



THE

FATIGUE

SUPER

CONFERENCE

Recovery story: The power of creativity to support healing

Guest: Violet Astor

Alex: Welcome to the Fatigue Super Conference. This is a bit of a different recovery story. It's different for a few reasons. It's different partly because I think it's a theme that we probably haven't covered at Optimum Health Clinic in the way that we're going to cover it today. But it's also a bit of an unusual one because it's my sister in law that I'm talking. So, hello Violet.

Violet: Hi.

Alex: It's kind of interesting because of course, I should try to be professional in my manner. But you and I do know each other rather well. But I think it's an interesting story as well. Because from my point of view, it's the probably the recovery story which I've been the most involved in apart from my own recovery story. That'll probably become clear as we come into it a bit more. But it's been interesting obviously from my point of view, having been someone that's had chronic fatigue and recovered. Having been a practitioner working with lots of people and training lots of practitioners to also be in the role of having a family member that has been going through their own journey as well. I like to think I was helpful at certain points, but I think I was probably unhelpful at certain points.

Violet: You weren't. You were very helpful.

Alex: We'll come into that as well. But the kind of main theme that we're going to explore with these recovery stories as part of the conference, where having done dozens and dozens of recovery stories over the years, what we're particularly focused on here is pulling out some of the key themes that can be important along the recovery path. For this story, we're going to look at the role of creativity. Having a creative outlet, having a creative connection, a creative passion.

Violet, now kind of coming through the other side of this whole experience, works as an artist. I have been a beneficiary of this artwork at various points

over the years, and the evolution of it as well. But has a staggering talent as an artist, and she'll get embarrassed of me saying that.

Violet: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alex: But it's really, if it hadn't been for Violet's journey with a fatigue-related condition, I'm not sure that you would be on this path that you're on now. It's also one of the gifts; one of the things I think has come from that journey.

Should we go back to the start though, in terms of where this story started? I know that even before you started having much more immediate kind of obvious signs of what was happening, you'd had some struggles in terms of energy at times, right?

Violet: Yeah, I had. I'd been working quite hard in the run up to me getting sick. I'd been exercising hard. I'd just been doing too much. I'd been pushing my body in a lot of ways. I'd been having a few symptoms here and there, but I didn't pay any attention to them. I kind of ignored them, thinking this is normal, or I'm just a bit tired. I'd normally come home from work and have a little nap before going out for dinner or whatever it was. I just kind of carried on going, carried on pushing until the symptoms just got so much worse and started screaming out.

Alex: You were working in a pretty stressful job at that time. You were teaching parenting classes in an underprivileged part of London, where some quite difficult caseloads you were working with, right? So that was also a pretty demanding kind of day-to-day life.

Violet: Yeah, it was really, really stressful. It was sort of front line social work with families in crisis. It was very emotionally demanding. It was also physically demanding; I was having to walk around a lot of Westminster, into people's homes. I was carrying heavy laptops. It was just a very demanding, demanding job in a lot of ways. I think because I wasn't happy in it, it meant that I was exercising too much, I was going out too much, I was probably drinking too much. All those things to try and mask the fact that it wasn't working for me.

So yeah, that was a really big instigator, I think. Had I not got that particular job, I probably would've carried on going. But it was that that was really probably the straw that broke the camel's back.

Alex: Then, as I remember it, when you first started getting kind of real symptoms, it unraveled quite quickly in my memory. Just kind of talk us through kind of what happened.

Violet: I broke my ankle. It was a very weird situation. I'd sort of had this mantra running through my head of, I just want a break, I just want a break. I was so tired. I was doing far too much. I missed the bottom step, and I broke my ankle.

Alex: You got a break.

Violet: I got a break. I literally got the break I'd been asking for. Went to A&E; they did a scan. They didn't notice anything. I knew that something had happened. I'd heard the crack. It was pretty obvious. So I went to a specialist who said I had something called a snowboarder's fracture, which they only generally see in really high impact accidents like snowboarding. Where the whole incident of my ankle was just crashed. When I told them that it'd been the fact that I missed the bottom step, he just couldn't believe that I created that much damage. So it really was an extraordinary injury to get.

I had to have an operation to remove bits of bone, which was nice. I went back to work quite quickly afterwards, hopping around London. It was very strange. I started to get a cough, and then I had pain in my lungs, and I was starting to get really emotional. I couldn't figure out what was going on. I kept going to my GP and he was suggesting maybe I should go on antidepressants, and I was so lost and confused at the time that it kind of made sense. I thought I'd give it a go. I actually didn't, but the symptoms were just getting worse and worse and worse. I was going in and out of A&E, and they kept doing CT scans and saying, "There's nothing wrong with you. Go home." This was all in a very sort of extraordinary time, over Christmas and New Year.

Alex: I vaguely remember going to some of those appointments with you.

Violet: Yeah, oh you did. You definitely carried me into A&E a few times.

I eventually again went to a specialist, literally on Christmas Eve, who did a whole lot of MRI, different tests. I didn't get any of the results until the 4th of January, when everything started back up again. Those test results came back with two collapsed lungs, fractured rib, blocked bronchial tubes, pleurisy, fluid on the lungs. I mean, everything that could have gone wrong, had gone wrong. It was just a strange time because none of it had been picked up in A&E. My doctor kept suggesting antidepressants. It was the start of this mind game that you go through when you've got a chronic illness, when you know that something's wrong but everyone professional around you is sort of saying, "Maybe not; maybe it's just psychological."

