In honour of Mental Health Awareness week I thought I would start talk about my experiences, share my coaching techniques and inspire a conversation. I don’t know how often this will happen, but I hope to find the time every now and then to write something of importance and hopefully inspire others to talk, seek guidance and find their power, just like I did mine!

I read a tweet today whilst I ate my morning bowl of porridge that reminded me of a time when I was on tour and wasn’t in a great place mentally. It brought back the feeling of being at someone else’s mercy and it felt uncomfortable to me. I haven’t felt that way for such a long time, and for that I am grateful, but it brought back lots of memories of a time that ‘on paper’ should have been filled with happiness and gratitude, but in reality was very different.

Whilst in the thick of planning a wedding, myself and then fiancé found ourselves in two great acting jobs. He was playing Boq in ‘Wicked’ in London and I was away on the UK tour of ‘We Will Rock You’. We rarely saw each other because of our work schedules and spent our days performing, saving our money and chatting on the phone...this was before FaceTime! We had found a good rhythm and the promise of a ‘dream wedding’ at the end of it was enough to get us through the weeks of not seeing each other. This was all until I reached the 6 months away on tour mark.

I reluctantly left our flat in Sydenham after dinner and drove the three hour journey to Bristol on my own, in our little car. I had been sharing digs with a girl throughout the whole tour up to this point, but her family home was close to the Bristol venue, so I found myself without a roomie and on my own for the first time.

I pulled up to the address of the place I was to live in for the next 6 weeks and bravely pulled my suitcase out of the boot and trudged up the path. The lady opened the door and welcomed me in. The only way to describe the feel of the place was ‘nanna’s house’ it was cold, old fashioned and un-welcoming. I dragged my suitcase up to my room to find the lady’s cat asleep on my bed. I DON’T DO CATS! The room had a musky smell and when I finally felt tired enough to get into bed, I pulled the cover back to find dozens of tiny black worms...YES WORMS...on the bed sheet. The only thing I could think was that the cat had brought them in or had worms itself!

It was late, so I had no choice but to wipe them away and try to sleep on the bed. I balanced all night on the very edge and cried myself to sleep. I didn’t want to be there, I didn’t want to be in the show anymore, 6 months was a long time and I wanted to be at home, with my fiancé, in my bed...without worms.

The next morning I woke up early to find a couple of flea bites on my legs! GREAT! I got myself in the shower and left without breakfast. There’s something about seeing worms in your bed, that makes eating from the kitchen some what indigestible...know what I mean? I walked myself to the theatre and held back the tears. I felt like I was a million miles from home, without my family and friends and the allure of being in the show was starting to slip away, fast I felt sad...I’m not a sad person, but I felt like I was being made to be somewhere that I didn’t want to be, I felt out of control, I felt like I didn’t have my power and that is an emotional and mental challenge for me.
As I walked into the building I was met by all the other cast members who were in a really good mood. The ensemble girls were all crammed in a tiny dressing room and everyone was talking about their ‘amazing digs’ and how ‘comfortable’ they all were. I lost my shit...I ran out of the dressing room and down the stairs out to the front of the theatre and I cried on the street into a pillar. I had my phone in my hand and I was just about to call my fiancé to tell him ‘I couldn’t do this for 6 weeks, I didn’t give a shit about the show and I was coming home, when over the theatre speaker (which was outside of the building, playing to the public) came the song ‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’ from the film Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. It took my breath away and I knew instantly this was a sign. We were due to be married in Walt Disney World, Florida and this felt like a conversation with the universe. I laughed to myself and stood in my surprise and quickly the tears stopped. I suddenly felt better. I was instantly reminded why I was there, why I was living in nanna’s house with the wormy cat. It wasn’t for the show, it wasn’t for the applause. It was because what was destined for after the show was going to be the making of me.

