

‘I felt appalling — I couldn’t bear my own company’

Depression has always seemed an ineffectual name for an affliction with infinite varieties. My illness — I prefer to call it “mind spiders” or “relentless f***ing misery disease” — was triggered by bullying. As a clever, tall seven-year-old I was moved up a school year and missed a year of socialising. Gangly, nerdy and ginger, when I went to secondary school, I was a plum target.

By 12 I felt isolated and awkward, so when a fog settled in my mind, I barely realised it was happening. Maybe I was just a bad child who didn’t deserve happiness. Depression is exquisitely good at papering itself over your personality. How do you know you are ill when your only barometer of normal is what’s inside your head?

In my teens, my normal became my mind screaming at me daily. I had the self-esteem of a potato. Feeling constantly anxious, occasionally cutting my wrist to release the build-up of pressure in my head — that was normal. I loved drama and reading, anything that let me become someone else.

From 13 onwards, when alone I endured suffocating periods of terror that felt endless. I also experienced anxiety, which often prevented me from sleeping. It should have been obvious that all was not well, but despite the fact that one in four people in Britain experiences a mental health problem each year, realising that person is you can be tricky.

Mental health problems, I thought, were something that happened to other people. Yes, I felt appalling 60 per cent of the time and couldn’t bear my own company but still: I had friends, and by 16, a steady boyfriend. I got good exam results. I had a life. It was everything outside that life that was a problem.

When I started my languages degree at Durham University in 2000, it felt like a wonderful escape. I adored life. Sports, clubs and college meant I didn’t have to be alone. I existed in an ever-fluctuating series of mood swings, drinking too much and behaving like a firework that burns out and relights seconds later. I would fire on all cylinders, and then dip, and be so exhausted I didn’t even have the energy to sleep.

Unsurprisingly, I started to fail part of my course and the fear of losing this place where I felt safe became overpowering. I felt shame about feeling broken. Talking to other sufferers, I’ve realised what an obstacle that is to getting help. We are judged on our personalities: what do you do when yours seems to be faulty?

I finally went to my family doctor midway through my second term, aged 18, when I had had a particularly nasty anxious episode. I was blissfully relieved to hear that wanting not to exist and having a suicide plan was not normal. I

was given antidepressants but no diagnosis — not that that would have mattered, it was just lovely to know my head could change.

By the time I left that doctor’s surgery clutching a prescription, I had long made my home life a misery. Take your stereotypical teenage nightmare, multiply it by explosive rage and screaming, and you have the joy that was me for several years. I was so frustrated that my parents couldn’t understand — or solve — the fizzing anxiety in my head which I couldn’t explain either. Depression is as singular as the mind, which is deeply unhelpful for both the sufferer and the person wanting to help.

Caring for a friend or relative with depression can be extremely hard, particularly if they won’t admit that they are ill or don’t know. My mum recently told me that she and my dad did a lot of work, such as talking to my GP, which I



never noticed, locked as I was in a prison of panic and isolation.

Things stabilised when I was 20, thanks to new medicine and good friends. When I came back from my year abroad, most of my fabulous party friends had graduated. I made new friends in student theatre and journalism and became better friends with girls from my course. I wasn't good at speaking about how I was feeling to my friends but it helped that I regained some focus.

Aged 21, and heading towards my finals, I was still struggling to sleep and I insisted on getting some sleeping pills that actually worked. Given my history, the doctor was reluctant to prescribe too many. I ended up with four Temazepam in total and guarded them like jewels for really bad occasions, like when I hadn't been able to work, or felt unmanageably exhausted and low. I also went on Fluoxetine (another antidepressant) and felt more balanced than I had done in years.

Depression doesn't only cause misery; it has other superpowers. However well I seemed to do, I felt like a fraud. When I started working as a journalist in 2005, I was desperate to impress in my personal and work relationships. I put myself under intense pressure and I made bad choices in who I dated and how much I drank, all of which made me stressful to be around.

But the cloud slowly began to lift — I don't know why. It could have been the

routine of adult life and work that helped, or it could just be that my mind changed and I grew out of it. I still felt insecure but the depressive lows began to pass. My mind seemed less jagged. I came off medication in 2007 at age 24, and began to wobble towards healing. I started exercising, first by walking to work, then a bit of jogging. Feeling kindness towards my body was a huge step and something my mind had never allowed me before.

I finally spoke out about depression in 2011 when one of the funniest, brightest girls in my school year took her life weeks before her 30th birthday. I felt total fury at depression for stealing her away from the people who loved her. I wanted to do something, anything. After writing about it, I joined the media

advisory board for Time to Change, which campaigns against mental health stigma. I started running seriously in 2013, raising money for the charity Mind, and last year I ran the London Marathon for them.

After experiencing a dip two years ago, I tried cognitive behavioural therapy. Thanks to a brilliant therapist I finally addressed all the stuff I'd packed away: my self-esteem; feeling almost alien because of my untypical appearance (I am 6ft 1in); keeping loved ones at a distance in case they realised the real me was too rubbish to care for. I kept the odd note on my phone. One reads: "Today I suspect we got to the crux of the matter with Doctor Steve, 'It sounds as though you think you are defective.'" That hit the nail on the head. Speaking to people about depression has meant a trail of discoveries that seem glaringly obvious, but aren't when you're alone.

These days, I have contingency plans for when I get that prod of barbed wire to the head. I'm more aware of the links between my body and mind, and the limitations of each. My diary is no longer triple-loaded and chaotic. Music and exercise are important, whether parkrun (5km timed runs) and breakfast with friends on a Saturday, or singing in a choir. The routine, camaraderie and beauty of music helped me feel calmer.

I am now, age 32 and 20 years down the line, at a stage where I can acknowledge that sometimes my brain will act in a way that is not "me". That may never change. But the fact I realise I am not less of a person because of it makes all the difference.

I can now feel dispassionate about my depression. But it is telling that I only really feel confident speaking about it when I am not connected to it on a daily basis. For people who suffer constantly, speaking up can be extremely difficult. Knowing that other people have been there is crucial because depression feeds on shame and fear. It sneaks up on people in the isolation of their own head.

Kat Brown

More information: time-to-change.org.uk; mind.org.uk

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