

Copywriting Portfolio

This portfolio includes a small selection of short-form and long-form articles for blogs or emails.

Some are my own reflections, written to resonate with the values and character of the organisation I wrote for. Others are ghostwritten, following interviews with experts within organisations.

If you'd like to see further examples of blog writing or are interested in examples of copywriting for web pages and promotional materials, please do get in touch.

e: hello@gemmacurran-digital.co.uk
w: gemmacurran-digital.co.uk
t: 07738 286 121

Tools for Transformation: Dave's counselling journey

When Dave rang our support team, he felt it was his last chance.

He moved in with his partner four years ago. They both divorced their previous partners some time before, and had grown-up children from their previous marriages.

As with many couples in this situation, from the outside they looked like a perfect pair. They loved having family gatherings with their children and grandchildren. They had an active social life and were cheerfully busy together.

But, privately, things weren't as good as they looked. Problems in their relationship were being kept under wraps and ignored, until Dave could not ignore it any longer. He felt that, if he didn't do something, he was going to lose his partner. So he contacted us.

Initial Meeting

At our initial meeting, Dave talked about the regular arguments he and his partner were having. They made him horribly uncomfortable, and each argument was followed by a long silence. Communication stopped entirely for a while, and then resumed as if the argument never happened. He commented that he didn't argue with his first wife – so he did not know what to do.

As a part of our assessment together, we teased out the state of their relationship through a series of questions, such as:

- Do you feel you can be yourself with your partner?
- Do you feel free to spend money as you wish?
- Is there anything you feel you can't talk about with your partner?

The last question in particular gave Dave pause for thought. He realised that had thought so, but now wasn't so sure. Some of the things they talked about led to arguments – particularly their children. A competitiveness had grown between them, around their children and their performance as parents and step-parents. So there were some things Dave was afraid to bring up.

As we probed that question, Dave expressed his frustration that his partner doesn't see his son in the same way he does. But he also noticed that he

didn't know her perspective on the situation. He felt defensive for his children and hated it when she criticised them.

Even in this initial assessment, it became clear to Dave that he actually finds it really hard to listen to his partner's perspective.

As we ended this assessment, Dave said that his partner knew he was coming to counselling – she felt it was his problem that he needed to solve.



The Argument Map

Dave came back to our second session even more determined to do something. He didn't know what needed to change, but was afraid that if he didn't do something, he would lose her.

We started our session by mapping out their arguments. What triggers them? What happens when the argument is triggered? We work out each step of the argument: what we would see and hear as the argument progressed? Then, how would it end? How long would the silence last? Who would break it? Would they return to the argument?

After mapping the argument, we noted Dave's emotions on the map. What did he feel at particular moments? Anxiety, fear, anger, defensiveness... He talked particularly about his own shouting during the argument. He hates shouting, but in the argument acted against his normal character. His overriding emotion was one of frustration at not being able to get through to his partner.

Hearing habits

Arguments between couples are, as you would expect, very normal. The problem with arguments is the breakdown in communication: during an argument, no-one is listening.



There are plenty of methods or tools we can use to shift an argument, so that communication can start again. Dave and I discussed a number of different methods he could try. He chose a couple he was interested in, and together we explored ways to approach it with his partner.

One of the exercises he chose was a listening and talking exercise. This involved him inviting his partner to a conversation where he listened with no judgement, no comment and no argument. He simply reflected back to her what she said. Then, they swapped, and it was the other person's turn.

Initially, she was resistant to taking part in the listening exercise. However, Dave persisted until he found a way to approach her so that she could engage in it. And, for both of them, it was a lightbulb moment.

The Lightbulb Moment & The Blow-out

When Dave returned to his following session, he came with mixed emotions. As a couple, they had a lightbulb moment with the listening exercise. For both of them, it built an emotional connection they hadn't felt in a long time.

And then, the next day, they had a huge blow-out argument.

