

# Rising from the ashes of burnout

**Gordon Symons** describes his work in helping a successful, professional man recover from burnout and depression; **Paul Robins**, the client, shares the experience from his perspective

I first became aware of Paul when his wife emailed me, saying that Paul had suffered from stress before, but was finding it 'rather difficult' at the moment. She asked for the earliest possible appointment and added that she would come with him 'so he doesn't get lost'. This was either an over-protective wife, or a prospective client in a very bad way.

Paul, a man of medium height and stocky build, looked weighed down, defeated and lost. He was 43, married with no children. He had suffered from stress and depression before.

## Presenting issues

During the first two sessions, Paul described a number of physical and psychological symptoms, many of which are typical of burnout: chest pain, sweating, and severe acid heartburn, which he described as 'a ring of fire around my heart'. He said he had no energy for anything, that he had lost his self-confidence, that he was not coping, had doubts about his ability to do his job, and was anxious and guilty, 'looking over my shoulder all the time'. He said he was 'a mess, in total meltdown'. He was finding himself intolerant of other people and feeling isolated. He was fearful for his future, and was having 'dark thoughts' and uncontrollable weeping, which he referred to as 'blubbing'. He was also clearly in the grip of severe depression.

I could see that he had cause to be seriously concerned about his prospects of returning to work, and even about his mental health.

We agreed a contract of six sessions, followed by a review for him to take stock and decide if he wanted to continue the therapy.

In the early sessions, we explored the circumstances of his work and the kinds of pressure he was under. His home life was entirely supportive.

He explained that his job carries a heavy workload, that the contracts he manages involve very large

sums of money, that some clients are very difficult that the situations can be very complex and that deadlines are strict, regardless of the complexity of the case. However, he said that all this was only a problem if he was 'not feeling 100 per cent'. Then, he becomes hesitant, self-questioning, re-works material and takes it home. He described his growing desperation: 'It feels as if the more you give the more they'll take ... I needed masses of approval to feel secure.' His anxiety and self-doubt grew to the point when it all became too much for him and he had to 'hit the stop button'.

He had reached burnout.

I asked Paul what he hoped for from therapy. He said: 'To get back on an even keel, to a state of confidence. To be comfortable with who I am.'

In Paul's account of his predicament, I was able to pick up on clues to some of the possible causes of his present condition. His strong need for recognition and acceptance and his harsh self-criticism pointed to old wounds and to self-wounding. We would need to explore his childhood history and his intrapersonal relations, his relationship with himself.

## Life history

Paul has no memories at all of his father, who left when Paul was two. His mother was 19 when Paul was born. She was married three times. Paul was born from the first marriage. Paul has a half-sister, five years younger, and a half-brother 11 years younger. His mother's second husband beat Paul from the age of six to eight. His mother departed and left Paul, aged eight, with his abuser for eight months.

He said of his upbringing: 'I was dragged up and didn't know my arse from my elbow.' He said of his present relationship with his mother: 'I love her, but I can't respect her.' We needed to look no further for the source of his insecurity, his great need to be needed and to be liked.

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We were now almost ready to examine and explore these events in more depth. However, to do this effectively, Paul would need to find a place within himself from which he could observe himself with more detachment and also contain safely some of the strong emotions he was likely to experience in the process of exploring his childhood suffering.

We therefore embarked on recognising and working with some of his dominant tendencies, his subpersonalities.

The first of these we agreed to call the Pleaser, the part of him that was desperate for acceptance and praise, and that overworked in order to gain these. Paul did this by seeing himself in a work situation and observing his behaviour, his thoughts and his feelings in some detail. What did this part of him want, and what was its deepest need?

Next we turned to another dominant tendency, his tendency to bully himself. We agreed to call this subpersonality the Bullying Critic, the part of Paul that is evident when he is raging at himself and beating himself up for 'blubbing' and being a mess. This time we began by looking at how this entity actually served Paul. What was its job, as it were? We discovered that its job was to help Paul by getting to him before the world did. Then we looked at how this part of him limited him: we saw that far from helping Paul, the effect was to disempower him and shake his confidence.

