

# Hands-Free at Last

## *A Therapist and Client Describe their Therapeutic Journey*

Lucien Ulrich & Saar Bach

### ABSTRACT

This article is written by a therapist and patient. It describes the therapeutic process of Saar Bach, who came to therapy entirely out of touch with her feelings, with negative judgments about her “disgusting” body, extreme obesity, and dependent and borderline personality disorder. Covering thirteen years of intense weekly work – moments of joy, fights, and depression for both patient and therapist – it presents the patient’s unique journey of learning to accept her body, seeing herself in the mirror, and losing weight.

**Keywords:** incest, powerlessness/empowerment, violence, isolation/group member, shame, overwhelming emotions/grounded emotions

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Sexual abuse is no longer a taboo subject. Recently, a well-known Belgian author, Griet op de Beeck, appeared in a prime-time Dutch television show, where she made painfully clear how the experience damaged the very core of her being.

Authors like Judith Herman and Babette Rothschild (who is very much indebted to Alexander Lowen) have described how chronic post-traumatic stress syndrome can devastate people’s lives, and how a healing therapeutic relationship that offers safety is needed to help patients work through all their painful and shameful memories before they can develop a more positive, realistic view of themselves, and new self-confidence, and trust in others.

Inspired by these books, this article describes, from the perspectives of both therapist and patient, how the therapist managed to support the patient in systematically reducing her colossal misery over the course of fourteen years of therapy. This required a great deal of courage and patience, but also a lot of compassion, perseverance, and inventiveness to not be discouraged by the client’s persistent fear and resistance to change. The risk of failure seemed infinitely greater than the chance of success.

In hindsight, everything appears as if it was quite structured. But while such a long-term process is going on, the therapist often has to feel her way and try her luck, without any guarantee that she is on the right track.

Despite the discrete way in which the client refers to the profound neglect and shameless, selfish sexual abuse she experienced by her father, the reader cannot escape the disheartening impression of how such childhood experiences can disfigure an entire personality. Trust and self-esteem have become suspect. Feelings of self-worth do not exist. Shame and guilt are obvious, and always present. Per-

“  
Listen,  
are you breathing just a little,  
and calling it a life?”

Mary Oliver

sonal feelings are not allowed, and evoke fear when they become conscious.

To protect herself, she had to hide behind a dissociative spectator's role and an unappealing thick blanket of body fat. But this did not really help, for the deeply despised and hated self remained present within her. The result of this long battle against the evil that seriously misshaped the client is not a complete makeover in which all shortcomings have been eliminated. Instead, thanks to the therapy, a woman has emerged who no longer hates who she is, but who dares to be herself and show herself – including the damage she suffered and the fears that, despite everything, remain a part of her. And she can now enjoy her own company, and that of others.

## Prior History

From her psychiatrist's transfer report:

*“Saar has an extensive psychiatric history, with treatment in a therapeutic community and several admissions in psychiatric hospitals, Chronic depression and disassociation related to sexual abuse by her father during her childhood. There are also severe personality problems, with borderline and dependent characteristics as the main issues. She is disgusted by her own body, which she sees as a suffocating shell. She cannot tolerate being touched and has issues with intimacy. She is looking for treatment that will help her accept her body.”*

## First Phase of Treatment: August 2004

My first meeting with Saar Bach (who was born in 1951) didn't leave me with much hope. I saw a woman who was completely numb, dull, and seriously overweight. She had many physical issues, and just as many complaints about her husband, daughter, son, and grandchildren.<sup>1</sup>

What was I getting myself into? In the transfer report, I might as well have read: things will never work out! I decided to look for something that interested me, instead of her boredom and her continuous emphasizing of how miserable her life was. To my surprise, I was fascinated by her clothes. They were made by a fashionable designer based in Amsterdam. I concluded there must still be an ember of self-worth if she was able to give herself such clothes.

I agreed to schedule five sessions, during which we would explore her response to physical exercises. We would then decide if we would continue working together. Very carefully, and in small steps, we started to let her experience what breathing and support could mean for her. Very

quickly, we encountered her grim judgment that her body was a filthy, suffocating shell.

