

'A potent catalyst to help you work through what it means to be an authentic leader in a world that demands and rejects vulnerability in similar measures.'

Megan Reitz, Professor of Leadership & Dialogue at Hult International Business School,  
author of *Speak Up, Mind Time and Dialogue in Organisations*

# LEADER AWAKENED

Why accepting adversity  
drives power and freedom



**SAMREEN MCGREGOR**

# The world we live in confronts us with unavoidable, and at times unprecedented, challenges and adversities.

These experiences can – but do not need to – impede your ability to lead. *Leader Awakened* invites you to accept, embrace and work with difficult or traumatic events and experiences. It gives you the tools to use them as a powerful catalyst for change and enable learning, empowerment, agency and wellbeing.

Learn how to:

- Become more acutely aware of the internal, external, personal, professional and organisational factors that affect you as a leader
- Understand the impact of your life story on your thoughts, behaviour, values and actions
- Discover fresh perspectives and explore new directions to see and do things differently
- Enhance your ability to deal with and navigate uncertainty
- Accept and face up to adversity and challenge and improve your wellbeing, relationships, agency, performance and sense of fulfillment

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‘Samreen compassionately surfaces the heightened expectations leaders face today and our need to strike a careful balance between granting freedom and demanding accountability to drive performance and generate value.’

Morten Nilsson, CEO of BTSPM

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**Samreen McGregor** is an executive coach who works with senior leaders and teams across industry sectors. Her interventions lie in a unique cross-section between business performance, behavioural change and embodied consciousness. Samreen inspires leaders, teams and organisations to embrace adversity as a catalyst for empowerment and wellbeing. Find out more at [www.turmericgroup.com](http://www.turmericgroup.com)



# Praise

*'Leader Awakened* sets out the contrast between achievement and the human challenges faced in its endeavour. A very easy book to read, though paradoxically challenging as you find your mind wandering into self-reflection.'

— **Sean Hastings, Chief Executive Officer of B2C Distribution**

'Samreen shows why taking the time to build on your strengths (underpinned by life's adversities) unlocks unhealthy patterns. This book has given me a deep and practical psychological vantage point and the inspiration to consider and reflect on how I work and live my life.'

— **Morten Nilsson, Chief Executive Officer of BTPSM**

'Samreen demonstrates how leadership is not an approach that is architected; it stems from the intrinsic, grounded and core aspects of who I am and why, who I want to be and what this means for how I choose to lead others both professionally and in life.'

— **Cilesta Van Doorn, Chief Marketing Officer of Global**

'As a second-generation British-Asian woman, I specifically related to Samreen's explanation of her childhood experiences and the impact this has had on her sense of identity. It has provoked me to question how my own identity impacts me at work more generally and as a leader.'

— **Naureen Hussain, Director Data Estate of Virgin Media O2**

‘Both humbling and thought provoking, *Leader Awakened* enabled me to relate my own personal journey to that of my professional behaviours. Putting theory into practice with Samreen is leading to significantly higher collaboration, trust and understanding in my team.’

— **Mike Hallam, Managing Director of Service Express UK and Europe**

‘Samreen highlights the perils of an increasingly demanding backdrop fuelling stress amongst other consequences for leaders, bringing into clear focus the overlooked connection between body and mind. I am struck by her concept of “refracting” – a discipline – to slow down, to see, feel, think and then actually do something different when navigating these realities.’

— **Jagdip Panesar, Global Head of Learning and Leadership Development of Clifford Chance**

‘A wonderful, thought-provoking resource for anyone looking to lead, form or reshape a senior team. This book brought to life how to put my purpose into perspective, understand the agendas of others, and develop a culture based on trust and positive relationships.’

— **Abby Thomas, Chief Executive Officer of Financial Ombudsman**

‘A courageous approach that uses a powerful, raw and personal narrative alongside client stories to open up a dialogue.’

— **Wyn Francis, Chief Investment Officer of BTPSM**

‘At the heart of this book is the deeply personal story of Samreen and her family. A story that will take you down to the depths, and then lift you up with relief. It’s the personal that sets this work apart.’

— **Glenda Marchant, Executive Coach (former Publishing Director of *Stylist* magazine)**

‘This book makes an important contribution to the literature on coaching and organisational development. At a time when leaders can be tempted with transactional strategies and illusory quick fixes, this book reminds us of the fundamental humanity at the heart of organisations.’

— **Simon Cavicchia, author of *The Theory and Practice of Relational Coaching – Complexity, Paradox and Integration***

‘Like a good TED Talk, Samreen’s book blends together personal story, practical examples and theoretical observations into a rich and compelling whole: a holistic exploration into the troubling complexities of contemporary leadership; a series of discrete investigations into various components of organisational experience; and an invitation into deep self-reflection about who you were, who you are, and who you want to become.’

— **Dr Richard Claydon, Chief Cognitive Officer of EQ Lab**

‘I read *Leader Awakened* in three 90-minute sittings – the perfect length of book during busy times. It’s helped me understand how all the facets of my life are intertwined to make “me” who I am.’

