

The Wolf Of Hope & Despair

Caroline's Story





The Indian Story

I would like to share a story that has stayed with me and helps me to understand how I have gotten through experiences and how I still do. It is the story of an American Indian grandfather. His grandson was going through a really tough time in life and decided to say this to him "Grandfather, my life is crap! I've broken up with my partner, my job is awful and I feel so depressed.". "Ah," the grandfather said, "it sounds like you are feeding the wolf of despair. What I will do is lend you my wolf of hope to fight your wolf of despair.". The grandson was intrigued by this and asked his grandfather which one of them will win. The grandfather answered "the one you feed the most".

My Story

I would like to share with you about the times I fed the wolf of despair and why and how I did that, along with the times I feed the wolf of hope and why and how I do that.

My name is Caroline. I am in my forties, married to John and have a son, Conor, and a daughter, Amy. I have really good friends in my life and I have a very full life. I am a psychotherapist, the Founder and CEO of Suicide or Survive, a trained advocate, a tutor for Maynooth University and a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) facilitator. I have been part of the Amnesty International Campaign - "mental health as a human rights issue" - for the last 5 years which has been a huge eye opener for me and very challenging at times. I have learned so much over the years. I have wonderful mentors around me who help me to continue to learn and develop so that I can do my job to the best of my ability.

Each day in my life I feed the wolf of hope so that I can have the quality of life I want. It's tough because the wolf of despair is always there, waiting in the shadows. I start each day by naming what I am grateful for in my life - the relationships I have, my home, my husband, my children, my wider family, my job. Each day, I start my day with what my greatest desires are and name them one by one. The top one is to embrace every single moment as if it were the last, especially with my family and friends. Each day I start the day with meditation so that I can build up the skill of becoming the observer of my thoughts and feelings rather than constantly getting caught in them and the negativity they can bring. Each and every day I try to walk so that I see nature in some shape or form so that I can remember I am part of a bigger picture and that life carries on regardless. Each day I read or watch one inspirational piece of film that feeds my wolf of hope. Each day I make sure to have specific foods for my breakfast, lunch and dinner as I know this helps my mental health.

Some days I feel so vulnerable, so raw and so scared that it takes everything in me to do all of these things, and my negative thoughts do everything in their power to seduce me into feeding the wolf of despair. Some days I feel so challenged, judged, hurt and lonely that I can almost feel the breath of the wolf of despair on my neck. At these times I remind myself to look around in my mind for the wolf of hope because he is also there. I feed the wolf of hope by remembering that on any given day I can wake up feeling really low in myself but that this can change by lunch time or dinner time and, in the meantime, I need to keep feeding the wolf of hope to make that change happen.

I, like all of us, am made up of many parts. One part in particular that was to have a huge impact on my life was my need to be perfect, to fit in. Outwardly I could appear to be confident, assertive and able to hold my own. Inwardly there was a meltdown taking place. The thought 'if they really knew me' was always there sitting in the background.

When I was in secondary school I had an Irish teacher who, for some reason, saw something in me that I could not see and she encouraged me, even when I fought against her. Looking back, her belief in me and the belief that others had in me as I moved on in life were huge players in my mental health - I just did not realise how important they would be. At this time in my life, although I was unaware of it, I was feeding the wolf of despair a lot with my belief that I was not good enough and that I was quite stupid. I never checked this out with others so these beliefs continued to grow and the wolf of despair got fatter and stronger.

As I reached my twenties I was aware that things were not going well. I was starting to drink more. Looking back, I see myself in a crowd, being the clown and hating every minute of it yet not knowing how to stop. I moved to London and, in the beginning, had a ball. I worked, I socialised, I lived. I started to drink even more. I was starting to feel "funny" but didn't really know what it was about. The spiral was starting and I hadn't got a clue.

I kept down good jobs and managed for a time to keep the darkness that was starting to creep over me out of the workplace as that would have destroyed me. I worked in the corporate world, in the centre of London and everyone was perfect. There was no room for imperfection!

Looking back, the cracks were starting to form. The perfectionist in me was getting stronger, particularly when I started to feel less in control. The anxiety was starting to manifest itself with early obsessive habits like needing to have the cushions all lined up or the chair sitting a certain way or certain colour clothes on me. I used to drink to cope outside of work and, in work, I worked really hard to be liked by everyone.