By exploring his dominant subpersonalities, Paul was able to gain a degree of detachment and loosen their hold on him; he was also developing his ability to observe this process without judging himself. At this stage I introduced Paul to a psychosynthesis exercise known as disidentifying and identifying. This is a form of psychological hygiene, and is a powerful centering technique. If we imagine the personality as an orchestra, it could be described as shifting from being a member of one's orchestra to being the conductor. Practised regularly, it can bring a sense of balance, proportion and clarity. It facilitates the capacity to be simultaneously detached and involved.

It was now time to check if Paul was ready and willing to explore his early childhood, both by means of his memories and through free visualisation.

In my opinion, this turned out to be one of the most crucial and healing aspects of the therapy.

We began chronologically, with his pre-memory experience. As hypnosis is not part of my practice, we would be relying on Paul's unconscious mind to offer up scenarios that could lead to an experience of connection with the deprived and wounded Inner Child, and facilitate healing.

Free visualisation involves the client relaxing, turning their attention inward, and allowing an

image to come into their consciousness. Paul had no difficulty at all with this technique, and visualised the front garden of a suburban house. In the garden was a large, old-fashioned pram, and in the pram, a small baby. It was a hot, sunny day. There was no one else in the garden.

At this point he had a choice to simply observe or to take part; he chose to step into the scene and approach the pram. Paul noticed that the baby was too warmly wrapped and was flushed with the heat. The child was not crying, but lay there, just looking at him. Paul stepped forward, picked the baby up. He loosened and removed some of the wrappings. The baby began to look happier.

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Then Paul chose to knock at the front door, but there was no answer. After a time, a female neighbour appeared. Paul asked her for a drink for the baby. The woman, without querying who he was, obliged. The baby drank and was relieved. (I say 'was', not 'seemed', because that is how Paul reported it at the time. We must remember that these are not two separate people involved; they are the same person, at different ages.)

The neighbour then took them round to the back of the house where they saw a young woman, sitting in a deckchair, reading a magazine. She immediately demanded to know why Paul was holding her baby; Paul answered that he was just trying to help.

This visualising exercise gave Paul the opportunity to do for the baby what his mother was neglecting to do: to attend to its needs. This encounter with Baby Paul was Paul's first contact with his Inner Child. It established a missing connection, an inner reaching out. Moments like the one when the baby's eyes and Paul's met can be powerfully and mysteriously significant on the journey to greater wholeness.

The second encounter between Paul and his Inner Child focused on revisiting the abuse that he

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suffered when he was a boy of eight. We worked with this over two sessions. In the first, Paul visualised himself being beaten by his stepfather and his mother not intervening to protect him. We employed the Gestalt technique known as ‘chair-work’, where the client speaks from the position of the different protagonists and sits in a different chair when doing so. The client himself is always a protagonist in each scenario. This gave Paul an insight into what he was carrying about his mother’s reasons for not protecting him.

The second session on this issue focused on Paul’s experience of being abandoned by his mother and being at the mercy of a cruel stepfather. He visualised

the child, alone in his bedroom. I asked if he was willing to connect for a moment with what the little boy was feeling: he did, and experienced a ‘screaming and a stabbing,’ too painful to bear for long.

I believe that this kind of experience of self, albeit in the imagination, can be a powerful agent in fostering the client’s empathy towards himself, and even towards others. It also reassures the Inner Child that they are no longer condemned to bearing their suffering alone. It can be the beginning of a life-giving connection between the adult and the child they carry within.

I sometimes say to my clients that we are like a living tree. The rings that denote the age of the tree are not visible while we are living, but the inner rings of the tree represent our sapling years and they are just as alive as the outer ring or the bark. When we are deprived or wounded as children, we can cut off from our earlier selves to avoid feeling the pain. We carry that pain unconsciously, and its poison leaks into our relationship with ourselves and with others.

**Structured visualisation**

It is my belief that psychological pain is usually meaningful; that within it there is an ‘emerging

**And from Paul Robins, we hear the client’s perspective**

**A**lthough I was unable to acknowledge or accept it, 12 months ago depression had seized me in its vice-like and merciless grip. I was in a dark, grey, unforgiving, ominously looming prison whose very foundation was my own belief system that I was intrinsically unacceptable to myself and, more so, to others. I had hitherto expended my time trying to be good in a manner that I perceived and

defined to be ‘good’ and I had told myself I had failed unquestionably and miserably. I had set myself impossibly high standards and I had grown to be an Olympic gold medallist in my own confined discipline: feeling guilty. When personal disaster befell me, my ideas about myself and the direction of my life did not seem to fit. I had nowhere to go with these thoughts and feelings; so I receded into an indecipherable void: constant racing thoughts, sleeplessness, early waking, dry mouth, excessive sweating, irrational thoughts, guilt, lack of energy, lack of purpose, loss of sense of proportion, chest and stomach pains, headaches and spin-off illnesses abounded. My levels of serotonin were thoroughly depleted and so ensued a gradual but eventually complete withdrawal from the physical world.