That was the very start of all of that madness. I think the only sanity I had was you in that process, who could see that there was signs of burnout and stress. As a result, I think once I sort of recovered - well, not even

recovered, but once I knew what the damage was - the first thing you said to me is, "You've got to quit your job. Come live with me and your sister. We'll get you back on your feet after three months." That's what I did. I don't know how I could have gone back to work in the state I was in. So it was a saving grace.

Alex: But it was an interesting time as well because I remember having personally seen hundreds if not thousands of cases, of reading cases of people, the build up to getting chronic fatigue, burnout, Lyme, whatever the diagnosis becomes. But there is always that kind of loads on a boat and kind of build up of things. It just seemed clear that was happening. Then at the same time it was like, I don't want to project my worldview onto what's happening. Normally, I would see people six months, a year, a few years, decade, whatever down the line, where it's become clear that that's kind of what's going on. We were moving house at the time. We were moving to a house because we were about to have another child, but bigger than we were going to need immediately. I remember saying to Tanya, my wife, your sister ... I was like, "I just don't think this is going to pass quickly. This doesn't feel like it's a go on a holiday for a month and rest and get better." It just felt more complicated and more kind of faceted.

But I also didn't think that it was going to be as complicated as it was, which we'll also come to as the story unfolds. Then this would bring us up until April of that year, that we moved house and you moved in. I think initially, I think everyone's expectation was it just going to be a case of taking a sustained period of rest and time, and taking away some of the pressures of work and life and then things would start to kind of bounce back from that. That obviously wasn't really quite what happened.

Violet: No. I still don't think I know what happened. I guess the physical aspect of what I had going on in my lungs had healed to a point, but the fatigue kicked in. The nervous symptoms were getting worse. The immune system was getting worse. That's when I think I started working with a nutritionist. Actually, I think I'd been with a psychologist a bit before anyway. But definitely the nutritionist, we sort of kicked it up then. Then just working really hard. Sort of anything that anyone ever suggested to me - skin brushing or tongue scraping or whatever it was - I tried everything. I cleaned up my diet. I pretty much followed any and every recommendation that came my way. Which was amazing; I learned a lot in the process. It was good, but at the same time, it kept on going and it kept on going and it kept on going and it kept on going.

Alex: I remember somewhat arrogantly thinking at the time, it's like, "Violet's getting a premium product." I know you went and did the 90 day program, you went and did nutritional work. I was very clear, like, "I am not your

practitioner," and you were very clear, "You are not my practitioner." I was there as your brother in law and friend as a support, and a kind of, hopefully at times, kind of wise voice. But I wasn't the one that was kind of working as the practitioner. But I remember kind of thinking, "Well, it's going to be longer than she thinks. It's probably going to be six to 12 months, but it's just going to be a gradual, kind of upwards kind of curve along that way."

That wasn't what happened, and we'll come to that a bit more in a minute. But there was some initial improvement, I think. Wasn't there? There was some kind of help in terms of calming down some of the ... There was a stabilization, let's say, that I think happened. But there wasn't perhaps the improvement that was expected.

Violet: Yeah. I think the acute phase passed, and it sort of went onto a more sort of flat line in some ways. But a steady flat line. But actually looking back on it now or thinking about it now, I was nowhere ready for recovery. For everything that I've gained as a result now, I wasn't ready at the time. I needed those three years. I know that sounds mad, but I needed those three years to get to what I've achieved now. Yeah, so I'm sort of grateful in some ways. I'm sorry to you that you had to put up with me for all that time, but I learned a lot in the process.

Alex: I've badmouthed you beautifully in the carers interviews. I'm teasing, I'm teasing, I'm teasing. What I actually said was that it was challenging for all of us. It was challenging that we were kind of in this ... Particularly that Tania and I were very much at that stage of one two year old, and one being born around that time, that we were kind of home a lot. It was quite intense. But it was also amazing, in terms of yours and my connection. You'd been in Australia when Tanya and I met. We met the first times on the phone, and by the time I met you in person, we were basically like, "We're having a kid, we're getting married, hi."

Violet: Yeah, exactly.

Alex: So it was also kind of gifts as well.

Then we were in that kind of period. Correct me if I'm wrong, but if we being in the other aspect to this story in terms of the creative pieces that came in ... But I think one of the earlier pieces was ... Was it cooking or was it essential oils which was the first piece?

Violet: First thing was the creams. I was making natural body products, sort of face and body products. Because I'd really cleaned up the diet. I just wanted to not put any extra stress on my body. I went into shops to buy face cream, body cream, whatever it was, shower gel. I would look at the back at

the ingredients, and half of it I didn't understand, but I knew that it wasn't exactly what my body was needing. So I researched and started testing out and just making all my own natural products with purely sort of healthy ingredients. I absolutely loved it. I got to the point where I started making it for people to sell. It was a very, very small income, but it was just a sense of achievement that I got from it.

Alex: You were pretty much housebound at that point, right? You were buying the various things, you were buying the containers and you were buying the ingredients and stuff online, and you were kind of doing it from the attic of our house, basically.

Violet: Exactly. I remember that I would have to book out with you guys certain hours where I could have use of the kitchen. Because I couldn't handle, my nervous system was so sensitive, I couldn't handle noise when I was trying to focus. It was amazing when I was doing my art. I was sort of upstairs; I could lock myself away. But when I was in the kitchen making my creams, it was just ... I had to have that time completely quiet. But by the time I'd done a few hours of making the cream, I was absolutely exhausted. It sounds mad now, but just even stirring the cream was enough to make me exhausted. I would have a few days in bed after that.

