Living a life of assumptions
A brief introduction

Roger Skelhorn

Keele 5th Counselling Conference, March 2011

roger@r-skelhorn.freeserve.co.uk
Living a life of assumptions

A brief introduction

This workshop is based on the work of Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, drawing on a fairly big personal event last year and my work with a range of clients over the last eighteen months.

By it’s very nature, and I hope you will be actively involved, the workshop may touch parts of your own lives so please be sensitive to this possibility.
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‘For the 263,000 people of Fukushima, the old certainties have gone.’ (Sunday Times Review, P1 20/03/11)

‘Yurio Fukuyama, 30, …said, “I have never even dreamt that these sorts of disasters, tsunami and atomic power plant accidents would happen. ……. We feel we were betrayed”’ (Sunday Times Review, P1 20/03/11)
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For the purpose of the workshop I would like us to accept the following definitions of an assumption:

In logic an assumption is a proposition that is taken for granted, as if it were true based upon presupposition without preponderance of the facts (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assumption)

Something taken for granted or accepted as true without proof; a supposition: a valid assumption (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/assumption)

And so we move into the first part of your involvement …..
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.... I’m inviting you to write down 3 things that you assumed would happen today.

Now you have done that, perhaps you would like to share these assumptions with the person sitting next to you. Any similarities?

Moving on, please write down 3 things that you assume will be waiting for you on your return home.

Again, please share these thoughts and see if there are any similarities.

Now we move on to ideas that are perhaps a little harder ......
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… to thinking about 3 things we assume will not happen to us over the next six months

Yes, have a chat and see if there are any similarities again and this time look back over the other exercises and see if any patterns are emerging

This is the stage where age starts to have an impact! What 3 assumptions do you have about what will happen in the rest of your life?

And looking back over your life so far, what 3 assumptions do you consider have guided your life?
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The risky one now *(this might touch a few buttons so safeguard yourself)*. Have any of your life assumptions been broken, damaged or challenged in any way?

Perhaps you would like to spend a little more time discussing some of the last three sets of assumptions

What are these assumptions that guide our lives, even the unarticulated ones that are taken as ‘givens’? What is the purpose of them in our every day lives?
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Moving away somewhat for a moment in to criminology, social scientists Wilson and Kelling (1982) developed the ‘Broken Windows’ theory that attempted to explain how neighbourhoods became ‘crime areas’. In an interview with Chris Ledgard (2011), Kelling describes how during the process of urbanisation and industrialisation of 19th century Britain there was a shift from ‘rural intimacy’ (knowing everyone around you – the world of Lark Rise and Candleford perhaps) to ‘urban distancing’. Our assumptions of who was who and what would happen were shaken as we dealt with difficult encounters with strangers and a societal response was the introduction of the Police Forces to maintain order. Kelling proposes that we all need order in our lives to enable us to function and be healthy.

Consider for a few moments what your daily life would be like if you had to consciously think about **all** the things in your life that you, perhaps, take for granted. You may go from the little ones like ‘there will be enough food for tea tonight’ to bigger ones, e.g. ‘I wonder if my partner will be there for me tonight’ right up to the really big stuff like the meaning of life.
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This sense of order is identified by workers from different disciplines and backgrounds e.g.

• sociologist Peter Marris talks of ‘structures of meaning’,

• psychiatrist John Bowlby notes ‘working models’,

• psychologist Seymour Epstein notes a ‘personal theory of reality’ (Janoff-Bulman 1992:5)

• Economists who assume that we all act rationally all of the time

• Polanyi (in Smith 203), a social scientist, talks about ‘tacit knowledge’ suggesting that 'we can know more than we can tell'.

