



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Suits of Armour

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Abstract

Suits of armour grew from my research into treatment trauma, from my personal experiences and those with whom I have worked. I've worn the armour both as a patient and a practitioner. Researching treatment trauma for my PhD found me down a rabbit hole about how we present ourselves and how we wear masks in the world. There was a real powerlessness that I experienced working in treatment programs. Everyone wearing armour, staff showing up as if they had it all together. Clients required to be patients and adhere to rules without question. It got me thinking about the punitive, coercive and carceral aspects of eating disorder treatment. In some ways we have to wear armour, to present in a certain way, particularly as an ED clinician. This has led to much of the panic and anxiety that lives beneath the shiny, solid exterior – the anxiety octopus.

Keywords

Eating disorders, trauma, mental health, recovery, critical eating dis/order studies

History

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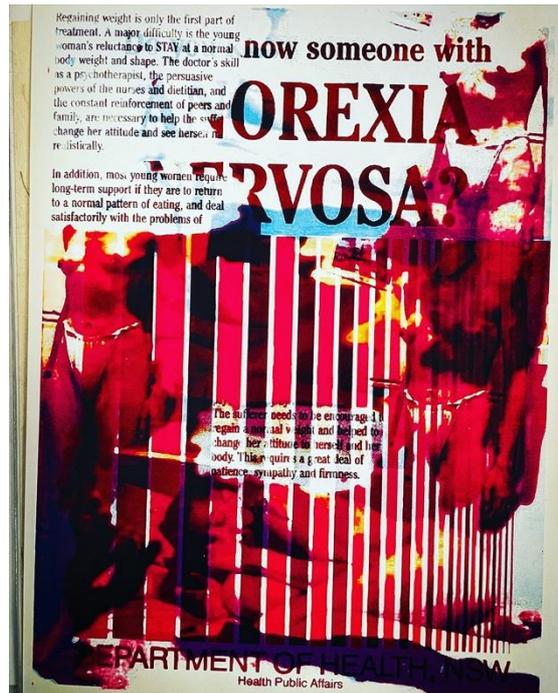


Figure 1. Image description: an information brochure with abstracted body images overlaying the faded text.

Suits of armour

How does recovery become a rigid suit of armour?

When I tried it on, they promised life, they promised calm, they promised better for me, they promised life would improve. Little me trusted them. We believed them. Or maybe we misunderstood?

Maybe it did get better in some ways? Maybe it just looked better on the outside? Or is it just different to how it was?

When I put the armour on, I was promised freedom, but I found constraint. I was promised freedom, but I found different rules. I was promised freedom, but I found a pain I didn't know lived inside me.

It seemed something to aspire to, something that everyone said I needed – to be “more normal and not so weird”, not so outspoken, not to rock the boat, to follow the rules and become an upstanding and productive member of society – but do it quietly and don't challenge the system. They seemed so safe and comfortable in their armour. In treatment, there are recovery coaches, dieticians, therapists, and other staff with their therapist hats on, their therapist armour – nice and clean and shiny. They show their perfect lives, presenting as perfect people. Wearing their supermen capes, with perfect makeup and

perfect hair, with their nice clothing and nice shoes revealing nothing beneath the armour, showing no dents or cracks. Pretending they follow all the rules they are selling, and acting like life is not hard, and that challenges can be easily overcome if you just do the things. Their armour is so intact, by all appearances. Perfect hair, perfect makeup, perfect clothes. Is this what we are sold? Looking good, being good, complying and following the new rules that have simply been overlaid onto the old rules.

Why can't I find the suit of armour that feels safe and comfortable for me? Is there no armour that is flexible and will fit me comfortably inside?

My suit of armour was simply placed over all the old armour that I've worn since childhood. The armour that was substance use, the armour that is trauma, the armour that is anxiety and depression. The armour that protected me before it was hidden, buried deep. No one wanted to see that. No one wanted to help me take that off before placing on the new suit.

They didn't tell me I needed to change those ones too. They swapped out the eating disorder armour for eating disorder recovery armour. Or was it that they swapped out the expression of the ones beneath, silencing them by pretending to be comfortable being in your body, not talking about wanting to hurt your body, and wanting to eat to hunger cues. You are meant to want to be normal, right? The truth of me remained hidden and silenced beneath this shiny new armour, biding its time to come to fore again. People are only interested in the new shiny armour and how sparkly it looks.

The eating disorder armour, it is a different type of armour. It often appears perfect. It sells itself as the only answer to everything. In time, though, it gets so tight and rigid you can't breathe or move in it anymore. It grows sharp edges inside that hurt, that get it stuck and terrifying to take off.