— **Carole Gilkes, Customer Director of Service Express UK and Europe**

‘Samreen challenges us to accept that we all share a common truth – we all experience adversity or trauma to a greater or lesser extent. Short and elegant, hooked to the end, I expect to read this book two to three more times, and see it activate further changes for me each time.’

— **Ulrik Langermann, Leadership and Organisation Senior Advisor of Valesco**

‘Samreen draws on the personal, the professional, the seen and unseen, the physical, emotional, psychological, physiological and social. There are different doors to go through, places to pause and reflect, and vantage points from which to look back from and then forward in one’s own life as it has been and may possibly become.’

— **Anthony Kasozi, author of *The Leadership Shadow: How to recognise and avoid derailment, hubris and overdrive***

‘This is a masterclass in how to wear your heart on your sleeve well, how to look into the hardest times and keep going.’

— **John Higgins, author and researcher into speaking truth to power**

‘If you can’t have Samreen as your executive coach, this book is the next best thing, holding you to account for the changes you need to make.’

— **Megan Reitz, Professor of Leadership and Dialogue at Hult International Business School, author of *Speak Up, Mind Time* and *Dialogue in Organisations***

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**SAMREEN MCGREGOR**

# R<sup>e</sup>think

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*To Anees*

*You inspire me to be, and relish being, my whole self.*

*May you awaken this in many more  
people just by being you.*



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# Foreword

I used to think that hitting rock bottom was the worst thing that could happen to a person. And I can confirm that it is not fun. I lost part of my leg in a boating accident when I was 15, along with my dream of being an international rugby superstar. But I also discovered that there is a freedom that comes from having nothing left to lose. It can make you powerful and strong and dangerous, or it can destroy you. It is up to us to choose.

We will all experience trauma in our lifetime, and we all experience it differently. It is how we process our trauma that determines if we come back with new depth and wisdom, or if we lose a part of ourselves because we have to hide away what we're not yet ready, able to or willing to face.

I'll never forget speaking at a charity event in London when I was approached by a couple who were concerned for their 12-year-old daughter. Their concern was that her life was too safe: they had lots of money, they lived in a beautiful home and she went to a very expensive school. It's the life we all think we want, except this couple recognised that it is challenge and stretch that make us great and money cannot buy that.

The good news is we don't need to go out looking for challenge - it will always find us! The other good news is that we can choose how we respond to challenge, and this matters because it is a reflection of who we are and what we believe. Who we are and what we believe is important because it spills over into everything that we do. There is no such thing as a personal and professional divide.

I've been a professional athlete for 18 years, competing in four Paralympic Games. I've been the world champion and the world record holder. I've also experienced injury and defeat, and through it all I learned that who I am away from the athletics track impacts who I am on the track. When the pressure is on, our real selves come out.

As an executive coach working with leaders today, I experienced the same to be true in the world of business leadership. In Samreen's words, 'We cannot separate who we are from how we lead.' This is why it is so important to do the work of knowing who you are, being clear about your values, working

through any unresolved adversities, and making more conscious choices. This book provides a great starting point.

**Stef Reid, MBE**

Paralympian, broadcaster, speaker and executive coach



# Introduction

I'm a hopeless overachiever – similar to suffering from an addiction, admitting the condition is the first step to recovery (or at least living with it well). Ambition and a desire to do well, to be exceptional, are no bad thing – they are the wellspring from which so much good happens in the world. But ambition can, and does, come at a cost – especially when what lies behind that overachievement remains hidden.

Like any overplayed strength, ambition also has its shadow – and in many workplaces it is a habit that can be ruthlessly encouraged and exploited. That insatiable desire to push harder, do better and outperform the world can crowd out the space for internal reflection and prevent us from listening to the inconvenient

voices inside that ask questions like: 'Is this worth it?' 'Why am I doing this?' 'What's happening in the rest of my life that doesn't fit with the language of achievement?'

I have worked for many years as an executive coach to leaders in all walks of life, helping them to navigate what feels like an increasingly impossible agenda filled with technical competence, exceptional performance, responsiveness to the unexpected and humble human connection. And I have been navigating my own life, which was complicated enough to start with as a Venezuelan/Indian/American/Pakistani/British 'citizen of everywhere', before then having to deal with my young son's life-threatening and gruelling illness.

I have written this book for anyone who is in or aspires to be in a leadership role. It explores what it takes to integrate the personal and professional, the manageable and the unmanageable – and the healthy and unhealthy demands we make of ourselves or others make of us. I have woven my own story, as well as those of others, into the book – because one of the things I know more than anything is that we cannot separate who we are from how we lead. This book expresses and shares the lenses I use after twenty-five years' experience in my profession, including the theory (psychological, neuroscientific, management science, naturopathic and body work) that supports and validates my interventions with clients. You will read stories from the coaching quarters that bring to life the adversities my clients have dared to face and

chosen to transcend. You will discover what it takes to see the barriers that impede us from being who we are and realising our potential. You will see how the intrinsic and extrinsic environments we navigate play a role, and that it is possible to influence the journey and the outcomes.

