

Today I'd like to talk to you about brain weasels, and how to – well, not cure them, they are pesky little blighters, and very hard to get rid of, but maybe at least find an antidote to muffle their symptoms, drive them into remission. This is from my own experience of battling the buggers, and I can tell you, although extremely hard to self-medicate, the trick to treating them is surprisingly easy, and very cheap.

You know what I'm referring to I'm sure. Brain weasels, or disaster weasels as they are colloquially known, cause the little voices in your head that tell you everything you fear is going to happen. That your self-doubt is simply you being reasonable. That whatever you imagine will go wrong, is actually currently going wrong.

Weasels are very small, but have earned the nickname 'nature's psychopaths'. Weasels are fast, relentless, and capable of controlling animals far larger than themselves. Once they get in your brain, oh boy, is it hard to get them out. Though they look kind of cute in the photos.

Just about everyone who works in health and social care would probably describe themselves as caring, compassionate, empathic and compassionate.

I definitely do. I'm a social worker by profession. I don't get much direct contact with our customers as a manager of multiple teams, but I'm a social worker at heart.

One of my teams deals with new referrals and requests for assessments into adult social services.

It's an incredibly busy team, and I have been known to pick up a phone if no-one else is available. Some of my team members are astounded by this, some roll their eyes and wish that I would just concentrate on badgering HR and finance to get them more staff, some shake their head in despair, wondering what extra work I will create for them....

I work in a rural area. Lots of people come to retire, while lots of families move away. The result of which is that we have a large elderly population many with no family close by. The families visit at weekends and holidays and we get a lot of calls after such visits, concerned about mum or dad, especially where there are early signs of dementia, confusion or self-neglect.

When I answered these calls. I explained to the worried relative that under the MCA (mental capacity act) you had to presume capacity, that people were able

to make what could be seen as unwise decisions, and that if your dad was refusing help or assessment, there was nothing we could do. But please ring back if the situation changes or your dad consents to an assessment.

Often this would be met with information about how their dad was refusing to stop doing DIY despite falling, or was not eating properly, or the house was unkempt. And I would again explain to them (in a compassionate, kind manner), about MCA and how if their dad had capacity and didn't want any help, there was nothing social services could do.

And I'd put the phone down, mentally patting myself on the back for being an empathic, yet professional social worker (and saving the team by not adding another assessment to the already long waiting list).

And then my wife got ill. And the CPN, when I aired my concerns about her behaviour and her mood, turned around and told me that... you've guessed it...someone with capacity could make unwise decisions blah de blah de blah

Because my wife, who had been sectioned, briefly, a few years earlier, but had made a full recovery, my extremely house proud, clean, highly conscious of her appearance, active wife, had descended into a space where she did not dress, or wash, or care about the house or our dogs (whom she adored, and would walk for hours). Who floated around the house in a dirty dressing gown, sitting in the kitchen, wringing her hands and smoking. Who refused to take the medication that had helped her get to, and maintained her in her wellness, because she was 'not ill'.

But she had capacity, so if she wanted to 'live' like that, she could. I tried to explain that if she had capacity there was no way she would. But the CPN (professionally and kindly), explained to me again about the MCA....

I could have screamed/ hit him/ burst into tears... all of the above.

It was around about this time that the brain weasels struck.

Over the next 18 months, in which time my wife was sectioned 4 (or is it 5 times? It all becomes a bit of a blur, to be honest), they took up permanent residence. They did go quiet sometimes, though they would wake up just as I was trying to sleep, as I woke up, and always, always when I was driving home from work.

If my wife was at home, they would share with me all the possibilities of what could await me on my return... the bottle of vodka, with scattered packages of

tablets across the kitchen table... but this time it wouldn't just be the vodka that was empty...that the carefully hidden car keys would be gone, and as I was frantically searching, there would be a knock on the door...

If my wife was in hospital, the weasels would turn their attention to our fur babies, left alone in the house all day. Images of the two of them getting caught on something and choking, eating something that poisoned them (definitely a possibility as the eldest dog was a known thief, able to break into cupboards), or, in a frenzy of boredom after being abandoned, had turned on each other.