Dave was disheartened by this – having felt like they had found a solution, it all fell apart so quickly. But we talked about the challenge of moving that kind of connection from the planned, non-confrontation moment to the normal, day-to-day communication.

The reality was the listening exercise was outside their comfort zone. It was new. It was different from what they did before, and better, but still new and uncomfortable. Dave felt encouraged by this reflection – they could keep practicing listening together until what felt new and difficult became more natural.

Defusing arguments

We revisited our argument map to look at how we might make space for these new methods in the midst of an argument. Dave recognised that if he behaved differently during the argument, there was an invitation for her to behave differently in response.

We discussed two particular tools for him to try:

- I statements. Deliberately shifting language from 'you did' or 'you said' to 'I felt' or 'I heard'. This picks up on the listening exercise – instead

of being about blame, it's about sharing how I feel in a situation. For example "you don't care" becomes "I feel uncared for when you don't have time for me".

- Stop & reset. Choosing to stop an argument, make some space and then come back to listen.

Both of these tools defuse blame arguments by shifting to a listening mode. When Dave employed these tactics, his partner was completely thrown. The argument fizzled out.

This built a new rhythm for them. They would take half an hour to calm down separately. When they came back together, they used the listening exercise to find out what was going on.

This new approach had an impact on their whole relationship. Dave was much more confident that they had a future together. And they were having fun again, laughing together and enjoying each other's company.

Ending well

As we ended our sessions together, we looked back and considered what had changed since Dave started counselling.

Dave felt that everything had changed! He particularly noticed that his partner was much more receptive to listening to him, now that he was listening to her. And although arguments still started, both their behaviours in the arguments had changed. Their arguments were more quickly defused, and therefore no longer destructive.

Dave was confident that the tools he had learnt would help them sustain a healthy relationship. He also knew that he could come back to counselling if necessary – or both of them could attend together.

It is common in relationships that are struggling for one partner to refuse to come to counselling. But, as Dave's story shows, individual counselling can make a huge difference in a relationship – by focusing on one partner's responses and actions, the relationship shifts. And often, the couple will come back to counselling together because they can see the restoration counselling brings.

This article was ghostwritten following an interview with a counsellor. It was part of a specific focus on helping men access counselling.



Rethinking Sex: Steve & Jen's counselling journey

Initial meeting

When Steve & Jen came to sex therapy, they were at a loss. Ever since their marriage 2 years ago, sex had always been painful – and now Jen had been diagnosed with vaginismus, a condition where the vaginal opening contracts too much to allow comfortable sex.

Sex therapy is quite different from counselling. Its purpose is to deal with the psychosomatic causes of sexual dysfunctions – in other words, the psychological and emotional factors that make sex difficult, painful or impossible.

So to start with, we talked in detail about their history from childhood.

Jen's parents both worked when she was a child so after school and in the holidays she would go to her grandma's house. Her grandma was much loved, however Jen picked up many negative ideas about sex from her. She considered sex to be dirty, not fun and painful – it was only to be within marriage and necessary for producing children.

Of course, these messages weren't conveyed outright. They were ideas that Jen picked up and understood over time, and they shaped her expectations of sex.

Jen went off to university from an all-girls school. Suddenly, there were men around her who were interested in her. Something seemed to be going on that she didn't understand: people seemed to be choosing to have sex with others they weren't married to... Jen couldn't quite compute her inherited understanding with the world around her.

She got together with Steve after university. At first, sex was ok, but over a few weeks it began to get more and more painful. It became a constant challenge and struggle in their marriage.

Steve & Jen have come to sex therapy because they want to find a way of having sex comfortably.

