

## THE CASE FOR ANALYSIS

PATIENT: GILES COREN

Esquire's editor-at-large reckons he's spent 720 hours on his analyst's couch. That's four hours a week for almost four years. Is he mad? Probably no more than you are. So how come you think you can solve your problems on your own?

Do you even know what it means if I say that I am in analysis? If I told you that I have been going to see a woman in Hampstead once a week for the last four years, who just sits there while I lie on a couch and talk about myself, would you believe me?

I suppose you would have no reason not to. In fact, if you knew anything at all you might even say, "Once a week? That's not analysis, that's therapy."



But you're British, so you don't know anything. You're not remotely interested in psychoanalysis. It's a load of self-regarding bollocks. An idle pastime for north London media gaylords who love the sound of their own voice. At any rate, it has nothing to do with you. You're fine. You don't even really believe in the "unconscious" (look, you put inverted commas round it). You probably call it the "subconscious", and think that's the same thing. You couldn't give a shit one way or the other. You're sound as a pound. This is boring. You're going to flick forward a few pages and find some photos of a girl with big jugs wearing nothing but a camouflage cap and an ammo belt and bang one out while trying not to think about your mother.

But what if I said, "As it happens, I go to this woman not once but twice a week"?

You might, if you know anything, say, "That's still really only therapy, but that's a fair commitment." Or you might say, "A double waste of time!"

And what if I said I went *three* times a week?

If you know anything, you will grant, then, that I am in analysis.

But if you do not, you will be flabbergasted. Staggered that I piss away three hours a week, not counting commuting time, lying on my back on a small divan with a patterned counterpane and a foam pillow, staring at the ceiling of a dimly lit box room on the ground floor of a north London council block, talking and talking and talking to a woman a few years older than me (but not many, I don't think) who I can't see and about whom I know next to nothing, who only ever says "hmmm..." or "yes?" or, at best, "I'm wondering how that makes you feel."

Welt, I don't go three times a week. I go four times a week. And have done since September 2007. I go at 6pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Every week, all year round. With holidays and the occasional bunk (only ever for work, and once for the birth of my daughter) it comes out at about 180 times a year. So I've been 720 times. Seven hundred and 20 hours. Thirty straight days. Exactly one month (this is the first time I've done the maths) of just talking, without cessation, about, well, obviously I'm not going to tell you what about.

So I'll just leave you to assume that we talk for 10 minutes about how I was occasionally smacked as a child, and then fuck.

It was nearly four years ago now that my recent ex-girlfriend came round in the dead of night (when I was in doors with my new bird, watching *Ghostbusters* and eating pizza) and started hammering on the door, screaming: "I know you're in there! Everyone knows you're a drug addict! Everyone knows you're a violent abuser! You take drugs! You take drugs! You're a liar!" Then, when I opened the door, started hitting me and screaming more about the violence and drugs until every light in the street had come on and a small crowd was starting to gather.

It would have been funny, if it had never happened before. But the same thing, more or less, had happened two years previously, with a different girl. That one I had signed off in my mind as a delusional nutter. Which is what I instinctively did now, with this second one. But two nutters on the trot seemed an unlikely coincidence. I thought back: the one before the nutters, I now

recalled, had occasionally accused me of being a bully although not of being violent or druggy). And before her, there was a seven year thing with a girl who hadn't said anything awful about me at all. But she still left.

Before that, just kids's tuff, first love, aeons of virginity, boarding school, single-sex education, fear of girls, a succession of nannies, quite a complicated father, a busy professional mother... before that, their marriage and social elevation, their parents, immigration, Holocaust, Old Europe, the Bible, Adam, God, nothing.

My ex, screaming on the doorstep, bellowed that I needed "help". The last one had said the same thing. It was not impossible that they were right. Although help with what? They were both wrong about the drugs. They were just massive prudes. I've never done smack. I've barely done acid. I've done fewer pills in my life than a banker does on a short weekend at Glastonbury. I haven't smoked a joint in 20 years. Not a whole one. I drink a bit.

