

The Chess Set by Jean'Py

I'm a very kind chess player. I have played for a few months. When I first met friends who played chess, it was on a Wednesday at Freedom from torture, after a therapy session. One of my friends invited me to join them in the chess club. The room was completely quiet.

There are people who are very clever – you can't beat them. If it happens that somebody tries and fails, the room erupts in laughter. But otherwise it's quiet.

Once I was in the room where they were playing, I was both confused and at the same time a little bit excited. Confused, why? Because I didn't know the rules of the game, the names of the pieces and how they're laid out – the whole composition. Excited, why? Because I was ready to learn a new game.

The leader of the chess group took care of me by explaining the rules of the game and everything else - even though it was a lot to take in and not easy to understand. At first, I was quite a weak player myself. After three sessions of teaching, I was ready to play with my friends, but wondered why I lost game after game. Day after day I tried very hard to improve, by following a careful plan. I couldn't believe how much time and effort it took to improve. I felt I was doing something wrong and wasting my time. But it was not so. It was not a waste. The effort of improving was the key.

It taught me the value of persevering.

It was like fighting with myself: why are you losing? You need to win. But I learned that I had to have patience with myself, to be kind to myself, in order to have time to learn. And that was something I was able to take away from that room, into the rest of my life. I understood as well that chess is not just about winning, but developing your mind, your ability to plan and strategise.

And to imagine.

I found myself downloading a chess app onto my phone, which I would play against myself on the way there and on the way back home.

By spending almost two hours every Wednesday playing chess at Freedom from Torture, and about an hour every day on the app, I started to win some games, and gained confidence. That confidence carried over into the rest of my life. Sometimes you have ups and downs and you have to be confident that you can survive them.

The chess pieces and their names are evocative. You have the king and queen, the knights and the bishops – and they are also the institutions of this country. And the castles: all those landlords with their huge estates. Some people, like those landlords, go straight for what they want. Some, like the bishops, are cunning and take a sideways route. The Queen can go where she wants. And when the Queen goes, the game is over. I can't imagine this country without the Queen.

But the little pawn has to go very slowly, step by step, to get where it wants to go. And it only gets there by persevering.

I don't want to lose in life. But losing in chess was helping me to learn. You lose because you make mistakes, but you learn from those mistakes. And day by day you gain wisdom and knowledge.

Before starting, I can have many things in my head. I might not have money, means to get to the game - it's not easy. But once you sit down, you are there, your concentration and focus are there, because you want to win. When you are there, playing with friends, you want to win. And in order to win, you have to concentrate on what's in front of you. All your mind has to be there.

And so I understood why it was part of therapy.

So here I am, just a pawn in the game. But I know now that even a pawn can win.