

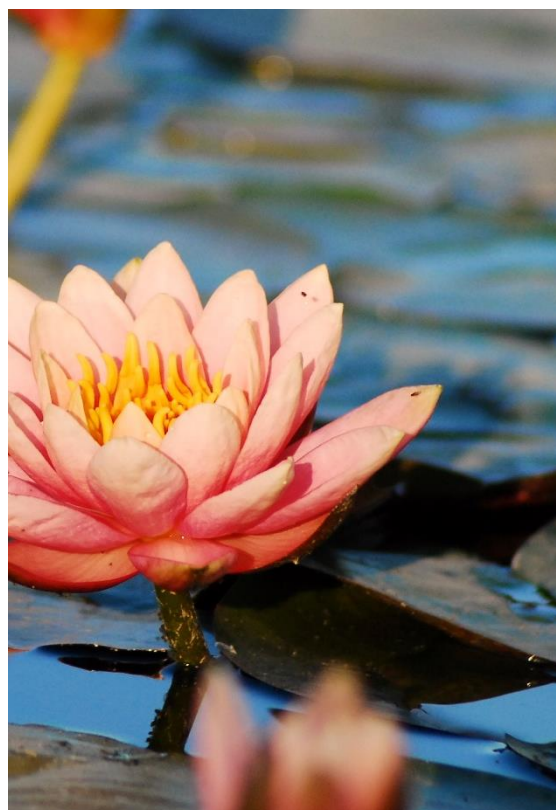
Becoming a Statistic

By Kelly Peihopa

Recurring dreams are like a channel that your sleeping mind tunes into on your mental television set. They are a part of a collective night time ritual, varying slightly from personality to life experience. The tsunami dream has been one of my regular bedfellows, popping in and out nocturnally over the course of my life, where I am trapped in a scene of fight or flight and relentlessly pursued by a wave which repeatedly just fails to engulf me. For more than a decade after my high school finals, I regularly dreamt I was sitting for an exam that I had forgotten to study for. The stress this dream caused lent a slight edginess to my mornings as I repeatedly reminded myself that my life did not depend on those marks. Or there's the naked one...

In recent years, my most prominent recurring dream features my husband, now ex-husband. I dream that several years into our relationship I find out that our marriage was never legal and wasn't officially recorded; we were never really married after all and I don't have to stay with him. I am free. In this dream, he always tries to convince me to stay. I intend to leave, but always wake up just before I am able to voice my decision to go and see his reaction.

Google 'recurring dreams' and you'll learn



that natural disasters, exams or relationships are typical categories for recurring dreams. Recurring dreams use symbols to send messages from our unconscious mind. They happen because we haven't solved or dealt with an ongoing issue that has created stress in our lives. Google says that these dreams appear during tough or emotional times in our lives, and the purpose of them is to figure out the problems we are facing.

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I can't recall when the realisation hit that I was

living in a domestic violence situation. I couldn't even say those words aloud until it was all over. I knew it wasn't perfect. I knew it was hard. I knew it wasn't right. I knew it had to stop. But I thought I knew what domestic violence was; it was something that happened to other kinds of women. Domestic violence, or DV as it is called in the system, happened to those beaten and battered women I saw on a television ad once. Bloodied women who were dragged out of the house by policemen while the husband yelled from the front porch, drunk, gesticulating at the neighbours, swearing at the night. DV was for those women who had married those types of men. It would never degrade my family. I would stay married forever and keep on fighting the good fight. Keep on overcoming *our* obstacles. That's what I believed real love was. I was so grateful to love so much and so deeply. When I first got married, people kept telling me that the first year of marriage was the hardest. I was looking forward to reaching the end of that first year.

In Buddhism, the lotus flower is considered pure as it is able to emerge from murky waters in the morning, perfectly clean. Because of this, the lotus flower is seen as a sign of rebirth. I learnt this at The Lotus Post Domestic Violence Group, where I received a laminated certificate of completion for my valued participation. I was also given a little pouch made by a woman in the class who wore a pink track suit and who looked much older than she was. In the pouch were several items along with a poem: Five cents so

you can never say you're broke, a marble in case you lose yours, a safety pin so you can keep it all together, an eraser so you can make things disappear; you get the picture.

Women living with DV experience stress about four times greater than other women on any given day. This means that a woman living in a DV situation is about four times more likely to go over the edge, as her stress reserves are depleted daily. This is called The Bank Account of Stress. I read about this on a handout I received in my welcome pack from The Lotus Post Domestic Violence Group. Overstimulation of stress leads to exhaustion, crisis and collapse. Living in this heightened state of stress is like being an adrenalin junkie; you are basically living in a situation of survival from day to day or from moment to moment. You thrive on survival.

