

Untold Anxiety - The Birth of a Treatment That Worked

By Judith Hoare

Seven years ago I crafted an email to a man I had never met but hoped could help me. I was considering writing a biography of Dr Claire Weekes, an Australian doctor and scientist who had written hugely successful self help books on anxiety, first published in the 1960s and still available today.

Dr Robert DuPont, a Washington based psychiatrist with a distinguished career specialising in anxiety and addiction, had known Dr Claire Weekes, who died in 1990, when she was a household name. My hunch was that she was a huge untold story. I had been a journalist and commissioning editor for decades and had learned to trust my instincts.

My interest in her was also personal, having felt the huge, helpful power of her words many years before. What was behind such a profound gift. Surely her story had been told.

It was not until 1980 that panic attacks found a place in the DSM, yet for two decades Dr Weekes offered something completely unique in the market. She understood the ferocity of the anxiety state and could explain and treat it. No one else had her track record of success.

Her first book, known as *Hope and Help For Your Nerves* in the US, was published in 1962 and covered panic, obsessions, compulsions, phobia and depression. She avoided labels, treating these conditions as having the same wellspring: fear of fear.

When I first considered writing her story I found only a brief Wikipedia entry. However the one professional quoted - Dr Robert DuPont - claimed she was an unrecognised pioneer in the field.

Noting he was the founding president of the ADAA, I shot them an email asking if they would be kind enough to let him know of my interest in Dr Claire Weekes.

I cannot adequately communicate the thrill of receiving his response, which arrived overnight. It was the highlight of a project that gives me immense, ongoing pleasure and satisfaction. Those who know him will be well aware of his generosity and he sits like a rock beneath this work. He is also a wonderful, vivid communicator.

His email was headed: "I am the guy you want for your book!" Then, just two lines of text.

"How can I help you? Dr Weekes had a profound, positive influence on my life and my work and anxiety disorders – and the field itself. No one but you and I know that. Maybe your book can change that."

After four years of research I had no trouble coming up with the title for my biography: *The Woman Who Cracked The Anxiety Code, the extraordinary life of Dr Claire Weekes*. Trained

as a journalist in the 70s, the only thing worse than inaccuracy was a “beat up,” but I have no reason to believe I have overstated her importance.

My book was first published in the United Kingdom in September last year, in Australia in October and in May this year was released in the US. It has been well received and no one has, so far, taken issue with the proposition that Dr Claire Weekes is the invisible hand behind the best of modern anxiety therapies.

What I discovered - and what many members of the ADAA will not know - is that this organisation exists because of the effects of Dr Weekes' books on tens of thousands of Americans who found freedom from overwhelming anxiety through her books. Many of these grateful readers eagerly educated their psychiatrists and therapists about this new way of overcoming the suffering they had endured. Dr Robert DuPont was educated by an agoraphobic teacher who despite working with him for two years still had to have her husband drive her to and from work. She had read in Glamour Magazine of a new approach to her problems. She got him to visit, with her, the program run by a psychiatric, Dr. Manuel Zane at the White Plains Phobia Program referred to in that magazine.

That visit changed his life for the better as much as it did hers.

My book opens with Bob's story - how he was grappling with anxiety professionally, and, more distressingly, on the home front. His ten year old daughter had developed a fear of confined spaces after being accidentally locked in a cupboard and had developed a phobia. He tried Dr. Weekes' approach on her with such success that she is now a Board Certified Psychiatrist with a special interest in anxiety. His other daughter was inspired by Dr. Weekes inspiration and she is now a social worker and leader in the ADAA.

Like most people he discovered Claire Weekes by word-of-mouth. When he sought out Dr Zane, who had established the first phobia clinic in the US, he learned of the extraordinary results his patients were getting just reading the books of Dr Weekes, including some incapacitated for a decade or more. For Bob, the experience was transforming. It not only helped him help his daughter but it lit the way to a new professional path.

In 1980, Dr DuPont, with Dr. Zane and Arthur Hardy, MD founded The Phobia Society of America with his assistant Jerilyn Ross, who had herself recovered from a serious phobia through the work inspired by Dr. Weekes and Dr. Zane. PSA changed its name to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America which then became the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Despite her huge global impact on the treatment of anxiety she slipped out of history.

Yet hers are the invisible shoulders on which rest every state-of-the-art treatment. Her simple mantra: *face, accept, float, let time pass*, with its idea you could pass through panic, changed “millions of lives” to quote emeritus professor, Dr David Barlow. So if you are wary of labels, have heard of acceptance therapy, the mind-body connection, first fear and second fear in the brain have a look at Dr Claire Weekes, who before she studied medicine was a

zoologist who has also left an enduring footprint in the textbooks on reproductive evolution. Behind that handful of simple, life saving words, lay a lifetime of deep scholarship as well as personal experience of high anxiety. My book tells that story, as well as revealing how the ADAA itself was born.

Judith Hoare is a journalist who started her career with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, working on Chequerboard, a trailblazing social issues program in the 1970s. She then moved to the Australian Financial Review where she covered national politics, and later, business. She became a feature writer and was ultimately appointed Deputy Editor of the newspaper, responsible for Features, a position she held for 20 years. *The Woman Who Cracked The Anxiety Code*, the extraordinary story of Dr Claire Weekes is her first book.