Extract:
Tales from the Valley of Death:
Reflections from psychotherapy on the fear of death
[https://bit.ly/32kAP08]

The caveman

For more than a decade, Berat rarely left the apartment that he shared with his mother. During the worst of it, a period that lasted for over three years, he would not permit any light to be switched on, day or night. His insisted that the refrigerator was permanently turned off, along with the washing machine and dryer. No cooking of any sort was allowed. He didn't sleep in a bed, preferring a thin mat on the floor. He lived in primitive conditions and almost complete darkness, like a caveman.

Ten years ago, Berat's desperate mother appeared in my rooms. Through tears, Elif described her son's worsening condition. Berat had been losing weight and was becoming weaker by the day. Elif would bring him takeaway meals so that he could have hot food, but he rarely kept anything down. Typically, fears of poisoning would overcome him and he would regurgitate the meals. Elif was shaken by his decline and ruminated about where it would all end. 'You've got to help my son' she pleaded. 'He's going to die'. I moved him to the top of my wait-list and managed to see him for an assessment within the week.

Berat was a wild, wiry figure with long hair and a pale complexion resulting, no doubt, from an appalling lack of sunlight. He resembled

Rasputin — and seemed similarly indestructible. Despite vomiting up his food on a daily basis, and living in prehistoric conditions, he was sprightly and somewhat animated in our first session. I wondered whether his mother had exaggerated the way he was living, but Berat told the same story. No lights, stove, washing, or refrigerated food. 'I can't have any of that, doctor — I get too agitated,' he said.

By Berat's account, his mental health had declined over a long period following a near-drowning at the age of eight, an event that continued to affect him. 'Being near water is very difficult, doctor, and I try not to drink it if I can' he told me. To avoid anxiety and the sensations of impending suffocation that he associated with that early trauma, Berat slowly developed a complex set of magical routines. And, as in so many other individuals that I've seen, the rituals had become increasingly complex over time and had to be perfectly performed to prevent harm. Every object in his apartment had its place and had to be returned correctly, or Berat would become unstable. He would only leave his home for appointments with his specialists, and then as infrequently as possible.

Elif faced tremendous difficulty getting her son to my office and successfully home again. Everything had to be done in patterns and reversed and done over if there was an error. On one occasion, near the beginning of our work together, it took Berat more than an hour just to walk down the five sandstone steps between my front door and the gate of my clinic. I watched in shock from the window of my consulting room. It was like looking at an acrobat performing a deft routine at the circus. He would leap down two or three stairs at a time only to spring back up in reverse and repeat the action. This happened at the end of many of our early sessions. If I came to the front door and insisted that it was time for him to leave Berat would do so. But, left to his own devices, he would be there for many hours, bouncing back and forth with the stamina of an elite gymnast.

Berat's most dangerous behaviours related to this habit of retracing his steps and repeating behaviours to get them right. On the face of it, such compulsions are not unusual. In fact, the need to walk back through doorways, or repeatedly open and close locks and light switches, are quite common in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. But Berat took reversing rituals to a whole new level. Firstly, he would literally walk backwards down the street, rather than turn around to retrace his steps. He would do

the same on stairs and, most dangerously, even in cars. 'In the past — not now, doctor — I've done it on the road' he said sheepishly. 'I've put the car in reverse and gone backwards down a street, doctor. I just had to start the street again', he said searching for understanding, if not approval.

Berat had other odd beliefs and behaviours on the road. He strongly maintained that one should only drive to a place if you could return by the same route. This superstitious belief is much harder to implement than one might first imagine. Though it's possible to do it at times, what happens with one-ways streets, no right turn intersections and single direction tunnels and bridges? You simply can't go back the way you came in those circumstances, or so I thought. 'I even did it in the Sydney Harbour Tunnel' he declared. I sat speechless as Berat described riding on a bike in the wrong direction, dodging the oncoming traffic, just to ensure that he could travel to the north side of the city on the same road that he had travelled south. 'I could have died that night, doctor, on my little bike with its lawn mower motor' he said with a grin, reminiscing on an event that was clearly a triumph for him.

When I first met Berat, he had no belief in himself. His confidence in his ability to recover was almost non-existent. He had suffered from extreme levels of anxiety for more than 20 years and he couldn't see the way out. Maybe others could recover, but not him — more than anything he needed to believe. I knew he could face his fear, but he didn't. This concerned me greatly because, in my experience, no-one achieves more in therapy than they think they can.

Berat and I quickly established excellent rapport, something that is generally easy to achieve with patients who are engaged and transparent in sessions. Honesty is a powerful bonding agent, melting away the masks that humans so often hide behind. Berat had a delightful simplicity in his manner, and I always enjoyed seeing his name in my appointment book. As our therapeutic relationship grew, so did his confidence. 'Little by little' he would say with a grin. 'I'll get there little by little' he would tell me as we set his homework at the end of each session.