I hope you gain insights from the resources and stories I share throughout the book, and these inspire you to take the space and prompts I offer at the end of the chapters to begin to adopt a new leadership development practice I call 'refracting'.

I contrast this to the act of 'reflecting', a concept which metaphorically relates a physics principle – which is what happens to light when it strikes a surface - to the process we use when we pause, notice ourselves, our thoughts, actions, and behaviours. In reflection, a ray of light simply *bounces back from a smooth surface*. In refraction, light enters different media (such as air, water or glass) causing a *distinct change in speed and direction*. The opportunity this presents enables you to understand yourself more deeply, scout out new angles, and to take actions to change the course of undesired behavioural and relationship patterns impacting you and others.

This book is a personal inquiry into my own development journey as a leader, professional and human being. It gives you the benefit of the ideas, theories, frames and lenses that have helped me to develop and apply resources for myself and my clients. The stories from the coaching room convey transformative shifts in the mindsets of my clients, how they view and work

within their organisational systems and their behaviours. It is also intended to inspire you to see yourself as an instrument, to know yourself deeper, to wake up to the bigger picture and the behaviours and mindsets you can adapt to navigate your context even better as a leader and human being.

### **A contract with you, the reader**

Throughout this book, I offer candid refractions I have made on significant experiences in my own life. All of these are real and personal. I expose critical moments that have presented opportunities for me to learn to traverse adversities. Many involve matters that are uncomfortable and some content may trigger distress. I believe I do not exist outside of the environment and dynamics described throughout this book. The work is deep and relational.

I also share reflections from coaching that provide tangible examples of others' experiences and circumstances, and how they faced them. The stories relating to clients are anonymised and I have sought permission for their inclusion in the book.

I have learned to navigate life and work-related situations, and I have the privilege of helping my clients do the same. Throughout this book, I attempt to catalyse a similar process for a wider audience, but to be successful this requires a similar investment and willingness for authenticity, honesty and brave reflection from the reader.



## My outside-in perspective

Since I was a little girl, attending an American school and living in Caracas, Venezuela, I experienced life from the sidelines. I always felt like I was on the outside looking in. I was, and still am, a cultural exception. This has been difficult, but it has also given me a gift – the ability to observe with a sense of detachment.



When I was invited for a sleepover at a friend's house, my parents would disapprove and say, 'You are not American, Samreen. Our rules are different, so you can't stay in the home of a family we don't know.' While I later realised this reflected their values around safety and control, at the time situations like this confused me and deepened my sense of being different from my

friends. Despite Spanish being my mother tongue, my father encouraged me to speak only English. Research convinced him it wasn't good to raise a child learning more than one language because it delayed their development – a theory later disproved by evidence showing that learning several languages simultaneously leads to improved learning.

I interpreted this strict language rule as a signal that I wasn't Venezuelan. Although we travelled extensively to India and Pakistan to visit my father's side of our family, I didn't learn to speak Urdu or Hindi, so it seemed to me I wasn't Indian or Pakistani, either. I often asked my dad, 'If I'm not American or Venezuelan or Indian, then what am I?' He would reply, 'You are a global citizen, Samreen.'

I realise now that my father's global citizen classification was ahead of its time. In 2022, Guido Gianasso, PhD, Professor of Leadership at HEC Paris wrote a superb post about Emma Raducanu's astonishing grand slam win.<sup>1</sup> The post went viral and in just a few days attracted nine million views, thousands of likes and personal messages expressing the overwhelmingly familiar notion of being 'a citizen of everywhere' as reflected in Emma's diverse Canadian/Romanian/Chinese/British connections. There was an emotional outpouring from expats, internationals and transnationals, interracial couples and 'third-culture kids', all grateful for the acknowledgement of an overlooked world demographic.

I found comfort in hearing about others who go through life with similar questions about their

identity, with a primal need to belong and who face the consequences of being different from a majority culture. The recent growth in awareness, engagement, curiosity and action towards embracing and inviting diversity, equity and inclusion is lighting up the stage for this much-needed dialogue.

As someone who has experienced a destabilising and complex journey, despite my gratitude for the growing support and curiosity towards generating better conditions for people to feel they belong I still find it challenging to open up about my lived experience. Writing this book marks a major milestone. When I reflect on the difficulties, I consider the stories I tell myself, am coloured by and project onto situations involving others, some of which we will explore together throughout this book.

Let's begin.



# 1

## Accepting Adversity

*Beaming a light to awaken you...*

Acknowledging and understanding your relationship with trauma (and in all likelihood, you do have one) is necessary if you are to overcome its undesirable effects on you and those around you. Fusing personal, professional and academic insights to help initiate your liberation.

### **Abrupt awakening**

‘There is something very wrong, Samreen! Pack a bag. Go straight to Ward 7 at Stoke Mandeville – the paediatric ward. Take something for you and Darshan to sleep in. There is something *really* wrong. I don’t know... See you there as soon as you can get there!’

exclaimed my husband, Fraser, on the phone. His voice shook, and I could feel the panic in his words.

