

'Everything is different to what I thought before'

Reflections on recovery from PTSD

Husnu Kuloman, a Kurdish refugee from Turkey, shares his experience of post-traumatic stress disorder and explains how it has shaped his views on politics and the asylum system.

For a long time, eight or nine years, I didn't know I had post-traumatic stress. I think I first heard about it in the UK. I didn't know how it affected people. That's the big problem: people don't realise they have it, and that it's a serious condition. They call it 'post-traumatic stress', but it's more than stress, so maybe there should be a name change to make it stronger-sounding. Everything has changed in your brain and it's scary: you don't want to go out, you're scared of other people.

PTSD had an impact on all aspects of my life. I didn't get involved in social life. I was staying at home, studying, feeling sometimes angry, panicky, nervous. One day I went to college to read something and I don't quite know how it happened, but when I came to college I felt very scared and very uncomfortable. I was somewhere really deep.

Physical tasks, such as cleaning your house or cleaning your room, having a daily routine – you've lost interest in things like that. You don't do it, because of the stress and the trauma. The problem is your brain gets stuck in history. You don't think – OK, I'm here now, I'm all right, today I need to do this, or that. Always you're still analysing history: why did this happen? And this? This? And this?

I remember receiving my letter from the Home Office giving me British citizenship. It looked like a certificate but I didn't trust it. You don't realise that your brain map has changed. Your brain is thinking negative, negative, negative – because you have got used to that - even if it's something positive. It's very complicated but the most important thing you have to realise is, is this real? Or not? Your fear, your life. You have to realise where you are.

Several difficult events caused and exacerbated my post-traumatic stress. My history with the Home Office started in 1999 when I left Turkey and fled to Germany. When the German authorities refused my case I came to the UK. The UK said, "Sorry – you came from Germany". They sent me back to Germany and from there I was deported back to Turkey. There was torture, many things happened. Then I came back to the UK. I had been in prison in Germany for three months, for no reason. They said I didn't have documents. At the same time, I was diagnosed with diabetes and told I needed injections. Four, five problems all came together at once.

I think I understand the cause of my PTSD. It happened because the key was not in my

hands – it was in someone else's. They could do what they wanted. That was the problem. You need to get the key into your own hands. You need to be able to arrange your life how you want it. The other problem was to learn how to stay calm and strong and to accept the circumstances – whatever they might be, it doesn't matter. If you don't you get angry, and that doesn't help. Anger is human nature, but it's a very negative force.

Despite my suffering, the process of getting help was a slow one. After eight or nine years, I recognised that this was a negative feeling and not a positive force. I felt anger but I couldn't get anywhere. Revenge is not good – you simply waste your time. After many years of more and more suffering you say, "OK, I'm fed up with this – so much has happened to me, but where's the solution?". You can't cope like that – you need to get out. You want to change your life to something new, better. That's the main thing. You don't want that other, dark life. You need to build a light life – if you can. Of course it's not easy though, I could see that.

Eventually I asked the GP. The process started like that. The GP gave me tablets and referred me to a psychologist. The GP himself doesn't have direct experience. They can say, "You have post-traumatic stress", and they can give you medication. But this medication is not a solution. It might make you feel better, like a painkiller, or help you sleep a bit better, but the problem will still be there. You need to look at the heart of the problem. I wasn't calm. I wasn't strong in the whole circumstances. I had problems as a child – I was a very shy child, worried, different. When I came here too, I felt shy, I didn't do anything.

Crucial to my recovery was speaking to the psychologist, and doing my own reading and research to understand what was going on in my brain. I spoke with a psychologist every week for eight or nine months. When you are shy and you have spent many years keeping things inside, it makes you a completely different person, in a negative way. I think the most helpful thing was that I was able to take what was inside me out. To talk. To find time to do something about it. When you have problems you have to take action, whether you are successful or not, to try to find a solution to what is wrong with you.

The psychologist just said, you need to become strong. Don't worry about what happened. It's passed, everything will go away. But the most important thing is you. When you start talking, your body is able to relax. You talk, you talk, it comes out. But if you don't bring it out, it stays inside for the rest of your life. You have to realise you need help. You have to make yourself conscious that you have a problem, and you need to understand that to find a solution will take time. There is no easy door. You may not find a solution tomorrow, or even next year. It may take many, many years. The brain is a very sensitive organ. When it's damaged, it can take many years to repair.

I think the real medication is in the understanding of the condition – not the doctor, not

the psychologist. Because you go in deep to find the reality. You need to take the opportunity to think deeply about what exactly your problem is. When you find your problem, it's easier to find the solution. Thinking, how you think, is the most important thing. Logical thinking, deep thinking: what is reality, and what is not reality? What is real? What is false? Because many people with post-traumatic stress hold onto things which are false. They believe what they want to believe. I did this too.

