life

Ask Professor Tanya Byron

The celebrity sex scandals have brought back my memories of being groomed

Q Ten years ago, as a postgraduate student, I became involved with a lecturer who was charismatic, respected and influential in his field. He took a particular interest in my research, telling me I was exceptionally talented and that he could open doors for me. I was flattered to be singled out by someone I admired.

What began as intellectual encouragement became an intense, secret relationship. He made promises about research opportunities and my career. Gradually the relationship became controlling and sexual. There were things I didn't want to happen but felt unable to refuse. I now understand that I was groomed and sexually assaulted, although it's taken me years to use those words.

I left university, built a career and got on with my life. I thought I'd dealt with it by putting everything in a box on a shelf at the back of my mind. Recently, with allegations involving powerful celebrities in the news, that box seems to have opened. For the first time in years I'm having intrusive memories, unsettling dreams and feelings of shame and anxiety.

I've read your new book *You Are Not a Diagnosis* and wonder whether I'm misusing the word "triggered", but that is how it feels.

I don't want to revisit any of it. I don't want to unpick the past or have therapy that makes me relive it. I just want to put the lid back on the box and get on with life. Is that possible?
Jules

A Your description of putting your experience into a box and placing it on a shelf at the back of your mind is a powerful one. Now, without your permission, its contents are spilling out, and you want to shut it again.

You question whether you are entitled to use the word "triggered", having read my book about the increasing tendency to describe ordinary experiences in clinical language. Please don't confuse my concerns about the overuse of psychological terminology with a dismissal of genuine psychological responses to trauma.

In your circumstances "triggered" is an entirely appropriate description. In psychology a trauma trigger is a reminder that activates memories, emotions or physiological responses associated with a threatening or overwhelming experience.

The relationship you describe involved a substantial imbalance of power, in which professional authority, intellectual admiration and promises of advancement became intertwined with and conditional on sexual access.

Grooming is often misunderstood as something that happens only to children or particularly vulnerable people. Adults can be groomed, especially where someone exploits a position of authority or trust. It is a gradual process through which boundaries are shifted, dependency encouraged and behaviour that might initially have been unacceptable becomes difficult to challenge.

Being told that you are brilliant, exceptional or uniquely understood can create a powerful emotional bond, particularly when the praise comes from someone whose judgment you value. Secrecy may then be presented as evidence of a special relationship rather than a warning sign. Promises of future opportunities can become entangled with an unspoken expectation of compliance.

You may remember feeling excited, flattered or emotionally attached at certain points, while remembering fear, pressure and sexual experiences you did not want. Initial attraction or willing participation in some aspects of a relationship do not constitute consent to everything that follows.

You describe being unable to refuse. I wonder if part of your distress now involves looking back at your younger self and questioning why you didn't challenge him, leave or tell somebody (insensitive people might ask that).

It is important to understand that our responses to threatening or coercive situations are not always deliberate decisions. When we perceive danger, the brain's threat systems activate automatic survival responses, including fighting, fleeing, freezing or appeasing. In relationships involving authority and dependency, appeasement may involve accommodating demands to avoid conflict, humiliation, rejection or consequences. This is not evidence of consent but one of the ways we respond when we feel trapped.

The box you describe represents an understandable short-term psychological coping strategy. However, keeping those memories suppressed becomes an exhausting task when reminders begin to intrude. The news about powerful men exploiting women brings up associations involving power, secrecy, manipulation, shame and the difficulty of being believed.

You ask whether you can put the lid back on the box. You do not have to open it fully, but trying to force it shut may not be the most helpful approach. There is a psychological phenomenon in which deliberate attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts can make them more noticeable. In a well-known experiment people asked not to think about a white bear rang a bell whenever it came to mind, which happened more than once a minute on average.

Similar can happen with intrusive memories. The harder we work to prevent them, the more attention is given to them. The aim, therefore, is not to eliminate every reminder but to manage and change your response when one appears.

Begin by recognising what is happening without becoming drawn into the thoughts by acknowledging that this is a distressing memory from a decade ago but not happening now. Then, when your distress rises, focus on your immediate surroundings: breathe steadily (use an app such as Calm or Headspace), notice where you are, identify what you can see, feel your feet on the floor and describe what you are doing. This enables attention to return to the present.

You do not need to work out why it appeared or what it means about you. Acknowledge it, calm the physiological arousal, ground yourself and return to whatever you were doing.

You mention shame, which often survives long after an abusive relationship has ended when behaviour is retrospectively interpreted through the knowledge and maturity you possess today.