Then we ask for help. We get support to change out of that rusty and rigid eating disorder armour. The human beneath gets exposed. Raw and vulnerable. Lost and confused and terrified. People say it will be ok. People say recovered armour hurts less and takes less work. People prefer the shiny recovered armour over the ED armour, and often, recovered armour is preferred over the soft human inside.

I purchased my suit of armour. I can see me on the high street at a ritzy shop with my desert boots on and bright blue hair, while people try to put me in a lovely white wedding dress when I really just want overalls. That is how it seemed in treatment. Having to fit in, to follow all the rules, to comply and behave appropriately. The rigidity was stifling. If you do anything wrong, you get sent right back to the start. If you fuck up, they call you treatment resistant, manipulative, or not willing to do the work.

This new armour is an expensive item to invest in and requires constant attention and time to keep it shiny and looking like its 'meant' to look. It's also really hard to find, especially to find one that matches everyone else's. Recovery has to look a certain way. You can leave treatment, if you follow all they say, and do all they want you to do.

Preferences are not allowed – this is labelled as the eating disorder.

Being forced to eat food that I don't like, such as an avocado sandwich with slabs of margarine... like ick on all fronts with that one. Preferences that have nothing at all to do with an eating disorder and have everything to do with sensory differences and a strong dislike of certain textures or flavours or smells. Preferences that stem from trauma and not being allowed choices. Preferences that just are, for everyone has them, yet in treatment this is labelled as non-compliant or disordered.

I worked so hard to be considered recovered. To have it all together. To be on top of all the challenges that a life lived with vulnerability and truth flung at me. I had to pretend to wear the armour, while I was - still felt - naked. Identifying as anything other than recovered can cost your job and even your license. I worked so hard. So many starts in recovery and almost as many retreats back to the 'safety' of the eating disorder. Mix in a substance use disorder and this shit gets complicated.

What does 'recovered' even mean? Who gets to define that? Who gets to ascertain if I am recovered or recovering? Or am I just living as best I can? Surviving in a world that doesn't seem to fit me well. A world that judges how shiny your armour is without taking any time to look and see the human inside.

People seem like they believe they have the right and the knowledge to comment on whether the armour is shiny enough or if there is a little dent in it or if it doesn't look like their armour. And in the same breath, they will say, "Your recovery is yours and will look different than other people's recovery" ...

No wonder we get confused about what is expected.

It often feels like once you put on that suit of armour, you aren't allowed to take it off. If you take it off for even a second, people judge what is underneath, even though that has always been there – just hidden by the shine of the armour. You can't show people the messy bits inside. I think that's part of what sets people up to fail. The expectation that once you put on the armour, it stays on and it stays shiny. People seem to believe that wearing the armour loudly and proudly and completely is always the goal. No rest, no mistakes, no backsteps, and no allowance for the human stuck inside.

Any neuro divergence is a dent in it, makes it different, makes it difficult for others to accept. Any slips or mistakes make a dent. Relapsing into "old behaviours" leaves a gaping

hole in the armour, or it gets ripped from you like it was never yours to begin with. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe that suit belongs to someone else. People don't seem to like armour that has dents or doesn't look like theirs.

Recovered became my new armour.

Then you've recovered and there's often not the promised freedom. The support to help keep your armour sparkling falls away. One at a time, the team disappears. The perception that a 'healthy weight' means a "healthy mind", the idea that abstinence is always the goal and that it resolves the need for protection, and the people you trust with your deepest secrets move on - the loss and grief is not often acknowledged. You're sent on your way to "live your best life." The armour must stay in place, and you must keep it glistening.

Armour seems to be a one size fits all and no, you can't change the colour of your armour if you are a professional or work in this space. I've spent too long trying to fit into that silver shiny armour. It isn't mine though, it belongs to someone else and doesn't fit me well. The problem with the armour is it's not impenetrable, it does not cure all. Recovery doesn't change your marriage, your life, your childhood. A "normal" BMI, a "normal" meal plan, a "normal" looking exterior does not fix a lifetime of doing what was needed to survive.

I don't want to be like everyone else. I don't want to have to wear the same armour as them, armour that feels cold and limiting. I want a fluffy unicorn suit that is soft and gentle and moves in the way I need it to.

Some of the armours are more difficult to remove. I have a secret cupboard that I can pull one of them out anytime life becomes too hard, or when the confusion or overwhelm floods me. Sometimes I see other people with their junkie armour on and I'm reminded of mine and that I could pretty easily put it back on. There is a part of me that wants to be wearing that all the time, and there's a part of me that struggles with what to put on instead. My junkie armour stays with me, beneath my recovery suit. It is like the life raft on a boat, always there in case I need it.