She realized that she wanted to pursue this approach, even with a male therapist.

After five sessions, there was enough trust to continue working together. I could see that, underneath this completely humiliated, flat woman, there was also vitality. The most important question was whether she would be able to accept the life in her body.<sup>2</sup>

The work began very intensely. If there was any kind of physical sensation at the outset, she would leave her body, and try to hold on to images from her traumatic past. I had to do everything I could to restrain her, to bring her back into the room, and re-establish contact between us. Sometimes the approach was gentle, but many times I had to raise my voice to reach her. She mostly wanted to scream and cry. This road was leading nowhere. It would only increase her inner feelings of emptiness.

We used the metaphor of tuning her engine to the right number of rpms. Not too high, but also not too low. So, instead of acting out her emotions, our work together was intended to enable her to tolerate her emotions.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, I discovered that relaxation created anxiety, and led to the sense, as she said: *“I am going completely crazy inside my own mind.”* A more successful approach was to give her a cup of tea at the end of the session, and have her sit up straight in her chair, and let her listen to classical music. We began with Haydn.

In the fall of 2004, her close friend ended her life. She considered this woman her soulmate. Saar felt guilty; she thought she hadn't done enough for her. A major crisis was looming.

We spent a lot of effort to place the friendship in its proper perspective. As it turned out, the friend had wanted Saar to show solidarity with the misery in her life, and thought that Saar should also kick the bucket. This insight was a painfully brutal confrontation.

Creating safety and continuity were important goals.<sup>4</sup> Saar indicated quite early on that she felt safe. To some degree, I could see this in her motivation to work, but it was also an almost blind surrender to the therapeutic situation. She was clinging on to something. This was the start of more intense confrontations. Boundaries I set were regularly tested, like ending the session on time, and not allowing her to shout at me. Saar kept an email diary.<sup>5</sup>

She kept this diary to ensure that incidents that had taken place would not take up all our time in session. In the diary,

1. Rothschild, pp. 56-65

2. Lowen, *Depression and the Body*, pp. 193-202

3. Rothschild, pp. 135-138

4. Herman, pp. 155-162

5. Horner, pp. 116-117

she would show no mercy for herself, spewing demeaning judgments and reproaches, preferably in bold capital letters. We tried to find a solution for this. After a while, she was able to use blank spaces instead of judgments in her text, which also had a slightly comical effect. In the beginning, there were a lot of white spaces, but this became less, and the diary e-mails became much shorter as well.

Wednesday morning was our regular appointment time. In all those years, she never skipped a session. During the first phase, I gave her the possibility to talk to me on the phone in the afternoon for 15 minutes about how the morning session had landed with her.

Gradually, she started to become angry if I told her to stick to our agreements. She threatened to walk out, and felt she deserved attention because of her miserable past. This crisis gave us the opportunity to create a ritual. After the session, she would walk to a church in the main shopping street, where she would light a candle, and sometimes write in the visitor's book.

Humour was essential in working with her. She enjoyed it if something funny would happen, or that she could laugh, if in her misery she inflated things out of proportion. I remember her great sense of guilt towards her children, feeling she had failed as a mother. Through her tears, she would say: *"If my life ended, this would give my children more room in their lives."* I reacted quite spontaneously by telling her, *"You are not Jesus Christ."* She would look at me in exasperation, but laughter would break through.

## Middle Phase

Her parents passed away quite quickly within a short time of each other's death. It was an intense period of processing, and her reflections were filled with shame about the abuse, sadness, humiliation, and longing for any kind of contact. She recalled how her father looked at her, images of the attic, and his inappropriate behavior on the ferry. Lots of tears and shame.

*"He shouldn't have been with me. But when he would leave, I would feel even more awful. I wanted to be loved, and if I would enjoy the sex, he would love me. That's when he would say: See, you do like it..."*

She also wanted to be a good daughter to her mother, who was often beaten by her husband. Her need for her mother's love was in opposition to her anger that her mother had been an accomplice in the abuse. Her parents and brothers saw her as a traitor, because she had exposed the violence and abuse at the end of the eighties, when she was 29 years old.