Over our 49 meetings during the 10 years that I have known him, I have watched a transformation in this man. His diet began to improve as he allowed his mother to cook again. He stopped regurgitating food, and he

started to gain weight. He reconnected with old friends, had his teeth mended and capped, cut his hair, and started dating. I watched a lonely, isolated young man re-enter the world. It was my great privilege and joy to witness Berat's rebirth over this decade.

Sometimes in therapy the things that impact people the most are not what we'd expect. Was it the complex formulation that I'd provided? The specifics of the homework tasks? My feedback for the thought challenging exercises? 'No, doctor,' he said, smiling at me recently. 'Doctor, it was when you told me that I looked like George Harrison. And you told me that together we would sculpt me out of hard rock — bit by bit we'd chip away to reveal all my potential. Do you know how many times I've told that story, doctor?' he announced, beaming with joy.

I don't remember saying this at all. But Berat does, and that's what matters.

Our interview with Berat

Ross: Berat, thank you very much for your openness about being interviewed. Can you firstly tell me about your family and life at home as you grew up?

Berat: Sure, I was born in Bulgaria. We moved to Turkey when I was two years old, and from Turkey, we came to Australia to live when I was four years old. Since the age of four, I've been living in Australia, and I have no brothers or sisters. I'm an only child, and it's been an up and down situation in my life.

Ross: In that early period, what was life at home like?

Berat: Life was good, life was good, yeah, life was pretty good actually, everything was okay. Nothing was strange — everything was normal.

Ross: How would you describe your relationship with your mother as a child?

Berat: My mother, my relationship with my mother, was very good. With my father, it was okay, but it was a bit more better with my mother. I don't know if it's because ladies will love more? Fathers will love — it's not that fathers don't love — but I used to be a bit more closer to my mum I think than my father.

Ross: I see. And did that continue? How would you describe the relationships now?

Berat: Very much the same. I'm still very close to my mother.

Ross: Did you experience any losses in your early life? And if there were any, what impact do you think those losses might have had on you?

Berat: Well, I've had a few losses. I've lost my grandparents, but they were elderly, and it was expected. When I was older, I had two other losses that really affected me. One was a cousin in Bulgaria — my mum's sister's son. They had a lot of animals and they used to move the animals from one place to the other place and to migrate the animals so they can settle down in certain places. While they were moving the animals, my cousin who was in front of the herd crossing the road got hit by a truck and he passed away at the age of 12.

Ross: Right.

Berat: Yeah, that affected me a little bit, because in the sense that it was very unexpected.

Ross: I see.

Berat: It was sudden, and that was the last thing we pictured for him, I guess, going to his funeral.

Ross: How old were you?

Berat: I was 24 or 25 years old maybe.

Ross: That had an impact on you.

Berat: Yes, it did.

Ross: Any other losses that you think had an impact on your life?

Berat: I've had one more cousin as well; he's my age, we're exactly the same age, the difference is he was married with one child. He was a bit of a naughty boy at times, doctor, but we all get naughty, but he was a bit extra naughty, and he disappeared one day and we thought, all right, because he was naughty, we didn't think nothing of it. We thought oh, maybe he's driving around and causing a bit of havoc or causing trouble, but then we found out that he was … he actually … he was murdered.

Ross: Oh, I see.

Berat: Yeah, he was murdered, and my auntie, she found out by getting private detectives for the case and asking around, and then they found out the person, they caught the person that done it. The way that my cousin died was a bit horrific, because they stabbed him in the neck, where his life vein is, and after they stabbed him, they chopped him up in pieces, and after they chopped him up in pieces, they burnt him.

Ross: Right.

Berat: Yeah, and they just found my cousins bones. How they know what happened was that they got a man to confess. That played with my mind a little bit, doctor, because I should have thought positive about him, not negative, no matter what, because he's my cousin, and after I found out that he's dead, I regret thinking not good things about him.

Ross: I see. When did this happen, Berat?

Berat: Maybe when I was 30 years old, doctor.

Ross: So a little older than the death of your first cousin. What a very horrific death.

Berat: Yeah.

Ross: What about in your parents' lives, perhaps even before you were born. Are you aware of any losses or traumas that might have affected them?

Berat: I have no knowledge of that, doctor.

Ross: Okay. Were either of your parents anxious? Would you call them anxious people?

Berat: I'd say my dad's a bit anxious, compared to my mum. My mum's not anxious, but my dad's anxious. He's a perfectionist; he likes to do everything spotless.

Ross: Yes.

Berat: If he does something, it has to be good. I don't know; I thought that maybe when I was growing up, he used to do a few things that made me think, 'Why does he do these things?' He might have the same problems as I do.