But it was amazing. It was really sort of using my hands, the smell. It used all my body senses, so it was an amazing process. It was going back to nature.

Alex: I remember that was quite a contrast at the time. There was the fact that you were more sick than you were expecting, and in some ways more sick than I was expecting as well. But you also had this kind of creative outlet and this kind of way that you were also connecting to the world, via that you were making these products and friends and family and stuff were experiencing it.

But just coming then back to the recovery story piece. I think it was around this point. I guess we're probably a year in; 9 months, a year in, or something at this point. I remember thinking, "This is kind of odd. This is taking a bit longer." I remember particularly it was a little more awkward at Christmas that year. I was sitting and people were like, "How's Violet today?" I'd kind of said six to nine months earlier, "I think she needs a good six months to a year." I was relatively new to the family at this point. It was interesting kind of learning process.

What was going on for your at that point? Because it must have been, at that point, you'd made some significant adjustments in your life and you'd given up a lot of independence and freedom. Suddenly you're relatively housebound although you were sometimes going and staying with family and

stuff, but relatively housebound. In an area of north London, really no people. You were kind of isolated from friends. What was that like for you at that time?

Violet: It was interesting. When you just said nine months, a year later, what was happening? I just have no idea. All I can remember really was just being really lost and confused. The emotional pain was like nothing I've ever experienced in my life. It was so physically painful, the emotion. But at the same time, I can't imagine what it would be like to be surrounded by friends and family who don't understand. Well, I can, because I had some that didn't. But I was just held in this kind of this bowl of cotton world by you guys. You were just so amazing with me. Because you understood it; Tanya has just an abundance of empathy. It was amazing. I felt like you always had my corner. You could always say to family who was starting to question what actually is going on here. You always had my back. You could sort of say to them, "Back off. She's doing what she needs to do in her own time. We're working on it," kind of thing.

I had a pretty comfortable ride in terms of that. But it also-

Alex: I wouldn't call your ride comfortable.

Violet: I know, but it also gave me the space to be able to completely lose my mind in some sense. Again, in hindsight, I think I needed that. I needed to lose it to re-find what was right.

Alex: I think in some ways, there were a few lessons for me. We'll come to some of the other ones in a bit. But one of the lessons for me at that point was that I mentioned I'm used to seeing people further down that recovery path. So I'm more used to seeing people where the falling apart's kind of happened, and someone's had the bed rest and the physical rest, and they're ready for the next stage of that healing process. My assumption had been that we could just bypass that part of the healing process, by the fact that we were getting the right things in very early on in the process. I have seen cases where that's happened, but what I discovered was that actually that doesn't necessarily work. That there is an innate wisdom and there's a process that people need to go through. People can get stuck in that process. You can at sometimes accelerate that process.

Often when people come to Optimum Health Clinic, they've gone through perhaps what we would call stage one into early stage two, but they're now stuck there. That's where often there's a lot you can do to start to move that forward. But you can't fast track in a sense. The fact that I knew quite a bit about it and I'd helped a lot of people and I'd been through it didn't change the

fact that your body and your emotional body was going through a necessary process.

Violet: Process. Yeah, exactly.

Alex: That was a lesson for me, and humbling in a good way, in a sense.

Violet: Good. Well, I'm pleased you got something positive out of it.

Alex: Let's then come back to the art piece. I don't want to impose my memory of my timelines on you. But my memory was that this was the point where you started doing a bit more in terms of the drawing side of the art. I remember at the time, for example, you helped design the Optimum Health Clinic logo. At that point, I knew you were doing some drawing in your bedroom. Basically the designer that was doing it, I was just getting so frustrated. It just didn't look right. I said, "Can you help?" This moment of desperation. A day or two later, I was like, "Violet can draw!" That was my reaction.

Violet: I had that reaction, too.

Alex: Well, build up to the reaction of the infamous, in my world, the lady drawing that still hangs in our living room in our new house. But in the build up to that, what was the point where you ... I know you'd drawn a little bit, but not in any way seriously before. But yeah, just talk us through how that came in and how it was helping.

Violet: How it came about. Do you know? I think it was a lot of people saying to me, "Have you tried drawing? It's very therapeutic." I literally think that was it. I know my mom has always bugged me about it. I had that teenage reaction to begin with, like, "No, leave me alone. I'll do what I want to do." I think there was just one day where it happened. I decided, because I was working out of my bedroom and because I was sick and I was wanting to reduce all toxicity, there was only a few mediums that I could actually use to work with that weren't toxic. I couldn't work with oils in my bedroom, or even acrylic. So I really only had the choice of watercolors and charcoal. I think I just ordered some of that from Amazon and just started sort of tinkering away.

I loved the watercolors but it just didn't seem to fit. The first piece I did was the woman you just mentioned that I gave to you to say thank you. It was amazing. It was just the minute detail that I was putting into it. I got completely lost and it would take me away from everything. They say that that kind of meditative process reduces stress, anxiety, helps with depression. I definitely found that I could find hours up there. I remember thinking, "Oh my god, it's nearly dinnertime but I'm a million miles away. I'm just enjoying being there." That was what sort of kick started it.