Armour is an ancient and antiquated protective covering. It's highly restrictive and any sort of protection that it might have offered is outweighed by how cumbersome it is. Recovered armour is differently, yet equally as cumbersome. Limiting freedom of movement and choice. It can make any movement slowed and effortful. It seems to be able to weigh me down and leave me feeling trapped.

Armour makes it difficult to be heard and difficult to hear. I feel like I am screaming from in here, but people don't hear. Or do they choose not to listen, not to see?

We can't see out of it. We can't see into it. The split in the helmet limits our vision and makes it impossible to look anywhere other than straight ahead.

The person inside stays hidden. We can't see their humanity inside. The armour falsely removes vulnerability. It makes us feel like we can't be harmed, like we can't make mistakes, like we are better than people who don't have that armour or who are wearing a different type of armour.

How can we help people feel safe enough to switch out the armour that will kill them for something else?

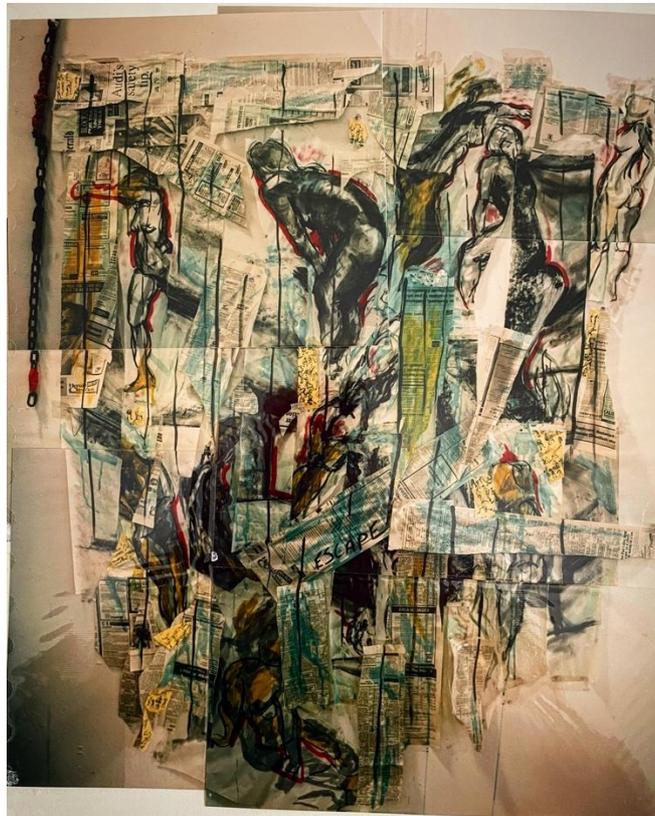


Figure 2. Image description: an abstract charcoal drawing of human bodies.

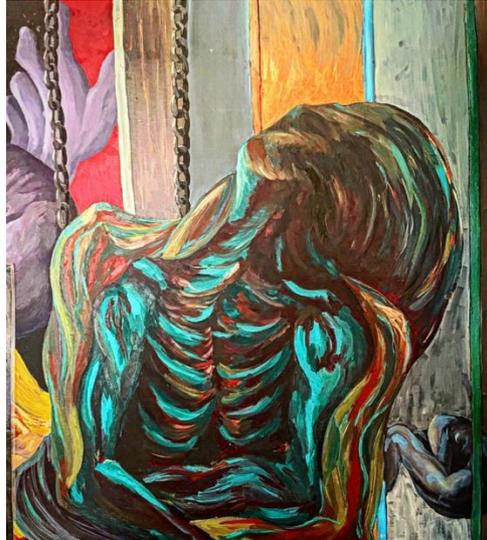


Figure 3. Image description: Colourful image of a blurred person throwing their head back and screaming.

Taking the armour off.

The octopus is my favourite animal. When you see them underwater, they can squeeze into any crevice, they can walk or swim, they change colour and shape as they move, they're super smart, and they punch fish when they feel like it! They can lose a leg and grow it back, they are soft and beautiful and can be super-fast or squirt ink at predators to aide in their escape. They're always watching.

Having to have that suit of armour on all the time as a clinician, people expect you to present in a certain way. This is what it is like sometimes in allowing the armour to fall away..