Ross: I see.

Berat: The doctors … we went to one in hospital when I was 14 years old and the doctors asked him the question, 'Do you suffer from the same situation or the same problem or do you experience the same things?' He said, 'No.' But I think he does. I have two examples. One, where if you washed the piece of fruit for him and you gave it to him, he'd still wipe it.

Ross: I see.

Berat: Then one day when he was driving, he actually drove home the same way he'd come even returning the wrong way down a one-way street.

Ross: Right.

Berat: 'Dad,' we said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'Oh, I didn't see it; I got confused.' It didn't just happen once, doctor, it happened about two or three times.

Ross: Two or three times he drove back, is that what you're saying, Berat? He drove back the way he'd come, even returning the wrong way down one-way streets, just as you later did as a part of your compulsions. How old were you when you saw that?

Berat: Maybe 16 or 17.

Ross: Okay, so you were quite young, you mightn't have begun to drive yourself when you first saw it.

Berat: I was just starting to drive myself, beginning to drive. I got me L's at that time.

Ross: Okay, and you saw your father need to go back in the same direction, that's very interesting. I'll come back to that later Berat. Is there any other history of mental illness in the family at all? Other than what you've said so far?

Berat: Not from my dad's side, but from my grandfather's sister's side, I know she's a bit autistic I think, doctor, and she's got a bit of problems where … they didn't let her get married because of her problems, and she wanted to get married, she wanted to do a lot of things, but because of her situation, they didn't think that she was capable of managing it.

Ross: I see.

Berat: Yeah, so when I go there, I try to see her, doctor, and she's not young now. She's about 45 or 50 years old maybe.

Ross: That's nice of you Berat. Let's move from your family to you. What are your earliest memories of being anxious yourself? Of being fearful, worried or afraid?

Berat: My earliest memory of being afraid was when I was first going back to Bulgaria. I was nine years old. To go to Bulgaria, the plane lands in Yugoslavia and then from Yugoslavia it goes to Bulgaria. When the plane landed, there was a lot of fog. All the planes got cancelled after we landed.

The airport was full of people, doctor. There was certain people there — a group of men, about four or five people — a bit dark-skinned and I thought they were always looking at us, me and mum, me and mum, me and mum, they were walking around looking at me and mum, me and mum.

Ross: This was in the airport?

Berat: Yeah, and I said to my mum, I said, 'Mum,' I said — when it came to the point where I couldn't keep it inside — I said, 'Mum, let's get out of here, let's get out, we have to get out and we have to go.' She said, 'Why?' I said, 'These men,' I said, 'They're following us; they want to hurt us.' She said, 'Why would they want to hurt us?' The thing is, they're not going to want to hurt me, they're going to want to hurt my mum, that's what I'm thinking in my mind, doctor.

Ross: I see.

Berat: Yeah, I'm scared for myself, I'm scared for my mum more than myself, that they're going to hurt my mum, going to hurt my mum and take my mum, and …

Ross: You were worried that these men in the airport might take your mum away.

Berat: Assault my mum. So I ran away, doctor, I ran away. I'm trying to distance myself from these men, and my mum's running after me, she says, 'Where are you going?' She started crying, 'What's wrong with you, son? There's nothing to be scared of; there's nothing to be worried of.' I just couldn't beat that fear, doctor.

Ross: Right.

Berat: I couldn't beat that fear. The men were still there, we were stuck in the airport for God knows how many hours. Them hours felt like days, doctor. The fear factor, I just couldn't control it, I couldn't get rid of it, and I couldn't think anything else different. The only thing that gave comfort to me that day, doctor, was there was a Bulgarian weightlifting team at the airport, and they were going to Bulgaria as well.

Ross: Right.

Berat: The plane that didn't take off, they were catching the same plane, and they said to my mum, 'You can stay with us and we'll help you out.' Because my mum had told them the situation. Once they said that we could stay with them and they will help us out, that's when I relaxed a bit, doctor.

Ross: You felt relieved.

Berat: Yeah, relieved, but the fear factor, I still couldn't get rid of all of it, doctor. We went to the hotel. I waited for them to get us in the hotel and this and that, I still couldn't relax, I was thinking at the time, were the men downstairs, the weightlifting team, doctor. Until I got to Bulgaria and I seen my uncle, that's when everything was all right, doctor.

Ross: That was a very traumatic experience. You were very, very anxious.

Berat: I was very, very scared, doctor, yeah. That's the least to say, very, very scared. I didn't know why I was that scared, and I didn't know why I thought like that. It wasn't about me; it was more about really getting my mum hurt there.

Ross: That fear that something will happen to mum, how did that progress over time? Did it come back to you across your youth at all? Did you worry at other times about mum being taken or something happening to mum?

Berat: The only time, doctor, when I thought of that, was when my parents got divorced.

