

Transcript of Jo Stubley on severe mental health difficulties

So the first example and I have disguised this a bit and also got permission, but the first example is of a woman who was a refugee in this country for a number of years, came from a war torn country herself.

And she had been doing quite well in the work that we had been doing with her trauma and a lot of her symptoms had settled, and she was starting to connect with others. And to be more involved in present life.

When the social isolation began, she found herself in her flat. On her own, and this was profoundly, reawakening a memory of being in her home with her family, in her original country, hiding there waiting for the enemy army to come.

So they couldn't turn on any lights, they had to make no noise, they had to be incredibly careful to try and not be discovered. And what was happening in the present was that she found herself during the same things, and that a lot of the memories of that time, which included subsequently many very difficult traumas, getting stirred up and she was having flashbacks to those events.

And so one can see how the state dependency of the similarity of the experience reawakens trauma again. One of my patients had had significant childhood trauma. Again, she was working on and doing well and had a lot of different coping skills that she'd been managing and she'd been using, erm, whenever she was feeling really distressed at home, she would hop in her car and go to a dance studio and do a lot of work there. So when the shutdown came, that was no longer available. What she found herself doing instead was going out for a walk.

The trouble was that she hadn't used walking for a long, long time in that kind of way and going out already a bit stirred up meant that when she was walking, it was another kind of state dependent moment where it brought back right to the forefront of her mind, experiences, adolescence, as an adolescent where she had been having real difficulties at home and would escape the house in order to try and get away from them. So she found as she was walking around she was having a lot of intrusive images and remembering a lot of things that she had previously not fought off for many years, and what she then found was that she started to dissociate so she would then.

To find herself in a different place, not quite knowing how she got there. So for a period of the walk she had just not been there. We often think about dissociation as the escape when there's no escape. I think that's what her mind was doing.