So there was no need for that sort of help. I wasn't going to be locked up in the Priory with a load of hollow-nosed ponces because sometimes, after a long lunch, when a mate winks and palms me a wrap and I go to the loo just to be polite, planning to fake it, to wait a minute and then come back sniffing, I have occasionally failed, succumbed, and woken up in a strange town two days later, half naked and crying. That's life's rich pageant, that is, not a case for treatment.

And I'm not violent. Not in the sense that I've ever hit a woman. Or a man. Or even come close to it. Just walls. And the odd door. A door is great to punch. If you're properly pissed off your hand will go right through it. Walls are less forgiving. I have broken my knuckles on so many that if you X-ray my left hand (I am a southpaw) you will find a horror map of scar tissue and re-knitted bone. When I walk into A&E with my hand in a bag of peas they say, "Ah, Mr Coren. Your usual cubicle?"

*I'm not a beater. I don't need arresting or counselling.  
I just grew up in a home where anger was  
expressed vocally, physically, frequently.  
We congratulated ourselves on not being buttoned up*



Funny. But not that funny. And clearly terrifying for the women who had made me angry. But I'm not a beater. I don't need arresting or counselling. I just grew up in a home where anger was expressed vocally, physically, frequently. We congratulated ourselves on not being buttoned up.

So when this latest one, my fiancée as it happened, chucked the ring back and stormed out, leaving me in the wreckage of yet another alone in the big family house I bought in 2003 with a girl who left me less than six weeks after we moved in, it felt like the end of the line.

Oh yes, I forgot. My father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer four days before. It was not a good week. (They had given him at best six months, but it would turn out closer to three.)

So I kicked the shit out of my car, smashed my mobile phone to pieces (satisfyingly, on a concrete floor, and not for the first time) and called my sister (on the landline).

"Again?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Again." And then I added, with a big laugh in my voice, "The mad cow says I need help."

"The mad cow," said my sister, "may have a point."

But what sort of help? Not rehab, as I said. Nothing to rehabilitate from. And not some sort of anger management programme, because the problem was not the anger. The problem was thinking that the problem was not the anger.

And then not cognitive behavioural therapy either. That's just a sticking plaster. It's popular with the Government because you can tabulate statistics for results and reduce apparent depressive episodes across a sample group of millions. But I'd tried it before. It was all breathing

exercises, mantras, and sticking Post-it notes on the fridge that say "I'm a nice person". Total horse shit. (And I'm not a nice person.)

So my sister got the number of a shrink off an old friend who got it from his shrink, and I went and sat down opposite a stranger in a little brown room in Hampstead, because I had nothing better to do, nobody else to talk to, nowhere else to go. Nobody I actually knew wanted to hear about my tedious, cyclical misery any more. (Nobody except young girls at the Groucho, who would listen if you paid for the drinks and then go to bed with you because it was, marginally, safer than getting the night bus home.)

Alannah (it's not her name but we'll call her that, oh God, that's the female version of my father's name, Alan -I swear it's not a Freudian slip, it's NOT, but it's too late to take it back now) listened to me for an hour, then told me to come back in a couple of days. And, for no real reason, I did. At the end of the session she said, OK, she'd take me on. Five days a week, one hour per...

"Five days a WEEK?"

I had been thinking of one hour a week, at best. But once is nothing, apparently. Just time for a catch-up. Two is therapy. Three is more therapy. You get to four or five sessions a week, and that's analysis. As in Woody Allen. Like in *Sleeper*, where he winds up in the far future and goes all to pieces saying, "I haven't seen my analyst in 200 years."

Except not Freudian analysis like Woody's, Alannah said, but Jungian. I still don't really know the difference. I think in Freudian you talk exclusively about sexual experiences in early childhood, and how you want to kill your father. And you always, always want to fuck your analyst. Except I had no sexual experiences of any kind until I was nearly 20, that was the whole problem. And my father was dying anyway, without my help. And I've never once wanted to fuck my analyst - although I did once dream she noshed me off, but that was years ago, and I never dared tell her.