Physically, I felt as though I were falling apart from the inside out, rotten to the very

core of my soul. I tried desperately to rationalise by blaming myself and regarding myself as unforgivably wicked. I experienced intense feelings of shame and guilt within my home and working environment. At work, as a property lawyer, I needed clear vision, clarity of thought and an ability to act decisively. These skills had drained out of my life like a thick black oil escaping into an unforgiving sea of troubles. I tortured myself but having internalised my thoughts, feelings and emotions, I had cut myself off from others for fear of rejection. I realised I would have to examine my past mercilessly, putting it all under a microscope and laying it bare for examination. The future seemed hopeless, out of focus and I felt ostracised from the world around me. Time was indeed ‘out of joint’ and something was indeed ‘rotten in [my] state of Denmark’. And so, like the young Hamlet himself, I resolved to use my best endeavours to ‘put it right’.

On reflection I became the Porter from

purpose', a birth trying to happen, which we can get in touch with and collaborate with. To do this, I introduced Paul to the psychosynthesis exercise known as Purpose/Block, a structured visualisation.

The first part of this consists of asking the client five questions in the context of their life's journey. Often, the client will receive answers to these questions in the form of pictures or images. When they do, they are encouraged to draw the image and these can then be processed by the client and therapist working together.

Paul's first image, in answer to the question 'where have you come from?' was a red and blue free drawing, which he said represented him being forced to come out of his mother, screaming.

In answer to the second question, 'where are you now?' Paul drew a large box, open at the top. He saw himself in the box; he was both struggling to escape from it and at the same time not ready to leave it.

In answer to question three, 'Where are you going?' he saw what he described as paradise: a vision of a calm sea, a palm tree and a sense of being at one with himself.

In answer to question four, 'What is holding you back?' he drew himself behind bars, which he

described as 'a prison of the mind', a belief that there was no way out.

The final question, 'What do you need in order to overcome this obstacle?' produced two images: one, an enigmatic 'get out of jail' card, and the other, a large key. The nature of the key was not clear to Paul, but he was confident that the key to his release from his inner prison lay within him.

In a later session we worked with a visualisation called 'The temple of light'. Starting from a psychological home base in a pleasant meadow, Paul proceeded along a path, which led to a temple on a hill. He approached and then entered the temple. A beam of light shone down onto the floor of the temple. Paul chose to step into the light, where he reported experiencing feelings of peace, warmth, comfort, protection, compassion and love. He remained in the light for some time, and then spoke of a sense of radiance.

These transpersonal exercises supported Paul in creating an alliance between his conscious and unconscious mind. The value of this type of exercise is that the images are generated by the client, and if there is to be any interpretation of them, it is the client's own interpretation. The client is drawing on his own resources by connecting with and paying

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I possessed all the keys but, drunk with the weight of my own problems, I was unable to find the right key for that all-important door. When eventually the door was opened I found more questions and rantings behind it. There was no clear path or vision or resolute end to my suffering. The key I found was to change the way in which I thought and felt about myself and accept what for months I had steadfastly denied: that I had a serious problem and one that could spiral out of all control unless I undertook some effective measures. I seized upon this opportunity to claw my way back to some semblance of a normal life. With increasing time away from work, due to illness and depression and my personal relationships creaking under the mounting pressure, now was the time to act. I had to change my pattern of thought and the way in which I perceived myself. I had to show myself some loving kindness and compassion which, at first, were extremely difficult

steps: they were both relative strangers in my emotional armoury but once I became adept at these, I did not and have not looked back.