‘What did he say, Mummy, and why is he crying? I can hear him crying! Why is Daddy crying?’ said my seven-year-old daughter Anees at 6:03pm on 4 April 2017, as I put the phone down.

I could feel her gaze penetrate mine while I tried to take a breath and snap out of my frozen state. I remember running around in a daze, packing random things in a bag and making Anees a chicken wrap that she didn’t want to eat. Going into my son Darshan’s room, I stared around aimlessly, not wanting to believe what was happening.

During the drive to the hospital, Anees fired a relentless stream of questions at me, and I desperately sought ways to relax us both. We comforted each other by squeezing each other’s hands and taking long deep breaths together.

Within twenty-four hours, Fraser and I were taken into a room and told by a consultant that our nine-year-old son, Darshan, had a ‘mass’ in his brain, which was located mid-brain in the thalamus and was spilling into two ventricles. She said he was suffering from severe hydrocephalus, which she described as a build-up of fluid in the brain. They were going to blue light us to Oxford Radcliffe Children’s Hospital in the next few minutes where our son would be seen urgently by the neurosurgical team.

As I write this chapter, the panic, terror, inability to think straight, and the relentless sensation of wanting to come up with answers and wake up from the

nightmare flood back into my body. The mere thought of that day makes me feel cold and the unsettling sensations overwhelm me as I relive the traumatic experience in my mind.

I will never forget walking into the ward's teenage room and finding my tearful Anees with four identically photocopied images of Minions she had coloured in all on her own while Fraser and I were scrambling to support Darshan and guide our parents to the ward.

I will never forget the scream when the nurse inserted the first cannula into Darshan's small, pale hand.

I will never forget the neurosurgeon saying, 'Mr and Mrs McGregor, this is very concerning news. I must tell you that your son has a brain tumour – it's in the middle of his brain. We must operate immediately to take a sample and find out which of the one hundred and fifty-six tumours it is, to establish if it's treatable, and we need to carry out a procedure to release the fluid in his brain. There are considerable risks involved. We cannot operate until the full team we need is available, so we will have to wait two days.'

I will never forget looking into Darshan's eyes and realising that there was nothing I could do to influence his safety or survival even though I was his mother.

## Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – a concerning trend

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as:

‘an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, it is typical to be in shock and denial. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, such as flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.’<sup>2</sup>

Gabor Maté, the author of *When The Body Says No*, provided a different perspective when he examined the embodied effects of trauma:

‘If trauma is defined as horrible things having happened to you in childhood... then it’s true, not everyone is traumatised. But if you look at the origin of the word ‘trauma’, it’s simply the Greek word for wounding. Trauma is a wound.’<sup>3</sup>

In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) carried out a world mental health survey to understand better the correlation between trauma and PTSD.<sup>4</sup> Of the respondents, 70.4% said they experienced lifetime



traumas, and a clear correlation was found with people who suffered PTSD. The traumas with the highest proportions of PTSD were rape, other sexual assaults, and the unexpected death of a loved one. The study found that those with a history of trauma predicted both future risks of trauma and PTSD. In the UK, PTSD is not yet recognised as a disability, although it is in the US.

## **Our first encounters with safety and threat**

Childhood is naturally the period during which we develop our sense of security and stability. Children whose families and homes lack these conditions must find their own ways of surviving and coping. These children tend to adopt learned behaviours such as being more mindful of others and masking their own needs and emotions. These tendencies, although helpful coping strategies at the time, can form barriers to building connections and trusting others, and can even impact people's ability to seek help and resources to fulfil their needs.

It is during childhood that we learn to regulate our emotions and interact with the world around us. Emotional regulation is an awareness and understanding of one's emotions and their impact on behaviour and the ability to manage those emotions.<sup>5</sup>

In the cognitive frame of how we view the world, social psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman found that we form three generic assumptions in life, which

are then reinforced during our lifetime: the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and I am worthy.<sup>6</sup> She believes that these underpin our wellbeing and equip us with the mindset to get through life's opportunities and adversities.

Our early relationships form the basis of our relationships throughout life. Attachment theory enlightened us to the importance of the people we attach to as children. Debates about its validity also help us to consider other formative relationships, for instance, infants develop these with their parents while adolescents tend to form them with their peers.

Stable and safe attachments are necessary conditions for us humans to develop our sense of self-worth and the belief that the world is a good place where positive things happen. The relationships we form and foster with our family, our friends, work colleagues and even acquaintances or strangers stem from these early bonds.

Studies have shown that adults whose childhoods involved relational trauma (severe breakdowns in their relationships) at home are more likely to suffer unhealthy relationships and more stress and anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Relational trauma is believed to manifest in later behaviour and adversely impact the ability to make and nurture healthy relationships.