Alex: I don't want to preempt what we can do in post production, but maybe we can put a scan of the ... I know you've got a scan of the piece. Maybe we can put it on the screen, people can see. Hopefully we can. If we can't, it's hard to explain how staggeringly detailed this piece is. It's enormous as well. It's not a small piece of art. It's a big, old kind of feature piece to hang in the living room. It's enormous, and it's staggeringly beautiful. Staggeringly detailed. I know you're going to get shy and embarrassed, but it is genuinely ... For me, I don't know what the time scale was. Maybe it was like a three or four month period or something from, "Oh yeah, Violet can draw because she did the things for the logo for Optimum Health Clinic" to this thing that was presented to me. I think it was my birthday; I can't quite remember what it was, but it was presented. I just remember being like, I don't understand.

Violet's just doing her art thing in her room. I was completely and utterly staggered by it.

Violet: You know, part of it for me was escapism. When I was drawing, I could focus on what I felt passionate about. It was positive things as opposed to the sort of hardcore social work I'd been doing before. But also, I was so sensitive and still am really sensitive to other people's energy, so I was able to sort of hide away and do that. I think one of the biggest things for me was I was doing it for myself and not for anyone else. I wouldn't really show anyone. I know Tanya would sometimes push down the door to try and come in and see what I was doing. But it was not my sort of intention for it to be seen. It was my own personal little safe space, my thing. Hence why I sort of worked up in my room and didn't really show you what I was doing.

Alex: Yeah, I was just like, "What?" We'll track back to the recovery piece, but what was also ... I remember pretty quickly going, "Can I commission you to do something for my friend who's one of the kid's godfathers?" I don't think I actually ever paid you for it, by the way.

Violet: No, it was ten pounds, I think it was going to be, wasn't it?

Alex: You wouldn't take my money. I remember when we presented it to him, and he fell on his ... It was a teacher of his from many, many years ago. He's a Buddhist teacher, and it was in his 20s, he'd gone and lived with this teacher in the Himalayas. So we managed to get a photo from a friend and you'd drawn from that. He literally fell on his knees and wept, he was so blown away by this piece.

A bit further down the line, another friend of mine saw the piece. "Can I commission Violet?" I loved the fact that it wasn't just Tanya and I that were being impacted, but people were coming in to our home or seeing things, and something was building from that. But I'm also wondering, what was

happening for you at that time? As you were starting to get some early reactions and recognition, but you were also still pretty sick at that point. How was that for you?

Violet: I still think I was really determined that it was never going to be a career or anything. I was sort of doing the piece for your friend as another way of thanking you, and that was as far as it was going to go. So adamant that I didn't think the work that I was producing was any good to show. But I also knew that it was my own private and personal thing, that if I started to sell it or do it for other people that it would just change the whole dynamic of what I was getting from drawing, which was just peace. I knew that if I had that pressure, there'd be more stress involved, which I was trying to reduce.

Alex: Can you say a bit more about what the creative process was like? I know you were saying it was like a way of escaping, a way of having peace. Say a bit about how that helped you in terms of the emotional and physical healing journey that you were on at that time.

Violet: Yeah, so I think the minute detail for me was a place that I could just escape to. Even though I might've been drawing a big elephant, within those tiny, tiny little sort of markings in its skin or the folds of its skin or its ears, had its own sort of drawing within itself. Every kind of millimeter was its own drawing. It just meant I could just go deeper and deeper into that. It was just a way to focus my mind on something positive, and away from the negativity of health.

I think I struggled a little bit in terms of could I sit up that day? Could I use my arms? Some days, I couldn't draw at all. Some days, it was only just a little bit. But there was a sense of achievement that came with anything that I did. I'd have the piece in my room and I would see it all the time. I'd wake up in the night and it would be there, and it would give me a fright. Like, "Oh my god, I've got a gorilla in my room." But there was definitely a sense of achievement. Although I didn't think it was good enough to sell or anything, I knew that it was making me happy and I knew that the reactions from the few people that were seeing it were positive. It was really fulfilling in that sense.

Alex: I think it's also worth saying that these pieces, they're large and they're very intricate at this time of your work. They were months to create one piece. It wasn't like a week or two. There must be something also about cultivating patience and you couldn't get too fixated on completion because it was such a long process to create a piece.

Violet: Yeah, that's really interesting. I don't think I ever necessarily thought about the time, because there was no time limit. I think that was what was so precious about it. I felt lucky enough that I could live with you

guys. There was never that pressure for me to have to earn to survive. I just am so thankful for that, because I appreciate that there's a lot of people out there that do have to do that, and art is probably one of the hardest ways to earn money anyway.

But because there was no time pressure, there was no pressure of any sort other than to keep doing it in my own time, it was just so healthy. Everything around it was positive, so it was brilliant.

Alex: Let's then come back to your recovery journey. I should say as a steering for where we're going for people, it became clear that there was more than just a burnout, classic chronic fatigue picture. It had become clear that you also had Lyme and there was a whole other kind of path that opened up.

Forgive my memory. I'm trying to remember how that came about. It wasn't me. I think it might've been Julia that-

Violet: Yeah, it was Julia. I think we'd got to that point where I'd started saying, "Okay, I've done this. I've been doing everything by the book," for I think it was probably about 18 months, two years at that point. I remember a lot of the feedback I'd get from you guys and the family was I'd say, "It's not enough. Something else has got to happen" was, "You are improving; you really are. It's just you're such a perfectionist, you want it to be faster. It's happening but it's happening really slow."