• Gladwell, (2008) a journalist / writer refers to ‘the power to think without thinking’

• Victor Frankl (2004) stresses the need to ‘find meaning and a sense of responsibility in his existence’

• Therapists Mearns and Thorne (2000) refer to ‘configurations’, a 'hypothetical construct denoting coherent patterns of feelings, thoughts and preferred behavioural responses’ (p102)

• Erickson suggests ‘a sense of basic trust’ in the relationship between mother and infant
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Polanyi's argument was that the informed guesses, hunches and imaginings that are part of exploratory acts are motivated by what he describes as 'passions'. They might well be aimed at discovering 'truth', but they are not necessarily in a form that can be stated in propositional or formal terms. As Michael Polanyi (1967: 4) wrote in *The Tacit Dimension*, we should start from the fact that 'we can know more than we can tell'. He termed this pre-logical phase of knowing as 'tacit knowledge'. Tacit knowledge comprises a range of conceptual and sensory information and images that can be brought to bear in an attempt to make sense of something (see Hodgkin 1991). Many bits of tacit knowledge can be brought together to help form a new model or theory. (Smith 2003)
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In essence each of these workers point to the idea that we create (or maybe have created for us, see Jung’s archetypes or socialisation processes) a working model of the world we inhabit, a form of ‘cognitive map’, to help us navigate our world, its interactions and changing circumstances. Stern, Spock, Winnecott and Bowlby (Janoff-Bulman, pp12-17) have all suggested the critical nature of our developing maps or schemas in our childhood growth and experiences To some extent this map helps us to feel rooted, knowing where, what and why we are.
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Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests there are a number of assumptions that guide our lives, our being and our existence.

He proposes ‘that our three fundamental assumptions are:

1. The world is benevolent.
2. The world is meaningful.
3. The self is worthy.’

The world is benevolent. Perhaps this would be better stated as ‘My world is benevolent’ as for many (most in the western world?) people the world treats them favourably or at least benignly. Yes, bad things happen but not to me; people get killed in earthquakes but I am safe; yes, women get raped but not in my town/village.

Consider for a moment the biblical life of Job or Dr Panglos in Voltaire’s Candide.
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The world is meaningful. We tend to attribute some sense of there being a ‘why’ to events even if we know the ‘how’. The ‘just world theory’ (Lerner, Janoff-Bulman 1992:9) suggests ‘we get what we deserve and deserve what we get’.

Why then did my wife, a good person, die from cancer at the age of 47 if this is true? She, and we, didn’t deserve it!

The self is worthy. In general, I perceive myself as good, capable and moral, I am important as me.

I know, people say I’m grumpy and pedantic but generally ….
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Now might be a good time to chat through Janoff-Bulman’s ideas and focus on how they might reflect your life.

Are these assumptions just illusions?

When all the pieces fit comfortably together we are content and not distressed, but …
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... sometimes this cognitive map, this schema, for our understanding of the world can be shattered in painful, distressing and brutal ways

Illness

Hurricane

Bereavement

Unemployment

Rape

Separation
Living a life of assumptions

These causes might be conveniently grouped as either:
Naturally induced or
People induced

The impact and scale of these will vary from the macro, e.g. ‘Japanese police say disaster death toll tops 9,000, more than 12,600 missing’, perhaps families being swept away with just one member left, to the micro e.g. an individual illness or personal attack.

Our responses will vary according to the circumstances.
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What happens to us when one of our core assumptions is shattered? When one of the pieces of the jigsaw are lost, or at least seriously challenged, how does it affect us?

Using three ‘case studies’, two from clients I have worked with and a personal one, I’d like to look at how assumptions about these lives were broken and some of the consequences.

Separation  Illness  Bereavement
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The first scenario .... A family worker

Established schema + New Trauma =

‘I’m married for 35 years, am a wife, and mother – this is how it will always be’

Husband finds new partner and leaves

Moved from ‘we’ to ‘me’

Every thing in the past is valueless

Guilt, it’s my fault!

Loss, part of ‘me’ is missing?

Fear, how will I cope?

Anxiety, what/who am I now?

I can never be happy again
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The second scenario ...... me

Established schema

New Trauma

I'm fit and healthy, active and energetic; I feel independent and secure

Pains in the chest. It's angina, now major heart surgery

= 

Anger, what have I done to deserve this?
I'm now a patient

Guilt, I've failed myself and the family!