You understand the manipulation and exploitation involved, but your younger self did not have the same perspective. Try to resist judging her through the eyes of the woman you've become. Instead, ask what you would say to another postgraduate student describing the same circumstances. Was she foolish, complicit or weak? Or would you recognise how skilfully her trust and ambitions had been exploited? The compassion you would extend to her, extend to yourself.

I advise that you tell one trusted person that these memories have resurfaced. You do not have to disclose the details, but having the care and compassion of another can reduce the burden of managing everything alone.

You are understandably reluctant to seek therapy because you fear reliving what happened. Good psychological therapy is respectful of your choices — nightmares, anxiety or intrusive memories can be addressed without immediately giving a detailed account.

If symptoms persist or begin to interfere significantly with your relationships, work or everyday life, I recommend an assessment with a qualified trauma-informed clinician to explore trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy or EMDR (emdrassociation.org.uk). These approaches do involve working with aspects of the trauma, but this would be carefully explained, agreed and paced.

You could contact Rape Crisis for confidential support (0808 500 2222), even though the events occurred ten years ago. You can still report the assault to the police (rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/it-happened-some-time-ago) or ask the university about its reporting process. Seeking support, however, does not oblige you to report what happened or pursue any particular course of action.

Finally, I want to return to your box. Perhaps the task is not to force the box back onto its shelf, nor necessarily to empty its contents and examine every painful detail. By recognising that the box exists, that it contains past distress and that you can decide how much attention you give it, it gives you back some of the agency taken from you.

***You Are Not a Diagnosis* by Tanya Byron (Penguin £18.99). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk**

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ANDREW FOX FOR THE TIMES



What do pupils hope and fear about AI?

How should we protect under-16s from new technology — and help them to use it? An NSPCC campaign hopes to address this issue, from cheating to deepfakes. Alice Thomson talks to students

"My chatbot says I'm ugly today"; "A boy put my head on a porn model"; "She cheats by getting ChatGPT to do her homework"... Jonathan Kewley is a partner at Clifford Chance who has been awarded for his work with global companies on strategy, safety and governance in artificial intelligence. Yet increasingly, he realised, it was children who risked being harmed most by this new online world as clients, parents and teachers told him they worry that AI is stunting kids' relationships, empathy and intelligence. It's acting as a best friend and therapist, providing answers to pupils' work, creating new opportunities for bullies and making the next generation less articulate and more submissive.

His son, ten, and daughter, nine, admitted it was taking over their classrooms. Yet schools appeared to have been given little help on how to handle this new tool consuming their pupils. According to the educationalist Anthony Seldon, 49 per cent of English schools have no formal AI policy and 66 per cent offer no guidance on how pupils should use it. "We are teaching for an AI-less world that no longer exists," he says.

So, Kewley suggested they create a poster, like the one he had in his classroom as a child about the Green Cross Code. "I could tell my kids to ignore the chatbots, nudifying apps and deepfakes and never to go online," he says. "But all pupils will need to embrace AI if they want a job in the future, so I wanted them to see the upsides as well as the downsides and learn how to use it properly."

Children think adults are floundering too: 62 per cent of pupils believe their parents and politicians have no idea about the threats the new virtual world poses to the younger generation. Meanwhile, according to a Vodafone survey, a third of children treat chatbots as their fake friend, while teachers can't always spot kids handing in AI essays and maths homework. "I worry their brains are going to atrophy just as they need to become smarter," one teacher admitted. According to the OECD Pisa education tables, 15-year-olds in high-income countries are 18 months behind their 2015 counterparts in literacy, knowledge and reasoning skills.

Kewley knew he needed to act fast. After consulting with his family and going to the European Summit on Artificial Intelligence and Children in Denmark, led by Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, he came up with the Smart acronym featured on the poster this summer. Chris Sherwood, the chief executive of the NSPCC, agreed to sponsor the project in all 33,000 schools in Britain. Businesses chipped in to help future employees to learn the skills required to handle this new technology rather than feel overwhelmed by it. Childline is a partner, and Kewley went to 10 Downing Street to ensure that he had the backing of the government, while the multi-academy trust the Haberdashers' Company asked pupils to provide feedback.

The idea behind the campaign, which is launching today, is to help children to learn how to spot fake photos and news, and use AI intelligently, appropriately and kindly rather than mindlessly. It urges pupils to remember to talk to human friends, parents, teachers and Childline if they have concerns. The poster will be regularly updated, and there are assembly and class plans, a curriculum and a teacher pack, created with the help of educationalists and the NSPCC.

