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Don't ignore the warning signs: take action on stress

Andrew Bird, Chair, ASCN UK, chair@ascnukmail.com

As the deadline for this editorial approached, I found myself in one of the most challenging situations of my life. I have not led a life sheltered from challenges and have pushed myself to achieve – both physically, running marathons and ultra-marathons of up to 50 miles, and mentally, completing a Master of Science with a distinction in Applied Health Studies. I have been published and have presented, nationally and internationally, and hold positions of responsibility as the Clinical Lead for a stoma care and prescriptions service, the Chair of the Association of Stoma Care Nurses UK (ASCN UK) and the Clinical Trustee for Colostomy UK. Just 2 months ago I was singing, dancing, precariously walking on stage in high heels and generally making a fool of myself in the name of entertainment with the local hospital pantomime society.

I share this to demonstrate the stark contrast between then and now. Three weeks ago my world collapsed. I was given a piece of information at work that was simple enough for any manager to deal with; a straightforward set of actions required to remedy a situation that had arisen. But I did nothing with this information. Nothing. It's not that I got caught up with something else and it slipped my mind; it just did not occur to me that I should do anything with the information. Fortunately, I was not the only one to receive the information so all of the appropriate actions were taken. But when I realised, I was broken.

Reflecting back, this was inevitable. I was tired. I had mouth ulcers, a cold sore, an infuriatingly itchy rash; all signs that I had experienced in the past telling me that I was run down. My physical symptoms were telling me to slow down, to take a break but I ignored them and, boom, I crashed.

The last 3 weeks before writing this editorial have been littered with periods of irrational anxiety. The NHS website (2023) defines anxiety as 'a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe'. I've experienced an overwhelming

urge to return home whenever I am out of the house alone. I have had a feeling of great unease while chopping vegetables for dinner, even while staring into the spice cupboard. This isn't me.

I have lost confidence in my decision-making ability. I have not been able to work but I have found a safe space sitting on the sofa in front of

the television. Much of what I have watched has washed over me but one quote has stayed with me. Ovi (Rudhraksh Jaiswal), a kidnapped boy in the film *Extraction* (2020), tells his liberator Tyler (Chris Hemsworth) 'You drown not by falling into a river, but by staying submerged in it', a

quote widely attributed to Brazilian lyricist and novelist Paulo Coelho.

My failure to act upon the physical warning signs kept me submerged until I almost drowned in my metaphorical river. I consider myself to be very lucky to be surrounded by a wonderful bunch of people whose care and support have thrown me a lifeline. This episode in my life has taught me two things.

First, life goes on without me. Although the work that I do in my various roles is important, the world will not crumble if I am not there. My colleagues at work are still providing the same first-class service to our service users as they always have. Members of the ASCN UK committee are hard at work preparing for our conference due to be held in Brighton in October.

The second lesson is that I need to look after myself better if I am to be useful in the future. My plea to you all is to learn from my mistakes, watch out for those warning signs and look after yourselves so that you can look after your patients, undertake your duties, accomplish your goals and live as fulfilling a life as you desire.

If you too are experiencing anxiety the NHS website has useful information on ways of alleviating the symptoms (<https://tinyurl.com/fc8e3287>). **BJN**

NHS website. Generalised anxiety disorder in adults. 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/2addrx2x> (accessed 14 March 2023)

“ Look after yourselves so that you can look after your patients ... and live as fulfilling life as you desire ”