Ross: Right.

Berat: Yeah, because my mum's by herself, I said, 'This is important, yeah, is she going to be all right, is she going to need help? Am I going to be there for her? What can I do to help her out?' A million and one questions always in my head, doctor, for mum.

Ross: Can I bring you back to your earliest fears. Before the trip to Bulgaria, the year before, I think there was an incident when you nearly drowned at Bronte Beach, is that right?

Berat: That's correct, doctor. I was 8 years old and I was at Bronte Beach with my parents, over at a rock pool there. Well, my parents were probably four or five metres away and I went into an area where the water was. It was chest high, and I was just learning how to doggy paddle then. I took another step and the step that I took, I couldn't feel the floor, and the second step that I took it really put me down in the water. I think I was doggy paddling, because I just stayed bobbing up and down thinking how am I going to get out of this? I started screaming out help in Turkish, 'Imdat, imdat.' Imdat means 'help' in Turkish. I don't know why I screamed in Turkish, doctor. I seen a fat lady and I grabbed on to the lady, but she pushed me away. I started bobbing up and down again. She didn't help me out, God knows why. I couldn't get air, couldn't get my breath. I was terrified that I couldn't get air. Then I saw a gentleman, and I started screaming, 'Help, help,' in English this time, and he came and picked me up. Because if he hadn't come and picked me up, doctor, I was going to drown in a rock pool four or five metres away from my parents.

Ross: That's awful.

Berat: Yeah, and he took me to my parents, and he said, 'Is this your child?' 'Yeah, what happened?' 'Oh, your child nearly drowned.' My parents were very anxious that it nearly happened to me. It scared me, doctor, I thought I was going to die.

Ross: That fear of not being able to breathe, you weren't going to get enough air, you were going to drown, how has that stayed with you over the years?

Berat: Yeah, that's stayed with me, doctor, when I drink water it feels like the water that I drink is going to drown me instead of making good

for me, so I can't drink much water. I try drinking little, little, little, just little by little. I can't get full stuff in. Yeah, to this day I still don't drink much water, doctor.

Ross: Right, because of that incident, because of the fear of drowning.

Berat: Yeah.

Ross: You are how old now?

Berat: I am 42 years old, doctor.

Ross: That incident, as an 8-year-old, is still really present with you every day.

Berat: It's present with me, doctor, but not as severe as before. Now when I'm very thirsty, I can drink little by little by little. And now I can take tablets. For years, as you know doctor, I couldn't swallow tablets with water. Now I can.

Ross: Over the years, how have your worries changed? What other things have you feared over time?

Berat: I've always had excessive fears doctor, but it all got worse when my parents separated, and my girlfriend left me. Then I lost a job that I had. After I lost my job I stayed away from my friends, and my anxiety was getting worser and worser and worser. The thing was, doctor, I didn't realise that it was getting worser and worser and worser. I just thought nothing of it. Suddenly I couldn't leave the house. I was at home for 10 years doctor; I didn't leave the house for 10 years.

Ross: Tell me more about that period. When you didn't leave the house for 10 years, what were you afraid of?

Berat: It was all to do with the street lights, doctor. I had a rule to stay safe — that if I left the house with the street lights turned on, I had to be back home with the street lights turned on. Otherwise, I wasn't safe. Everything depended on this pattern. I thought instead of struggling and living and going through all this drama, it's easier for me not to go outside and just stay in the house, doctor.

Ross: Just so I can understand it if you left in the early hours of morning, and the street lights were still on from the night, you would have to stay out all day, to wait for the lights to come back on.

Berat: That's correct, yeah. I would sit in the gutter outside for hours and wait for the lights to come on before I could open the door.

Ross: Life became very, very difficult and you tended to just stay inside.

Berat: That's right.

Ross: Often week after week at a time. You would not leave the house at all.

Berat: Correct.

Ross: That went on for many years.

Berat: 10 years it went on for, doctor.

Ross: In that 10 years how often would you have been out of the house?

Berat: Maybe once every month. It was very hard doctor. I switched the TV on; I didn't switch it off for three years. The lights in the house, we wouldn't switch on, at night time we'd just stay with the TV's light. My mum wouldn't wash clothes because the washing machine affected me. We switched off the refrigerator because it made certain noises when it used to start and turn off. No fridge, no washing, no cooking, the TV on for three years, lights not on.

Ross: You started to form magical patterns and beliefs with everything. You couldn't have the fridge motor kick on and off, so you turned it off. You literally had no refrigerated food for three years.

Berat: That's correct doctor. And I wouldn't let mum cook. So my mum used to bring me takeaways quite a lot. And I had hundreds of other rules. I couldn't get one thing from one room and put in a different place and leave it there. I had to get it and put it in the same spot, the exact spot. I wouldn't stop until I had that perfection feeling.

