

NATIONAL FITNESS NEWS E-ZINE

CASE STUDY

Physical Health & Emotional Well-Being

Smiling nervously, the anxious young woman with a pleasant demeanour perched on the seat in front of me. It was Catherine's* first time to attend counselling and she was understandably a bit apprehensive. As she began to talk, she relaxed and her story unfolded. Age 29, she had a fulfilling job and plenty of friends, but had split up with her long-term partner four months previously. It was her decision to separate, so she wasn't prepared for her subsequent "slide into a decline" as she described it.

"I thought I would get a whole new lease of life – my feelings for Paul had been dying away for a while and I felt ready to make the break. But I didn't realise how much I had come to depend on him, even though we weren't living together, for small things – he had been my "go to" person for anything I needed and now I feel like there was a big void in my life – I wasn't expecting that."

Initially she had enjoyed her new singledom, freed from a relationship that had become stale and uninspiring. But as time went on,

she found herself staying in more, comfort eating at night-time, avoiding social situations and basically just feeling depressed.

"I seem to have lost my enthusiasm for everything – my pilates and yoga classes, going out at the weekend, even work seems boring. I've put on almost a stone in four months – I used to be really good at keeping fit and healthy. I just can't understand how I've let it all slide."

Understanding Loss

Catherine's experience, though confusing and distressing for her, is not an unusual one. The ending of a relationship, even a dissatisfying one, can be akin to a bereavement. The companionship, regular contact and familiarity provided by a relationship can be so woven into our lives that it becomes invisible and often taken for granted. Losing this can provoke a feeling of loss or emptiness that gradually erodes our sense of well-being, confidence and self-esteem.

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Catherine's response to the breakup was to retreat into herself, allowing her social contacts to fall away and comforting herself with food and sometimes alcohol at night. She began to rely on take-aways instead of the healthy cooked meals she used to enjoy preparing. She stayed up late watching TV instead of going out to her exercise classes. Though she felt lonely, she couldn't drum up the energy to break out of the destructive pattern that she had fallen into. She became harshly self-critical, berating herself for her unhelpful and regressive behaviour.

When I suggested that what she was experiencing could be compared to a type of bereavement, Catherine began to cry softly. "That's really weird – my father died 10 years ago. I thought I was over it, but I have been thinking about him a lot in the last few months. I'm missing him again - the split has brought it all back up, for some reason. And after he died, my mother went into herself as well – it's only in the last few years that she's sort of back to normal".

By withdrawing into isolation, Catherine was unconsciously trying to avoid the pain of moving forward without Paul in her life, even at the price of loneliness and lassitude. She was also falling into repeating a family pattern in relation to loss, unwittingly replicating her mother's response to her own bereavement.

Knowing What Affects Our Mood

I explained to Catherine why, when we become anxious and depressed, we often stop doing the very things that keep us well. Healthy food, adequate exercise and regular, consistent sleep are the foundation of physical and mental health. Together, these three elements underpin the optimal functioning of the nervous system, which is the hardware that we use to run the software of our emotional life.

Though the brain accounts for only 2 per cent of the weight of the body, it uses up 20 per cent of the energy that is derived from the food we eat – far more than any other organ. This is why consuming natural, unprocessed, nutrient-dense food is essential for maintaining brain and nervous system health. But we also need appropriate exercise to release feel-good hormones like endorphins and oxytocin that have proven benefits in terms of mood, energy and self-esteem. Regular exercise also enhances sleep, which is fundamental to feeling buoyant, optimistic and energetic.

As Catherine took all this on board, she could see how her negative spiral had developed. Falling away from her well-established habits of cooking, exercise classes and early nights during the week had depleted her energy and lowered her mood. Inactivity and seclusion had replaced the active and sociable life she had previously enjoyed. Her self-esteem had dropped as she saw less of her friends and watched her weight slowly creep up.

Beginning Recovery

The first challenge I gave Catherine was to ease off the self-criticism that was holding her back from even contemplating positive change. To help restore her emotional balance, she agreed to begin a daily practice of morning meditation, starting with just five minutes a day. She also embraced the concept of self-compassion, meaning the development of a non-judgemental and forgiving attitude to oneself, as a salve for the harsh voice of condemnation in her head.

As she adopted this more benign attitude towards herself, Catherine's mood began to lift. By our third weekly session, she had started going out for a walk in the evenings instead of taking straight to the couch. The sunlight and fresh air helped lift her spirits and even with this small change, she already felt more in control of her situation. She

confided in a couple of close friends about how low she had been feeling and was greatly relieved by their kindness and understanding. She also opened up to her mother, who responded with empathy and concern. Coming out of her isolation and connecting with others was an important step in rebuilding her inner strength and self-belief.

Slowly, Catherine began to experience the power of mindfulness in her daily life. "I was living on auto-pilot, using food and TV to switch off and not feel anything. But that turned out to be worse than the feelings I was trying to escape! Now I try to tune in and be aware of what I'm feeling and not give myself a hard time about it, no matter what it is." This awareness allowed Catherine to live more consciously and fully in the present moment, lifting her previous dullness, apathy and cynicism.

Before long she found she no longer craved the unhealthy, addictive fast food that had become the mainstay of her diet. She resumed her evening cooking and quickly experienced an increase in her energy levels. She returned to her gym classes, going back to beginners level in order to gradually re-establish her fitness level.

Moving Forward

As Catherine implemented these positive changes in her daily life, we continued to work through her emotional issues in counselling. Six weeks on, she could see real progress. Her mood and social life had improved and she was losing the extra weight. "It's like I forgot everything I knew about keeping well – like I slid down inside a bottle and couldn't get back out. Now when I meditate in the morning, I feel like I am connecting in with myself in a deep way, it sustains me for the day and I don't get so stressed. I am aware of how I use my mind and know how to guard against negativity. I can still feel sad and lonely sometimes but I don't let it overwhelm me. I keep all the healthy routines

going every day and I'm not afraid to ask for help when I need it."

Though still in the process of overcoming her sense of loss, Catherine now had learned practical skills to manage her physical and emotional health, maintain her well-being and face life's challenges with renewed confidence.

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****Names and personal details have been changed to preserve anonymity.***