Caroline's Story



I moved back to Ireland with an uneasy feeling but with no understanding whatsoever of what was building up in me. I lived in a community that did not speak about mental health unless it was to talk about 'that woman or man' down the road who had a nervous breakdown and was sent away. I had been brought up in a community that never understood that negative thoughts, vulnerability and struggle were very normal and very much a part of life and that if I did not look after myself mentally, I would become unwell. I had not been given wellness tools to help me challenge my negative thoughts, to understand that vulnerability was a strength and not a weakness, and that struggle visits all of our lives but that it would also pass. So my wolf of despair was growing day by day.

The uncomfortable feelings, especially around people, were growing. I found it more and more difficult to stay in one place and I had a constant feeling that something terrible was going to happen and everyone would see it. I started to wear dark clothes. I started to constantly have a feeling of despair but didn't know why.

On my first visit to the family G.P. I was embarrassed and ashamed and did not have a clue how I was going to explain the madness that was taking place in my head. He listened and he prescribed medication. I took the drugs and waited to be fixed. Looking back I know that if my G.P. had said a number of things to me in that moment, it could have changed which wolf I was to continue to feed. Firstly, that what I was going through, feeling anxious and depressed, was normal and that it happened to other people. Also that people recover and have full lives. Sadly none of this happened so I lay down beside the wolf of despair and spoon fed him!

My greatest fear at that time was that my bowel would release and everyone would notice. While I was going through this time I kept a journal. I would like to share a piece from my journal that captures for me what it was like at that time:

'It's getting worse. Keep taking the tablets. Be careful to make sure I take the right ones at the right time. How many a day, Jesus - I am on 16 a day. The obsessive thoughts are stronger now. Get up in the morning, make sure I have extra knickers in my bag just in case something happens. Wear dark clothes - that way if something happens, no-one will see it straight away. Bring a cardigan so that I can cover myself if something happens. Make sure that I don't get into a situation which I can't get out of. Don't talk to anyone for too long as that brings on the feelings. Make sure I am near a toilet. Make sure I can get out the door when the feelings and thoughts start. I'm so tired. When I am not working I'm sleeping.'

John, my husband, was there for me all the time and watched in complete sadness and despair as I slowly fell apart. He never ever judged me. I began to question my ability to make a decision. John, just like my Irish teacher in school, saw something in me that I was not able to see at that time. He saw the hope and my ability to survive.

I will always question my decision to go into the psychiatric system. I felt I had no other choice. No other treatment was made available to me and I believed that the experts were going to fix me. I will always question the amount of medication I became addicted to and the lack of information given to me in relation to the side effects. I now know that I needed a place and a time to pause and reflect and work out what was happening and, yes, I needed medication for a short period of time, but alongside a range of other supports. I now know from my experience, that being diagnosed, medicated and becoming a psychiatric patient was to add to my feeding of my wolf of despair in a way that I did not know would be destructive to my life.

Throughout this time I continued to feed the wolf of despair without knowing I was doing this and the devastation it would continue to cause me. Again, looking back, if the team in the hospital had sat down with me, engaged in a two way conversation rather than taking notes and diagnosing, and worked with me to help me to understand that it would take me and the team working together, to build my life up again. I know I probably would not have liked to hear that I was the one who would need to take responsibility for my wellness or that I was the one that was going to have to turn my life around with their support and understanding. But if this had been clear to me, it would have stopped the belief I had that others would fix me and I might not have become so dependent on the system and the drugs.

Coming home, I saw people's need for me to be better and I actually felt worse in some ways than I ever did before I went into hospital. I felt I no longer fitted in anywhere. I didn't know what I was going to tell people about where I had been, why I had been there, and how I was now. People genuinely did not understand.

Each day I fed the wolf of despair. My thoughts were negative. I smoked very heavily and drank a lot of coffee. I stayed in company where our conversations were mainly about the bad things that happened to us, the medication we were on, the labels we had. I never walked and would go without food for long periods of time, choosing cigarettes instead. I did not see anything outside of myself and was very angry at times that others could not see or understand what I was going through.