We are learning from studies in epigenetics that our bodies respond to and store the effects of both loving and stressful interactions we have. This applies during childhood and over time. Traumatic memories have the potential to weave undesirable and damaging patterns into our psyche and body that can lead to recurring dysfunction in our relationships.

## **Our brain helps us to survive: learned behaviours of trauma**

When we face a horrific situation and we are at a loss as to what to do, our response relies entirely on the most primitive part of the brain, the basal ganglia, which controls the innate and automatic self-preserving behaviours needed to survive. This part of the brain is also responsible for primitive activities such as feeding, escaping danger and reproducing.

The brain is a predictive organ and it learns from the consequences of what we do. It learns typical day-to-day behaviours from situations during our early developmental years. When we take a potentially unsafe action such as touching an electrical socket or crossing the road when a car is approaching and a guardian intercepts, informs us of the risk and offers an alternative action, the brain will learn and apply this categorically across a diverse set of situations involving danger and safety.

The brain gathers the data and understands that certain actions have certain consequences – this stems from our evolutionary survival needs. When our brain perceives danger, a threat or simply bad news, we tend to be guided by a negativity bias.<sup>8</sup> We register negativity far more easily but also tend to dwell on these circumstances far longer. Our memories of traumatic experiences stick with us far more than positive ones; we remember bad feedback more easily than good and we respond to and feel affected by adverse situations more strongly than desirable ones.

If your boss forcefully demands permission each time you want to try something new and responds negatively when you take the initiative without their blessing, a repetitive pattern of you acting in line with their expectations can be established. If you feel the need to know you are doing what is expected, your brain will ensure you follow this precedent in future situations (involving this boss as well as others).

In a professional context, these learned behaviours impact how we react to performance reviews, stakeholder interactions and interpersonal exchanges with team members or peers. The things that may once have kept us safe and helped us to survive can become the reasons for patterns in our relationships (more on this in Chapter 4).

The brain learns to expect a reality that isn't necessary or a reflection of what is happening in the moment and, as a result, it prepares for an emergency relating to a danger that may no longer be real.



Reacting to a danger that isn't there can have a detrimental impact on your work relationships. Your peers may perceive your behaviour as strange or irrational. You may be taking action to avoid a threat you can't quite articulate. The undesirable reality is that you are then seen as a difficult or awkward team member. An example I often see is unverballed resistance from an individual out of a fear of rejection or the anticipation of negative consequences affecting them or their team members.

Snap judgments are common in the workplace when we don't have the space, awareness or time to understand what drives someone's lack of co-operation. This negatively impacts the quality of relationships and begins a repetitive pattern of interaction. It may lead to feelings of shame and individuals questioning their capabilities and contributions. The absence of dialogue reinforces these implicit and unspoken judgments, which leads to unquestioned norms and undermined connection and trust.

Learned behaviours drive the following undesirable effects:

1. Feeling defensive
2. Feeling judged
3. Having disproportionate reactions
4. Attending to the wants of others at the expense of our own needs
5. Avoiding personal expression and interaction

These undesirable effects impede interpersonal connection and shared understanding, and distort the relationship between people's intentions and the impact of their behaviour.

## **Trauma-induced interpersonal patterns**

These undesirable effects lead to repetitive patterns in several contexts and relationships. A further complication is that the perception of time is based on lived experience and this varies between people. Time can be felt as fast, slow, short and long depending on the emotions and perceived experience of the individual. The implication is that the brain does not always know when the threat is over and when the primal fear response is no longer necessary. A traumatised mind is hypervigilant and programmed to wait for the danger to recur and then respond in the automated manner it has learned.

We need to find new strategies that help people feel safe and grounded at a deeper level – at the level of their nervous system – to stop the derailing of relationships they develop and grow in life. Paradoxically, it is through relationships that people can find strength, comfort and support to heal the wounds brought about by trauma. Without explicitly interrupting these invisible patterns, this opportunity remains latent.

## REWRITING A NARRATIVE OF SELF-BELIEF

Tina was put forward for executive coaching by her boss because she demonstrated noteworthy technical potential and they hoped she would become the director of a senior in-house team. Tina was reticent and avoided the opportunity. It became clear that it wasn't a lack of drive that held her back but a lack of self-belief and self-esteem. When we began our work, Tina expressed that she was keen to unravel what was undermining her confidence and ability to take on challenges.

The early stages of our coaching work revealed dark and painful memories of her early school life when she was frequently bullied by a classmate. The bullying involved degrading situations, which included opening the bathroom stall while she was using the toilet and being laughed at and called a loser by the bully after Tina was selected to lead the debate team. Feeling threatened by the bully, she became fearful and pulled out of the debate team with trepidation that she would lose. Her continued academic excellence developed into a pattern of being on the receiving end of envy, and this affected her academic studies, work and social contexts.

Our work involved Tina facing the traumatic consequences of her history, accepting it as an unfortunate reality in her formative past, making space for her to process emotions such as anger at how she was treated and gradually rewriting the narrative in her current reality with validation from current examples of how her talents are valued.

