unblocking trauma, but to begin we talk about earlier experiences and feelings. Instead of dwelling on the events, I ask the patient to observe how their body feels. Sarah became aware of her clenched body language, and of how her stomach would feel tight as she discussed her mother. The big breakthrough with this therapy is understanding that the stress is a biological one, so although I don't touch my patients, the therapies we use – sensorimotor psychotherapy and somatic experiencing – focus on physical sensation. Patients will usually observe a physical response as energy is released. Some will feel warm – they may break into a sweat – or cold. Twitching and shaking are common. We treat the nervous system, not the past, which can't be changed but can lose its power to control our lives. We treated Sarah just like a fallen gazelle, and like a gazelle, her biology was intelligent enough to do its work once we opened up the pathway. Once released from her trauma, Sarah's rages and terror of abandonment disappeared, and she has a very different approach to relationships.

Another patient, Kate, treated at our residential

Ben Fry



HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

FOR TEMPORARY RELIEF

- Smells such as aromatherapy oils are the quickest way into our nervous systems.
- Press your feet into the ground and feel the size and strength of the earth: it tells our body that we are 'grounded'.
- Breathe through your nose and exhale slowly through the mouth. This mimics the body's response to rest and safety.

FOR LONGER TERM HELP

- Read *Waking The Tiger* by Peter

Levine. It explains this new understanding of trauma; he also has a CD to guide you through the process.

- Notice your physical sensations rather than your thoughts as much as possible.
- Body work, such as meditation and yoga, reduces the impact of the mind.

FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

Find a practitioner in somatic experiencing (seauk.org.uk), or sensorimotor psychotherapy (sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org), or contact Khiron House (see below).

Clockwise from opposite top: Benjamin as a baby with his mother Alice, who died when he was 11 months old; aged 18, modelling for Mario Testino; a family portrait with, from left, stepmother Jane, half-sister Annabelle, father Charles, Benjamin, and half-brother James

too difficult to try to manage this process alone. Cara came to see me with a history of bulimia and self-harming. She had been sexually abused as a child and her early adult life had been dominated by a heroic

attempt to overcome her history and not be defined by it. She worked at a bank, bought a house and earned a lot of money. But always anxious and sensitive, she abused food and alcohol, before her increasingly black depressions undermined her career and the self-harming started. In early sessions she curled up in a chair in the foetal position, and our first job was to make her feel safe. We worked with a happier memory from her childhood – a best friend whose family welcomed Cara to stay in their loving home – and this became her safe place to go to when she felt overwhelmed. Releasing too much trauma too quickly can be retraumatizing and so has to be managed very carefully. It doesn't matter what happened, only that the stress is frozen, unfinished. So one person from a war and another from a dysfunctional family might have the same symptoms. Our nervous system can't distinguish between a car accident or a person – it just understands threat, and the same stress energy floods our system.

This is the big difference between this treatment

and conventional talking therapies, especially those that try to 'retrain our thoughts'. Our thoughts are not the main problem (although they can then contribute to it) – they are a symptom of a deeper cause. We need to tap into the deep 'mammal brain', which is part of all of us, below the rational level, to the sensing, nonverbal place where the damage is stored. After eight weeks in residential treatment, Cara still had work to do but looked, moved and felt like a completely different person.

My story ended happily too. I went through multiple stages of both physical and emotional releases: shaking, twitching, deep grief, sadness, loss and anger. My children were delighted to have their father back, but it had taken a toll on both my marriage and my children. Trauma always affects those around us as well as ourselves. My illness and absence, which they have experienced as an abandonment, along with their fear that I was so ill I might die and never return, upset my family deeply. Having seen how well I was doing with this therapy, though, some of them have also had the treatment to recover from the trauma of this

passage of our lives. They are all doing much better. It takes support, patience and love to recover from trauma, but it can be done. Feeling overwhelmed does not have to rule your life or be a permanent part of it.

Somewhere, something happened to you that caused you a huge stress, and you have been unable to release that trauma. But our bodies are wise, they know exactly what to do – they have been doing it for millions of years. All we need to do is get out of our own way and let that happen. I did it, and so can you. The rewards are life changing. ■
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'It takes support, patience and love to recover from trauma, but it can be done'

clinic in Oxford, told me how every time she thought she was 'in trouble' with authority figures – such as being late for work – her heart would race and her chest feel tight. Her fear of people with power over her stemmed from her early life with strict parents and an even stricter school. Constantly in flight mode throughout her childhood, she had built up too much stress energy to discharge it properly, and the frozen stress haunted her interactions as an adult. In a case like this, it's helpful to stop worrying about the 'trouble' and observe your reactions. Instead of saying 'my boss is making me crazy', think, 'I notice when my boss gives me a look; I instantly experience worry and stress.' Now see if you can identify the physical sensation that goes with this feeling. As you do, you start to connect with the deep mammal instinct that knows how to let go of that stress response, and if you are lucky, or after you have practised this for a while, you may notice a response in your body, such as trembling or other form of energetic release. You may feel an emotion connected with this – sadness, anger – or you may even cry. This is what happens as the trauma thaws and passes.

While self-help is possible for many of us (see above right), for deeper or very stuck traumas, it is