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Again and Again

by MaryPat Campbell

I had twenty minutes to go before the end of my day at the surgery yesterday. It was Jack's turn to pick up the kids from after-school club, so no need to hurry. One last appointment with a woman I've known for years whose husband died recently.

She arrived early and looked nervous. I had trouble following her at first she spoke fast and kept repeating herself. She described her sleepless nights and how she wakes at four or five most mornings. All this, repeated over and over.

Turning the cooker off, turning the taps in the sink and bath off, turning the lights off, again and again. Did she lock the front door? She can't remember, so checks it again. Did she leave the keys in the car? She can't remember, so checks them again. This is how she spends her days, checking and double-checking, over and over.

In reply to my asking her if she has any idea why she constantly checks everything, she replied, "I can't explain why I do these things, I just keep doing them, again and again."

It took me twenty minutes to calm her down. To get to the point where she began to realise that the constant repetition of what she called her "again and again things" might have something to do with her dead husband.

"I hated him," she whispered. She looked at me for a long time and started to weep. "But I can't live without him," she added more loudly, and wept some more.

I remembered her husband, a large and distinguished looking man. A bit irascible and impatient whenever he came to see me. One of those men who look up their symptoms online before coming, and then lecture the doctor on his self-diagnosis.

Polite, and at the same time dismissive. I never saw him worried or distressed with whatever ailed him.

“Everyone thought he was a wonderful man,” she said, “a charmer. Well, I know different. He was mean and cold with not an ounce of warmth towards me in him. We never had children, and of course he blamed me. I doubt he ever loved me. He was so particular about everything, he was always right and I was always wrong.” She suddenly shouted, “I’m glad he’s gone.” She was trembling now, although quieter and wiping her eyes with some tissues I’d placed strategically on the desk.

At first I thought I should prescribe some anti-depressants, but then thought better of it and decided she might be ok without them. I suddenly felt grateful for Jack and the children and going home to them now, once I’d turned out the lights and locked up for the night.