Anxiety Octopus

Anxiety grips my chest. Crushing and suffocating. The nausea. I can't breathe. My body gets crazy hot and breaks out in a cold sweat. I try to stand but I can't balance. I can't walk. I am alone. Downstairs under the house in my office. Am I dying this time? I try to go upstairs. Can't do it. I sit in the sofa chair outside my office. It is really hot. I am really hot. My head is spinning, and I feel like I could throw up. It's like a sudden onset of food poisoning. Weird. Even weirder is that I am also calm. Part of me is able to make sense of this. Part of me is able to recognise what is happening. Why now? That question I cannot answer just yet. Do all the things. Slow down my breath. Feel the concrete under my back. The coolness on my arms and legs. Focus. Focus on the trees. Breathe. Breathe again. And again. It'll pass. Just wait it out. Here laying on the concrete under the house. There is nothing else to do in this moment. Just breathe.

My phone is beside me. I have no-one to call anyway. And if I did call, could I even speak? Explain what is happening and let them know where I am? I don't need to. I've got this. It's a panic attack. We have had these before. It's ok. Its ok. Its ok.

The sun is setting. It will get dark soon.

I manage to get myself upstairs. The cat is yelling at me. Its dinner time. I can't attend to that right now. I lay flat on my back on the sofa and turn on the tv. The Chaser is on. Focus on the questions. Make sense of the words. Breathe. The cat comes and sits on my chest. "feed me. Feed me now". Slowly slowly my body calms down. The nausea subsides. It's been over an hour since this started. Finally, my body and mind are coming back online. I feed the cat. He is happy.

I picture it like an octopus. Tentacles holding onto everything so tight. We have to keep everything contained and in its place. Locked away so no-one will see.

Octopus must keep everything in reach. In control. It is afraid that if it relaxes, we will lose control. Control of what though?

We talk. The octopus and I. What about if you can sit up in a tall tower and watch? Keep an eye on everything without needing to hold it all so tightly. A lifeguard's chair with an umbrella to shield you from the weather.

Octopus relaxes a little. We've got this. We are safe.

This life needs to be shared. These stories need to be told. To be seen and heard. Its ok my friend. We can do this together. Its ok for you to sit up in the chair and take care of us from there. Its ok.

Octopus lets colour back into his body. He allows the orange and blue colour to flow through. We bring him a mocktail. He likes this. Crosses his legs and settles into the observer's chair on my shoulder. We've got this. It is going to be ok.

Exploring this event is interesting. What happened? I really don't know. Or maybe I do...



Figure 4. Image description: Black and white pen and ink drawing of a rope in knots.

Adventures of Little Girl in a Red Dress

When I think of myself as a little kid, I am always dressed in a little red dress on and a matching bow in my hair. They tried to make me into a little girl. They failed. I decided to write and put my story out into the world because I don't want to wear the armour anymore. The life that brought me to the here and now, to where I am. All the different armour I've put on and taken off throughout. It's too tiring. Story telling is a way of safely exposing my vulnerabilities and the octopus inside. I've always felt more comfortable underwater. Armour rusts if you wear it underwater; you also just sink to the bottom. You don't need it, it's not necessary under there. Scuba diving put me in touch with a different world, with all the cephalopods.



Figure 5. Image description: Photograph of a smiling 3 year old child in a red dress with a red bow in her hair.

Let me tell you a story about a little girl named Sandra Margaret —a joyful, playful, and spirited kid from what I can remember. As she got older, she was often labelled as naughty, too independent, rebellious, or defiant which, while not inaccurate, are merely facets or parts of her and they need to be seen. Writing her name evokes a real and deep sadness in me, confronting me with a past where nothing was as it seemed and she didn't want to be.

Sandra's existence began in 1969, conceived out of wedlock in an era where that mattered, where that was judged and frowned upon harshly. Her parents married late in 1968 which makes her born within the marriage, so she was a 'legitimate' child.

Sandra acquired a younger sister when she was almost 4 years old and so was raised as the eldest daughter. Her father was (and still is) an alcoholic, and not a very pleasant one. There are not many stories I can think of to tell of good memories that involved him. Not a lot of good memories really at all, although there are some. Somehow the unpleasant memories stick more firmly. She grew up trying to be invisible, to be quiet, to not upset anyone. She wasn't very good at any of those things even though she did have some very solid role models in the skills of avoiding and hiding the truth.

When she was eleven, she found out she was not the eldest child in her maternal bloodline. She was informed by her father that she had another sibling, older than her and not his child (his attempt to get her "on his side"). Her world was a confusing mix of secrets and realities, of discoveries and unspoken truths that shaped her existence. Until then she had never questioned that she was the first and oldest child in the family. She was excited to find out there was an older child, a girl baby born in the same hospital that Sandra was but who was born with red hair. She was not allowed to ask any more questions nor ever to speak of this other child, ever. This part was harder than finding out because she had a curious mind and really wanted a big sister, a real flesh and blood one, not just an imaginary one that she

could never mention. She had a lot of questions that remained unanswered until, in 2021 a DNA test gave us information about how to get in touch with her.

