

Talk to the Royal College of Psychiatrists

(05 June 2015)

Introduction

I was brought up believing that it was not polite to ask, directly, for anything. After my 'crisis moments' I was always embarrassed that I had caused so much fuss and I became very apologetic and very "compliant". My biggest problem has been self-stigma. I believed I was creating a "fuss about nothing". Every time I was turned away by professionals I felt I was being told to "get real" and grow up. I considered my negative thinking to be 'realistic' and my story will show that I reached the stage of preferring to remain 'in the gutter', because there I couldn't be kicked any lower. Although I was diagnosed with depression at the age of 20, it is only now, in my 50s, that I am beginning to understand my own depression.

Formative years

My mother died when I was 9, having been diagnosed with breast cancer when she was just 40 years old. My father re-married when I was 12 and I retreated to my bedroom for most of the time. I was abused by my brother, and separately by my step-brother, during my teenage years until I left home and went to University. During my second year away I fell pregnant and was 'encouraged' to have an abortion. Being brought up as a catholic this did not sit easily with me and I was diagnosed with depression a few months later. I was given some medication in the short term but in the long term I just had to 'get on with my life'.

From married life till my breakdown in 2000

But, a few years later my life seemed very rosy indeed. I got married in 1982 and was fortunate to live in The Bahamas for four years, due to my husband's work, and we had two beautiful sons. However, shortly before my second son was born, my husband became abusive towards me. 18 months later, feeling completely trapped, I took a large overdose as I felt this was my only way out.

The marriage ended soon after returning to the UK, but I managed to raise my two sons, now age 32 and 30, on my own. I struggled during the recession, going bankrupt and losing my home, but my fortune changed when I went on a 'basic computer literacy' course in 1994. After a further 8 months of studying I became an IT Tutor, then later I worked for Microsoft, eventually building a successful career working as a self-employed IT Consultant. Then suddenly my father died and a year later, in October 2000, I suffered a major breakdown. I walked around my house in the early hours of the morning, collecting all my meds together then I sat in the lounge counting out 1200 plus tablets, wanting to take them but knowing I couldn't because of my boys. I managed to phone NHS Direct, who insisted that I phone my GP. I was taken to the local psychiatric hospital, assessed briefly by a psychiatrist, given a prescription for venlafaxine and sent home, embarrassed and ashamed.

Moving to Cambridge

Whilst still vulnerable I was drawn into yet another relationship that turned out to be abusive... verbally, psychologically and financially. It took me six years, & three attempts to escape, before I was finally able to end the relationship, by moving to Cambridge to be closer to my sister. I found a good job and somewhere lovely to live but I continued to be harassed by my ex-partner and in October 2006, late one night, I spiralled out of control...

"I'm in a dark black hole that's getting deeper and deeper. It's pouring with rain & as I try to climb out the sides begin to collapse & I fall back into the thick black mud.

"Everyone is standing at the top saying 'well, come on then, climb out! You know the only one who can help you is you' - Well I've been trying for nearly 30 years & I'm so very tired. I've lost the will to keep on trying. I just want to let the mud engulf me and put an end to the countless hours of grief & misery. I hate myself so much. None of you can hate me more than I hate myself."

I drove off to a place that I thought was in the middle of nowhere. I drank two bottles of wine and took every pill I could find. I was found two days later by the police after

someone had reported seeing me in my car, two days running. They were concerned because I had not moved.

The following day I was assessed by Liaison Psychiatry and sent home, to my sister's, later that afternoon. Despite my overdose I received little to no help for my depression. I remained on venlafaxine and two weeks later I was back at work, the whole sordid matter being quickly brushed under the carpet.

I never quite recovered and, in March 2008, I lost my job because I was no longer able to 'work to the required standard' despite being 'micro-managed'. With the recession in full flow, looking for work just added to my depression and I was made homeless, albeit briefly, in 2009 before being housed in a council flat 8 miles out of Cambridge. At the same time my sister and her husband moved abroad. I felt lonely, desperate and abandoned.