So, Jungian. I read up a bit. Learned very little. He was a Christian but mystically minded Swiss who was into archetypes, not fond of Jews and dreamed of giant underground penises. Great. Psychoanalysis is a field packed with sensitive little Jewish writers like me, and I get the Nazi.

The only thing that seemed to fit my needs was that Jung saw analysis as a process of "individuation", an inward journey to be made in middle age when all other forms of growth have been completed, towards a full understanding and realisation of oneself.

But I couldn't start immediately. It was late July, and in August analysts go away. For the whole month. All of them. Famously. They all go to the same secret location, no doubt in Switzerland, to gather together and talk about how mental we are.

*Nobody I actually knew wanted to hear about my tedious, cyclical misery any more. (Nobody except young girls at the Groucho, who would listen if you paid for the drinks)*



Oddly, although I was dubious about the whole thing, I grew more and more desperate to see her during that month when I couldn't. I began to understand the full implication of Woody Allen's *Sleeper* line, and to shudder at the thought of being a sleep for 200 years so that, on waking, one's analyst would be dead. And I hadn't even started yet. My parents were not happy. All they could think of was that I was going to be going to this person to talk about them and their failings (were I their analyst, I would have asked them, infuriatingly, "Why do you think that is what I would do?"). I think they saw it as some sort of betrayal. A complaint against my upbringing. And, anyway, they did not hold with that sort of thing. My mum is a doctor and my dad was a tough guy. If you couldn't drug it, operate on it, thump it or laugh at it, it didn't exist.

When I mentioned it to my father, who I suspect suffered from depression throughout his life, one way and another, but never acknowledged it, he said, "They once tried to make me see someone," ("see someone" is one of the grand euphemisms favoured by a generation for whom any sort of admission that things are amiss smacks of laudanum, straightjackets and the lunatic asylum) "but the first thing she did was ask me about my mother," and he laughed at the

nonsensicality of it. "Honestly, what did she think my mother had to do with anything? My mother was not remotely interested in me!"

So, Alannah came back from her holidays, I haggled her down from five weekly sessions to four, and we started. She explained that we would do no sociable "hello, how are you?" stuff at the beginning of the sessions, and no goodbyes afterwards. I would walk in, lie down, talk, get up, go. It's not about social interaction or niceties or disguising feelings with language. It is about ... something else. About re-experiencing early trauma. Trauma in the loosest sense (dropping an ice cream, shitting in the bath, not necessarily being butt-raped at knifepoint by your uncle, although if you were butt-raped at knifepoint by your uncle I'd imagine that's going to creep out ahead of the ice cream). But re-experiencing. Not just thinking about. I think. It's about making the unconscious conscious. Knowing yourself in ways you didn't know you could know.

And, yes, lying down. On the couch. I had read that Jungian analysts did it sitting up, facing each other (don't you dare snigger, Freud explains that "there are no jokes"). But Alannah said, "My group is the most Kleinian of all the Jungians." And I said "Ah, I see". But I didn't.

So I lay down. I looked at the ceiling. And after a bit I started to talk. That was four years ago. And I'm still talking. I still have no idea how it works. I've gone through phases of thinking it was crap and pointless and being furious that I have to waste 80 minutes of my evening in traffic and her bloody little room when I should be relaxing at home with a stiff drink. And I kept resolving to stop. But I never did stop.

Sometimes I lay there and said nothing at all, and then got up and left. But afterwards I usually felt better than before I went in.

And since I started I haven't hit anything. In those four years I haven't even really got all that angry with anyone. Occasionally. But then sometimes people are such arseholes. I haven't calmed down in any noticeable way. I just generally know where I am with things. I'm not sleep-walking. It's all me. And it turns out I don't hit walls.