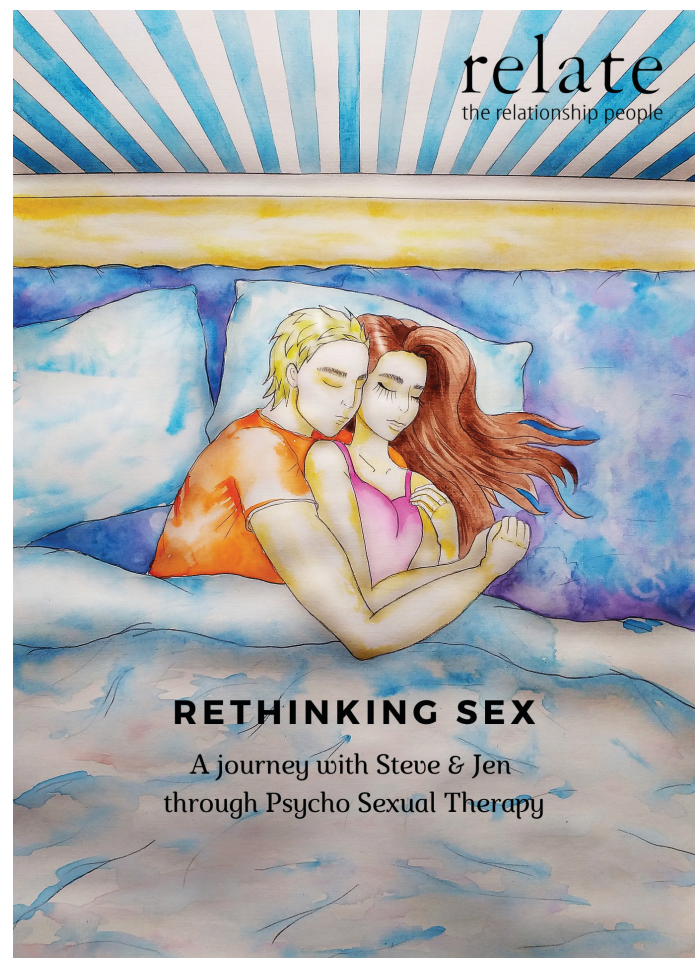
Journeying

After covering their history, I make a treatment plan for them. This is another way sex therapy differs from normal counselling. In sex therapy, clients engage in a programme of exercises that begin to rewrite their relationship with sex, usually over the course of several months.

Jen & Steve are both surprised to discover that this

plan starts with no sex at all. The plan begins with booking time with each other every week to engage in lots of physical, non-sexual contact.

One of these exercises I asked Jen & Steve to do is the sensate focus exercise. It's about paying attention to the sensations in your own body as you touch your partner. So, when Steve strokes Jen's stomach, what does her stomach feel like? How does it relate to what he sees? And for Jen, what does it feel like when Steve touches her? And then they swap over, with Jen stroking Steve's stomach.



The sensate focus exercise is non-sexual, not intended for arousal, nor is it a massage. It is essentially a 'selfish' exercise.

Each time they complete the exercise, they can talk through with each other their experience and they take notes to share with me at our next session.

This feels very strange at first for Jen & Steve, but when we discuss the outcome of the exercise, they are surprised by the impact it's had. It has built intimacy and connection between them that they have not experienced before. Jen also admits that knowing it wasn't allowed to be sexual has helped her to relax and feel safe when



Steve touches her.

The importance of trust

It's about trust all along the way. Trusting that your partner will not do something that you don't want them to do.

As we continue to see an increase in the trust and intimacy between Steve & Jen, and carry their treatment plan forward, I meet with Jen individually. It allows us to explore together the impact of her background on her experience of sex. We begin to unpack and process her experiences and her emotions, creating space to reshape her thinking.

Progression through the treatment plan continues, always at the pace that Jen & Steve are both comfortable with – in both body and mind.

We begin to introduce some sexual elements to their relationship again. Steve now begins to understand the difference between intercourse and sexual intimacy. While intercourse describes the physical sexual encounter, sexual intimacy starts with complete trust and non-sexual physical intimacy.

Jen & Steve are finding for the first time that their sexual relationship is satisfying and enjoyable – even without necessarily having intercourse.

Ending well

Over the course of their treatment plan, Steve & Jen have seen what they thought was impossible become possible.

