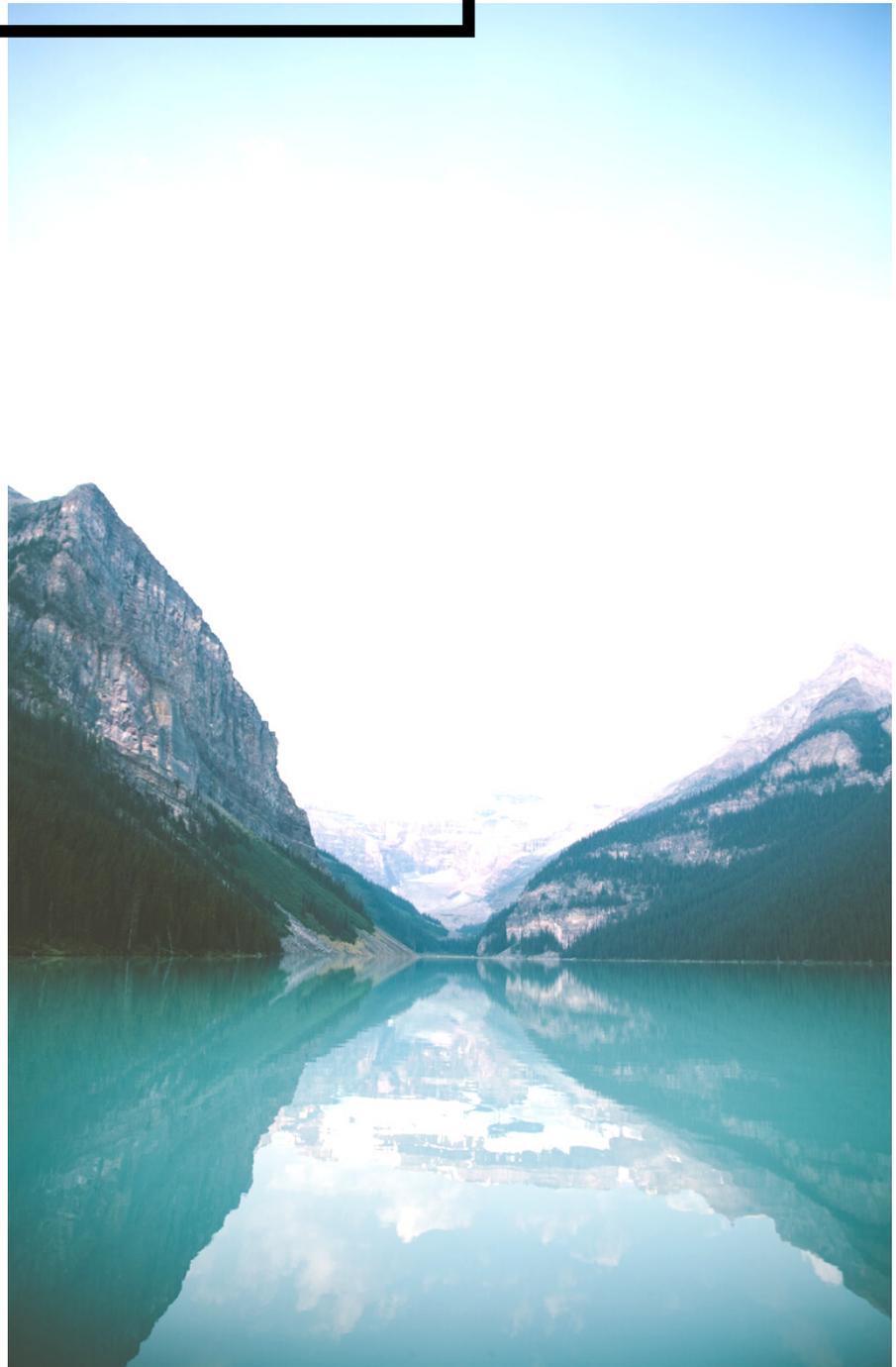


ON THE SIDELINES - SUPPORTING SOMEONE AROUND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Words by Dr Kate Middleton

It's an incredibly tough role to have, standing on the side-lines and supporting someone in this way. No one chooses to struggle with mental ill health, and in the same way the decision to care for someone battling it isn't one you get to make yourself - it is made for you when someone you love suddenly sails into the kind of storm that you know could easily drag them under the waves. Caring through mental ill health is hard in very obvious ways - the intensity of the emotions experienced, the inevitable worry, the practical demands, the often long term nature of the journey to name just a few. But it is also, I think, particularly hard by the distance that a mental or emotional health problem can put between the person suffering and those desperately trying to help them - and the lack of control and helplessness you can so often therefore experience.

I heard a story that reminded me starkly of this recently. Alex Honnold is the climber made famous by 'Free Solo' - the film telling the story of his decision to climb El Captain without any ropes or safety equipment. It's an amazing story - not just the sporting achievement of what he pulled off but the character study of this guy achieving such great things reflecting on his own journey - his early life, struggles with intimacy and what led him to become a professional climber - a sport that involves such a lot of solitude and striving on his own.