Ross: Can I ask, with all these obsessions, what did you fear would happen? What were your worried could occur if you broke the rules you had set?

Berat: I just couldn't control the anxiety level, doctor. I couldn't control my thoughts and the feelings that I used to feel. I thought I wouldn't get enough air, doctor, like when I was drowning. I had to do everything right. I wasn't even able to sleep in a bed. My rule was to sleep on a foam mat on the floor.

Ross: They were a very difficult, disabled set of years. You were living without light. You were living without cooking. You were living without a fridge. You were living in the dark and sleeping on the floor, and you rarely went out. They were extraordinary years, Berat. You were living almost like a caveman.

Berat: That's right, correct — I was like a caveman in the dark. But of the 10 years, only 3 or 4 were this bad. Then, with treatment, it started getting a bit more better.

Ross: You started to be able to turn the lights on, and use the fridge again. Step by step with exposure you started to be able to confront your fears.

Berat: Yes, when I met you, doctor. Before that I was just self-medicating with marijuana. I knew what marijuana was at the age of 14, but I didn't touch it until the age of 17 years old, doctor. It was good for me. Some people take medication like tablets, but I couldn't swallow tablets, doctor. I couldn't swallow tablets, I couldn't swallow capsules, so I couldn't take any medication. The smoke, it calmed me and then it gave me a feeling where it's relaxing me, making me think less about what's happening. This stayed with me, and I found for many, many years until I found treatment, the right treatment from the right doctor, that marijuana was good. No, the only thing is I believe in God. Some are going to say, 'Oh, doesn't that conflict one another? It's like you believe in God, but you're smoking drugs.' But for me it's the intention that matters, doctor. Is it a good purpose or a bad purpose? A lot of people will smoke marijuana to get high, to have a good time, but I wasn't like that doctor. My one purpose was just to come back down to earth, have a bit of a breather, where I can relax for a couple of minutes or however long it lasted. That was my only getaway 'cause I didn't have no-one friend-wise, human-wise and all-wise to turn to. I always turned to God. 'God, please help me out… God, please help me out,' and it would work for me. I've seen a lot of doctors, and now I've taken a lot of medications, but my turning point in the whole thing was meeting you, doctor.

Ross: Thank you.

Berat: If it wasn't for you, if I didn't meet you, and I was just going to other doctors, this is my belief, from my mind to my heart, that I'd still be on the same path, and I'm just smoking pot, and I'm still worried about the light, and I'm still worried about the TV, and I'm still worried about the washing machine. I'm still worried about the fridge. I would still be worried. I believe that I would have still been in that condition, doctor.

Ross: I see.

Berat: What got me out of it is the confidence that you gave me, and the way you explained things to me, doctor. You gave me an understanding of what I didn't know, what I didn't understand, what I wasn't capable of … wasn't capable of understanding, doctor. Because with OCD, when you look at the end of the tunnel, it's so small and far away. In my eyes, there was no way to the end because you're just going to suffer for your whole life, in the same process as what you're living now.

Ross: Yes.

Berat: You changed that process by making me think differently, act differently, and wanting things differently, doctor. That helped me out. Am I one hundred per cent cured? No, but I'm seventy per cent better doctor. The 30 per cent I'm controlling with the medication, the proper medication, that the doctor has given me. Being able to swallow medication now has also helped. Without your help, the medication's help, I truly believe that, as much as I believe in God, that I wouldn't be in the good position that I am now, doctor.

Ross: Certainly, when I met you, you were living a very restricted life. Once you started to believe that little by little, you could face one fear and eliminate it, and then the next fear and eliminate it; I think you started to recover.

I want to pick up on something we discussed earlier, which was your compulsive need to drive home the exact way you'd gotten to a place. That's another way in which your fears developed over time, isn't it Berat. You were very concerned about not being able to go back in the same direction. It's very interesting today to hear you say that you actually saw your father do this in your early life

when you were just learning to drive. Can you tell me about this problem? I'm particularly interested in how it stayed with you for so long — for over ten years.

Berat: Sure, doctor. As I've said the rule was you had to return the same way you come to a place. I had done that for years before my 10 years at home. Then one day, when I was 21, my friend wanted to see a few girls in Newcastle, and he said, 'Would I be able to drive him down?' I said, 'Look, I'll drive you there. As long as I can go the same way and come back the same way there's not a problem; I can manage it. I will be able to do it for you.' He said, 'Yeah, not a problem, we'll go the same way and come back the same way.'

Doctor, when we got there, we got to see the girls, we talked, we had a good time, whatever. Then when we were coming back, he didn't know the way back. As soon as he said that he didn't know the way back, this automatically created anxiety in me, and it just sparked things, really doctor. It was just like you throw the lighter onto petrol. You've got a burning, and I said, 'Joe, you promised me that you were going to take exactly the same way, and now you're telling me you don't know which way. What am I going to do mate?' I started speeding, and he said, 'Relax ov, relax ov, relax ov, relax ov, relax ov.' Ov means older brother in Turkish.