You learn many things during this process, then you implement them slowly. Step by step is important. I made the mistake of trying to go fast. Here in Brighton I was trying to study, trying to deal with the Home Office, dealing with medication, and dealing with financial problems because at that time the Home Office stopped my payments. It was £37, but they stopped it. I was having to write letters and go back to have appointments with them every two months. I was also not healthy – it was difficult to deal with it all. It brings a lot of stress, a lot of pressure, and slowly, slowly, you collapse.

The solution is your own: how you think, how you are doing in your daily life. You need to learn not to follow empty things. Now I live better. In the morning I get up, make breakfast, I go out, I look around, I read, write, and manage myself in a positive way. Before I was scared to go out, I was scared of people and I would stay home, feeling sadness or anger. Now it's different – I manage my day slowly, not in a hurry and it's much more healthy. I don't worry much or have much stress or anxiety. My world has slowly changed. Everything is different to what I thought before. Everything becomes more positive, more acceptable.

Being active and getting out is so important. That's why, maybe four, five months ago, I was walking along the street and I saw a sign about hot yoga. I thought maybe it's helpful. I needed physical exercise because for many years the whole of my body felt infected with stress. It's not just your brain – your muscles are tight and you have to learn how to relax. And it was good because as you sweat you lose some of what's inside. You become more logical, because doing yoga your brain is concentrating on quite difficult physical exercises. The organisers said that it was good for stress, depression and anxiety, and it was very helpful. I would recommend it to many people.

I would say that I have got better in the last six to eight months. It's new, brand new. Every day, I still have problems but I know what I have to do to deal with them.

.....

I've met many other refugees on my journey who had some kind of problem, they were suffering in some way. Many of them would take alcohol, drugs, something like that. I think language is so important. The government should make a law that people who come here have to learn the

language. There's no question about this: it's reality. Language is the most important thing – you need to express yourself and you need to understand what is going on around you in the place where you are now living. If you don't understand that, then in your head you are still living in Turkey or whatever country you came from.

Many people who are in London and still cannot speak English have trauma, stress, or other mental health problems. They are suffering, but they cannot understand what's going on or how to ask for help, and they might not even know that they are suffering. It's difficult to get an interpreter because there have been government cuts. If you don't have English you can't even go to the GP. The GP isn't the whole solution, but he can at least help with tablets to help you sleep. You don't just need to be able to talk, you need to be able to read a lot of things and use the internet. I found many, many interesting pieces of information on the internet in scientific journals. It's not easy – but if you don't learn English, you'll never, ever be able to help yourself.

The other thing that makes things very difficult for refugees and asylum seekers is the Home Office, and the people working there. They didn't live in another country, they didn't suffer or have pay the same kind of price. It's difficult for them to understand the human reality. You might be afraid, have problems with your health or be anxious. There are many things the people in the office might not understand. It is easy to say, "Come to Croydon", but where do you get money, or a psychologist's statement, or something to eat, or drink. Every week they would say to me, "Come to Croydon", but what was my psychological state? How was I getting food? Or money? It's too easy for them to say to someone, "OK – refuse". Maybe they need to be shown what is reality, what are the real problems, and what might be the solutions.

Of course it's difficult to solve, but as a person, you have to fight. You have to feel you can say, "Look, I don't think you really understand my reality, you don't understand my situation". You have to have that right, but it's hard to make them understand. They have not felt those pressures and I think that they are doing many cases wrong. But the Home Office is very difficult to change. All change is difficult and, in fact, only experience really changes you. If you can fight for your rights maybe you have a chance.

.....

Now, I am fascinated by neuroscience and its impact on society. I would like to know many things. I'm interested to know how do you find the best brain to run the justice system? What is the best brain to run the economy? And peace is so important too. If you don't have peace there will always be problems with something. Peace, the economy and justice.

Neurology plays a big part. I think people need to understand that the people who are

managing justice or the economy, they come from rich families, they don't know what is going on. David Cameron comes from a rich family. He doesn't understand what it is to be poor, what it is to suffer.

Some people have pain – but you don't really understand completely unless you have felt that pain too. When you've never suffered, you think everything is OK. You think that the people that are suffering are not behaving in the right way. They seem to be doing stupid things and you make negative comments about them – but you're wrong. You don't really understand them or why they are doing this, why they are thinking in this way. I think the people who make the best economists, the best peace-brokers, the best people for the justice system, are people who have suffered first. Seeing, observing, is not enough. You don't completely understand it, or feel it. You don't know the deep reality. And in my opinion, people need to understand that and only then get power. Not just rich families who move from one big building to another, enjoy life, talk, and say, "I want to make the economy better". Real life is not like that.