

Journey to balance

I have been involved with St John in volunteer and paid roles in events and frontline ambulance for almost 20yrs in total

I have worked out of ten different stations both double and single crewed.
Time to hospital in these regions varies from ten minutes to an hour and a half.

Like many many people, I was a giver.
I would give and give and give some more.
I was your classic give it all girl.
Can you do an extra shift? Yes
Can you start early? Sure
Can you finish late? Of course
Could you do this transfer? Absolutely
Could you help this family member out? Naturally
Could you help this friend out. Love to
Could you help this group out.
How could I not...?
No was not something I found easy to say
I'd be there for it all, physically, financially, emotionally, whatever was needed
And don't worry about what time it is you might need me, because I do random hours, so I can handle whatever you throw at me, at whatever time you want to throw it

I was also a 'should' girl.
'You know, you should do this,
you should do that,
you should go here,
you should go there.
And I did. Endlessly...
Hubby will be ok
Kids will be ok
They understand I like helping people...
It's who I am
It's in my blood
It's how I roll and it's a good example for the kids isn't it?

I reasoned this way for a very, very long time, and I would argue I did all these things pretty well, covering those shifts, helping those people, getting those things done
And while I had to periodically come up for air and do a rethink and rejig on how much I was doing, I essentially kept pushing on, over committing myself, living life at a crazy speed

Then one day, after pushing many a warning sign under the rug, under the carpet, then under the house, the 'giver' could no longer 'give', not to her job,
not to her family,
not to her friends,
not to anyone

On this particular day, the 26th of September 2021, it's etched in my memory!, my husband and I were driving home from a trip to New Plymouth to see family, which had gone really well
I then started contemplating the following day back at work and I suddenly thought to myself "I don't want to go to work tomorrow", which was very unusual for me.

Then it progressed to full on panic about going to work the next day

This I believe was in part due to fear arising in my mind about keeping myself and my crew partner safe.

Some 4 weeks previously I had attended a job where the crew partner I was working with was seriously assaulted, and this ultimately ended up in the offender being imprisoned for six months

As we continued on our journey home from family, I became increasingly distressed
I was writhing back and forth in the seat unable to sit still
My respiratory rate was increased
I dissociated, something I have never experienced before, and I was unsure of what was real or not looking out on the landscape
I wanted my husband to get off the main road because I feared being in a head on crash
I experienced what I can only describe as a camera roll of multiple traumatic jobs I had attended over the years
I contemplated getting my husband to call an ambulance (horrors, because we all know ambos' are extremely reluctant to call an ambo!)
I even checked the roster for who was on that shift I believe had I made that call I would have accepted olanzapine or even droperidol.
I was desperate to feel anything but what I was experiencing in those moments
I also had two questions go through my mind "Am I going to our local mental health hospital, and how long will I be there?"
It was very confronting, and I was absolutely terrified
I eventually managed to get myself through to a more settled head space, but my overall mental state still felt incredibly fragile

This was a foreign lane to me
This was a foreign feeling to me
This was what happened to others

On the floor and unable to stand back up
Uncertain
Scared
Helpless

Acknowledging I was not 'near' my limit, but actually 'past' my limit, and that pushing through this one on my own was way above my pay scale, was painful, and hard to accept
Reluctantly, difficultly, desperately... up went my hand

Putting my hand up, asking for, and accepting the help that was available, and following the treatment plan, were hands down the best decisions I could have made at that time, for my family, for my friends, for my job, for my colleagues, for myself!

I'm not gonna lie, it's been an incredibly hard road to healthy, and I am still walking that road steadily
At the start of this journey I felt like my brain was broken

I couldn't look at my uniform without feeling sick
I struggled to look at an ambulance
I struggled with the sound of sirens
I couldn't watch anything involving trauma
I couldn't hear about anything involving trauma
Any one of those things would cause my brain to go into a panic

Initially I had difficulty facing even those closest to me
At times I couldn't even leave the house

In all honesty I wasn't sure that I would ever get behind the wheel of an ambulance again
In fact, if I was a betting girl, my money would have been on I wouldn't

I stared losing the career I loved, and had worked so hard for, square in the face
It looked like an ugly end to a cherished position
It was worth fighting for
More importantly, I decided, I was worth fighting for!

In the following months I had to learn a huge amount of patience and overcome a lot of frustration to just accept and respect what my brain was telling me.

This was not easy!

I was off work for ten weeks in total.

A couple of attempts to get back were thwarted by anxiety.

But, happily, through listening to, and acting on the good advice from others, both professional and personal, and with huge backing from PEER support, management, family, friends, colleagues, along with my strong faith, and life changing therapy, I got back there, and more importantly in my mind, although still a work in progress, I am now a much happier, healthier, balanced version of myself both professionally and personally.

I have now employed 'not negotiable' activities in my life that bring me joy and ground me.