Ross: He was saying, older brother relax.

Berat: Yeah, relax, relax, because he was so scared that I was going fast and there was another passenger in the front, who was all right, he was a Slav boy who wasn't saying nothing. I turned, I chucked a u-ey [u-turn] on the freeway, and when I was on the freeway, I found a police car, doctor.

Ross: Yes.

Berat: I found a police car, and I got next to the police officer and I said, 'Officer, I'm from Sydney.' I told him what happened, a quick version, I said, 'I'm from Sydney, we went to Newcastle to see a few friends but I'm lost now. I don't know how to get back to Sydney, can you please guide me?' He said, 'Tailgate me.' I tailgated him for many kilometres, doctor, until he got me on to the right pathway

that said Sydney. I waved thank you to him; he waved thank you to me.

Ross: I see.

Berat: But then it all went wrong doctor. When I got towards Sydney I had forgot that there were two ways into the city — the Harbour Bridge way and the Harbour Tunnel way. I didn't realise I was in the lane for the tunnel, doctor. It was a disaster doctor. I had to go over the bridge because that's the way we went to Newcastle. But now I was locked into going through the tunnel. You can't change lanes. So I'm going through a tunnel now, that I don't want to go through. I'm having anxiety, where I feel like I'm having to hold my breath and that I can't breathe properly, but I have to breath because I'm going to conk out if I don't. I'm screaming, and I'm saying, 'Look what you've done, you've made me come into the tunnel. I can't get out of the tunnel.' The thing is, doctor, I can't reverse back with the car through the tunnel. I can't reverse back and go back over the Harbour Bridge. Now I'm at a no return point.

Ross: Yes, because you had used reversing before, hadn't you, if you were anxious?

Berat: To get out of certain places, I'd be reversing, reversing, reversing. That's quite correct, doctor, and because I couldn't reverse and get myself out of the situation, that just brought out the anxiety to a new level, doctor.

Ross: I see.

Berat: Some anxiety situations last five minutes, some last five hours, some last five days. This I carried with me, doctor, for 10 years.

Ross: That's amazing.

Berat: Yeah, 10 years I carried it with me, but then I solved it. Do you want me to explain that to you?

Ross: Yes, absolutely. How did you get past it, after 10 years of anxiety and worry. You'd gone to Newcastle in one direction, and gone into the tunnel in the other direction. How did you address it?

Berat: Well, it was very hard. At first, I didn't leave the house and I started making up all those extra rules. I made up all my other rules to stay

safe. I was stuck in the house for all those years, doctor. I tried seeing a doctor but he was making it worse. He was making me think of the past — opening up feelings again about things. Instead of making it smaller, it was actually a worse situation here, doctor. I wanted to go to hospital for a treatment program, but he wouldn't let me.

Ross: I see.

Berat: It didn't matter how much marijuana I smoked. I'd smoke and smoke and smoke; I'd smoke a lot, just to get the thought of the tunnel out of my head, doctor. I'd smoke a lot. The turning point for me was when the doctor said, 'No, no, no, no, no, no, you can't, you don't have to go to the hospital.' I got very upset, and he called the police on me. After he called the police on me they took me to hospital and they explained to me that they're going to have to keep me inside here. They had a talk with me about why I was scared, what I was doing, and what made them bring me to the hospital? They wanted to keep me by force. I said, 'Please don't do this to me.' I said, 'Give me a bit of time, and I'll come to the hospital myself if I can't solve it.' I didn't like the hospital, doctor. There's a lot of people where they don't let you out of the hospital, they just keep them in there, doctor. They lock the doors at certain times and cut certain privileges.

So now I'm at home again, there's no-one around. I'm by myself, just like I'm the only person in my mind. 'Please God help me out, I'm on the marijuana again, I'm smoking, and I just can't beat this anxiety feeling. I just can't beat it' I said. Now I couldn't believe it, doctor, but I said, 'I have to go back the same way. If I go back the same way I'm going to be all right, nothing's going to happen.' I bought myself a bike, a normal average bike, but this bike, it had a lawnmower made on it, doctor. It was like a motor bike where you just pressed the pedal and it will take you.

Ross: This was a pushbike with a motor on it.

Berat: That's correct, doctor. I said to my mum, 'Mum, I just can't beat it.' I said, 'After years of smoking and repressing it and leaving it behind me; it's still like I'd experienced it yesterday.' Doctor, I said,

'The feelings, the scary feeling, the obsession feeling, the anxiety feeling, the feeling of not being able to control my mind and sticking to another place', I said, 'I have to do this in reverse and get it out of my system.'