And other strange changes have come about, that are unquestionably to do with "making the unconscious conscious". Like public speaking, for example. I am faced with it a couple of times a year, when I really can't avoid it, and it always used to make me sick to vomiting. I knew I was good at it and that people would laugh and clap like always, but the mere thought of it beforehand made me puke till my throat melted. I was unable to take emotional solace from the absolute knowledge that it would be fine. Like some tragic arachnophobe or wussy flyer. But now I'm fine. I'll stand up and talk to a thousand people in a room until they beg me to go away. Weird physical and mental responses no longer follow where they are not required. It wasn't a cure I went looking for. It's not an especially big deal. But it was indicative of a certain sort of nonspecific mental healing.

Anything that you do that you don't want to do, anything you are that you don't want to be, is because your unconscious is acting in ways you do not understand. If you are obese or you smoke or stammer or twitch or are violent or habitually unfaithful to your partner or unkind to your children... and you wish you were not or did not, then analysis would help. It's probably the only thing that would help.

I don't know why and I don't know how. I think what happened with me is that Alannah provided an ersatz relationship for me to play at making and breaking. She allowed me to create a human relationship from scratch, in full light of day, on which nothing hinges. There was no history. There was nothing she had not done in the past but should have done, and nothing she should not have done but did. We owed each other nothing. It was not going to end with sex or marriage or children. We were not going to fall in love. So the relationship would happen before my eyes, with all its flaws, in ways that I could see and fully own. In life, it takes two to make an argument. In analysis, you can do it on your own. And from that, comes enlightenment.

It meant, when I met my wife, that she did not have to be anything but herself. Didn't have to plug other holes, be other things that I was missing. Didn't have to be unconditionally available, always there, always listening, never judging. Because you can't ask that of a real person in your actual life. Can't base a relationship on that. It doesn't work.

If you aren't clear what I mean (and you care) then the thing to do is to watch *Tile King's Speech* again, and be aware this time that you are not watching a film about King George's elocution. The film has nothing to do with a speech impediment. Look at what Lionel Logue becomes for George VI. See what they talk about. What you are watching is an analysis. That film did not become the astonishing success it did because anybody gives a rat's arse about a dead

toff with a stammer. It is because people saw what had always been missing from George's life, saw how Lionel became that thing, and wept because they did not have it themselves.

I still know almost nothing about Alannah. And I've never been curious. I know she rides a bicycle, because I arrived early once and saw her walking it up the hill. I think she is married (though analysts are traditionally divorced) and has children, because her holidays always coincide with school vacations and half-term. But I don't know for certain. And I don't know where she lives, or what she did before, or where she's from (there is the faintest Northern echo in some of her vowels but it's too late to ask her now).

Is that weird? That she knows everything about me and I know nothing about her? Maybe that is all part of how analysis works. Who knows. All I can be certain of is that because of her I stopped shouting and punching walls, got married and had a baby. And that I am happy now, in a way that I always planned to be but had given up all hope of.

*I worried, when I started, that if my analysis changed me I might lose something. I worried that my anger and pain might be in somehow the flipside of my positive, creative self. A necessary evil*



So the value of analysis, the quest to give voice to the unconscious, is an article of faith with me these days. I go to Alannah again and again, even though I don't want to (it's boring, it's endless, it gets in the way of my life, it keeps me from my baby, it could all be bollocks) because that is what I do. Like a Christian goes to church. And like a Christian, I have crises of faith and long periods of doubt. But I still go.

I worried, when I started, that if my analysis changed me I might lose something. I worried that my anger and pain might be in some way the flip side of my positive, creative self. A necessary evil. I think that is how my father must have thought of his own fits of anger and melancholy - that they were an acceptable price to pay for the brilliance of his wit.

I worried most of all that I might lose my sense of humour to this mystic humbug. I put this to my sister, in a cafe in Belsize Park, not long after the sessions had begun.

"It's all very well this woman you've sent me to making me in to a better person," I said. "But what if, when it's done, I'm not funny any more?"

My sister narrowed her eyes. "Don't let that worry you," she said. "You're not that funny now."