



# Case Study

## Impact of trauma on the body

October 2023

Sarah is 19 years old and is having relationship issues with her boyfriend of one year.

Sarah grew up in a difficult family home. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mum and dad often had explosive arguments. In kindergarten she loved being outdoors and anything to do with dancing and art. When Sarah started school, she really struggled sitting still for long periods in class. She often found herself gazing out the window thinking of playing outside. She was easily distracted and had trouble making friends. Halfway through her first year at school Sarah was diagnosed with ADHD and was prescribed medication. While this helped, she always felt like an outsider and that she was different to other kids.

When Sarah was seven years old, her father started sexually abusing her. The abuse went on until her parents separated when she was 10. She never saw her father after the separation because her mother and her moved interstate to be closer to their family. Sarah's father would phone occasionally, but Sarah found it very difficult to talk to him.

Sarah found the move and changing schools tough and she struggled to make friends. Sarah felt her ADHD diagnosis made it hard for her to fit in. After a few months she made a couple of friends, but some girls in a different class took a dislike to her and bullied her for the rest of her time at primary school. Sarah tried to tell her mum, but she dismissed it, saying "*just ignore them*". Her mum's lack of help and support left Sarah feeling very sad and alone.

Sarah found she enjoyed high school because the kids who bullied her went to a different school. She was doing quite well academically and at the start of year 10 got herself a part-time job at a café. At the café she helped in the kitchen with dishes and some basic cooking.

Sarah really loved cooking and after just six months the head cook was teaching her more skills.

Part way through year 10 Sarah began to struggle with her schoolwork because she didn't like some of her teachers and by the year's end she was dreading starting year 11. She often felt quite down and just wanted to do something different. She was enjoying her job so much that she asked her mum if she could leave school at the end of the first term in year 11. Initially her mum said no, saying it would be good for her to finish year 11. After persistent nagging by Sarah, her mum said, if she got an apprenticeship, she could leave school. Sarah immediately started looking for a chef apprenticeship and before too long had one at a nearby hotel. Sarah started her apprenticeship shortly after turning 16.

Life was finally starting to look good. She felt happy and although she was the youngest person at her work, everyone was really nice.

The work was hard and the long hours, especially over the weekends, which were particularly tiring. She was pleased to have Monday and Tuesdays off to recover.

After a couple of years Sarah started to experience an overwhelming sense of fatigue and body discomfort that was worse when she was stressed. While she enjoyed the high energy of working in a kitchen, sometimes the anticipation of her long workday affected her mood and made her doubt her ability to complete the apprenticeship.

One of her co-workers said that she ran early in the morning and that gave her energy for the whole workday. Sarah wondered if she should do something to boost her energy, but didn't like the idea of running.

## Case Study continued . . .

### Impact of trauma on the body

Sarah made some new friends at her cooking school and liked the coursework associated with her apprenticeship. She started cooking at home and enjoyed her mum's rare praise at her skill.

When Sarah turned 18, she obtained her driver's license. Having more independence felt amazing.

She also started dating Michael, another apprentice chef from her cooking school. He is a year older than Sarah and likes camping and fishing. Sarah had never been camping or fishing, but was keen to experience something new. Their first camping trip was successful. On the trip they decided to take their relationship to the next level. Sarah felt attracted to him and safe in his presence. She had been wondering what sex would be like with him but had a sense of anxiety around the idea that was hard for her to place.

She had never managed to use tampons, as she felt uncomfortable touching herself around her perineum. The few times she had tried, it felt painful, like there was a brick wall she couldn't get through. Despite her intentions and Michael's patience, their first attempts at penetration were painful and, in the end, not possible. This left her feeling deflated and ashamed.

Further attempts over the following weeks had the same result. Her body would not do what she wanted it to do. She was too embarrassed to talk to her GP about it, but after some googling came across the term vaginismus and wondered if that was the issue.

She had not told Michael about her experience of sexual abuse. Since their attempts at intercourse, she had experienced some intrusive memories that made her whole-body tense and freeze. She wondered what impact her past was now having on her life and her relationship.

She read online that pelvic floor physiotherapy could help and decided to make an appointment with a local clinic.