Actually, I've never asked you this. Was that genuinely what you thought? Do you know what I mean? I'm putting it back on you, but it felt to me like I needed to start saying, "Okay, something else needs to come into this."

Alex: It is what I genuinely thought for quite a while. The progress was slow. I don't mean that as a judgment; it just kind of objectively, compared to what I expected it to be, it was slow. But it was there. The classic signs of ... Your lows weren't as low as they had been, they were lasting quite as long. Your highs were a little bit higher, they lasted a little bit longer, there were more of them. But you were still relatively housebound. You'd go and stay with family, and it was still a journey to get there. I would drive you or Tanya would, or they'd drive you back. It wasn't like you were limited in your energy but kind of living your life. You were not getting back into life, if that makes sense.

Violet: I remember sort of going out for dinner with friends. This was probably once every three months or something. It would floor me for weeks after. I'd just have to prepare myself that that was the sacrifice I was going to make if I wanted to feel normal. Going out for dinner and it was just like, oh my god, this is the world. This is what people do. This is what was normal for

me before. It was so excited. Then I hit a certain point at 9:30 in the evening. I'd be like, "I've got to go home now. I can't do it anymore."

But yeah, at that time, there was improvement in that I was getting out a bit more. I think I was going up to the shops myself. I had a car, so I could drive myself up there and pick up any kind of products that I needed or whatever. But it just felt deeply frustrating that I just was so far from a normal life.

Alex: I know there were a few conversations; I don't remember the exact sequence. But I know there were a few conversations where you said to me, "I feel like there's something missing." I think there was a point where I was like, "Yes, I think you're right. I think there's something missing." I know that I had a few conversations, obviously with your blessing, with Julia and with Jess. Is there anything we're missing? What else is going on here? What could it be? It kind of comes back a little bit as we talk about it. I think it was Julia who said, "Let's look at Lyme." I think you then had some tests with Amon Lab, I think it was in Germany. But then came back. Was it a bit inconclusive, from my memory? There was co-infections that was there. Do you remember?

Violet: I think it was a process of elimination. It wasn't necessarily a positive, but it suggested that the levels of my immune system-

Alex: That's antibodies, yeah.

Violet: Yeah, that was what was coming back, alluding to the fact that it was probably Lyme disease.

Alex: Yeah. I remember it wasn't that clear, but I remember that there was like, "Yeah, it looks like there's something that's going on here." Then that started a whole other phase. I think this is where the next bit, in terms of lessons ... It's not meant to be Alex's confessional lessons. But one of the lessons that came for me was that I didn't know that much about Lyme disease at that point. Optimum Health Clinic knew more than I did, because obviously my primary work is on the psychology side, and I have some oversight of the nutritional department but not on a technical level. So we know more than I did. But we didn't know anything as much as we do now. It was one of the cases, there were a bunch of cases, but it was obviously the case closest to my heart. My point of view was like, what else can we learn? What do we need to do?

You then went off and added in, saw some other people, added some other pieces, which became a sort of learning and information. I'm wondering, what was that like for you at that point, to get a new level of clarity in the

sense of, "Hang on, this actually explains some of these other pieces of the picture that didn't feel so understood" at that point?

Violet: Well, I remember the amount of tests that I was doing. Every time they'd come back, "You're within normal range." I just remember by the time I did the Lyme test, I was like please. I was praying for it to come back positive, which is crazy now I think about it. It came back with a potentially positive result, and I just remember thinking, "You've got to be careful what you wish for; this is terrifying." Because anything that I looked online said that chances of recovery are pretty slim. All the different methods out there that were being poo poo-ed. It was just a scary place to be, and I think that was the first time where I got a sense of what it'd be like if I'd got ill without you being there. That it's suddenly like, oh my god, there's this big world out there, and where do I start? Who do I go to? What do I trust? What do I do?

But we found someone pretty quickly. I remember I was going to go to America to do clean heart, and we found one of his practitioners who happened to live about three streets up.

Alex: That was so funny. People would not believe it if they saw it on the map, how close she was. Actually, Dr Klinghardt is one of the interviews on this conference. If people want to know about clean heart protocol, they can listen to that interview. But anyway, go on.

Violet: I started that. I was having quite strong Herx reactions from some of the treatment. I felt like I was going too quickly and it was too strong. There was a whole load of other things. I was having to travel to Germany for cryotherapy, and I can't remember. There was a whole load of things that they wanted me to. After about six months, my dad's business partner sort of got downwind of the fact that I have Lyme disease, and said that his best friend had been cured by a doctor in Belgium. That's when I went on a whole new journey. Within the first sort of few days of being out on that treatment, it was very clear something was shifting. It was so clear.

I remember thinking that during the time, we were saying, "Okay, there's something else going on here." I remember what was going around in my head was, "I feel infected. I just feel so infected." That was the thing that was singing out to me the most. When I started the treatment in Belgium, on day two or day three, I had a certain treatment that again brought out the Herxheimer reactions. The next day I woke up, and it was the first time in what, three and a half years that I didn't feel infected. It was unbelievable. It was so clear. I think that was a time that made me realize we've got to listen to our bodies and our intuition and fight for it in some ways. Not that it would have necessarily have changed my journey, but it was very clear. I'd got that confirmation.