The house she grew up in was volatile at best. There were a lot of secrets in this family. A secret kid that we never, ever talked about, secrets about the fighting and drinking, secrets about all the things that happened behind closed doors, secrets about the things that happened to her, to her mum, secrets about the things she saw and heard, secrets she knew but that were denied and covered up. I guess if no-one talks about it then it isn't really happening right? If no-one talks about it then it's not real? Right? But it was real. It all remained secret or she got told it didn't happen. Reality and imagination become confused, mixed up. Her imagination was strong, it was safe, and it was a way nicer place to be most of the time. Her writing, the art, the journals – these all became evidence of what she experienced. She wrote to document her existence. A way of recording her truth.

She loved to be outdoors; it was safer outside. Especially anything to do with water or feeling the wind in her hair. She was a good swimmer and although she was competitive, she didn't care enough to dedicate everything to winning. She was always told she could be an Olympic swimmer if she committed but this wasn't anything that she overly interested in. She wanted to be celebrated but not be the centre of attention. She was an average runner; she was pretty good at Netball, but she was terrible at soccer. She played cricket on the boys' team because there was no girls team. She joined the boy scouts and was kicked out of the girl guides. She became one of the boys with long brown plaits in her hair.

She always believed she wasn't smart enough. Smart enough for what? She was smart enough but somehow this was not ever part of her awareness. She got by at school, flying under the radar as much as possible. Sometimes in trouble but mostly just being quite unassuming and trying not to stand out too much, other than the fact that she talked a lot in class and was often called "attention seeking". Imagine her surprise if she could see who we have become, if she could know that we are doing a doctoral degree in psychology – mind blown. I only wish I could let her know we, her and I, are, eventually, going to be ok.

Being stuck inside a classroom and doing what she was told was not her happy place. In high school she had her own desk and chair in the hallway outside classes, always a great idea to stick the naughty kid in the hallway alone, right? She talked too much and was too disruptive to be allowed to be inside so she found ways to entertain herself outside of the classroom. At home she tried to comply, to be quiet, to not be noticed.

She was a latch-key kid, entrusted to take care of her little sister after school and get them both home safely. She learned how to make after school snacks for them both, most often a

cheese or peanut butter sandwich because it was simple. She was playing grown-ups in a kid's body.

She grew up in the water. She dreamt of being a mermaid. Whether it was the ocean with her grandma (Mim) or the pool where the laps and training became an escape, the water was always a safer place than land. This is still true today. If I could find a way to live and work in the water I'd be there with bells on.

We lost her grandmother – my Mim – when she was 11. This was a significant event in the life of little Sandra. Mim was a stable thing in her life. She lived near the beach. When we would stay with her, she would take us to Gunnamatta Bay. We would walk there. On the way we would stop at the bakery and get fresh yummy bread rolls. Then we would stop by the fruit and vege store and pick up some tomatoes and cheese. Mim would have packed butter and salt in her bag and we'd head to sit under her tree where we would have the fresh rolls for lunch. She'd sit under the tree and watch us while we swam and played in the water. I miss her. I miss these times. I miss being a kid and feeling safe in her care.

Then at 11 years old I arrived home from school. Before I even walked in the door, I knew something was really wrong – my parents were both home and that never happened. I remember, vaguely, walking in the door to the news that Mim had died. Part of me broke that day, crushed into little bits then buried deep. I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral – apparently, I was too young to understand or something. I've done a trip back to the place her ashes were scattered. There is no plaque, just rose bushes. I've kept things that were hers and little things she gave me. Sometimes I can still smell her perfume.

Swimming training and being in the pool as often as possible was the most effective escape she had available and lasted until she discovered substances when she was 12. At this stage swimming and sports almost became secondary, although continued until around 14 years of age when it all got too hard to maintain the façade. Substances provided a much quicker and less time-consuming way to escape pressures of having to fit in and succeed. She ducked out of the success fallacy not too long after reaching high school and gave into the rebel, the rulebreaker, the escape. Starting with the more 'friendly' or acceptable and readily available substances and progressing from there. The eating disorder was probably there in various shapes and forms from around 11 or 12 years of age, alternating with the substance use disorder. She hated that her body was developing, and that people felt the need to comment on this, to bring attention to the parts that were growing as she hit puberty.

She found a way to exist in a world where she felt she didn't belong.

The duality of desperately wanting to fit in, to belong and be part of something and the need to rebel against the norm, to stand out, to be noticed. Falling into the darkness of addiction and an eating disorder not really knowing that was happening nor how to stop it.