She was seen as a completely insane woman who need-

ed to be locked up. This made it very tempting for her to actually end up there. The image that she would paint of herself was that of an overweight woman, drugged up, in a mobility scooter, who would say goodbye to her mother with tears in her eyes, because... *"she's still my mother..."*<sup>6</sup>

We also spoke about the function of therapy, which was not intended to save her life, but to give it meaning and perspective. We made agreements and developed protocols with her psychiatrist about access to crisis services.

## Creating Perspective, Giving Meaning to her Life

Singing became an important anchor for her. With a piano in my therapy space and a voice teacher I invited to join us, we began a singing experiment to open her throat, feel the power of her voice, and stay firmly balanced on her feet. We started singing improvised duets with nonsensical sentences. Initially, her falsetto voice was shaky, and she was close to losing herself. Then, she practiced the chest voice, eyes open, feet firmly on the ground. This way, she made consistent steps. She would feel the pain in her pelvis, so we would take a short break and then continue. After a while she started to take singing lessons with the teacher, in addition to our work in therapy. The approach succeeded: strong support through therapy and then something to continue doing outside the therapy setting.<sup>7</sup>

Her sensitivity to drama and opera gave us the idea for her to join an oratorio choir in a village 50 km outside Amsterdam, which performed Saint Matthew's Passion each year. She has now been a loyal member for years. I have seen their recitals, and witnessed how Saar became part of something larger than herself. Those were healing moments. Bach must have written *"Erbarme dich"* for her.<sup>8</sup>

In the aforementioned church, she met the parish priest. After speaking with him, the idea of being baptized occurred to her. He cared about her and told her, *"Welcome to the flock."*

Another positive development was that she lost a lot of weight over the course of two years. She did this completely on her own, without my prompting. She literally became more visible, and that caused a lot of tension and fear. In the end, that experience became well-integrated.

Money was also an important theme. She paid for the sessions herself. Her daughter had chronic money issues and would turn to her mother, who, because of her sense of guilt about not having been a good mother, could not refuse her, even though she didn't actually have extra funds. In desperation, Saar would throw the contents of her wallet onto the floor of my therapy space: *"Just take it, I don't need it..."*

6. Charles, pp. 65-68

7. Charles, pp. 110-111

8. Herman, pp. 214-218

We spent a lot of time talking about the value of money, and to see what she could do with it. We discussed how she could save money, and tolerate it in her wallet. After a while she started budgeting herself; she began using old-fashioned envelopes for that purpose. From that moment onward, she did not give in to her daughter's unreasonable demands.

During phases of change, we always felt as if we were walking on eggshells. After each positive development, such as singing in the choir, the baptism, a short holiday alone at a seaside Naturefriends hotel, stopping her medication, losing weight, and acknowledging the value of money, were often followed by severe setbacks.<sup>9</sup>

If things went too well, this inherently posed a threat that our therapy would end. A most familiar feeling was activated: deep distrust.

After "celebrating" her achievements, we needed to pay just as much time and attention to her deep-rooted fear of being ultimately abandoned. Moreover, her conviction that my family was perfect elicited strong feelings of jealousy towards me. Being able to work through and accept these strong ambivalent feelings was a tough job.<sup>10</sup>

Entering into conflict outside the therapy setting, with people who were emotionally important to her, was a new challenge. An important statement became: "*Saar: speak your mind!*" After her first strong experience of turbulence, and her subsequent refusal to have anything to do with that person, she took time to calm down and slowly let ripen what she wanted to express. She would write down the sentences, and use the notes for support during these hard conversations. Over the years, she had many of these types of talks, and emerged from them in a positive manner, with preserving the relationship as a major plus.

However, the disagreements between her and her husband became so intense and hopeless that she decided to get a divorce in 2014. The arguments were mostly about money, the value of her therapy, and the – according to her husband – pointless steps she was taking, like visiting museums, attending concerts, and having lunch with friends.

That she was able to develop such strength of will in the midst of this stressful period was quite a miracle. She arranged her divorce, including the entire bureaucratic paperwork, social security, and housing. When she had finally settled into her furnished apartment at the end of 2014, she realized: "This is not what I want." The distance that she put between them, literally, had helped her rise above their squabbles. She realized they had had a tough life together, and that neither of them was to blame for the situation.