Alex: Absolutely. I think also, just to kind of bring it back to the story unfolding ... Around this time, we were moving house. We bought a house and we'd spent the last year doing renovations on it. We were moving into the new house. Tanya and I, we just assumed, "Well, obviously Violet's coming too." But I remember the bedroom options in the new house weren't as good as the old house. In the old house, there was this kind of granny flat on the top floor, which was kind of perfect in sense. Then in the new house, it was basically the basement, which is nice but it's not quite the same. Not quite the same artist life as what you had before. Or this room on the landing that if we were going to have a third kid, probably was going to be their room. Which we didn't in the end, would've been there room. But it was kind of in the middle of the house and not that big and quite noisy. I remember thinking, "It's going to be tricky, but obviously we'll make it work."

Then I think you felt you'd made enough progress just about. I think it was a bit borderline, but enough progress just kind of enough. You were like, "Actually, I also want to move on." I think it wasn't immediately, but in time, you then ended up getting your own place. There was some progress and there was some change over that time. I think a lot of kind of emotional work that kind of shifted. But physically, things weren't ... I think you probably felt, and I felt, I was like, "I wish we'd got you that bit further." Then it was, a lot happened. One could argue that it all got better when you moved out from us.

Violet: I was going to say. No, it was literally the timing, that I went to Belgium was when I'd literally just moved out, I think. Yeah, it all happened very quickly, but I also think it was all meant to be. That that was the shift that was right.

Alex: I also wondered, won't ever know the answer to this, but I wonder if you'd been able to tolerate the Belgium work or if it would have been affected if you hadn't done the work that you'd done leading up to that. We'll never know the answer to that question.

Violet: Yeah. I'm always very scared of different therapies that say, "If you learn this breathing technique, you will be cured of your Lyme disease." There's a lot of different therapies out there that make these grand promises. I've always been really shy about. I can't remember what we were talking about-

Alex: We were talking about whether the preparation had been necessary.

Violet: Oh, yeah. So the things like my diet, even though I cleaned it up, I was sort of getting messages from particularly online that if I'd cleaned up my diet and if I followed these certain sort of diets, that it would get me better. I

remember that sense of frustration of, "I have been doing this to the T for the last 18 months, two years, and it hasn't." This was all part of that interesting process of, I'm doing everything but it's not changing.

Sorry, I forgot.

Alex:The point is that each thing was necessary, I think.

Violet: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. So without the diet, I wouldn't have had that foundation that I would've been in the prime position for that treatment to have come in and worked. It was everything I'd done had got me in the perfect place for it.

Alex:Then you went off and did that work. That was a bumpy ride at times, but it was also clearly significant in terms of the progress that you made. Tell us how the creative piece was evolving at this point.

Violet: Well, so I was still drawing. Again, no intention to do anything with it. My mother and my other sister very naughtily went off behind my back and took some of my artwork to a gallery and said, "Do you think you could do anything with this?" He said that he liked my work and he wanted it to be in a show in two months' time. I think it was two months after that. So they came back and confessed to me, and I thought, "I might as well give it a go." I did and had great sort of positive reception. I don't know, it just snowballed from there. It felt like everything was working at the right time, at the right speed, in the right way. Everything was positive. All the feedback was good. Doors were opening. Everything just felt easy and like it was meant to be. I didn't really have to fight. For me, that made sense, that I'd been on this unbelievably bumpy journey, and I've been to some dark places and done some dark thing, that that's the reward I was getting. Was that life was showing me what was easy and what was right and what was clear.

So, I sort of went with it. It's just made for the most amazing career. I've got all my greatest loves, being world life, travel, and drawing every day of my life. I've got a career where I can work my own time schedule. Because I'm still sensitive; I need to be able to spend a lot of time on my own. So I can do that when I'm drawing. I can choose my work hours. If I'm having a day where I'm not feeling great, I don't have a boss that I have to answer to. I still work incredibly hard, but it's within my own capabilities and being able to still listen to my body when I need to.

Alex:Say a bit more about life now, because you're traveling off to wild and crazy places. I know you spent a bunch of time in India. Just run us through some of the travel. Because I think for someone that was housebound for a two and a half year, three year period, and people that are watching and

listening to this that are still in the phase, that yes, you have some sensitivities and you have to live a little bit careful around the edges, but you're living a very, very full, rich life. So just paint a bit more of a picture of what that's like.

Violet: I think a big part of my recovery was actually when I moved to the country. I knew for me, I needed nature and wildlife. It's something that feeds my soul. When I made that move, I think it was two years ago, I definitely felt I went up the next notch in terms of recovery. I think what I've had to do is get my head around expectations of what I'm capable of. Whether it means I've got to let a little bit more on the journey to go in terms of recovery, or just this is who I am, this is what my constitution is, this is what feeds me, this is what depletes me.

But I basically live on my own in a cottage in the middle of the countryside. I have a studio five minutes up the road. I have fairly quiet weeks. Eating healthy still. Not always eating healthy, but most of the time. Sleeping well. I still do my meditation. Then what it means I can do is I build up the energy, and then I can go off. Last year, I was in Papua New Guinea, I was in Kalimantan. I manage to go off and travel and collaborate with these conservation projects. I can do two week stints, three week stints out there, come back, and often I'm feeling so much better. The sunshine, just the excitement of it all. I need to come back and rest a bit, but generally I can thrive after those trips and then work towards the exhibitions to sort of donate some of the proceeds back into conservation.