Not wanting to stop it because it gave her a sense of community, people to “hang out” with and a reason to leave the house. Conflicted is a word that comes to mind. The natural human need to belong and feel valued and important, while also not wanting to fit into what others said was “normal”. A lot of the time she felt like an outsider, that she didn’t belong in this world. As I say this, I can feel the confusion, the fear, the uncertainty. Baffled could be a slogan for her life. Maybe it’s that she didn’t understand the rules of life within the box. She didn’t really have a guide and navigating on her own led us down some interesting paths. Being known as being vague and confused is another way out though, another way to escape, to avoid. It is like a protective cloak, an armour. Showing up as not knowing provided space, a way to get others to try and make sense of things, a way to get out of things or get someone else to do it. Or maybe it was a way to feel safer in a world that didn’t make sense, a way to survive when she never really understood why the world is as it is.

The ED part of this existence really hit in my later teens and early 20s. When the expectations from others got too big and heavy to carry. When people wanted me to have goals, to have a career, to have a clear plan for life as an adult. I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t want a plan. The ED was like a shield, protecting me from the reality of existence and allowing a sense of control over my life. Success was finding enough money to survive. Success was surviving another day when I really didn’t want to.

There was always a part of me that wanted to stay to see what was possible. And then the parts of me that were scared, that were unhappy, that were lost and confused. They would step in and take over. They’d ask who cares what is possible? Why does it matter anyway? It’s just life. It ends. Let’s get it over with and opt out now.

We didn’t. We stayed. We hung in. The eating disorder ramped up hard every time I was admitted for treatment of the substance use disorder (SUD). I couldn’t just be. I didn’t know how to be. Nothing felt safe. Nothing felt real. Nothing felt like it mattered. I didn’t feel like I mattered, despite what people said or how much they said I did matter. I didn’t believe them. I wished I could stop existing.

As I got older there were more parts of me – the young Sandra, then Sandra the teenager, Sandi the artist, the stoner, the junkie. They all had a role and they all still exist, although we have added Sandi the academic, Sandi the therapist, the surfer, the advocate for change.

When you have no money, it's difficult to connect to other people. When you are using, you don't really have any friends, but you have connections – plenty of connections but always watching your back, never really able to trust anyone. My survival no longer depended on being good at things but on having enough money for substances first, then a place to sleep, a meal, and someone to be with me in that. Success meant having shelter, food, and enough money to ward off dope-sickness.

My treatment journey did not start by choice, which is the same for a lot of us. I was using a lot of substances, I did have a preference for my substance of choice and, at the same time, any substance would suffice if the one I wanted wasn't available.

Anyhoo.... My stepbrother was part of the 12-step program and decided I needed help. He said he would take me to a meeting in a detox centre – which he did. It sucked and I hated it, obviously.... But then he left me there and I got admitted for 11 days of treatment. What a shitshow that was. Rules, rules, and more rules. Don't talk to other patients, only allowed to have 12 step reading material... talk about brain washing – which failed obviously.

One vivid memory from that first treatment episode was doing art therapy (something I avoided after this). The instructions – or prompt – was to draw a place you dreamt of living at. A possible future or something like that. I didn't quite understand what they wanted. And as usual I got it wrong. I drew a lovely big house with trees and garden and a dog in the yard and all the nice 'normal' things that we were meant to want. I also drew a shed. The shed was to hold a never-ending supply of my preferred substance. The staff were less than impressed with my imagined future, with the dream I had for my life. I got removed from the group and "spoken to" in the office. I didn't and don't understand why but this was not ok to draw, to imagine, to want for myself. At that time that was my dream house. All the things plus a way to make me feel ok with that life in the suburbs. It took me a very very long time to be honest in therapy again. A really long time.

This experience was pivotal to how I work now. I would explore the image with them. I would not tell them that it is wrong. If I had to do that activity again, my drawing would probably still look the same. I've learned to trust myself, my voice, my imaginings. The problem was not that I drew the shed, it was that I couldn't imagine a better or different future for myself. It would have been helpful if they had helped me explore that stuckness rather than forcing me into their idea of what a recovered future would look like. I had no way to create an image of something I didn't know existed. I do now actually have that shed in my backyard. But it's empty.

No single episode of care or approach that helped me find recovery. It is all so messy and mixed up. People often seem to have a substance use or an eating disorder recovery story. I

don't have that. It's tangled and blended and combined with other behaviours and an array of mental health diagnoses or labels placed on me. A composite of trial and error with a multitude of providers – some of whom got it and others who tried to put me a box and make me do it “their way”. I needed to find the path that worked for me - not one from a textbook.