Loss, I now feel vulnerable and dependent

Fear, will I survive?

Anxiety, what/who am I now?
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The third scenario …… a forester

Established schema + New Trauma =

Wife falls down stairs and life support machine is switched off.

Worthlessness, I can’t be bothered to go on.
Anger, what have I done to deserve this?
Physical pain, my body hurts with the wanting

Guilt, she was so good I should have gone first.
Loss, I now feel vulnerable and dependent
Fear, I can’t visit the same places?
Anxiety, what/who am I now?

We’ve raised a family together over 40 years and share many interests. Life is good with us.
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

From the three scenarios you will perhaps have noticed that there are differences as well as similarities in the responses and you may well be feeling you recognise them as being associated with PTSD. Well, check that out against some of the PTSD indicators…

**Re-experiencing Indicators**
- Frequently having upsetting thoughts or memories about a traumatic event.
- Having recurrent nightmares.
- Having strong feelings of distress when reminded of the traumatic event.
- Being physically responsive, such as experiencing a surge in your heart rate or sweating, to reminders of the traumatic event.

**Avoidance Indicators**
- Making an effort to avoid thoughts and feelings, or conversations about the traumatic event.
- Making an effort to avoid places or people that remind you of the traumatic event.
- Having a difficult time remembering important parts of the traumatic event.
- Feeling distant from others.
- Experiencing having difficulties with positive feelings such as happiness or love.
- Feeling as though your life may be cut short.

**Hyper-arousal Indicators**
- Having a difficult time falling or staying asleep.
- Feeling more irritable or having outbursts of anger.
- Having difficulty concentrating.
- Feeling constantly "on guard" or like danger is lurking around every corner.
- Being "jumpy" or easily startled.
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Some metaphors that were helpful in describing the feelings
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

The Janus effect
Looking backwards and forwards

When one of our key assumptions is shattered, we tend to review our lives both in the past, ‘perhaps if I had ..’ as well as re-assessing what we might do in the future, ‘I will not let that happen to me again …’. We can think of this as the Janus effect.
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

The order that Kelling spoke of earlier is important to us and so we each try to reconstruct the schema, the model, of life that we had previously, this time attempting to integrate the new data, the new experiences so that our model more adequately reflects the world we have experienced and come to know. (Reducing the illusionary element perhaps)

Perhaps in a sense we move from dealing in certainties to probabilities.

(I discovered that I had less than a 2% chance of not surviving the heart surgery. Great! You only die once though.)

Common features of starting to ‘recover’, to rebuild, include denial and emotional numbing. These can be seen as negative reactions but we need to find some sense of calm, a sense of distance, before we can start the integration of a negative experience into our schema. In extreme cases, e.g. concentration camps, the phenomenon of ‘mussellman’ was widely experienced (see Frankl for the need to hope to survive)
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Extreme denial can, of course, lead to dissociation, splitting off and completely disowning the traumatic experience. For a chilling and moving recollection of this process see ‘Out of the Dark’ by Caine and Royston.

Intrusive re-experiencing, often through dreams, is also a common process. One flood victim that I know tended to get dreams involving water following the flood experience of 4 years ago. Certainly hypersensitivity was evident every time rain started to fall. Both these responses have now reduced considerably though under times of stress they can resurface.
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

Over time, cognitive reprocessing of the experience will allow the integration of the experience into the schema. The real dilemma is that during this process the images and recollections can be ‘intensely painful and threatening’.