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In the coming chapters, we will explore how the unfolding reality faced by organisations presents unprecedented conditions for leaders and people today and generates a sense of getting or feeling stuck. We will consider how our ability to lead can be enriched by embracing and accepting (or being open to) associated emotional and physiological feelings relating to adversities and traumas we have faced during our lives. We will look at the importance of creating space to examine ourselves, our connections with others and the less obvious systemic and cultural dimensions that together comprise vital resources that maximise personal choice and agency.

### **Disrupting patterns by unleashing emotions**

To enable people to transcend their traumas involves encouraging them to reflect on and assimilate the consequences of the specific adversities they have faced and to learn how to apply this enhanced consciousness. It also demands that people question their own reactions to the less comfortable emotions involved. This is easier said than done. There are environmental factors that make it difficult to create the time, especially in an organisational context (we will cover some of these contextual barriers in Chapter 5).

Also, the capabilities required are significant and specialised. Helping people to notice what underpins behavioural patterns informed by trauma requires skill, consideration and, in many cases, professional intuition. The expression of negative emotions that stem from trauma can at best get in the way of more



functional and operational aspects of a work environment and at worst make people feel uncomfortable, judged and unable to cope. I do believe that it is important to address some of these requirements but they should not be reasons to avoid devising ways to surface and work with the effects of trauma.

## Unlocking the need for control

Throughout his illness, Darshan struggled with the insertion of a cannula for blood tests and scans. He found the first few procedures severely traumatic and there was one occasion when the cannula was removed in a rushed manner and hurt him.

These experiences led to Darshan feeling the need to control his surrounding environment and conditions. In any procedure, he now insists on a countdown before a clinician is permitted to insert a cannula or begin a scan. This fear also crept into his need to try to control time: to be extremely early for school, swim practice, a race and even informal meet-ups with friends. By being early, he feels in control and able to positively influence the conditions surrounding his activities.

As parents, we encourage him to continue to use this approach as long as it feels helpful to him, but we also coach him to accept that there will be situations when he will not be able to influence conditions. It is important for him to experiment and gradually rely less on controlling the time and settings so he can embrace and normalise the uncertain and ambiguous conditions that he will inevitably face in life.

## POSITIVITY IS NOT A LIGHT SWITCH

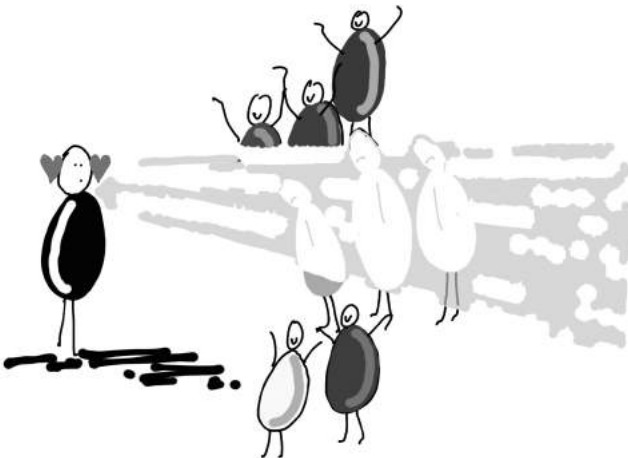
A Ukrainian client, Daryna, was facing considerable suffering as her family was affected by the events in her homeland. At a session that took place at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, she described how many in her UK community, both at work and in social circles, expressed pity and encouraged her to ‘look forward and remain positive’.

Employing a positive mindset when faced with painful adversity and focusing on hope can be remarkably powerful. This is backed scientifically by a growing neuroscientific understanding of how neurotransmitters like serotonin (which can be released through positive visualisation) can play an inhibitory role that helps to regulate emotions.<sup>9</sup> It isn’t as simple, however, as turning a dial up or down and exerting control over how optimistic or pessimistic we feel in any given situation, especially when the limbic or mammalian layer of the brain responsible for emotions, learning and memory is activated by the reptilian layer on high alert to avoid danger. Ideally, the primate or human layer of the brain uses reason and logic to adopt the positive reframe, but a pre-requisite for this is that the reptilian brain is at peace and the mammalian brain is content. A more likely risk in this scenario is that heightened emotions are masked and therefore repressed. When I asked Daryna, ‘How does looking forward and remaining positive feel for you right now?’, she expressed despair, incompetence, frustration and helplessness.

Catharsis became the goal of our coaching session. I gently encouraged her to divulge the feelings, sensations and tensions she was holding in so tightly in an effort to spare others discomfort. The session

involved long silences, tears and rage, and ended in elation. Her story triggered thoughts about my family in Venezuela who spent fifteen years living under an oppressive regime and suffered versions of what she described. I connected compassionately with her raw vulnerability as she released her pent-up remorse.

My intention was for her to use the space we shared to purge emotions. Soon after this catharsis, she could think more rationally about and articulate how to live with this reality that is outside of her control. She recontextualised the small and meaningful things she was able to do to offer realistic support to her family. We explored other things she could do to continue the process of purging emotion, like journaling, to lessen the effects. Weeks after the session, she was able to sleep better and felt less physically impaired by the intensity of the emotional burden she carried.