To her surprise, her husband reacted the same way, and in 2015, they remarried.

## Final Phase

Returning home to Amsterdam from Heiloo late every Tuesday night became too much of a sacrifice. After looking around for a while, she found a church choir right around the corner from her house.

Around 2012, she began singing songs with her voice teacher. After two years of preparation, she gave a short concert with a small group of invited guests. The repertoire was classical, as well as popular. She invested a lot of time and care in making the programs herself, which she really enjoyed. Every other year, she gave another short concert. The small concert became an indicator that would show how self-assured she had become, how much her expression and courage had increased, and how much the quality of her singing had improved.

Over the years, she has taken several trips. She went to Rome and London with her grandchildren. She re-established contact with two former sisters-in-law who had gotten divorced from her brothers. She keeps the contact limited, as it also evokes the painful family history. These improvements showed me that the frequency of our therapy could be reduced.

We developed the mantra: "*It's time go out there with your hands free*". Naturally, she showed a lot of resistance towards reducing the frequency of our sessions. Many times, "proof" was shoved in my face that this road would lead nowhere, and that she would not be able to survive without me. "*I really cannot do without your support. The changes are only illusions anyway....*"

She completely designed the scenario for reducing the number of our sessions. This meant a gradual decline in frequency, up to the point we've now reached: four times a year.

We started with clear agreements about e-mail contact and length of sessions; however, the need for appointments is still there. The therapy might end, but our connection will remain.

Out of sight, out of mind? Being abandoned? No, but standing on her own two feet and gaining a sense of pride and self-esteem from that. The woman who didn't dare look at herself in the mirror, who scrubbed herself vigorously, is able to admit, shyly, that there is a well-dressed lady inside.

**Lucien Ulrich**  
Body psychotherapist

9. Bateman, pp. 93-102

10. Horner, pp. 73-80

## “Without a shadow of a doubt, I would go down this road again!”

Saar Bach

### The Beginning

In May 2004, my psychiatrist went to a conference in America. When she returned, she told me: “Saar, I’ve met someone. It’s just, well, he’s a man! I talked to him about you, and told him what you need. It would be good if you paid him a visit.” I called Lucien, and our first appointment was on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

On the first Wednesday morning, only I talked, and afterwards I was surprised that I told a man I had never met so much. We agreed to five visits, and then to see if it would be good for me to begin this therapy, which targeted the body. After the second appointment, it was clear that this place, this form of therapy, was good, and that I could allow a male therapist into my life. I never really had a good connection with the men in my life. I started the therapy without being able to feel anything, without being able to cry, just being able to talk. I was a zombie without feelings, who survived on autopilot. I’ve always considered all men as being exactly the same. I thought all men were the same as the man who damaged me so much. Much later, during my therapy, I was able to meet men who were actually honest and genuine.

Every week, I would have a session on Wednesday. I never stayed away, even though there were many moments I wanted to walk away – but not because I didn’t want to do the therapy and the body-related work. I wanted to run away from the many mirrors that were held up in front of me. Not knowing how to deal with this, I just felt deep fear. It took a lot of effort to take responsibility for my life. I only knew a life full of guilt and shame! I wanted to walk away, and yet I continued to feel supported and not rejected. I was invited to put my fear into words, and after such an attempt to flee, lots of tears followed.

### To Work

The therapy space is very well-lit. There is a piano, and a very large mirror. I can only look into it very briefly. There is a poem called “Healing,” with the sentence “Only Time Can Help.” There is a sofa with pillows, and a duvet. There is a stool underneath the duvet: a breathing stool. When I was finally ready to do more body-related work and started using the stool, I called it the “birthing stool.” It’s incredible what happened to me on that stool. I could allow myself to be touched. My body started to move; sound started coming out of me. I was so afraid of this. But very carefully, step by step, I started learning how to deal with it. I was surprised, but also sad because of how extremely tense my body was.