There's cars coming one way, so I'm going to put people at risk, so I put flashlights on the bike — flashlights that turn on and off, on and off, just to make sure, to make them aware.

Ross: Yes.

Berat: When I first came into the tunnel, doctor, there was a lot of cars coming, and there was a bay where you could park the car if you break down. I went there and waited for the cars to go past, and I thought, I'm going to die doing this, but if I don't do this I'm going to die with the anxiety, doctor. I have to do this. I'm going to die either way.

Ross: So you thought you might die doing this, but you would end up dying from the anxiety if you didn't.

Berat: That's right, doctor, for this had come to a level where I can't control my anxiety feelings, I can't control my anxiety thoughts. I haven't left the house for years. I thought, if that little thing gives me a little bit of comfort and a little bit of relief, I'm willing to do it and take it, doctor. I went to the tunnel, I've got a place to put my flashlights on, for I didn't want to hurt no-one, kill no-one, harm no-one in the process, but I had to do it, doctor.

To overcome this situation, I just couldn't suppress it, hold it any more. I went through the tunnel, cars are coming on to me, when I see cars on the left lane I was dodging in the right lane, when I see them on the right lane I was dodging them on the left lane. I was dodging cars, and got out of the tunnel.

Ross: It must have been extremely frightening.

Berat: The thought was in my mind, doctor, I just want to get out of here as quick as possible. I just want to get out of here as quick as possible, I just want to get out of here as quick as possible. As I said, I was just thinking, I have to accomplish this, accomplish this, accomplish this, so I can get rid of these thoughts that have been in here for 10 years, doctor.

I got out the tunnel and up to the Harbour Bridge. But when I was doing a u-turn some police officers busted me and they stopped me. Then he said, 'Mate,' he goes, 'What are you? I think you're just stuffing around.' I said, 'Why officer?' He said, 'Mate, you can't be riding on the Harbour Bridge, riding your bike there.' I said, 'Well it's got a motor.' He didn't care if it's got a motor or not, he said, 'You can't be on here mate, we're going to have to get you out of here.' They were going to put me on the side where there's a walk path, doctor.

The thing is, I'm going to be creating a new problem. I told them, I said, 'I suffer from OCD and if you put me in there then I'm just going to want to come back. Can you please help me out?' They asked me 'What do you want us to do for you?' I said, 'Can you just give me a lift into the city with my bike, and then I'd get out.' They said, 'If the bike fits into the paddy wagon.' They put the bike into the paddy wagon. I got out of the paddy wagon in the city, doctor, and I drove home. After that I didn't use the bike again, yeah.

Ross: Such an extraordinary incident, Berat. You just felt you had to correct that one, it was too hard.

Berat: That's correct, doctor.

Ross: Now I have a few more questions, I want to just change topic, to death itself, to thinking about death. I want to ask you, Berat, what emotions arise in you at the thought of your own death?

Berat: My own death, doctor. This is my own belief, everyone has different beliefs in life, but when we die we don't take nothing with us except for the good things and the bad things we did, doctor. We're not going to take a mountain of gold or a chest of money or a chest of treasure; we're just going to take ourselves.

I'm scared of dying; I'm scared of dying. There's two things I'm scared of, doctor. First, the process of dying, the feeling of dying. Second, after I die I'm scared of where I'm going — how am I going to answer for all the ugly things that I've done, that I have to answer for? There's two things that scare me, doctor.

Ross: That relates to my next question Berat. I wanted to ask you what you think will happen to you as you physically die, and what do you think happens once you're physically dead?

Berat: Well, our religion — I'm a Muslim — says once we've passed beyond our deathbed, that there is nothing, no family, no friends, no relatives that will come and help you out, that can come and help you out, because it's impossible. The only help that you will get is where we're told that we're going to be asked certain questions in the grave, doctor.

In the grave, if you can answer them certain questions good you'll be all right, you'll be in a better place. The place that you're in will feel comfortable, but if I've been a bad person and I've been bad to other people, and I've taken their rights away from them, or I've stolen something from them, I have to answer for that. Death, for me, it's inevitable, and if I'm a bad person I'm going to be in a bad position until the day of judgment, doctor, that's what I believe.

Ross: I see. How often, Berat, do you think about death? Do you think about it often?

Berat: I used to think about it lots, doctor.

Ross: Did you, in the past?

Berat: Yeah, yeah.

Ross: Would you have thought about it most days in the past?

Berat: Yes, when I was doing my OCD, doctor. I'd be walking down the stairs backwards, forwards and backwards, running down the stairs backwards, doctor. Going through one way tunnels the wrong way — I was constantly thinking my rituals would kill me. But I'd suffocate and die if I didn't do it doctor.