*Our pain and anger are part  
of us too - make space for them*

## **The detrimental impact of trauma on our bodies**

My understanding of the body from my studies in bio-medicine so far leads me to believe that this phase in Daryna's life will contribute to what I would describe as a traumatic memory unit stored deep within her nervous system, organs, tissues and cells. As Gabor Maté expresses, 'Emotional competence is what we need to develop if we are to protect ourselves from the hidden stresses that create a risk to health, and it is what we need to regain if we are to heal.'<sup>10</sup>

What we have learned more recently is that when we frequently encounter stressful situations, our immune and stress response systems are compromised. This impacts the development of the immune system, manifesting as illness and diseases later in life. Even average degrees of anxiety and stress lead to autonomic responses, which trigger physiological responses like those we experience during a fight-freeze-flight response. You will read more about how these responses work in Chapter 8.

When a situation presents a threat, our pupils dilate to see more clearly and our senses are heightened to identify sources of danger. There is an increase in heart rate and blood pressure so that our muscles receive the oxygen and blood supply we need to move. The redirected blood flow leads to a cold sensation in the hands and feet, which stimulates a more rapid breathing pattern. As the sympathetic nervous

system is triggered, we feel less pain. Stress hormones coursing through the body cause shaking and trembling, which is something my son still does years after his recovery in moments of distress.

Even in ordinary, everyday situations, our physiological response can be triggered disproportionately, depending on the degree of early or repressed trauma. Others may witness the response and interpret this as an overreaction or underreaction in the context. The correlation between trauma and physical pathologies and pain has been widely studied. Children with conditions such as chronic eczema have been found to have suffered traumatic conditions. In adults who suffer chronic pain or autoimmune illnesses, there may be a relationship between the pathologies and symptoms and an earlier trauma.

A study of over 17,000 participants, ranging in age from nineteen to ninety, looked at the transferral of trauma from childhood into adult life – labelled in 2000 as ‘toxic stress’.<sup>11</sup> Researchers gathered medical histories of the participants’ exposure to abuse, violence and impaired caregivers. Nearly 64% of participants experienced at least one exposure and, of those, 69% reported two or more incidents of childhood trauma. Results demonstrated a clear correlation between childhood trauma exposure, high-risk behaviours such as smoking and unprotected sex, and chronic illness such as heart disease and cancer, as well as early death.

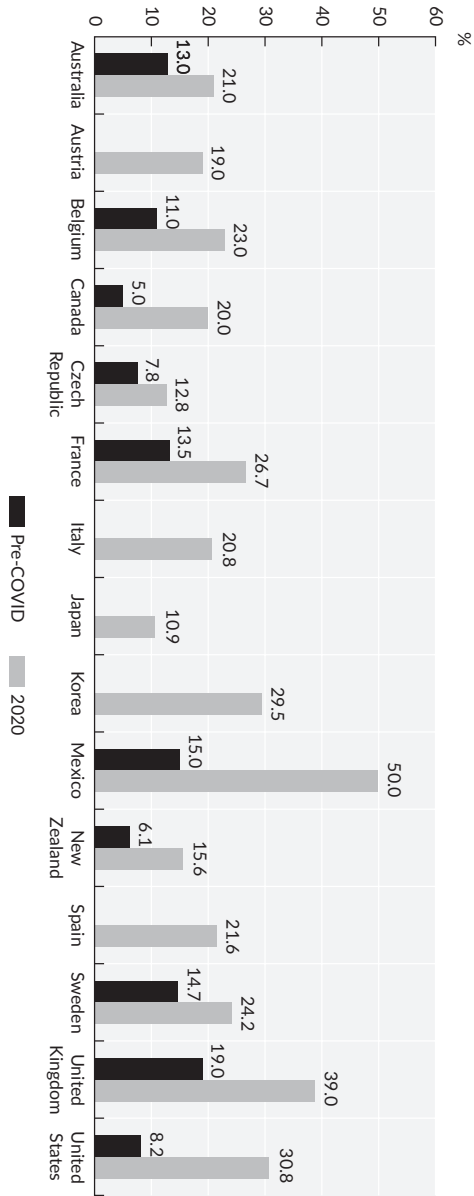
## The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) compared results before and after 2020 and states:

'For decades, the prevalence of mental health conditions has been broadly unchanged; this trend changed in 2020 with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. From March 2020 onwards, the prevalence of anxiety and depression increased. This has sparked a trend in increased mental health risk factors involving financial security, unemployment, fear.'<sup>12</sup>

The following graph illustrates significant climbs in the prevalence of anxiety.