And yet the most precious outcome for them is not that they can now comfortably have sex – but that they are enjoying a deep intimacy and trust in each other, of which sex is a part.

One thing clients realise over the course of sex therapy is the sheer complexity of sexual dysfunctions. It's not a quick thing to fix. It's wrapped up in so much history and emotion. It is far more complex than my clients ever foresee.

Journeying together with clients in unpacking and overcoming all the psychological and emotional barriers to a functional sex life – and seeing couples enjoy a wonderful intimacy and trust together – is tremendously rewarding.

This article was ghostwritten following an interview with a psychosexual therapist. The topic was chosen to help break down stigma around talking about sexual dysfunction.



A Story to be Told: Maternal Mental Health Week

Our mental wellbeing isn't a thing to be fixed now and forever. It's situational. At times when life is easy, we feel great. But then, circumstances bring us to the limits of our resilience... and we grow, developing the resources and strength we need to thrive in difficult seasons.

One of the most challenging seasons for women is motherhood. Becoming a mother deeply impacts your body – the physical process of birth and a massive disruption to your sleep cycle. It also has a huge impact on your emotions, being a season of extreme change in your daily life and relationships. And, with both these things comes the challenge to your mental health.

Holly's story

When the pandemic hit, Holly was in her second trimester. She and her husband went straight into shielding, following government guidance, and prepared for the birth of their son.

Trying to take ever-changing restrictions into account when writing a birth plan was tricky. Holly ended up with plans A, B, C, D and E! But when it came to *Amos being born, nothing went to plan. Instead of plan A (a water birth at home), Holly had to go to hospital as soon as labour started and eventually gave birth in theatre. Amos got an infection after the birth, which meant Holly staying in with him on her own for 5 days.

Finally, they were reunited with Holly's husband at home and began to settle in as a family.

A cathartic process

3 months after she gave birth, Holly met an acquaintance, and found herself telling her birth story in great detail. It was a "cathartic process" for her – she realised she had not expressed the trauma and emotion of Amos's birth and early days until that moment.

In fact, when we go through any traumatic experience, it really helps to talk it through again and again. To retell the events and the emotions we felt. Without connection to a ready-made community

of mums, Holly didn't have opportunities for this informal therapy.

Realising the value of revisiting her experiences, Holly took advantage of the Birth Stories service at her hospital. This gave her the opportunity to sit with a consultant midwife and go through everything that had happened. She could ask questions to understand why things happened the way they did. The midwife was able to explain the decision-making process of the medical staff. And Holly was listened to as she shared her concerns about the care she received.

Holly found there was tremendous value in being heard. It enabled her to put to rest the trauma of her birthing experience; to reconcile the events against what she had hoped for. She was able to face and acknowledge the sadness she felt and recognise the things she could treasure.



The price of sleep deprivation

Birth isn't the only challenge new mums face. When Amos was a few months old, he went through a season of struggling to sleep. Holly walked miles with him in the pram or sling, in all weathers. She had weeks of holding him with barely half an hour's break. And night after night, she was up for hours comforting and feeding her son.

We all recognise the cost of sleep deprivation on our mental health. And the price was far higher for Holly because family and friends were unable to support her in the ways she most needed. She spoke to her doctor about how low she was feeling – and the doctor told her to get more sleep.



Impossible when no-one else can be in your house, and no-one else can hold your baby!

Creative thinking brought some relief to Holly through local friends. One of them would show up on the doorstep at naptime, and take Amos for a walk in the pram. Amos would get his sleep, and Holly got precious time to herself. This became an opportunity for rest, not just physically but mentally and emotionally too.

Holly also began to make regular video calls to family on long afternoons. As well as capturing Amos' interest, it relieved the repetitiveness and loneliness of life stuck at home. It was an opportunity to connect with someone else and enter their world for a while.

Neither of these things were the solution for Holly's struggle. But they were a part of her journey to better mental wellbeing – they drew her back from the brink.