"This is a grassroots campaign. We didn't want to be sponsored by the AI industry or use celebrities," Kewley says. But, through word of mouth, schools in the US and Europe are already asking if they can get involved.

Kewley, whose children do not yet have phones, believes a ban on the under-16s accessing AI would be pointless. "We can't say to kids, 'This is awful, don't use it,' when it is a huge part of their future. But they need to be aware how it can go wrong."

The lawyer met the astrophysicist Stephen Hawking in 2017, the year before he died. "He gave a speech saying AI will be the best and worst thing that will happen to humanity. I want this story to have a happy outcome."

We are meeting on the day that Anthropic was valued at $2trn in a record IPO. "There are incredible innovations in tech every day, but the success of these ventures shouldn't come at the expense of our children being bullied in classrooms and losing the ability to think for themselves. We need guardrails," Kewley says.

His son loves drawing but found increasingly that AI was doing his creative thinking and sketches for him. "Whereas it's been great at practice questions for the 11-plus," Kewley says. "It democratises tutors: less well-off kids can now get free personal help. At worst, it makes learning redundant."

Kewley takes me to Ironbridge in Shropshire, near where he grew up, to show me the cradle of the Industrial Revolution and the first big cast-iron bridge, built in 1779 by Abraham Darby.

"AI is the next Industrial Revolution and, like Darby, we need to embrace it with a moral conscience and use technology for social good." He doesn't want to sound like a Luddite. "It's the opposite. I am incredibly optimistic about its benefits, but we have to address the dark side too."

At the Haberdashers' Abraham Darby Academy in Telford, I am more pessimistic, assuming the secondary school pupils I'm meeting will be reticent about their use of AI in front of their head teacher. But the 12 to 15-year-olds are buzzing about the poster. They chat about the problems and benefits of the new frontier for an hour.

They are keen to share their advice. "They are machines, they don't have thoughts and feelings," one says. "You need to use AI, not let it use you." They all agree. One uses ChatGPT to mark homework, another to compose music, a third to identify a bug or bird and a fourth for rugby tips. It all sounds wholesome. But they have been tempted to use it negatively. "It's hard to use it as a guideline only, when you know it could do all your homework. You have to be self-controlled," one says. "Or worried you'll get caught cheating," says another. Some have used it for help over relationships or for mental health issues. "I was bullied quite a bit, and I asked it for help as I didn't want to be a burden to my mother, who was ill," a boy says. "But in the end talking to a teacher was better."

> **Pupils will need to embrace AI if they want a job in the future**

They are all most concerned about how the information they have provided online will be utilised. "It scares me, it already knows so much about me, agreeing with me, encouraging me to share more," one boy says. "How would you help a person whose information, face and feelings have already been captured by AI?" They all look relieved when told that there is a tool they can use to erase their history, and are warned to think before they share anything about themselves online.

They want more help in spotting fakes and not to feel embarrassed talking about scams. "AI is progressing so fast and is so realistic now there aren't many three-legged people any more," one boy says. They don't understand why nudifying apps aren't banned. "They're not funny." Another fear is that AI will take away their future careers. "I don't want to sit at home all day while AI does the work, I want an interesting job."

None of them thinks you should use AI at primary school. "You need to learn the basic skills first. It can be manipulative and even wrong," a boy suggests. In secondary schools, their conclusion is that it should be used in moderation. One says: "We still need exams and pop-up quizzes to keep us learning, and verbal tests — speaking is as important as writing. AI has the knowledge but teachers should show us how to apply it."

No one thinks that virtual AI classrooms in their bedrooms could replace their school. "We come here to see our friends, socialise, do sport and art." When I ask how they envisage future lives, one girl says, "My parents tell me they used to play outside all day, rather than sitting around on screens. I'd like us to go back to that. I want real relationships not virtual friends."

I leave the school optimistic. These children appear more aware than adults of the benefits and downsides of AI, less likely to catastrophise about P(doom) and more likely to see AI as an additional tool, not a takeover. As the quietest children in the room said, at the end of the day, "If you want to prevent an apocalypse, we are your best bet, so we need to learn to master this technology now, before it controls all of us."

Top: Joanne Edgar, the head teacher, and pupils of Haberdashers' Abraham Darby Academy in Telford. Right: the new poster



The poster and materials for teachers can be downloaded at learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2026/november/smart-ai