

# Life & Times

## Desert island therapy

My senior partner was an experienced and kindly clinician with an encyclopaedic medical knowledge, often spotting the zebra of an unusual diagnosis in his packed surgeries. His father had been a doctor in the Punjab and their family had been forced to leave India at partition. This had left him with a heightened awareness of the fragility of security, and a lasting dislike for sectarianism. He and his wife had also managed the difficulty of coping with a chronically unwell child for whom he spent much time trying to ensure a safe future. After he retired, a patient transferred to my list. We discussed her various struggles with anxiety, rooted in unfortunate life circumstances, and she shared with me the advice that he had given to her. His recommendation had been that, when she found matters overwhelming, the best way forward was to stop, turn on the radio, and just listen for 15 minutes or so. This had been transformative for her and had helped her cope with caring for her husband with dementia.

### MY EXPERIENCE

Three years ago, I was diagnosed with a cancer requiring multimodality therapy and then, during staging investigations, with a very rare second tumour requiring further surveillance, investigation, and possible surgery. The combination of challenges in a 2-month time frame threw me back on his suggestion and I started to listen regularly to the back catalogue of *Desert Island Discs*. I chose this initially as my grandparents had lived in Sussex, and I had a Proustian memory of sunny Sunday mornings on the terrace outside their house, the theme tune to *Desert Island Discs* and the sounds of seagulls overhead. Soon, however, I found that listening gave me support and strength as I went through the ongoing investigations and treatment. Not only were the broadcasts of themselves



interesting in subject matter and music, but many of those interviewed also gave their own perspective on major life challenges and adversity.

### MAROONED

In addition, in many respects I felt as if I was isolated on a desert island of sorts. Unable to work during chemotherapy, it felt like a gradual process of losing touch with 'real life'. There was a heightened awareness of those coughing and sneezing in crowded places, which made me prefer walking in the open to social contact. It was difficult to talk to colleagues as my situation unfolded because they tended to want to gain a diagnostic understanding of my illness (How many nodes are positive? What stage is it?) rather than ask how I was coping or feeling. My circumstances were so unusual that some of my treating clinicians tended to emphasise this rather than think about how I was affected by this overwhelming combination.

I was also increasingly aware that I was becoming a liability rather than an asset to the team, someone who was going to need more time off through ill health and consume resource rather than deliver care.

Now, back at work and consulting again, I

have started to recommend these podcasts to patients. Many cover topics that we see regularly, and the lived experience of these famous individuals is easier to assimilate when distressed than written booklets.

There is Sabrina Cohen-Hatton (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0008xy6>) and John Bird ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009435n](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009435n)) on the subject of homelessness, Jo Malone ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04xmqd6](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04xmqd6)) and Lisa Jardine ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05xcsms](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05xcsms)) on breast cancer, Sigrid Rausing ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06y9796](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06y9796)) on depression, and Mary Berry ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0115pll](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0115pll)) and Lily Allen ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b047w8tm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b047w8tm)) on the loss of a child.

These are just a few of the recordings I have found useful to suggest as they clearly convey the process and immense difficulty of surviving such trials and moving forwards in life.

My patients have commented on how helpful these have been to their recovery. Sometimes the most therapeutic suggestion is one of the simplest.

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