

Stigma



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When someone mentions mental health, that usually leads into a conversation which carries a heavy luggage: **STIGMA**.

Somehow, people forgot to see a human being as a whole entity, composed by the homeostasis between an individual's physical and emotional aspects.

Early in my life, around teenage years, I became someone different from my peers. Something strange was happening to me, I wasn't feeling well at all and despite all clear physical medical check-ups, I was still a 14-year-old girl in emotional pain and missing out the experience of growing up. High school times, teenage brain, and a massive need to fit in and belong were completely trashed and violently unmet by the impact of some strange words I had never heard before: agoraphobia, anxiety and depression. Society conditions people to think that growing up is a blissful experience. Young people, so free from demands and responsibilities, are expected to be careless and happy. Eventually, when this doesn't happen, a heavy stigma and culture of judgement tend to prevail.

Closed at home most of the time, dreading to face others or the world around me and trying to figure out through several routes (GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, homeopaths, acupuncture...), what could be done to help me out of that darkness quickly became my routine. At the end of the day and against societal pressures and expectations, I wasn't that happy teenager I was meant to be.

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I think it is particularly hard for young people to face mental health's stigma. While trying to explore and discover their own identity, find their place in the world and become more independent and self-sufficient individuals, they still must juggle the complex art of fitting in, find their tribe(s) while somehow marking their presence with a hint of uniqueness and character. Is there any time, head space or maturity for recognising and understanding their internal world? Even more importantly, have these young people ever been thought about their wholeness and supported to learn how emotions can impact them physically? How fair is it then to expect them to smoothly grow and be "happy" (whatever that concept means) whilst not even being able to fully understand or verbalise their internal processes?

Going back to my story, it was a long path. As the years went by, my fears kept growing at a fast pace and they consumed a big part of my life. The so important connections and social network became smaller and smaller. We wouldn't talk much about what was happening to me, others kept living the expected experience of youth life while I stayed behind fighting my battles.



I eventually entered university. I've decided to study Psychology undoubtedly because I loved it however I believe that part of that love for understanding and supporting others may have derived from my own internal need for being understood and supported. My anxiety manifested itself in a really physical way. I was constantly unwell, unable to attend classes and almost unable to leave my home.

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At the peak of my mental health struggles, home became a threatening place too. Without a safe haven, some days of my life were spent in a full alert mode. My brain was constantly scanning for ANY perceived threats keeping me on my toes, breaking me down, making it hard to breath, taking away my appetite, making me struggle to sleep while feeling absolutely exhausted, with no energy or motivation. Panic attacks were more and more frequent with a worsening of symptoms. I am really grateful for the support of my amazing parents and my boyfriend at the time (now my husband) because there's no doubt they kept me alive. I became extremely dependent.



Recovery is a long-term process. I must say my life went to lots of ups and downs. I've finished my degree - must confess I felt really proud at that instant, obviously because of the achievement itself and the milestone reached in my personal and professional career but most of all for being able to do so while enduring so much suffering. In the same year I got married to the love of my life. My mental health reached a stability stage.

Abruptly, a decision to move to a new country was made and I landed in Scotland. Not an easy move. I'm an only child and as mentioned above I was highly dependent and attached to my parents, especially after missing out so much in terms of social development and relationships building.

It was tough, I can't deny it. But still, I made it. We are stronger than we think and frequently that only becomes known when we are tested to the limits.

Stigma



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Following on that, things have once again alternated between coping periods and times of struggle. When my daughter was born, my emotional structure got shaken again: post-natal depression. Sometimes I feel embarrassed for so many labels, definitions and things that through time have been "attached" to me. I'm not particularly passionate about a clinical approach to mental health or the indiscriminate use of jargon. For me it's the people who matter and whatever they are feeling regardless ticking boxes from medical books.

More than being embarrassed by labels and judgements, I now try to tell myself to accept that in fact I'm resilient and strong. I may be more prone to suffer from mental ill health due to various factors, and my recovery pathway will be long if not for life, however, I'm still here! I fought all the battles up to today and will fight any other than may come, every day with more awareness, understanding, insight but more importantly with more gradually built self-compassion.

Since the birth of my baby girl things spiralled down significantly. On the day she turned 3 I was admitted into a mental health hospital. I was absolutely heartbroken as a mother, despite knowing that it was the most responsible decision to take. Today I'm grateful for how much I've learned from that experience.



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Behind the locked doors of a psychiatric ward is a place full of compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. The ones who are there in the same position as you, try to make you feel a little less alone and they try to reassure you that you're not as terrible a person as you think you are and that you are worthy of love.

I remember their names, their faces, their stories and the warmth they offered to my heart when I needed the most, asking nothing in return. From then my life restarted. Rather than surviving I slowly started to live. It took baby steps, taking small risks, listening to my needs and relearning my place in the world. Volunteering, starting to work again, having another child. Years went past and I rose from the ashes.



I must say this wasn't an easy road, even after being in hell and climbing back to life I had moments when I doubted, when I felt I couldn't keep going when I thought the ghosts from the past would be able to drag me back. But this is RECOVERY – a bumpy road; a road where you meet people that hold your hand but even more often people that put you to the test; a road when you sometimes feel that you can run while others you can barely walk; a road where, in my case, I found out I am often my worst enemy but being aware that I am as well the only one who can save me and the only one who truly knows what it feels to be me.

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That's Mindspace's mission and why I am so proud to be part of it. Supporting people through their unique recoveries. Empowering them and accepting them for who they are. Either young people or adults, no one should struggle alone because together we are certainly stronger.



I chose to fight stigma, I chose to embrace uniqueness and life worriers and warriors. Despite being reluctant to share my story I realised that by doing so I would be portraying my mission. Silence consumes you while taking the risk to be vulnerable in appropriate circumstances can inspire others, show them they're not alone and that it is possible to win. I am proud of conquering, not a war, but a massive number of daily tiny victories.

