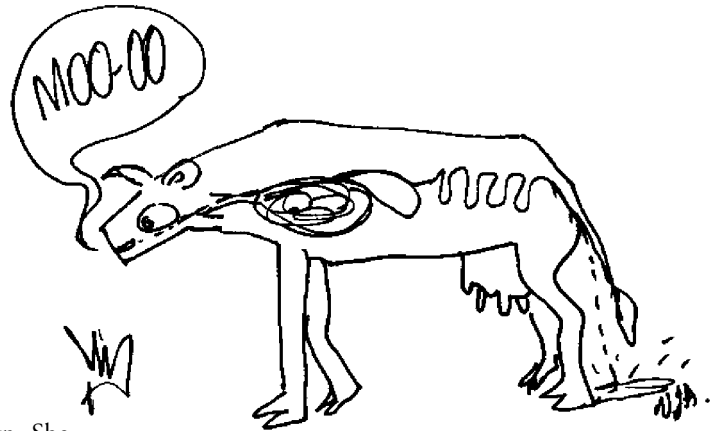


Mooing

Valerie Atkinson



‘What about doing your cow drawing?’ says Sharyn. She is my co-leader, a survivor herself of panic disorder with agoraphobia. Eight years housebound — she has shared that with the group. We are running the Family and Friends Information Night of the Anxiety Disorders Intensive Treatment Programme (CBT of course) at Mt Druitt Community Health Centre (western suburbs of Sydney). The problem of ruminating has been raised. Sharyn is spot-on, as usual. So up goes my cow drawing.

‘OK, here is my cow. Do you know that all animals with cloven hooves, hooves split in two, like cows, sheep, goats, camels and pigs, all have two stomachs and are called ruminants?’ The whiteboard marker goes crazy with masses of grass being chopped then swallowed, going into the first stomach. ‘In the heat of the day the cow finds a shady tree, and back into the mouth from the first stomach come wads of grass to be chewed up properly.’ Therapist demonstrates chewing the cud, gross jaw movements, over and over and over. ‘Then it is swallowed again.’ The drawing shows the cud going into the second stomach, on through intestines and out with a splat to become a cow pat. This is what a cow needs to do. The cow is a ruminant. This is a neat system for the cow.

But when we do it with our negative thoughts — what we think about what someone thought of us, what a fool we made of ourselves, what painful stuff was done to us in the past, etc., it just gets bigger and bigger. We are not digesting it, we are not problem solving, we are not reflecting, we are just ruminating, negatively ruminating.

Then I add the sequel. Some time ago I saw a retired man from a northern European country. I shall call him Peter. He and his Australian-born wife, Jan, always came to see me together. They gave me permission to share this story with other clients. Peter was serious and dignified, rather a perfectionist, a man who ruminated endlessly upon the very damaging past behaviour of some of their family members — tragic stories. He ruminated on a lot of other things too — all negative. Jan said that when she went to his country and met his family they all ruminated. So I had done my cow drawing for them. Jan, something of a larrikin, piped up, ‘Right’, she said, ‘Every time I see you doing this, Peter, I am going to say, “Moo”’. I assured Peter I would never have dared make such a suggestion!

Next interview I couldn’t wait to ask her if she had really ‘mooed’ at her husband. She had — often. Both were laughing. Much prior work had been done in therapy, but after this, there was a big turnaround. A few months later Peter had ceased ruminating altogether.

In the next group session, those who hadn’t attended the family information night had to find out why people were being ‘mooed’ at, so the cow drawing and its sequel had to be repeated. It seemed to hit a lot of chords. The following week many commented on their habit of ‘mooing’. They had noticed themselves ruminating but now they called it ‘mooing’! More partners had joined in. More laughter. They set themselves homework tasks of challenging their ‘mooing’ habit. They came back saying, ‘I saw how much “mooing” I was doing about a panic attack. That was the day before — went on for hours. Told myself to let it go, fix my thinking.’ ‘I was “mooing” on Saturday about going to the Club, but I stopped that and had a great time — stayed till 10.00 o’clock.’ ‘I was worrying about losing it if I tried to take the kids to the Show — “mooing” I was! Three years since we’ve been. The kids loved it.’ They were recognising the ruminating habit and discovering they could deal with it.

Came the last group and filling in of evaluation forms and what was one of the most useful things about the group? ‘Mooing’ of course!

P.S. Now this is being published, my cow drawing and stories have another sequel. By the way, is this CBT? Laughter Therapy? Narrative Therapy? Creative Arts Therapy? Systemic Family Therapy? Psycho Ed? It has certainly been therapeutic, whatever it may be called.



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