One time I opened the door to silence...no barks or tails wagging. The disaster weasels started rubbing their hands in glee. I walked into the living room. On the floor was an empty chocolate wrapper, my boy, Gelert, moaning on the floor beside it. Anwen was nowhere to be seen. The weasels high fived and gave a victory dance. SEEEEEEE they screamed....WE TOLD YOU.

And then I noticed that the 'wrapper' was actually an old one, Gelert was actually snoring, and Anwen...well Anwen had made herself comfortable on the mound of clean washing I'd yet to put away. You would have thought this would have silenced the weasels, wouldn't you? But no, as I said, they are resilient buggers, and, the emotional and psychological stress the 'near miss' caused was prime food for these predators.

Because, you see, the only way to treat brain weasels is to starve them of such sustenance, to not give them room to swirl around, creating the anxieties and disaster scenarios, because they feed off our reaction to them.

Watching someone you love go through any kind of illness, in pain, either mental or physical is an awful thing. I've been a social worker for 25 years, I am an experienced manager. I deal with professionals, people, difficult situations every day. But none of this prepared me for being a carer, for trying to get help from a system I've been involved with for all my working life. Its only when you are on the outside you realise how difficult and unwelcoming it is.

Compassionate leadership is something that is growing in popularity and importance. There is clear evidence that compassionate leadership results in more engaged and motivated staff with high levels of wellbeing, which in turn results in high-quality care.

And compassion is the treatment, the antidote for those brain weasels. Compassion is basically 'a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it'. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

But I thought I was being compassionate and professional speaking to that daughter, desperately worried about her dad, the brain weasels running around in her head, growing sleek and fat on the distance between them.

When my wife was ill, I sometimes compared it to living with a body snatcher- she looked the same (ish) on the outside, but there was nothing of what made her 'her' inside- the humour, the zest for life, the empathy. Even the bloody mindedness. On one of the worst days, worn down by loneliness, a chest infection, and despair, after finding yet another hidden stash of medication, I ran from the house, at my wits end and bereft.

The brain weasels were having a field day, telling me nothing would ever be right, my wife wasn't going to get well, that I was going to be fired because I cried so much in work...which I did.

I rang the mental health team, and, crying, told the member of staff that I couldn't cope any more, and if they didn't do something, I was going to leave my wife and home.

The member of staff replied, basically 'I cannot tell you what to do, whether to leave your wife or stay'.

Now I know that this member of staff, the same as when I handed out advice about mental capacity act, was being factually correct and professional. She wasn't being deliberately cruel. But was she being compassionate?

Being compassionate, and being a compassionate leader, isn't about having all the answers, or telling people what to do. It's about working with people to find shared solutions to problems.

I will admit, during the worst times, what I thought I wanted, and probably what that daughter I spoke to wanted, was someone to wave a magic wand, say everything was going to be ok. But that would have been a panacea, not an antidote.

I was finally offered the antidote during my wife's final stay in hospital (there is a link there somewhere...). They had found the hidden stash of medication in her room, and finally, finally, understood my concerns. My wife might still have 'capacity' but I felt they understood now what was happening, and started to

plan how to resolve it. They listened to me. They worked with me. They didn't promise me everything would magically be ok, but they were compassionate and they were professional.

The brain weasels didn't disappear overnight (the antidote isn't that fast working), but with every injection of compassion, they became weaker, and more lethargic. They still wake up now and then, but I'm much better prepared for them.

So, my message is, be a compassionate leader. Create a culture of compassion that will permeate every inch of your service, your staff, and how they respond to each other, to patients, to carers. It's not difficult, and it doesn't take much time.

When my wife was ill, work was my lifeline and the compassionate leadership which I had then made me stay in work.

Now, when I pick up a phone and there is a distressed, worried relative, I am still professional. I give them the facts, and I don't promise to make everything better. I might still tell them about the MCA and capacity, because, well because it's the truth. But then I will spend the time asking about their concerns (because I damn well know those brain weasels will be active), and giving them suggestions or information that might help lower risk or anxiety. I might not be able to give them a statutory assessment, or three home care calls a day. But I can give them compassion. And often, that's exactly what they are looking for.