Trauma is proven to have long-term psychological and physiological effects, but the long-term impact of COVID at a mass level is still unknown. The pandemic has disrupted normal life, injecting all sorts of unsettling and unfamiliar circumstances. There have been ongoing waves of change and flux including where and how we work, whether children must attend school or be home-schooled and the planning of travel – adding all sorts of variable logistical tasks like testing, COVID passes and more. We lost our usual clarity of routine,



Significant rises in the prevalence of anxiety (OECD/2021)<sup>13</sup>

making people feel powerless. This led to a combination of physical and psychological adaptations to move through the unravelling pandemic landscape. We may talk about it more casually as we adjust to various 'new normals', but the mental and physical effects on adults and children are unpredictable. For some people, the pandemic has been a positive time with high levels of financial security, comfortable living conditions and more opportunities for rest, time with their family and replenishment. Many have expressed shame at this privilege, conscious that, for others, it has been a time of crisis, loss of loved ones or great danger leading to increased rates of domestic violence.

Talking to Healthline, psychiatrist Dr Julian Lagoy said:

'Generally, PTSD trauma is defined as being exposed to a traumatic event, such as a sexual assault, war, a car accident, or child abuse. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has qualities that qualify as a traumatic experience as it takes a physical and emotional toll on many people.'<sup>14</sup>

Recent research indicates that healthcare workers, in particular, are experiencing unprecedented levels of trauma resulting from the pandemic and, while we don't yet have data about the trauma people experience outside healthcare settings, anecdotal reports suggest children and adults are experiencing mass trauma.



## Bedding down

I am passionate about awakening others to see how we underestimate the effects of trauma. Trauma, as a concept, has its roots in the context of violence, uncontrollable disaster and death. Bessel van der Kolk, who wrote *The Body Keeps the Score*, expresses that ‘the interesting thing about trauma is that people who suffer from it, want to forget about it because it [feels] too much [to handle].’<sup>15</sup> The adversities brought on by trauma are not a palatable subject. Van der Kolk has talked a lot about how unwilling many, if not most, people are to face and engage with the notion of trauma. Embracing trauma requires humans to accept that society and humans are profoundly irrational. Consider your own response to the title of this chapter before diving in: what preconceptions did you have?

Coming back to the deepest traumas I have experienced in my life, Darshan’s cancer diagnosis, treatment and recovery top my list. For some, this example may feel a world away and difficult to imagine. For others, it may resonate more. In either scenario, there may be discomfort and a lack of willingness to even acknowledge its existence.

My learning has been that trauma is trauma – and every experience counts. Through my work coaching clients and teams, I have seen a rich tapestry of the threads of traumatic incidence sewn into each of my client’s fabrics (and, in many cases, these are not recognised). Although there are relative differences and variations in the characteristics and perceived

severity, each story I encounter has its roots in and associated human responses during and after events and traumatic memories.

I am on a journey to develop and crystallise how best to help a growing number of people embrace the work needed to hamper the undesirable effects this has on relationships, whether family, friendship or professional. I want to help people do the work to maximise their short- and long-term health prospects by understanding the physiological cost of avoidance and repression.

During the past four years, I have worked hard (with support) to not only permit myself to do the following, but also to make the time and create the space to:

1. Process what happened to me, my family and our life at my own pace – acknowledge and embrace the traumas, which often demands accepting less desirable situations and conflict.
2. Interrupt the automated cognitive responses my brain is so skilled at perpetuating, which have had a detrimental effect on my livelihood and relationships.
3. Stay with the pain (take some time to think about it and notice changes in my emotional state), accept the continued fear and discomfort that lessens very gradually but never quite goes away, realising that the shorter-term sensation of pain is not damaging.

4. Allow myself to be supported by practitioners who can help me determine ways of releasing the deep (and cumulative) effects of adversities and use processes to purge or extract them from my body, which gradually enables me to regulate myself, my emotions and somatic responses and my behaviour more effectively.
5. Seek naturopathic and integrative support to strengthen my health and wellbeing to help address the effects of trauma from a physiological angle (an arena I am only just starting to scratch the surface of in terms of my own learning and experience, which includes homeopathy and plant medicine).
6. Integrate the use of movement and exercise to support healing.
7. Continue learning, testing and finding ways to remain aware, mindful and holistic in how I navigate the road ahead.

In the intimacy of the coaching space, I notice that people often find it more comfortable to keep trauma out of everyday life. This is apparent in the organisations I work with and the judgments expressed by individuals in the professional as well as social and family contexts I roam. Studies on this topic by some of the greatest researchers and practitioners like van der Kolk validate this point. My work on myself and with clients has demonstrated that the most powerful

route for people to transform what we learn from life's adversities is through acceptance, a willingness to face the trauma and be more conscious of its effects, and a curiosity about how to develop the capacity to work with it rather than put up with its hidden effects.

### A SPACE FOR YOU TO REFRACT

1. What feelings does the word 'trauma' evoke in you?
2. Are there any events or circumstances that you might reclassify as traumas in your life having read this chapter?
3. How might their effects manifest in your family and social contexts?
4. How might these situations impact your behaviour in a professional setting?
5. How might they affect dynamics in a work context (for you and others)?
6. How do the effects of traumatic experiences show up in your or others' leadership?