Ross: It's interesting. With your rituals, you were desperately trying to stop death coming, and cope with the anxiety, but you were actually increasing the risk of death through everything you were doing.

Berat: That's correct, doctor.

Ross: What relationship do you see between thoughts about death, fears of death, and everyday living or everyday life? Are the two connected do you think?

Berat: I'm not sure, doctor, how much they are connected, but my main key, the main thing for me, was just not being able to control the fear. The fear feeling. Not only the thought of death but the feeling of anxiety. That was my main thing.

Ross: I see.

Berat: Yeah. I've done a lot of dumb things in my life, doctor. I know that one occasion was when they tried sending me to Turkey when I was 14 years old, they found a Turkish family with me, they gave me a bit of money at the airport actually. I didn't want … I told them I didn't want to go, I told them the day I was at the airport, but no you're going to go, you're going to go, you're going to go.

Anyway, doctor, I went, I'm at the airport, I've said my goodbyes to the family and friends, so I went into the airplane and I seen the lady that I was going to spend the next 20 hours or odd hours next to her, in the airplane, just the look of her scared me, doctor. She had … the look of her scared me, she just had these freaky eyes, and I said, 'There's no way I'm going to sit next to someone that's scaring me.' I can't do this, doctor, she just scared me.

I got my bag, and I'm going back out, and the lady said, the hostess said, 'Oh what are you doing?' I said, 'I'm going home.' She started laughing at me. I said, 'Just look.' She goes, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I told you, I'm going home.' Then she quickly goes after me, doctor, she's pretty well chasing me through the airport, and they're screaming, 'Stop, stop, we don't want to hurt you, we don't want to hurt you. We just want to talk to you; we just want to talk to you.'

I'm not stopping, doctor, with the bag, I'm just full blast, and it came to a point where I couldn't run any more. I stopped and actually tourists were passing by, 'Where are you running?' I told them the situation, I said, 'Look, they want to send me to Turkey, I'm scared of this and that, and when I went into the airplane I got more scared.' I said, 'I just don't want to go. They said, 'Oh, a lot of people want to be in your position, to go for a holiday. Because you're going to have a good time, yeah, there's nothing to be scared of.'

They tried to give me positive thoughts, doctor. I just couldn't get the positive, turn the negative into a positive, and I said, 'I just can't

do this, I won't do this.' They said, every half an hour that the airplane doesn't leave, it costs the airplane $30,000 in fuel money, doctor. I said, 'I'm sorry to disappoint you all, but I can't go.' I thought, when I get home now, they announced to my parents through the microphone, and they weren't gone yet, because the airplane was still there. I thought my dad was going to kill me; there's no return, I'm going to really, really cop it for this one.

Well, when I got home he just asked me, he said, 'What happened?' When I told him, he didn't even raise his voice at me, doctor.

Ross: That's very nice.

Berat: Yeah, and so the way they got me out of that situation was, a couple of months later they sent me with my mum.

Ross: That was much better.

Berat: Yeah.

Ross: The close relationship to your mother has been very important in your life. One final question Berat, what makes your life meaningful? What is it that you think gives meaning to your life?

Berat: Just being able to function normally. Eat, sleep, rest, go out, interact with other people, being able to talk, being able to watch TV, or being able to talk with people, being able to socialise. It's just being able to function that's given me a lot of joy, doctor. A lot of happiness. Before if I wanted to, I wouldn't cook because it would take me a couple of goes to cook things, doctor. If I was going to cook scrambled eggs, instead of breaking two or three eggs, I'd break the whole box, just to cook one egg, doctor.

I wasn't going to go through a whole box here every day just to cook one egg; I wouldn't cook, doctor, I would leave that process. Now, that I have that ability, to still overcome my fears and my thoughts, and enjoy it, and to actually do these and feel good about it, I'm at a different level, doctor.

Ross: It gives you meaning and purpose.

Berat: Meaning in life, doctor? Yes, just to function normally.

Ross: That's fantastic, Berat.

Berat: With all this that I've been through, experienced, I sometimes thought I'd never make it. When I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel, everything was dark for me, you and God were my shining points, doctor. You said, 'There's a light at the end of the tunnel. There's a light there. It might not be a big one, but there's light there.'

You told me this, and you explained this to me, and I like the way you said, 'It's not going to happen overnight where there's a bang and it's all gone, but it is going to happen'. I took that on board with you, doctor, and I truly believe that if I didn't see you, or come across you, I wouldn't be seeing that light in the tunnel. I just wanted to say to the people that there is a way out of anxiety, sadness and repressed feelings. There is light at the end of the tunnel. There is light at the end of the tunnel. You just need the right doctor, the right medication, and the right understanding.

Ross: Well that's a lovely way to finish, thank you very much.

Berat: Thank you, doctor, and saying thank you is enough for me.