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Growing up, like many kids of the 80s, physical punishment was a common occurrence in our home and the suburban streets we roamed with our neighbourhood gangs were sometimes a violent place. At times, the schoolyard wasn't much better. I have four separate memories, the first beginning in year 1 or 2, of being the recipient of various schoolyard and neighbourhood beatings, and witnessing some family members receiving the same fate. Other times, we were lucky enough to outrun our assailants. I remember vividly the fear and intimidation of certain streets, certain houses and certain residents. No one was concerned much about this; it wasn't readily discussed but was just the

way it was. So, when I began married life, some of the things that happened felt a little familiar. Felt like home, for a time.

There are neural pathways in our brains that develop through repeated practice of the same things. Strong neural pathways develop so we don't have to relearn the same things every day, such as walking and talking. It is the same for trauma or if we have been living in an ongoing stressful situation. The brain learns how to respond and cope and builds strong neural pathways so we don't have to continue to relearn. The brain is very clever in this way. Then there are triggers. In The Lotus Post Domestic Violence Group, where we were taught we had the right to pass go if it ever got too hard, I learnt that triggers set off flashbacks. Flashbacks cause old behaviours and reactions to occur in new situations, even when the danger or stress is over. When we are triggered, we need to teach the brain that this situation is different and begin to weaken the old neural pathways. Right now I am feeling . . . I am sensing in my body . . . because I am remembering . . . but I am now here . . . and I can see . . . so I know . . . is not happening anymore. I never thought my adolescent son would become my trigger. Two sets of neural pathways to be weakened. How to do you alter generations of neural pathways?

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“How can I avoid getting myself into another abusive relationship?” I asked my psychologist during one of my \$190 sessions. “I want to learn how to have healthy relationships with men.”

“Listen to your body,” she said. “Listen to how your body responds. Your body won't lie.” I had flashbacks to times when I would have panic attacks during my sleep. How my gut would churn when I'd hear the rocks crunch under the tyres as my husband drove up the drive way, or hear the key turning in the door. How my food wouldn't digest for days, sitting in my stomach and preventing me from eating. There was a constant dull ache in my kidneys that wouldn't go away; I had read once that we store our anger in our kidneys. My teeth would ache regularly and every time I became unwell it would go straight to my throat and I would lose my voice, which an energy intuitive informed me meant I wasn't being heard. I know what it feels like to have stress slowly kill you.

Unpacking my old life and rearranging it into my new, I found my diary from when I was engaged. I read the words of a naïve, unknowing young woman who was filled with love, hope, compassion, trust and total confusion. I read the words of a young woman I used to know who was dealing with the very same issues as the older version I am more familiar with now. What had begun as serious concerns and disturbing signs had festered and grown, despite everything good that was thrown at it. It festered until it bulged out of the corners of the home, spilling into public view. Sitting alone on a makeshift mattress on the floor, going through the boxes that were hurriedly packed up, I realised that I had done the right thing. I shouldn't have stayed any longer. It was then I knew for sure that nothing would ever

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change if I did not. I breathed in the free air.

At an appointment during this time, I was drawn a mind map on a white board illustrating the various types of domestic violence. I discovered that DV wasn't that picture in my memory of the bloodied and bullied woman. The case worker informed me of some of the categories of abuse, such as physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, sexual, verbal and social. I was surprised that everything had a name and that organisations specialised in these fields. You can study it. You can read pamphlets on it. They offered classes on it. The classes were all full. It is rife.

One of the most prophetic facts I learnt about DV was in a toilet cubicle. Instead of the usual graffiti grabbing my attention, there was a pink sticker on the wall illustrating the signs of an unhealthy relationship. I read the story of my marriage in stick figures, arrows and symbols. I discovered a recurring cycle I had adapted myself to that our whole lives revolved around. The cycle may start with tension building in the relationship. This can be a breakdown of communication, silent treatment, moodiness or unjustified anger. Often the abuser says nothing is wrong, but their whole energy screams

something is brewing. The other partner tries to keep the peace and begins to walk on eggshells. This leads to an incident. After this incident, the abuser may apologise and say it will never happen again. Or they can often blame the victim (if you didn't do . . . I wouldn't do . . .) or make it out as if it wasn't as bad as it seemed. This is when you start to question your sanity. Then there is a make-up period. This is good. This feels right. This is why all the hard stuff is worth it. Everything settles down and the abuser acts like nothing ever happened. It is vital in this phase that you forget all past hurts, never acknowledge your confusion and pretend as if nothing has ever happened. You need to enjoy this while it lasts. Then the tension starts building again, something changes in the water and looks could kill. The eggshells start crunching. Something big is coming and you brace yourself.