Caroline's Story



My belief system about myself was one of worthlessness, that I was not valuable, I was weak, different in a negative way and now, one of those people society did not talk about. I was 'the man or woman down the street' who had had a nervous breakdown and had been institutionalised.

My wolf of despair was huge at this stage and, unknown to me, my wolf of hope was slowly dying. This is the time in my life when I started to choose death. I was caught in a spiral of darkness and had become obsessively negative. I could see no way out whatsoever. The good people around me cared with all their hearts and souls but they, like me, just did not know what to do or where to turn. I had become quite depressing to be around and I know I was like an emotional vampire - I sucked people dry with my negativity. I lost friends at this stage and people called less. It broke my heart but looking back I can understand. It was just too much for them and I had not yet realised that taking personal responsibility was going to be my salvation.

For the thought of death to start coming into your mind as a way to stop the emotional pain is devastating. It was the last thing I ever believed I would see as an option. I had spiralled down so far that I just did not know where to turn. My wolf of hope had no energy - it could barely raise its head. My wolf of despair had become strong and was feeding me with negativity leaving me with no way of coming out of a spiral of disaster. I ate, slept and tasted fear, desperation and an overwhelming feeling of being alone. I could not tell anyone what I was feeling, what I was thinking and I was so ashamed and so fearful. So, at that time in my life I attempted suicide. My husband watched as the hospital got my heart beating again, watching as I took a breath again. Somewhere someone was looking out for me and it was not my time or the right reason to leave this world.



I will never forget that time in my life and it brings up great sadness. Two strong memories that stand out for me are a nurse who said 'what are you like, trying to take your own life and these poor people fighting for theirs?' and another nurse who came in and offered me a cup of tea, didn't say anything but smiled in a warm and kind way. It's not difficult to figure out who had the positive impact on me.

My recovery was driven by anger, frustration and not knowing what else to do. Therapy was offered to me by fluke as I was in a hospital that had a psychoanalytical teaching department and the therapists needed clients in their training. I went three times a week, not having a clue why and what difference it would make. But it did - I got the chance for the first time to talk and talk and talk, to cry, to get angry, to be vulnerable, to be afraid and I was never ever judged. I was challenged, but not judged. My wolf of hope was slowly, slowly coming alive again. It was fearful and uncertain but was now able to raise its head. I joined a support group to help me understand what I was going through. When I really felt down and doubted what I was doing I seemed to meet people along the way who gave me a gentle push.

The negative thoughts were still strong and the anxiety was still high. I still felt heavy and low. Despite this, I kept going to therapy and my support group not knowing where it would lead to. I was now starting to educate myself on what my symptoms were and how they were having a negative impact on me. I was starting to understand that talking things through in a safe place would help me to let go of pain and despair. One of the hardest ideas to let go of was that there is a quick fix, a right answer. I realised it was going to take time and a lot of effort on my behalf. I was starting to build up my mental health wellness tools without realising it.

I started to realise the only way through my darkness was to take complete responsibility for my mental health with the support of others, that I had to learn to become resilient, to understand that struggle and pain are a part of life as much as love and laughter.

I got myself back to college with the support and love of family and friends. I found it bloody hard but, again, they saw in me what I could not - my potential. They loved me, they challenged me and they started to understand, just like I did, what I had been going through. We were becoming more equipped to feed the wolf of hope. We had information, a new awareness and an understanding. I also came to understand that I had to choose how I looked at my life and what I would need to do to if I was to have the quality of life I wanted. No-one else could do that for me. I was also realising life was not all about me and that everyone had their struggles. I began to look at my spirituality and realised there was a big hole there, and, over time, through listening and trying out different things, I realised my spirituality was to have a very positive effect on me as it helped me understand I was part of a bigger picture and that compassion and kindness was all around me and that I was here to give back.

Caroline's Story



I was excited, I was full of hope and I thought this is great - I have now learned how to keep myself well. I studied the system, spent six years studying to qualify as a psychotherapist and had an in-depth life experience of panic, depression and suicide. I thought this is great - now I can work with others in the services and share our learning from both sides.