It fast became clear to me and also to my wife, Sue (to whom I owe a huge debt of thanks for her love and support), that I needed to seek professional help. I had heard and read about psychotherapy. This involved one-to-one sessions with a counsellor in identifying the source of patterns of thinking, feelings and emotions from the past and relate them to the here and now. It soon became clear to me that patterns of thinking had been carried forward and remained obstacles to me. They had shaped, and to some extent defined, my somewhat jaundiced view of the world and my place in it.

Much of my subsequent transpersonal development and success I owe to my counsellor, Gordon Symons. Gordon is a man of few but most incisive, reflective, thought-provoking, emotive and sometimes life-changing words. Together we

delted into aspects of my unsettled and, at times, unduly violent childhood. It soon became clear that my feelings and emotions had been universally stifled. My belief systems were stunted and unrealistic. I craved acceptance to the point of distraction. This had stemmed from a lack of real love at a very young age. This was coupled with a year-long abandonment by my mother – she had left me with a violent and sadistic man who was not my father and who unleashed hell upon me because he had no one else he could hit out at. I harboured feelings of guilt, insecurity, lack of identity, fear and an overactive desire to please and to be accepted. I would go to extraordinary lengths to achieve this. I had taken many of these feelings and emotions to the next level on the tariff of depression: it was no longer a question of simply pursuing these but consuming them to perfectionism. Of course, I always fell short of this and so castigated myself vigorously and constantly.

attention to his own unconscious process. Paul's return to health was greatly assisted by his ability to engage at this level, while at the same time supporting himself in more conventional ways

Paul now entered a period of intensive learning and change: he gained new insights into his own behaviour and through starting to take more responsibility, began to move away from a sense of being a victim. Referring to his work situation prior to burnout, he said: 'I was putting myself in a position where I felt I couldn't say no. I can see now that the drive was coming from me and not from the bosses.'

His awareness of himself was growing: noticing his feelings of exasperation towards a less-than-committed badminton partner, he said he became aware of what he called 'the old me' coming to the surface. His awareness and compassion for other people was also developing: seeing how his brother-in-law was contributing to his own suffering and how his anger was 'leaking out'. And again, referring to his work situation, 'I can see how my colleagues are caught in what I was caught in'.

The work that Paul had done on his early relationship with his mother necessarily addressed his internalised, or 'portable' mother, not the lady

in her sixties, now living in Italy. However, it seemed to help Paul to envisage the possibility of a new relationship with his actual mother, who he had said he loved but could not respect.

He courageously decided to visit her and her third husband in Italy. He came back joyful and saying that he found his mother to be caring and very special.

Paul then set about negotiating the terms of his return to work with his employers. He created an impressive Powerpoint presentation, in which he described his journey back to health and the ways in which he would support himself in future. This was welcomed by his employers whose concerns about his future health were then allayed.

When he returned to work, he started at 10am to avoid the rush hour, and made a point of going to meet everybody; his colleagues seemed concerned and caring and he himself felt pleased to be there.

During these weeks, Paul was supporting himself by reading and working through a self-help book, *Change for the better*, and by creating new habits or personal rituals. He began to make time for lunch at work and began to take five-minute breaks; he started working out at the gym twice a week. He also took some sessions of reflexology.

Through visualisation techniques, Gordon and I were able to transport me back to incidents or near incidents from my childhood. On these occasions, however, I was present as a passive and yet somehow active observer and helper to 'Little Paul' (the name we ascribed to myself for these purposes). I was able to aid Little Paul through some difficult times to correct some of what had occurred. I derived much comfort and understanding from these sessions. In particular, that many of my earlier experiences were not within my control and my participation was often through fear or just being caught in the unfortunate malaise of someone else's anger and frustration. I had no choice and I was a victim of circumstances and events happening around me. Once I began to acknowledge and understand, so I felt able to move forward and use these difficult times in more positive and life-enhancing ways.