I wandered through life the best I could. I experienced trauma, many times. I saw things I wish I didn't see. I did things I wish I didn't do. I witnessed people getting hurt, really hurt. Sometimes they didn't survive. I survived it all. I wondered a lot why I survived. Why I was left behind here in the world. Why others could get off this roller coaster and I was trapped in it.

The eating disorder is so intertwined with the substance use disorder it becomes impossible to distinguish one from the other. Essentially, they are the same beast, I guess. It was always a trade-off. Get treatment for one, the other would increase. Get treatment for that and we'd go back to the other. The see-saw of ineffective treatment. Self-harm was another consistent theme throughout, another strategy to try and manage distress. All these things, all of them, helped me survive waking up each day. An expression of pain and distress, even though I did work very hard to keep all those parts secret.

Throughout my twenties and thirties, I searched for belonging. Searching for my place. Searching for my people. Being in hospitals or in treatment centres gave me somewhere to belong, somewhere to be safe. Using substances also gave me a sense of belonging, of connection to people who seemed to understand me. We were all living on the edges of society, in the shadows, on the streets.

I had girlfriends and found a kind of sense of belonging there. I got involved in the Queer community. Was part of the Sydney Mardi Gras for a few years. Until that all fell apart when I had a boyfriend and that was pretty much the end of my belonging in the queer community at that time anyway. Back then there was no space for what they called “fence sitting”. I was told to make up my mind – straight or gay – there wasn't any space for me within that dichotomy.

I met my wife at a dance party in Melbourne. I was 21 or 22 years old when we met. Our relationship has never been easy. Nothing I have ever done has been via the easy way. She stuck with me. I adore her for that and I am still not sure why she stayed with me. I was one of those people you get warned to stay away from. She is my rock, my stability, the one consistent and dependable part of my life.

Yet I was able to go to university, studied visual arts then became a schoolteacher. I did this because the world told me I needed to do something, so I did. I think I was about 23 when I started my degree. It also provided a nice façade to hide the reality of the eating disorder and substance use that existed behind the façade. Just another secret. I was great at putting on masks and showing up in acceptable ways. I was great at keeping secrets, until I wasn't anymore. Hospital and detox admissions were frequent and informed the work I produced for my graduation exhibition. I made art. I expressed myself in images that, like my life, looked bright and pretty from afar with deep and dark content once you got close up.

I knew I was different somehow; I was always just that little bit different. I never really knew why or what I had done that made me not quite belong. I didn't understand why I didn't fit in and I didn't understand how to do that. Honestly, I still don't know most of the time, but I care less now than I did back then, in some ways. I did things that helped me feel part of, to feel like I was part of, to feel like I was "normal" – whatever this even means. I had to learn the rules and being quiet was often my go to when I needed to fit. Being a good swimmer gave me a place to belong, even though I usually felt out of place anyway. Substance use gave us all another place of belonging, a community of people all wanting the same thing. The eating disorder was always a big secret, until it wasn't, but it was one thing that wasn't about belonging, the eating disorder was purely about survival despite the obvious contradiction in this statement. It shielded me from reality. I felt like I was walking on air in a bubble, it was safer to exist there. It was a sense of order in the chaos that was this life.

So many treatment episodes, so many failures. The 12-step total abstinence philosophy was harmful for me. A harm reduction approach worked eventually. I moved away from Sydney when I was offered a 12-month teaching position. Things fell apart in an epic way out there. Stints in psych wards and a load of total chaos and some pretty dangerous behaviours. So many things happened here. This was the bottom of the pivot point, where many things shifted in a lot of ways and other things got worse. This was eventually where we found the beginning threads of recovery, although there was still a long way to go.

I still felt like an outsider, like I didn't belong. I don't think I did belong. I don't think I belonged anywhere. More secrets, more hiding behind masks, more performing to meet other people's expectations.

I had to get out. I had to leave, I had to run. I had dreamed of going and living in Thailand ever since I went there for a holiday - or somewhere in South East Asia, but I never ever imagined this would be possible for "someone like me". I did live this dream and I made this fantasy come true. In 2014, I was offered a job in Malaysian Borneo, same same but different to Thailand. Close enough though. I needed to get out somehow. So, we packed up

our house and I flew out to Malaysia. My partner followed a few months later with our dogs and we set up home in a country where no one knew us, where no-one knew me.