This was one of my early experiences where the universe answered a call, not that I knew it at the time...I wouldn’t be fully aware of that power until many years later, but this was the moment that I needed to gain control and reconnect. I made the conscience decision to wipe my tears, I took a good amount of time to take a few deep breaths and i engaged the breath deep into my diaphragm until I felt like I was back in control of my emotions. I went back in.

I knew if I was going to survive mentally and emotionally in that environment for 6 weeks I had to take control of my time there. I knew that the small girls dressing room was going to be an intense environment to be in, so I went downstairs to ask one of the principal cast members if I could share her dressing room. She was a lovely girl and very young at the time, she was grateful of the company and was happy to share her big space with someone else. This actually encouraged two other ensemble girls to do the same and join us. We created a lovely little atmosphere in that room and this, in turn gave all the girls more space to exist and I found the friendly support I needed.

In my lunch break I went straight to Primark and bought myself a duvet, sheet, pillow and duvet cover in a bright colourful pattern...I would later tell ‘nanna’ that i toured my own bedding as it felt comforting to me. I went to Wilkinson’s and bought flea spray for my room, which I sprayed into every inch of the carpet the next day. I did some research and found a cute little cafe on my way to the theatre that did a lovely breakfast menu. I went there every morning for 6 weeks for porridge and coffee and this little space felt like mine. I made a feel good playlist on my iPod and would listen to that on my walk every day to and from the theatre and found nice places in and around the centre to spend my time. This routine became my stability and it felt easier to turn a day into a week, until the 6 weeks was up.

Later I would have my handbag, purse and phone stolen whilst in Bristol...but that’s another story!

I got through it and our last night in that venue was Halloween night. I decided to buy a big pumpkin bowl and fill it with sweets. I wrote a note “To all the cast and crew, help yourself to a treat and thanks for a great run.” I decided to find the gratitude in the situation and appreciate what I had experienced there. I now look back on certain parts of that 6 weeks with fondness. I don’t know why really. Maybe I realised I was able to stand on my own two feet or find an inner strength that I didn’t know I had. Maybe this small part of my life made much more of an impact that I thought.
This experience on tour taught me two things:

The importance of my breath for emotional stability

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**Heartbeat Breath**

The Heartbeat breath is a very simple breathing exercise that helps in all kinds of situations or emotional states, such as:

Nerves, Anxiety, Worry, Stress, Anger, Frustration, Upset, Confusion, Fear etc.

If you find yourself in one of these emotional states, the heartbeat breath can snap you back to the present moment and help you gain perspective and focus.

Follow these simple steps…

Whilst engaging your diaphragm:

**Breathe in for 4 beats**

**Hold for 4 beats...**

**Exhale for 4 beats...**

**Rest for 4 beats...**

Repeat this 3 times. During the exercise try to relax your body. Be aware of any tension being held and release it. Just concentrate on your breathing and calm your mind and body back into focus!

TIP: The heartbeat Breath is especially valuable just before an audition/casting or before you are about to go on stage.

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By changing a few things that were in my control, I could retain my emotional and mental power over the situation.

Do You!

Exercise

This sounds so simple… but it really can be a day changer! This will be different for everybody as we all have different budgets and different things that light us up mentally, physically and emotionally.

We all live very busy lives and never really have enough time or money to spend on ourselves, but as we all know “stuff” for you is very important… on lots of levels. Taking something that is just yours can improve your mental wellbeing and emotional state by an enormous amount!

So I’d like you to find a tiny amount of time today to ‘Do you’… it could be:

- Playing your favourite song really loud
- Buying yourself a gorgeous bunch of flowers that you can never justify the money for
- Take a class
- Talk to a friend on the phone
- Giving yourself a gift of those expensive chocolates you love
- Lighting some candles and running a long, hot bubble bath
- Buying yourself a shiny new book to read
- Writing in a diary
- Taking yourself to the cinema
- Have a solo picnic in the park
- Buy yourself a plant for your desk
- Sing your favourite song out loud!

It can be anything… just make sure it fills you up with joy and carry that feeling with you throughout the day!

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