My years of despair

My depression worsened, exacerbated by limited income, and I withdrew into my own shell. My sleeping pattern became totally erratic - "duvet days" became the norm. When I was awake I did very little except sit in my lounge staring at the clock, my mind full of negative thoughts. My only reason to get dressed was a weekly 10 minute appointment with my GP, followed by an anxious, flying visit to the supermarket. Days turned into weeks, which turned into months and then years. Every day I felt the same and I gave up caring...

*I have nothing,
I feel nothing.
I am nothing.
I am no-one,
I am just carrion.*

*I am alive
but dead.*

*I have
no value,
no purpose.*

*I feel disconnected,
discarded,
disgusted at myself.*

*'I think therefore I am'
but I do not want to think.
I shouldn't **have** to think -
I am just carrion.*

In March 2011 my benefits were suddenly stopped. I saw no future, no way forward - "existence is futile" echoed continuously around in my brain until I felt so hopeless I took a massive overdose, ending up in Addenbrookes once more. Yet again I was discharged the following day... **the same meds, the same non-existent help, the same feelings of despair.** I was driven home by the Crisis Team and they reported to my GP that **"I seemed brighter than the last time they saw me"**! There was a distinct lack of professional help. I was left feeling that I needed to "pull myself together", that there was really nothing wrong with me. In June I finally got to see a psychiatrist. I said that I didn't think that venlafaxine was working for me. She stated that she couldn't change my meds while I was still depressed, though she did at least recommend that I was assessed for CBT. That said, she commented that I was **"probably too high risk"**!

My turning point...

In December 2011 I was finally offered 12 weeks of CBT but the following March, just as I was getting back on my feet, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. This knocked me back quite hard. The ambiguity I felt about my breast cancer rang alarm bells for my psychologist. But, incredibly, this was my turning point!!

My psychologist put my name forward for a clinical trial for "Long Term, Treatment Resistant Depression" and amazingly I was allocated to the treatment arm of the trial. I was under the care of a psychiatrist, who saw me every two months, and a psychologist and CPN who saw me weekly... For an entire year I received intensive, holistic care that covered everything, including my physical health!! I was allowed to come off venlafaxine and I was given a choice about which medication to try next. With the help and support of the entire team, by the end of the trial I was able to say, at long last, that my depression was in "remission"!

The Recovery College & Peer Support Work

At the end of the trial a few of us agreed to form a support group and Richard, our psychologist, managed to secure a room within the Recovery College for us to hold our meetings. Being frequent visitors to the Recovery College, we then heard about the Peer

Employment Training Orientation Day. Kathy was very keen to attend and I went along mainly to support her. By the end of the Orientation Day I was totally enthralled by what was said and I decided, tentatively, to take away an application form.

That was how I came to read an amazing article by Dr. Patricia Deegan - "Recovery as a Journey of the Heart". I began to understand that **Recovery from Mental Health Challenges is not only possible, Recovery is our right!** (It's a very enlightening read, so the article will be made available on your website should you wish to read it for yourself.) It was this article that convinced me to apply to become a student on the Peer Support Worker course. Kathy and I were both fortunate to be accepted onto the course and we graduated, **with flying colours**, in January this year!!

Since January I have been volunteering at the Recovery College for one, and sometimes two, days each week, helping out with admin work and tutoring on some of the courses... and I have developed a new database system for the college. (*My previous life as an IT consultant is now becoming relevant again!*)

Last month there was an opportunity to apply for a job as a Peer Support Worker at the Recovery College and I am **exceedingly proud to say** that I am now employed by CPFT, job-sharing with Kathy, 2 days a week!!

I now feel hopeful about the future and I feel a sense of belonging again, but I am very aware that I have lost 7 years of my life. 7 years imprisoned by my self-stigma, with no real help until the trial. Whilst the treatment I received on the trial was no doubt costly, the cost to society, and to myself, by **not** treating me was **far greater**.

I now understand my depression much more and I am more self aware. If I do start to slide I hope I will have the courage to ask for the help I deserve. I am determined to never sink that low ever again. My self-esteem and self worth are stronger than they have been in a long time. Although I don't know what's around the next corner, at least now I have the strength, courage and determination to take the steps that will lead me around that corner!