But I met with huge resistance when I tried to get the system to work with me. I knocked and knocked on so many doors - the psychiatrist's door, the HSE's door. I was naïve and, as much as when I look back, I am saddened at how I was treated but I also believe it helped me to grow a thick skin. I was not encouraged, I was not listened to. For some reason I was a threat and not an asset to the system.

I knocked on other doors – the doors of people who had the same vision, people who believed in me and people who wanted to support me.

At times I wanted to walk away from all of it because it was hard! It was tough and it felt like I was up against a machine - a very, very, powerful machine. I was told "Caroline, you haven't got a hope in hell in bringing about change.". But once I let go of my pain and anger, I knew deep down that it was essential for us all to work together.

I continued to educate myself, to now feed the wolf of courage and hope. This involved my staying in therapy, watching when I became obsessed with negativity, watching when I took things personally, making sure every day that I continued to build on my own wellness and also accepting there was no clear cut road, no one way, no day when it or I was all perfect.

Over the last couple of years some very kind people have continued to believe in me and have supported me. These people have also invested funds in the vision of SOS. I have at times thought 'Caroline, you are not the person for this' especially when the vulnerability raises its head and I feel I am knocking my head against the wall. One man in particular keeps saying 'keep going Caroline' and those words for me mean so much. Again he sees in me my potential that I don't always see.

Today my wolf of hope is fed on a daily basis. If I don't feed this wolf I know I will become unwell just like anyone else would.

Caroline's Story

So what was missing from the start? ME! I was the missing ingredient in my road of recovery or, as some would say, discovery. I was not the driver of my own wellness - I was the passenger and others were in control. As much as, at times, it suited me not to have to do the work and hand over my power to others, it was short lived.

Today I am full of hope, excitement, enthusiasm, positivity and belief that it can be another way and will be in time. Today I am holding the vision of a country that sees the greatness of people - warts and all. Today more and more of us realise change will only happen by working together. I now work with people - some are using the services, some are providing the services. Today I am an ambassador for change like so many of my family and friends and it feels good and empowering.

I hope my telling of my experience has been useful to you in some way.



If, having read the lived life experience above, you feel it would help to talk to someone why not mention it to a close friend or relative and then perhaps use the list of resources at the back of this Wellness Workbook to support you.

Which wolf are you feeding?



The following worksheets were designed to help you to notice what you currently do in your life to feed your wolf of hope and your wolf of despair and to identify other things you could do to make sure you continually feed your wolf of hope to keep it strong and healthy.

Once you identify what you do to feed your wolf of despair, you can start to take action to stop yourself from doing these things. This is most likely to occur when life throws up challenges, when you are feeling under the weather physically, and when you start to feel stressed or under pressure.

Identifying what you currently do to feed your wolf of hope can help you to put plans in place to do more of these things or to do them on a daily basis rather than ad hoc (you can look back at your “Mental Health Maintenance Plan” and include them here). You can also identify new things that you can do on an on-going basis to feed your wolf of hope as it is always useful to have a variety of strategies - some will work better than others or will be more practical at particular times in your life and in particular circumstances or, on some days rather than others.

Once again this exercise is designed to get you started rather than as an end point. It is something that you can develop over time. For this exercise to be useful to you it needs to be completed honestly and added to over time. It needs to be an active part of your life rather than a worksheet that sits in a folder or drawer once it is completed.

It might be useful to store some short notes based on this exercise on your phone or computer or to stick them on the fridge or a wall – somewhere where you are reminded every day of things that you can do to feed your wolf of hope. Once reminded, you then need to act on it on a daily basis if it is to be of any real benefit to you.



Gratitude

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life.
It turns what we have into enough, and more.
It can turn a meal into a feast,
a house into a home,
a stranger into a friend.

-Melody Beattie





The Wolf of Hope and Despair

Think about the things you currently do that feed your wolf of hope and your wolf of despair and record them below.

Things I do that feed my wolf of hope

Things I do that feed my wolf of despair



Food For My Wolf of Hope



Now think of some other things that you could do that would feed your wolf of hope – these should be things that you could do either on a daily, weekly, monthly or one-off basis (try to include some of each) that will encourage and strengthen hope. They need to be practical things that you can actively do rather than things you need to rely on others to do for you.

Things I can do that will feed my wolf of hope