Until this point, my relationship with my mother had been, at best, transitory

and difficult and at worst, cynically dispassionate and unfeeling. I left home just as soon as circumstances would reasonably permit. I was going off to college and my family were then moving abroad. I absolutely craved a transformation in these feelings since I recognised they were unhelpful and destructive. First, I had to recognise and accept that although childhood events had shaped who I had become to that point, they did not define who I was. Second, and perhaps more tellingly, I had to accept that the person my mother once was, all those years ago, was different to the woman I now know and love with all my heart. Having retired and settled abroad, my mother finally became the person I am sure she had tried to be: caring, intelligent, loving, understanding, witty, relaxed, radiating an aura that others could feed from and wanted to be around. I learned that while I had suffered during my early childhood years, I could make this time up now. And so I set about

it. I moved from blaming my mother for all my woes. I have been able to rationalise and find a place for the anguish and the heartache. More importantly, I had fundamentally freed myself from the shackles of my guilt and shame. These systems were now consigned to my 'Delete' box and all I needed to do was press 'Escape' for these to go for ever. My parents living abroad might be considered somewhat of a barrier; far from it. I have nurtured and strengthened our relationship. I have found both my mother and my stepfather (whom I regard as my father, having taken me on from an early age) warming to my new-found radiance and light. To me this feeling is rich and embracing. We all make a concerted effort to keep in touch by phone and by email so we're all very much involved in each others' lives.

And so, I no longer claim the lofty title of being responsible for everything. Instead of sinking into self-absorbed guilt I have endeavoured, successfully

At the start of one session he announced that he was on 'the crest of a wave' and that this was scary too! I explained to him that he would experience lapses and maybe even relapses, natural dips in the process of growing and healing. This gave him permission to recognise when he wasn't happy with himself, and to do so without fear.

Since then, Paul has sometimes experienced negative feelings rising to the surface. He has been able to acknowledge them, explore the underlying issues and make decisions about re-ordering his life.

### Summary

Paul has gone from a state of burnout to a healthier state than he had known previously. He has done more than recover, he has reconstituted himself. His resilience, which was disabled by stress and burnout, has been recreated and enabled so that he is no longer prey to the flaws that he carried before therapy. This therapy has gone deeper than reparative therapy, it has been transformational, enabling the client to bring forth previously blocked potential.

Mere recovery from breakdown or burnout is not enough and is often followed by another breakdown. What is required is a transformation

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that results in a reformed personality structure in which the conductor takes his place in the centre of the orchestra and leads its members in harmonious collaboration. Such a personality structure will have the resources to be more resilient in the future. ■

### Reference

1 Wilde McCormick E. *Change for the better: self help through practical psychotherapy*. London: Sage; 2002.

I think, to right what can be righted. I no longer see the world as governed by a grand design of immutable laws of reward and punishment but see it as an interplay of choices and human intention. An environment in which I can (and do) embrace a new hope and freedom. I accept life will bring with it crises but I have and will continue to meet these head on with courage and optimism.

I am no longer shackled or burdened with concerns about myself. Through psychosynthesis and transpersonal development I have rediscovered how immensely interesting and rewarding this life is. I possess a zest and vigour for life that I have not hitherto experienced; I have worked hard to reach what I can only describe as this beautiful sometimes fancifully Utopian place. I regard inner peace as important and I, like the father of psychosynthesis, Robert Assagioli, have 'blessed the obstacle': without my experiences I could not claim my rejuvenation and resilience. I claim and embrace that equilibrium in my life

now and through my ability to identify and dis-identify, I am able to maintain and promote this feeling to the fullest extent. I subscribe to it wholly and I would recommend that more should be done within the self-help arena to promote its importance and effects.

I think of all the many important and life-changing lessons I have learned about myself and my place in the world over the last 12 months: it is the readiness to change and recognise choices that will remain with me until I shake off this mortal coil. If I may return to my man of the Millennium, William Shakespeare, and his Hamlet, whose words put the notion of readiness so aptly:

*Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now: if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.*  
(Hamlet: Act V Scene II)

I believe in a rounded approach to reaching apotheosis. As well as learning about and embracing psychosynthesis and continuing my work with Gordon, other activities all go into the mix: I take daily cardiovascular exercise to aid with fitness and stamina. I have engaged a personal trainer, who is simply quite brilliant with his programmes of exercise and his obvious talent and knowledge.

Nutritionally I have visited (and will continue at regular intervals) a homeopathic clinic. They have been able to recognise my symptoms and prescribe suitably effectively vitamins and supplements – again, quite brilliant.

I regard 'me time' as important too. I use this by going to reflexology. This aids relaxation and soothes my feet to boot.

Back in the office I have become like a new member of the team. My mind is sharper, quicker and more incisive. My confidence is brimming and I love my life. No, I really love my life!