This was where I found myself. I made some friends, I learnt to scuba dive and fell in love with being underwater, and I began trail running and competing in the jungles of Borneo. This was the life I wanted. But as usual, things started to fall apart because I was still outside the box. So, when I got offered a position in Thailand, we took it and relocated to Chiang Mai for 2 years. It was 2017. Can't say I loved it there, far away from the ocean, but it was also great in many other ways. I'd started my PhD and made plans to go back to Borneo. In 2019, I flew back to Australia to work for a few months while waiting for the new contract in Malaysia. I was due to start work again there in March 2020.

Then COVID hit across the world. Where things fell apart in a massive way when I got stuck in the UK after going there for 10 days to present at a conference. The world closed while I was in Dublin and that was it. Stuck with one suitcase of conference clothes, no job, and no place to live. Stuck for 8 months. The old demons I thought I had dealt with resurfaced in new ways. My mental health crashed and I struggled.

The little girl in me was terrified, again. Feeling unsafe, feeling abandoned, feeling very much alone. She tugged at my leg and my heart. She cried, a lot. We got through and made it back to Malaysia at the end of 2020. I resumed my own therapy with a new therapist, I worked with a dietician, I joined groups and found support. I reached out for help and worked through the shame and embarrassment of needing help – again. I found acceptance. I found compassion and I found people who think like I do. Everything changed, once again, and I made a place for myself.

A new recovery, again. Another level, again. I know recovery is not linear but seriously. Again. Connecting with people across the other side of the world, in a country I had never even visited before. Finding support in places I had never considered before. I found people who wanted to know me, who wanted to help me, who wanted to encourage me, to help me thrive. This is the sole reason I am here, those people, those connections. I had finally found a place I belong, I think.

I spent so much of my life trying to escape, to forget, to be what others wanted me to be. I discovered that I am never going to be what others want or expect so it's better to be just whoever I am at any given time. Sometimes shy, sometimes awkward, often anxious, and always with a hint of humour and silliness. I am finding my tribe, my peeps, the people who want to know me even if I don't always comply with the "rules". They value my existence for what and who I am, not what and who they want me to be. They may not always understand, and that's ok. They don't try to remove or quiet me, they don't try to put out

my spark, my quirks, my weirdnesses. I have no words to express how much this small mob of equally weird humans mean to me and the life and glimmers they bring into my heart.

This is Sandra's story, intertwined with Sandi's story. Sandra still lives on in me and shows up here and there. She is safe enough to breathe. She is safe enough to play. She is safe enough so I can take risks – like telling her story.

I've learned more about the things that get me through—swims in the ocean, scuba diving, surfing, writing, helping others, motor bike riding, and community and connection. These are the things that keep my cup full, and I know that each of us needs to find our own life rafts.

These days I am more ok with not fitting in, well most of the time I'm ok with being an odd one. Sometimes I notice that pull to be "normal" is strong and at times I have to surrender to this to achieve the things that are important to me. The world is a strange place. These days I recognise that my value lies in who I am, it lies in my differences, in the things that make me unique, creative, and sometimes annoying (or maybe that is oftentimes...). I have come to a place where I embrace those who value the uniqueness and weirdness. I spent enough time trying to be what others considered acceptable, which I mostly failed at. So, who better to be than who I am in any given moment. Darkness and light. Hope and despair. Tears and laughter. They all have a place. I have a place. We all have a place.

I have learned that recovery isn't a destination that you can reach, or that you may never return from. I don't believe that anyone doesn't have the capacity to go back in extreme circumstances. I know that recovery doesn't look pretty most of the time, but that it is worth persisting through the shit to be able to see the rainbow. I have been lucky enough to find calm, for now.

It's been a long process of trial and error and I've attempted to construct a life with purpose and meaning while also trying to earn a living, while also still needing to engage in the behaviours and stuff that helped me feel safer and gave me a sense of having autonomy, even if this was a false sense of security, it helped me survive. I've had to unlearn, relearn, ignore, pay attention, unlearn and learn again, change direction, hitch a ride with someone else here and there, but at the end I have been able to plant myself firmly in the driver's seat, most of the time. Even if it feels like I often have no idea where I am going or what I am doing, have doubts about my abilities and my sanity, and often get lost or find myself on a road that didn't lead where I thought it would. The detours and mishaps are all part of the adventure for me.

The journey is far from complete, and it is exciting and scary to consider what could be possible. And so, Sandra's story continues, her legacy interwoven with my being, always present, a figure of the past and a potential future, like the shed at the far end of the yard—always there and filled with the promise of a future yet to unfold.

*And perhaps
What made her beautiful
Was not her appearance
Or what she achieved,
But in her love
And in her courage,
And her audacity
To believe:
No matter
The darkness
Around her,
Light ran wild
Within her,
And that was the way
She came alive,
And it showed up
In everything.*
Morgan Harper Nichols

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