So, I've got a pretty good life. Weekends are fairly busy. I do still need to be mindful of not booking a lot into my life. I'm content; I'm happy with that. I was thinking the other day, thinking about this interview and reflecting on things. I don't think I've ever been this content in my whole life. I look back on the times where there was just this kind of inner turmoil that I used to have. I just don't have it anymore. I can still have periods or bits of anxiety or feeling a bit depressed there, but that is on top of a base contentment. God, I feel so lucky I've been able to get there.

Alex: But it's also interesting that the journey has had these different stages. In a sense, you did all this preparation, you then had this period where things moved forward quickly, and then there was a steady build for a while. You had this big step forward, and it appears to me that you then went back to some of your fundamentals in terms of actually, "I need to live a life which feeds me and a life that is happy. I need to live in a place that feeds my soul. I need to spend time around the people which make me excited." Those life fundamentals that also had an impact.

Maybe say a bit about how constructing your life in a certain way has been not just about your health recovery, but also about, in a sense, creating a life which is nurturing for you. As opposed to pre all of this, being the person you thought you should be. Does that kind of make sense?

Violet: Yeah, totally. My body is permanently my guide as to what is going on, what I should be doing, what I shouldn't be doing. So if I'm doing too much in terms of being around people too much or the wrong kind of people, I get really clear messages. My body tells me when I need to do yoga. I can feel it the minute I haven't done meditation in the morning. I know that my body's not okay. My body's still massively my guide.

I remember one of the doctors in Belgium saying to me that I don't have the constitution to be a marathon runner. Don't ever expect to be that person. I see that in all area. I'm never going to be someone who's going to be able to work a sort of seven day a week job, working for someone else. I've managed what I know I'm capable of and what makes me happy. When I start to push that boundary a little bit, I get the feedback quite quickly, and I adapt and change and try and listen as much as I can.

Alex: What's your relationship like with your art these days? It's an interesting thing as well, you make the transition from something that was, "I'll just do it as a complete expression, creative play when I feel like it," to now you have to create to a certain schedule. You have to create for exhibitions. You have sponsors for trips that you have to then have an output from. How have you managed to maintain your joy and connectivity in art?

Violet: It's been a journey in itself, and I've gone up and down with it. After I did a big trip last year, something in my system just had a complete tantrum and I refused to draw. I didn't draw for probably about four or five months. I think it was because of the pressure. Subconsciously it was all building up too much. I had a lot of conversations with artists about this, and a lot who used to say, "You need to force yourself. You just need to sit down and do it. Even if you don't like what you're producing, just keep going, keep going." As harsh as that sounds, it actually was, for me, what really helped. I think more than anything, I realized how routine is good for me. So for me, knowing that I go to the studio from 8:30, 9:00 in the morning till 3:00 in the afternoon, that whatever I do in that time doesn't necessarily matter, but I just have to be there. So if I'm having a day that I don't feel particularly creative or good, just as long as I'm there and I'm doing the best I can, that is the best.

I think also having goals, something to work towards, and suddenly bringing in responsibilities. But they're very much under my own direction and my own desire. That having that responsibility means that I am answering to myself, I am getting up, I am doing stuff, which is helpful. It's

that balance that you need, where there's not too much responsibility, I'm doing it for myself; and also come on, you've got to get up and do stuff.

Alex: Would you have ever believed when you first started drawing in the bedroom at the old house on Rosebery Road, that you would be sat here now ... Because I remember you saying a few times, "What am I going to do for a career?" Those kind of existential questions about your life. Would you ever believe that you were be an in demand, successful artist?

Violet: No, shush no. Definitely no way. Absolutely not. It was a very slow drip fed process of me trying to imagine what I wanted for my future. I think collaborating with conservation projects was always number one. I always wanted to work with wildlife; particularly endangered wildlife. I couldn't necessarily see how that would happen, so I would never have imagined it. Never. Yeah, never a career that exposes so much, exposes my work. I never thought I would be able to do that. But it's just felt so natural and so easy, that it's just been clearly the right thing.

Alex: How I think about it is a lot of the emotional turmoil you went through in those early few years was you digesting and shedding the layers of who you thought you were prior to that, to get closer to actually who you really are. In a sense, once you contact that, particularly when you've had to make so many compromises for a period of time in your life when you can't do the things you want to do, I think one can become, in a good way, quite uncompromising on the other side of that. It's like, "I now have this connection to this thing, and I love it, and therefore this is what I'm going to find a way to express in my life."

Violet: Yeah, definitely.

Alex: These are the last few questions. What would you say to someone that's in the situation that you were in before you had the breakthrough, in terms of your health piece? Where you've been incredibly diligent ... There was never a time where I thought, "Well, Violet just needs to get her shit together and work harder on the tools." You know my character and you know how I am when I'm not being me in my professional role. I'm quite uncompromising, I'm quite pushy, and I'm quite like, "Shit needs to get done." I can be quite punchy and direct with patients sometimes where I feel like they're not serving themselves. I never felt that way towards you. There must have been times that you were, I'm sure, very frustrated about the amount of work that was going in when the output felt small, even though, in a sense, things leap forward partly because of that work. Even if it was just the emotional work supporting your creativity.

But what would you say to someone that's in that place where they're putting a lot of work in and it feels like things are not moving forward? They feel frustrated and want to give up, and they feel just resigned to the fact that

it's just, things aren't going to change. What would you have wanted to hear at that time, or what would you say to someone in that place?