I also have a "hey let's give this some thought" handbrake and a "not my stuff" protector pedal

My Dad used to have a saying about life 'Your boat, you gotta row it'

I'd now say after this experience, 'It's my boat, I gotta keep it afloat!'

For what it's worth, here are some of my learnings...

I cannot be everything to everybody, no one can
Plenty of people are going to pull me down, intentionally or unintentionally, I should not be one of them

I am responsible for far less than I imagine

My needs matter

If I'm no good, I can't do good

I don't always have to be ok

Not doing something doesn't mean I can't, but it might mean I can.

I CAN acknowledge my limits

I CAN take care of myself

I CAN keep myself well

Holding other peoples pain in my head and heart will take a toll

I have to counterbalance this

I ignore the warning signs my body gives me –
AT MY PERIL!

Limits are a MUST and need setting within my job, and without

I should not be perpetually available in my personal life

I should not be perpetually available in my professional life

This does not mean I do not care

Personal boundaries are a protection for me and for others

Professional boundaries are a protection for me and for my patients

I will survive saying no, and so will those I say it to

I wouldn't over invest my money, I should not over invest my time, energy or emotions

Balance is a challenge, but it's not impossible

There is 'blue' beyond the 'black'

My health and happiness do not lie in someone else's hands

It's up to me to look out for, and after, me

I am worth it!

We actually all are.



A letter to my future ambo self

This letter to me was born out of desire to heal and rebuild.

So you want to be an ambulance officer?
Noble calling and cause...
There are some things I'd like you to know however, before you embark on this journey
I say these things not to scare you, but to prepare you...
Realise this job will challenge you in ways you cannot begin to understand right now.
Realise it will also reward you in ways you cannot begin to understand right now
You will learn this is a position of privilege
Time will teach you these absolutes...
You will see people in the depths of despair during the lowest moments of their lives physically, mentally and emotionally
You will see grief that spans both the surface and the inner depths of their souls
You will be discouraged by systemic failures and lack of resources for the people and their families you so eagerly desire to help.
Conversely, you will work with people as equally passionate as you about helping these ones, and together you will achieve great things for them
Respect your colleagues.
Everyone's start story will be different, but their end game will be the same as yours.
These same said colleagues will carry you on their shoulders at times, as you will at times carry them.
You will make mistakes, some small, some big, own them, learn from them, but don't be destroyed by them.
Be kind to your dispatchers.
They have your back.
Know that at times your break will not be on the same station as where your lunch or dinner sits.
Keep food with you.
Take seriously the wise words given you that the chances of an urgent job are directly proportional to bladder tension.
Keep your bladder empty!
You will see poverty, you will see privilege
This job will teach you not to take your own health or that of your family's for granted.
You will gain weight and you will lose it
You will gain grey hair and colour it
You will develop muscles in your body, brain, and heart.
You will learn that the jobs that appear to be nothing, will be something, and the jobs that appear to be something, will be nothing.
You will want to take little old people home
You will want to take little people home
You will stand in stuff you wish you hadn't
You will smell things you wish you hadn't
You will laugh at the stupidity of people
You will laugh at the stupidity of yourself
You will be covered in vomit. Just breathe...
You will be scared, and even terrified
You will want to run away, but will find yourself running in.
You will question your sanity
You will reach the limits of your sanity
You will also be courageous
You will cope with things you never thought you could, and find strength you never thought you had

This job will not be just in your head and your heart, it will also run through your veins.
You won't ever 'clock off'
You will cry so hard you won't know if you will ever laugh again
You will also laugh so hard you will cry
You will be so tired you can't think
You will be so energized you can't sit still
You will see the worst of humanity, and you will also see the best of it
You will marvel at the strength of people, you will also marvel at your own
You will be entrusted with peoples deepest emotions
You will be entrusted with peoples very lives
There will be times when the only thing between a person and the grave, is you
People will die despite what you do
Accept this
You will be the last person to speak to the dying
You will be the last person to touch the dying
You will dignify the dead
You will comfort the grieved
You will cry for people and you will cry with them
You will feel deep gratitude from complete strangers
You will learn life can be short
You will save lives, but mostly you will assist them, never underestimate the latter
You will bring confidence
You will bring relief
You will bring hope to the hopeless
You will feel weak and you will feel powerful
You will be judged and you will judge yourself
You will be berated
You will be championed
You will be questioned and you will question yourself
You will experience naivety and you will experience wisdom
You will learn you are not in control
You will learn to let go
You will learn your self worth does not lie in a career
You will learn to lighten up
You will learn to love yourself and look after yourself
You will find deep purpose
You will feel deep satisfaction
You will see justice and injustice
You will bring about lasting change
You will think you can't do this anymore, but your heart won't allow you to stop
You will be on the floor, but you will stand back up
You will be victorious
Your faith will be tested, your faith will be reinforced
You will be wrapped up in love
You will make your family proud
You will make yourself proud

Is this the career for you?
You bet it is!
Go get it!!