There is a tall pillow, which I have hit many times. With bare hands, or with a tennis racket. Those were the moments I realized how much anger I felt inside of me. I was hardly breathing because of all the tension inside. I was not aware of this at all. Time and time again, I was told to pay attention to my breathing. Many times when I stood in front of the pillow, I couldn’t help but laugh. My laughter hid my deep fear of having to feel what was happening inside my body. I was a zombie anyway, locked in my own suffocating shell. After the physical work, I would be shaking and crying. This was very unfamiliar; my body was responding!

In the therapy room, also called the laboratory, the atmosphere was supportive and safe for me. In this place, I could practice things before I using them in the outside world.

Money was always a burning issue. To me, money was something dirty, and out of guilt I always thought I had to give it away to my family members. I wanted to fix something, but I couldn’t fix anything. I now know that what was done to me is not my fault.

I always paid for therapy myself, and no one can take away how much this means to me.

### First Experiences

During the first few months of therapy, I was unable to comprehend what was happening to me. The therapy space made me feel calm. It was so overwhelming that I could feel welcome/safe somewhere, but I was so afraid. And meanwhile, there was a storm raging inside. I had always just swallowed everything, but it felt different this time.

Something was simmering inside, but I didn’t know what it was. I can still see how I was banging the door. I wasn’t even sent away! That’s how the first months went: I continued to talk and move, and something changed. I didn’t realize it immediately. Very carefully, when I was saying something, a mirror was held in front of me. Little by little, I got different insights, which was very shocking. I started to cry; the tears started coming. I started to feel! After this, I would say “sorry”, but that wasn’t allowed, of course (I continued to say sorry and that has sort of become a forbidden word, but I still stay sorry). “Feeling” made me very fearful, and I panicked many times. This meant that I wanted to run away, so I wouldn’t be confronted by what was coming out. At those times I would say ugly words to Lucien. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I now know that it was my way to make him say: “Madam, you should leave.”

I was so scared to be confronted by what I really felt. However, I wasn’t told to leave, but was actually invited to put into words what was touched upon inside me, that had actually made me leave myself. Oh, my shame and guilt were very big, after I’d been acting so ugly. I wasn’t even

punished for that. Lucien had a nice expression for this: *“The feeling has come to fruition inside of you, and is trying to find its way out.”* And also, that the ugliness was actually a sign that I trusted him and felt safe. Safety, support, and human kindness were things I didn’t know at all. This brought me back to feeling panicked, and full of confusion.

## Singing

A few months after starting therapy, Lucien asked me if I wanted to start singing, in addition to the sessions. I didn’t dare make a sound, and was suffocating on all the things I hadn’t said. I would say a few things, but everything was superficial. Talking about the horrible things that happened in my life was strictly banned – seriously, it could have led to the death penalty. As a child, I was told: *“I could commit murder with you, because you wouldn’t say anything anyway.”*

This is how a voice teacher entered my life. Once a month, in addition to my therapy, I would get together with Lucien and the teacher for a singing session. With their support, I was able to utter the first sounds in a manner that suited me. The sounds “o” and “a” became words. Words became sentences, and these sentences became music that was sung.

Very carefully, more sound started coming out of me. This also benefited the therapy, because I was able to feel more, and my tears came spontaneously. Carefully, step by step, it became more and more clear how I had survived and what had been done to me. I could feel my fear and sadness, but also my ANGER. I realized that I had to take responsibility for myself, and I had to take my life into my own hands. It was my fear that was limiting me. I preferred to hide in the crap and denial, because that was safe and familiar. Change for the better? I didn’t think so!

During the first years of therapy, I would always call Lucien in the afternoon after our morning session. I felt that this was enormously helpful in allowing me to process everything that had happened during the session. Sometimes I would leave a voicemail. It helped me to hear his voice. I would send an email diary. I needed this to express the things that had been very intense for me. The emails also helped me move forward. The frequency of emails was high at the start. There were a lot less as the years passed. Now, in 2018, I email one page every three weeks. And on the day before I have a session, I send the email diary. I also email on the day of the session, to reflect on it.