This cycle is repeated continuously until it becomes the pattern of your lives and you attune yourself to its ebbs. It becomes what is normal in your relationship. The cycle can take hours to complete, weeks or even months. As time goes on, the making up and 'normal' stages are shortened and slowly start to diminish. In that toilet cubical, safe from some aspects of DV, but

never all, I realised that I was a statistic.

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In The Lotus Post Domestic Violence Group, where I was told I had the right to leave the room if I wanted, I learnt about the vacancies left in your life after DV. We drew a pie chart on how much of our time had been taken up dealing with DV in our homes. I charted hours of arguing and long discussions into the night on insignificant issues that only existed in one of our minds. I charted hours of missed sleep. I charted hours of strategic moves of avoidance. I charted regular day-trips escaping out of the house with the kids to avoid a potential situation and give him some space. That was the easy part, but I was unsure how to chart the mental aspect. I used to plan every move and rehearse future conversations to be sure not to make a mistake that would set him off. I would go through things in my head over and over again to try to make sense of a situation that was often illogical. I was always trying to work out what were lies and what was truth. I was constantly on alert to try to keep the kids out of his visual, mental, verbal or physical firing line. It overwhelmed me to think of all the mental energy I had put in each day to survive and keep the peace. I realised I had worked most of my life around my world of DV. I had become codependent. And my efforts failed. I had always set him off.

The first time I tried to get an AVO was when it was all coming to a messy end. DV never ends quietly. I took the advice of others who thought that if I did this, he'd get the message that enough

was enough. This was not what I wanted to be doing, but the words Domestic Violence had awkwardly slunk themselves into a corner of my mind. The police didn't buy my story because there were no marks, no direct eye-witnesses (sounds didn't count) and it was his word against mine. And he lied. That was the first time I was ignored and invalidated by the system. My journey had begun. There was one (now ex) friend who asked me, "Well, how would you expect him to act?" And another, who barely knew about me or my marriage was heard saying, "All the abuse in that relationship happened because of her. She ruined a good man. She is a controlling, self-righteous..." There will always be others. There will always be those who are okay with people treating women and children in this way or that allow it in their homes. Statistics reveal that most violence committed against women occurs in the home. Statistics also show that most women don't report that violence, which is usually at the hands of a partner or ex-partner. I was realising that this wasn't okay for me anymore and had come to the conclusion that love wasn't enough. In fact, love had nothing to do with it. I was no longer going to be that pink stick figure on the toilet cubical wall, blindly following the path towards the next arrow, and the next.

The acronym *ADVICE* stands for Area Domestic Violence Integrated Case Management and Education. *ADVICE* runs through the police department, not by police, but by female social workers. They were the first professionals in the

system who validated me. Through their direction and resources, I have learnt about the many forms of abuse; things that I believed were a normal part of my relationship. Intimidation and bullying can be creating fear through looks, gestures or violent body language. It is also punching walls, throwing things or reckless and dangerous driving when you are in the car with them. Verbal abuse consists of threats, raised voice, ridicules and offensive language. Physical abuse can be pushing, shoving, pinching, squeezing, kicking or hitting. It doesn't have to leave marks. Even lack of consideration for her physical comfort is classed as physical abuse. Emotional abuse is as simple as making her feel stupid or feel like she is crazy. It is also humiliation, being degrading or demeaning and the infamous silent treatment. Controlling her behaviour through signs of disapproval by reactions to what she does is also abuse. I was finally validated. I wasn't crazy. And I had the marble to prove it.

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My favourite part of the day is bedtime. Some nights I am able to let go and give the worries of the conscious mind to the unconscious. My most favourite dream has only occurred twice and like my recurring dreams, it falls into the typical favourite dream category; it's when I can fly. It is no ordinary flying dream. It is one where I can actually feel the breeze. I feel the fresh wind on my face and my hair blows wildly. I am chilled from the rush of air on my goose-bumped skin. I

feel my stomach churn and drop. I am reminded of the days of my youth when I had the courage to bungee jump and sky dive. It is one of the most euphoric feelings my body and mind have ever experienced. I am in total control with no hindrances. I laugh out loud in my sleep, wake with a huge smile and feel high for the rest of the day. If I was a believer, I'd say it was an out of body experience. But if it is not, I believe it is a gift; a brief moment of pure elation, too precious even for my conscious mind to accept. Too giving for a giver to take. So I receive it where no one can take it from me, where there is no judgment, where no one else can enter and where it is safe within me. A reminder that under all the layers of mortality, there is still me. Kelly is still here. She is alive and strong and happy. And she laughs out loud in her sleep.

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