Violet: Trust. Trust that things will work out in their own time, in their own way. In hindsight, it's easy for me to say that now. But if someone had said that to me in the time, it's like, "Yeah, but I feel like I need to do more." I always felt like, "Maybe if I don't do that one thing that's been suggested to me, that it will be the thing that slips through the cracks or means that I don't get better." I think that as long as you're doing the best you can, you've got to listen to your body, listen to your intuition, and listen to the science you're getting. Just trust it'll work out in its own time and in its own way. Which is easy for me to say now, but that was my experience of healing.

I was so deeply frustrated that things weren't moving. So I think if I had been able to say to myself, "You've got these three years where you're sick, or these five years where you're sick. Choose how you're going to deal with it. You can either be deeply frustrated and angry and whatever, or you can just accept that that is the time you have been given to do all the things you need to do to explore yourself, and all of this will come good and have benefit in the end." Again, I don't know if I would have necessarily believed it if someone said that to me, but that's what I would like to say to myself five years ago.

Alex: People, just to complete the story, sadly the doctor you saw in Belgium passed away a year or two ago. People might be asking about that. Would've been great to have her as part of conference. Is that anything that you want to share in terms of the more physical level in terms of how you work with the Lyme piece? Any key messages?

Violet: On the physical level, so what I was doing physically. I think like very much, it was following on from OHC, and that it was very holistic. In Belgium, I worked with a medical doctor, an alternative doctor, a body worker, and a psychologist. For me, I would never want to do any treatment that wasn't incorporating all of those areas. Then I think yeah, it was listening to my gut and sort of having a conversation with all the doctors at all the times, saying, "That doesn't feel right for me" or "That does feel right" or "Yes." Listening to them and knowing that they might know better than me, but also knowing that my body is something that they don't know as well as me.

I think it's just the holistic approach. Being open to everything. But also, if you know that your gut instinct's saying, "No, I can't do that," then that's saying that for a reason. What might work at one time might not work at another time and vice versa. There was certain things that I was doing early days that were irrelevant that I will incorporate now that are relevant. It's all listening to feedback, I think, as much as you can. Being open minded.

Alex: Yeah. I think that's right. In a sense, it was a great gift that you gave to me and gave to Optimum Health Clinic because there was a whole new learning and evolution for us. Obviously that always continues. But there's nothing like having one of the people you're closest to in your life, in your family ...

Violet: Yeah, it must've been so hard for you.

Alex: It was much harder for you, but it was certainly ... I've always said Optimum Health Clinic's approach has evolved over the year by a few handfuls of people. It's evolved because of everyone, but particularly I can track back a few key people where, for whatever reason, things didn't go the way that we would expect. Because for different reasons, refusing to let go or because we go more emotionally in that case for whatever reason, but that's where things get updated in terms of ideas and protocols.

Violet: I think you can see recovery like that as well. That things that go wrong tell you something; it's sometimes the biggest lessons. I definitely learned that. There was things that went wrong where it's like, "Whoa, okay. That definitely pinpoints my recovery as well."

Alex: Final question. I've asked my "what would you say to someone that's at the place you were before." What would you say to someone who's coming through and making progress but not really clear what they want their life to look like? I think that was one of the other big pieces for you, was taking some control of the process. Of going, "I've made a bunch of decisions up until a previous point in my life, where I was doing what I thought I should be doing or what I thought was the right thing." I guess really what I'm asking is what gave you the courage to follow your passion? I think people either need the courage to dive in and find that, or they have a sense of that and they don't believe that it's something that they can pursue. What gave you the courage to make those choices?

Violet: I guess it's a two part thing. A lot of people have said this to me; even people who haven't been sick. "I need a career change," or mothers who are wanting to go back to work and not knowing how to do it. For me, the first one was exploring lots of different things without the pressure of it being, "This is my career." Some people can go jump straight back into studying something, and maybe jump in too soon. So it's just being able to experiment and try things. I tried the creams, I was trying cooking and making my own little cookbooks and things like that. But it was the art that really kind of was the one that very clearly was going to carry on.

Then the confidence ... I just feel like it was not something I had to work on. It was something that was naturally there because it felt right. I've definitely had moments of doubt, but I just tend to ignore them. I don't know, somehow I manage to just shut it out and just keep going. I think when you're sick, it's really clear what's important and what's not. That's what's brought me a lot of contentment. I often used to try and please other people, and I think the process of being ill made me realize that actually that's not going to do any good for me. That I've got to please myself. So that has just naturally given me the confidence to just keep going, keep going.

Alex:I'm sure people listening to this, there'll be people that want to go and check out your artwork. Your website, you might be too shy so I'm going to give it, is Violetastor.com. People can go there and see your work. Anything you want to say about what's coming up in terms of your upcoming projects?

Violet: At the moment, I was in Oman at the beginning of the year, and I'm collaborating with the Environment Society of Oman. I'm producing a body of work on Amman's endangered species. That's going to be exhibited at the end of the year in Muscat, which is very exciting.

Then a couple of projects. Maybe Madagascar next year; maybe Africa. Got lots in the work. I think another place to stay in touch is through Instagram. I think I'm @Violet.astor. That's where I constantly update what I'm up to.

Alex:You're trying to get me to Instagram better as well.

Violet: We'll get you there. Not that I'm any good anyway.

Alex: Violet, thank you so much. I really appreciate you telling this story. I remember you said to me a number of years ago that you couldn't wait to be able to do your recovery story. Well, we did it.

Violet: I'm here! I can't believe I'm actually there. It actually means a huge amount that I'm here. Thank you as well.

Alex: Yes, my pleasure, you know. Thank you.

Violet: Thanks.