## Fear of Anger

Anger; oh, so many times I thought Lucien was angry with me, and I still think that sometimes. The idea that he was angry with me made me very upset. I was unable to deal with my own crap. It made me feel powerless, and it gave me the tendency to throw the negativity in his face.

I’m still stunned that he has NEVER been angry with me. He has always been honest and respectful towards me. He held a mirror in front of me until it became clear what was truly going on inside of me. I felt myself break at those moments, and that’s when the tears came. Many times I was told: *“Don’t forget to breathe.”*

I was unable to take responsibility for my own life. Life was living me and I just survived, and now I had to take responsibility for myself. *“Gosh, how do I do this?”* This was a mess that was impossible to unravel! But, step by step, I was able to do it. What I needed was to be careful and do things slowly, although I was convinced that nothing good would come of it. I was convinced that my results would be 0%, no matter what. A tiny improvement of 0.25% was already a lot, and this would make me feel very afraid.

## Structure

Clarity and structure were and are very important for me. If they don’t exist, I drown. I now know that this is a part of me and always will be; uncertainty suffocates me.

I didn’t allow myself to be angry. I would feel complete panic when I felt my own strength, because I thought strength was only negative, which was what I had experienced my entire life.

## Loyalty

I’ve always been loyal. I always had the thought, somewhere in my head, that I wasn’t entitled to anything. I always let others cross my boundaries. I drowned in my own loyalty, and was abused because of this. I thought I always had to do what somebody else demanded, because I was filthy/dirty and didn’t deserve to exist. As a little girl, I was told: *“Sit down, shut up, don’t move, don’t breathe, you’re only useful as a f.....!”* So this is how I started to act.

In therapy and also outside of it, I began experiencing very gradually that people treated me with respect and as an equal.

Step by step, Lucien’s honesty and respect made me dare to look into the mirrors he was holding in front of me. I wanted to do this, no matter how afraid I was. I told him that this confrontation helped me. What wouldn’t have helped would have been to pamper me. I would say: *“If you treat the wounds gently, they will fester!”* I think that, partially because this, I was able to follow this path.

## Anchor Points

At a certain point, Lucien made me a note with anchor points. This was intended as guidance during moments of great confusion. I would yell, on so many occasions, if anything went wrong: *“SEE!”* Of course things will go wrong again, whatever I try. I could never believe that

good things could happen in my life. If I wake up, good things will turn out to be just a dream!

When I began the anchor points book, I didn't quite understand it.

The anchor points note consists of 5 points:

- 1: Panic!
- 2: See, this always happens to me (victim).
- 3: I feel empty.
- 4: Well, these things can happen.
- 5 : Something that is nurtured will not lose its value.

This note with anchor points was created when a singing lesson was cancelled, which I was really looking forward to! Of course it didn't go through! See!

The book, the collection of notes, has become so thick that it can barely be closed now. When things get hard, I take the book and read it. I made photos of the therapy space, and I put those in this book. Many things have been written and photos have been put in. Also, the yellow post-it notes, as a form of support, help me: a simple message, or information. I can get so confused that I can't remember anything, and those are the moments a yellow note helps.

This led to the tradition that Lucien will write something in a small book at the end of the session. I sometimes read the little books that have been written, and see the big changes. These touch me deeply, and I still find these hard to believe.

## Summer Holidays

Every summer holiday was a tough period. I didn't want to say anything about it, but Lucien invited me to say what I truly felt. I felt a lot of anger; I felt abandoned, afraid that he would never come back. There was a huge discharge, and to my surprise, I felt air entering my body and we were able speak calmly.

He gave me a "holiday-word" to support me. Some of these were:

*Summer 2011: Acceptance*

*Summer 2014: Taking control*

*Summer 2016: Loved*

*Summer 2017: Persistent disbelief*

*Summer 2018: Believing in my own strength.*

## Music

Music became increasingly more important in my life. At a certain moment I dared to start singing with the voice teacher, outside the therapy space. Singing lessons followed. I took steps forward, and I even dared to take a one-day workshop in a group of about 12 people. That's when I felt the desire to sing in a choir. After this, I sang for almost 10 years in an Oratorio Choir. Such spiritual wealth, and I really love to sing! I, who didn't dare to

make a sound, look at me go. I have done this faithfully. My favorite piece of music is the Saint Matthew's Passion, and I have had the opportunity to sing this for many years. At the point when traveling to the choir every Tuesday became too much for me, I found a choir closer to home. I sang there for a year and a half, with my last Saint Matthew's Passion as a beautiful closure.