Disclosure of the trauma can be beneficial. Pennebaker (reported in Janoff-Bulman, p109) describes how narration of the trauma, either to a third party or privately, can be positively adaptive. This was certainly true of the flood victim I know. As Pennebaker notes, ‘when we think about an event, we are likely to relive the same scenes over and over again in our mind. However, when we talk about the event, it is unusual and difficult to say the same thing to the same person again and again’

Some of the techniques in EFT (tapping and Matrix re-imprinting) draw on this type of approach for remodelling experiences. Interesting developments are taking place using psychedelic drugs to allow ‘patients’ to talk about the trauma without the associated pain and threat. (The Times, 22/03/11, body&soul section, p7)
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

In attempting to re-build our assumptions, to make sense of what has happened, we are likely to use some of a number strategies such as:

Comparing ourselves to others:

‘It could have been worse worse’
‘I am coping well compared to …’

Blaming ourselves:

‘It is because I am …’
‘If I had/hadn’t done ….’ possibly leading to survivor guilt feelings

Seeing a sense of purpose in the trauma, a kind of altruism perhaps

‘At least more knowledge will be gained, others may learn from my ….’
‘I didn’t like it but I know something more about myself now …..’
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Who can help?

The survivor themselves? – doing something is better than nothing. Carrying out a small task or action that was, and still is, part of their previous assumptive world provides a base line, a reassurance that all is not gone.

The external world? – ‘In studies of various crises, social support has consistently been associated with better adjustment, including decreased distress following job loss, increased rehabilitation success among the disabled, recovery from illness, and emotional adjustment among the bereaved.’ (Janoff-Bulman 1992:144)

In other words, friends, relations, support groups can make a difference when that support is positive. But ……. 
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

...... often friends, relatives and society may feel unable to be supportive. Someone else's trauma may in fact feel threatening to you, acting as a mirror of the potential for your own assumptions to be challenged, even threatened.

'Survivors of extreme events are powerful reminders of human frailty and the fact that the world can be malevolent, callous and cruel.' (Janoff-Bulman 1992:148)

...... perhaps blaming the sufferer is a response, 'Well, it's your own fault that you needed heart surgery considering the diet you had and your lack of exercise!'; 'If she had not invited him into her flat after the party she wouldn't have got raped.'

...... being unable to talk because it is so scary, threatening; not wanting to hurt the other
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Who can help? (continued)

Therapists acting as the:

Caring other – “However, most people who are traumatized want and need to experience a relationship with a real, warm, concerned human being who is actively involved with them in an empathetic, responsive way” (McCann and Pearlman, cited in Janoff-Bulman 1992:162)

Teacher – offering ways to either approach or avoid the trauma within their lives further, e.g. pharmacological methods, cognitive-behavioural approaches and insight therapies. (Janoff-Bulman 1992:164)

Mentor/coach – testing out various approaches with the sufferer
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Rebuilding the jigsaw - Loss of our assumptive lives

So what does it need for a survivor to survive?

3 factors are likely to be significant. The person’s ability to:

• tolerate arousal and distressing emotions;
• creatively rework and reappraise the powerful ‘new’ data
• the support of close and caring others  (Janoff-Bulman 1992:172)

If all this is present, how will the person (and perhaps us as a therapist) know that recovery has occurred?
Janoff-Bulman (1992:170) suggests the survivor will be:

• invested in the present and hopeful of the future;
• capable of feeling pleasure;
• free of disturbing thoughts and feelings;
• able to maintain close, emotionally significant relationships.

All to a ‘good enough’ level, for what is perfection!
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Almost a final word

Poetry by Domestic Violence and Rape Survivors - The Pathway

Pain and terror,
Destruction and loss,
Grief and anguish.
Time and courage,
Tears and ablution,
Courage and solace.
Forgiving, but not forgetting,
Faith and trust rebuild...
The pathway of healing.

By Lori A. Scrive,
Feb. '97

http://www.hopeforhealing.org/Page3.html
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Thank you for listening to whichever one of me was here today giving the presentation

Mr Leader

Mr Caring

Mr Insecure
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References

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Chris Ledgard, In Living Memory, BBC Radio 4 transmitted 23/02/11


http://ptsd.about.com/od/symptomsanddiagnosis/a/PTSDsymptoms.htm

Sunday Times Review, P1 20/03/11

Linda Caine and Robin Royston, Out of the Dark, 2003, Corgi


The clients with whom I have had the privilege to work and agreeing to let me use some of their material

The Times, 22/03/11, body&soul section, p7

http://www.hopeforhealing.org/Page3.html