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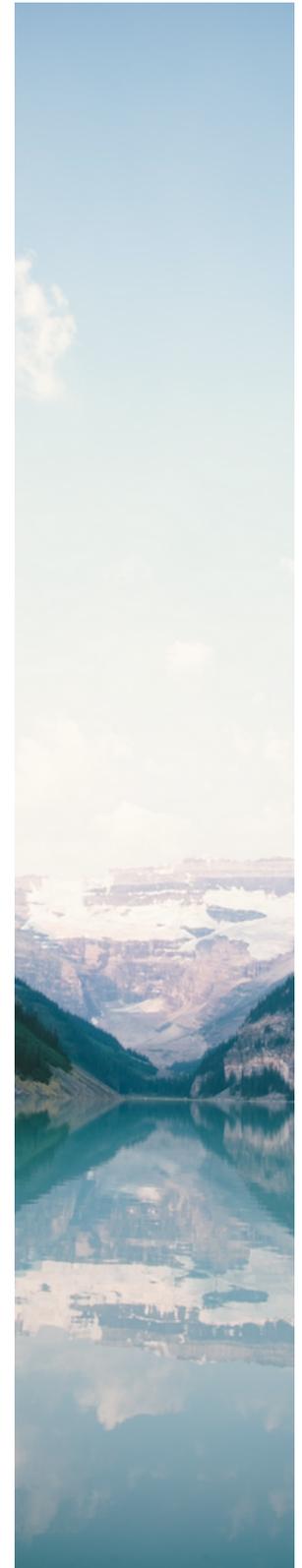
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But it was in a radio interview with Alex that the parallels of his experience to enduring and surviving emotional and mental illness struck me. In the podcast episode of 'Don't tell me the score' in which Alex features ('Don't tell me the score' is a radio 4 podcast looking at heroes from the sporting world and was they can tell us about bigger topics - well worth a listen even if you are not a sports fan as such) he tells the story of a moment when he was free climbing another great peak - Half Dome. As he was climbing, caught on a particularly difficult part of the climb he found himself stuck and for a moment in the grip of doubt and panic. He hesitated and struggled, not sure what to do next and caught between the inevitability of his gradually getting more and more tired, and his fear of making the next move, almost overwhelmed by panic and the sense of the enormity of the pressure he was under and what he was trying to pull off. But all the time the rest of the world is tantalisingly close - normal life continuing oblivious to what he is going through and how his life literally hangs in the balance. He says:

'That's the whole thing with Half Dome - and this whole experience I was maybe 100 feet below the summit. And Half Dome is this crazy mountain where the summit juts out - its called the visor - and so you can occasionally see people's heads looking straight over the visor and they're looking straight down 1000 feet all the way to the ground. So I can hear people having a good time - and it sounds like you know a shopping mall or something above me. But I'm by myself having this crazy experience.'

He continues to tell of how he eventually does make the move - and finishes the climb, arriving at the summit - but still no one knows what he has just done - no one has seen, **no one understands the enormity of what he has just been through.**

The visual image of what he describes just made me think so strongly of what it is like to be fighting something in your own head - whatever that is - memories from the past, trauma, or the darkness of your own thoughts and emotions. The isolation people experience is a mixture of something self imposed - as everyday life becomes harder and harder the desire to retreat from it strengthens. Many people withdraw - whether in reality or just into their own heads as they struggle to keep going. But it is also often something to do with the particular nature of what people are experiencing and how hard that is to understand or to describe. Putting into words the kind of bleakness and cloud that can fall over your mind and your world is near impossible, and some particular circumstances such as past trauma or memories from the past surfacing makes that particularly hard.



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As you endure mental and emotional illness therefore, often the majority of people around you are oblivious to what you are going through - to the invisible fight behind the scenes, the reality of what it is like to face the things you are feeling, or remembering, or experiencing. You are - like Alex - clinging to a rock face, in the middle of the climb of your life, clinging on and desperately trying to fall. Gripped in your own struggle it can feel at times overwhelming, the battle to keep holding on and to keep climbing - and all the time the buzz of the crowd is in the distance as the rest of the world continue with their life. It is often said there is nothing more lonely than being in the middle of a crowd but still alone, and that sense of doing things on your own is a cruel pain when you are already fighting so hard.

That is why the role of those who love and care for you means so much. They take the time and care to see the unseen - to look below the surface and recognise what you are facing day to day. They take the time to ask - and care enough to really listen to the answers, whether they are actually verbalised or not. They hear what is unsaid, and are willing to sit and hold whatever you are saying - or not saying, when silence says a lot more than words.

In her book 'A spirituality of survival', Barbara Glasson speaks beautifully of the journey taken by those working through trauma and abuse - and how they move from life 'sous vivre' (french for living under) their experiences to life 'sur vivre' - literally living over (and of course the origin of our word survive) and above their experiences. She describes how people are drawn in - how when you are living under and overwhelmed by the pain of past trauma, you can effectively disappear from normal life, unable to engage with it, spectating on your own existence and doing the bare minimum to get through each day. And I love what she says about the vital role those who love and care for people in this place play in their coming through it, saying that:

'We are most likely to 'sur vivre' if we know that someone is searching for us, that there is a longing for us to re-surface among those who realise we are missing.'

So - this one's for all the carers - all those who realise someone is missing.

For all who notice someone is gone and miss the fullness of their presence.

For all who felt the clouds descend, but didn't walk away.

For all those fighting a darkness that is not theirs.

For all those holding hope against the weight of despair.