## Faith

The Saint Matthew's Passion awoke a deep desire that I had hidden for a long time. There was no faith in our house; it was mocked. The only faith in my family was abuse and violence. When I came home, I did research on the internet on how I could be baptized, despite not having been raised in any kind of faith. I met the parish priest and told him what I wanted, and why. I spoke with him many times. At some point he said to me: "*Saar, welcome to our flock*".

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, in the company of a small group of people, I was baptized in his church.

## Concerts

In 2013 I found my current singing/piano teacher. I started studying songs with him, from classical to popular. I started going once a month, and this eventually became three times a month.

He taught me so much about singing. We work hard, but we also have fun. From alto, I began singing soprano.

After discussions with him and Lucien, we decided to have a small concert in the therapy space. The first performance was in June 2014, the next one in 2016, and the third in June 2018. The last concert made me very happy, but also very confused! I could feel how I was singing within my own strength, showing myself, in the presence of others, even.

## Setbacks and Getting back up Again

I still don't know how to deal with certain moments. I freeze and feel myself becoming very small. But that's when I hear Lucien's voice in my head: "*What do you need? How can you send yourself in the right direction?*" This helps me a lot. I now dare to speak about things on my own initiative. There is still fear, but I know that it's still better to do something than to remain passive.

That's when I think about his email of April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009: "*Your trauma is painful, but most important, in the end, is to live your own life. This is actually a bigger trauma than your incest story.*" I can admit how recognizable this is for me.

The abuse and the violence of the family that I come from has led to the feeling that I don't come from anywhere and don't know anything about life. Let alone that I know how to live my own life; this is strictly forbidden, and I don't have the courage to stray away from that. Many times I

have said that I am brain-dead. There is nothing in my head, I have not been able to develop myself. I had to, I now think, subconsciously do everything I could to survive. That was quite a job in itself.

By now, I've come to realize that creativity and music are very important to me, and I'm very happy with the input and stimulation of books, museums, and movies.

## Divorce and Remarriage

I always had the hope and illusion that my family would change along with me through everything that I learned throughout the years, and that they would be able to see it as well. I can't say that I am not disappointed about that.

In 2014 this even led to divorce, after 44 years of marriage. I couldn't take it anymore. My husband and I are so different and also have very different interests. We had more and more fights and the situation became unbearable for me.

I had to choose for myself and what was once horrible, I really needed: living on autopilot without any feelings. I still don't know how I did it. I arranged a house, the financing, and all the paperwork myself. I now realize that I needed the divorce to get closer to myself and cut the awful ties with my past. Or, to stand on my own two feet. My general practitioner said: *"Congratulations with the enormous step you dared to take to put your past further behind you..."*

I married again. Half a year after the divorce, and yes, with the same man, but this time I very consciously made my own choices. We are still very different and many times I have difficulties and feel misunderstood, but I still want to be with my husband.

## Losing Weight

At a certain moment I felt like I wanted to lose my weight. I wanted to eat away my misery. I was hiding. I started to understand that eating away my misery didn't help. I was so tired of my weight, and I lost 43 kg/95 lbs. Until now, I've stayed reasonably balanced. I'm still in disbelief that I was able to do this, very consciously and caring towards myself. I, who had never taken care of myself. This was the very first step in taking care of my health.

## Disbelief about Change

My disbelief is still quite huge. I simply cannot believe what my life has become. I have worked very hard over the past few years, with great positive changes for me. I feel really emotional about this!

It's still hard to accept that my loneliness, heaviness, somberness, sadness, and disbelief are a part of me. But I am now able, much to my surprise, to accept and speak about these feelings and judgments.

I still find it very hard to accept change. I need time to get used to it, even if the changes are positive.