Trust in yourself

Another big learning curve for Holly was self-trust. Many mums do lots of reading and research to help them be good parents. Holly was no different! It felt even more significant when so many informal sources of information were hard to reach. But, like *Abbie, she found the books and the social influencers she followed reduced her confidence as a mum. Each one presented their vision of perfect parenting; each had their own theory of how to do it. But which were right? Which were actually achievable for real-life mums?

In reality, there is no right way for most things and very few wrong ways. There's just you and your child, and what works for you both. So Holly stopped reading books that were making her anxious. She stepped back from social media. And she made a choice to trust her instincts. Even as a first-time mum, no-one knows Amos like she does. She can trust herself to be exactly the mother Amos needs – and seek guidance when she decides she needs it.

A beautiful story

Holly's journey into parenting has really only just begun. Yet, already, she is developing strength and resilience that wasn't there before.

She has discovered a number of things that are true for all of us for our mental health:

1. Telling your story matters. Whether it's about

having a baby or about something else entirely, sharing your journey through a trauma is in itself a cleansing experience. Seek out people you can share your story with – whether specialists like counsellors at Relate, or close friends and family.

2. Be creative to get what you need. Sometimes, we might recognise what we need – for Holly it was rest and space – but it seems impossible to find. Yet, with a bit of creative thinking, Holly could carve out a small amount of space to get her through a tough season. It was enough to clear her thinking and give her fresh strength for the rest of the day. If you know what you need, but aren't sure how to get there, start thinking creatively with your friends & family.
3. Notice what undermines your self-confidence, and find ways to cut it short. It might mean self-discipline around social media (there are some great ideas here), or perhaps pulling back from some destructive relationships.

Most of all, you don't have to tackle seasons of mental and emotional pressure alone. Relate's expert counsellors are ready to hear your story. They can help you make sense of what's happening in your internal world. And they can work out with you where you want to be, and how to get there. Don't struggle on alone – find out about individual counselling to draw on our expertise.

This article was written following interviews with 3 mums who gave birth during the pandemic, as a part of our #maternalmentalhealthweek campaign.



Weetabix & The Glory of God

I'm looking forward to Mother's Day morning already this year.

It means having my annual breakfast in bed, two still-sticky cards from my 5-year-old and 3-year-old, and (hurrah!) it'll be daddy's turn to play dodge-the-weetabix with my 7-month-old son.

Yet Mothering Sunday has become a slightly awkward moment for many of our churches. Of course we want to celebrate mothers, but what about those women who have lost or never been able to conceive a child? Or those who have chosen not to have children? How can we both celebrate the mothers among us and include the rest of us in the process?

Perhaps we can allow Mothering Sunday to have a more profound purpose, going further than the celebration of a few. It can become an opportunity to grow together as disciples, whether we are parents or not. What could God teach the whole body of Christ through the daily experience of mothers?

In *Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline*, Catherine McNiel reminds us that the miracle of the incarnation was not that Jesus was a man or that he was God – but that he was God and man. He, the Holy One, had his nappy changed and nose wiped. Perhaps Mary also regularly played dodge-the-first-century-weetabix with him.

It is because of this miraculous incarnation that we can see the fingerprints of God in the very physical, bodily activities of a mother's life. The daily round of humdrum activities echoes Christ's service to us. Their ever-wakeful vigilance through the dark of the night reminds us of the Father's constant loving gaze. The love that carries them through the pain of labour shows something of the enduring love of our Saviour. And the creative miracle that happens within their bodies is unmistakably the gift of a Creator God.

A mother's discipleship journey uniquely reveals something of who God is. But we need stories of each disciple's journey – male or female, single or married, childfree or a parent – to create a deeper, fuller understanding of the wonderful God we serve.

We can choose to walk that collective journey of discovery by shifting our focus this Sunday. As well as saying 'thank you', try asking 'how have you grown as a disciple through being a mother?'

We may all discover more of the glory of God through her answer.

This article reflects on my own experiences of motherhood. It was written for LICC, a Christian organisation, as a part of their Word for the Week email reflections.