I still think that people can see what happened to me, just by looking at me. I would love to go somewhere and drink tea by myself, but I haven't dared to do this yet.

## Loyalty and Trust

I am now able to say that I am a loyal person. I always try to keep appointments, and won't just stay away. In all these years, I've never missed a therapy session. There have been occasions when an agreement about emailing didn't work out, and I'm still very unhappy and ashamed about this. I know that I have done this extra emailing in a panic or crisis situation, and then I talk about it with Lucien.

Sometimes I'm surprised by situations that make me feel very small. That's when I change into an ice cube, and completely shut down. I lose all my oversight, and panic rules supreme. When we talk about this in therapy, it becomes clearer to me. This literally gives me more air, and I can move forward. Also, this is one of the many things that are a part of me. I know that I am a complicated woman with deep scars. I still have a hard time accepting this.

When I see emotion in others, it moves me, and makes me quiet and happy – that there are people who dare to show themselves and show their respect for me.

I still fall into the trap of deep mistrust. It's hard work to climb out of it and restore my faith in others. I do recognize this process much quicker, and try to find the right path for myself. There have been moments that I needed to stay in a rehabilitation center or I needed to be committed. This is a thing of the past. What I need is time, space, rest.

When we talked about time-outs, we came up with the plan to go to Bergen aan Zee. I really like going there. It's a nice place to be, and walk by the sea. Once I wrote my name in the sand. I felt touched when the flood washed away my name; it felt like a part of me was washed clean!

## Winding Down

In 2013, Lucien proposed that I start coming every other week instead of every week. This seemed an impossible step. I was convinced that I would need therapy every week for the rest of my life. I had to wind down the process in a very supportive and safe manner, which gave me full control. For the time being, I would have a session every two weeks. And I would decide when I was ready for the next step.

So it went, step by step. I would also send fewer emails. But I knew that if the need was at its height, I could turn to him. This helped me take these steps.

In 2014, I took the leap to once every three weeks, and once again I had great doubts and uncertainty about my

ability to take this step.

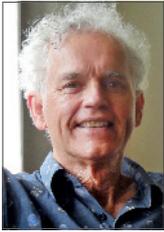
After the summer of 2015 came the hardest part: to come up with a frequency that I could agree with. I was in control, and told Lucien how much I struggled with this, but that I would be kidding myself if I didn't try these steps. So, we went to once every four weeks. I am also ready to take more control of things myself. But I would say regularly: "Remove the decreased frequency from your calendar; it will not work out."

I did it one step at a time. After every change, I took the time to get used to it, after which I would be able to take the next step. This kept adding one extra week at a time, forcing nothing, but my fear was great. I was so afraid to lose him and others. Saar, you are on your own. But that was not the case at all. That's how I worked towards October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, convinced that I could handle this. On that day, the frequency was lowered to once every three months, and that's how it will remain. It gives me peace of mind and security.

During the last period I went to an exposition of Ans Wörtel, a local anarchistic artist in Bergen. I had never heard of her before. I didn't know her work and was touched by it. So purely herself, without caring about what others think. An inspiration for me. She was an autodidact. I learned another word. This means a person who has gained knowledge through self-study! I have no education, learned nothing, but now I think: "Wow, I've learned so much over the past years! I want to figure out my own path with my painting and music!"

Last year I said to Lucien: "Thank you; you have given me back my life." I mean that sincerely: I never lived; I survived. I know that I worked hard, looked in many mirrors, went through the lowest of lows. But with his support and safety, I've been able to reach the point that I am at now, at the end of 2018.

**Saar Bach**  
The client



**Lucien Ulrich** is a body psychotherapist trained by Bill Solomon and Bob Zimmerman. He has been practicing in Amsterdam since 1990, treating patients in individual and group therapy as well as holding men's groups and singing workshops.

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**Saar Bach** is married with two children. She is a grandmother and great grandmother. Around 1988, she made her incest history public and went to court. This was the start of many years of turbulence which included psychiatric treatment, medication, hospitalization, and a deep crisis in her marriage. She was completely rejected by her family because of her betrayal. In 2004, her psychiatrist referred her to body psychotherapy.

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