

It's Okay Not To Be Okay: Anxiety and Me...

One of the things that we need to do on our mental health and wellbeing journey is to continually fight the stigma surrounding the subject. Our school council and Squad 19 are helping with this as they are reinforcing the message that it's okay not to be okay. We are helping to empower our children to understand subjects such as anxiety and what to do when our wellbeing is compromised. In school we run an intervention called Friends For Life, which is a programme that seeks to normalise and remedy anxious states. Our staff have been trained in emotional coaching and we promote and encourage speaking out and seeking help when things get on top of us. I feel proud to work in a school where my colleagues are deeply committed, first and foremost, to the wellbeing and safety of our children.

Our journey towards continued positive mental health involves the whole school community - our children, our staff and our parents. We encourage everyone to take advantage of our open door policy. Reaching out and verbalising our worries (or even writing them down) is the first step in getting help. It can be hard - as I have already mentioned, we recognise how powerful stigma is. This is why I am writing this - to share my own experiences in the hope that it may resonate with others and deconstruct some of the shame and embarrassment that mental health issues often carry with them.

Sitting comfortably? Then I shall begin...

For the last few weeks, anxiety has shaken me awake in the middle of the night and left me in a bit of a state: heart racing, gasping for breath, drowning in my own cold sweat. All at once, I'm terrified and puzzled - my body rages with the physical signs of stress but as I calm down, I'm mystified as to where this mental spike has come from. The aftershocks of the panic attack keep me awake for hours. Some nights, I will give up and get up, even though it's not yet four in the morning. The next day will often be a write-off. I'll generally be so exhausted I could spontaneously face-plant at any second. Not only that, a lingering feeling of inexplicable unease will lurk in the shadows of my day, putting me on edge.

The simple truth is that I've lived with anxiety for the majority of my life, on and off. To some, this comes as a surprise. The fact that I experience anxiety is contrary to the preconceived notions that people have about me and how I generally present. I think that I'm generally regarded as confident and upbeat. Most of the time, I'd agree. I like to think of myself as a ball of optimism and energy. Most of the time, I believe that everything is fixable and that ultimately, everything will be okay. And I really do. Most of the time. I smile, I'm quick with a joke and a pithy comeback. I see the humour in everything. Most of the time.

But now and again, anxiety will elbow itself into my life uninvited, claiming squatters rights. It's horrible. It's also somatic: it will run me down and give me styes, cold sores, tonsillitis and huge bags under my eyes. It will happily dispatch an upset stomach my way. My body becomes the enemy as it waves a white flag and submits to it.

For me, anxiety is a shapeshifter. It's less of a worry and more of an unknown dread. Sometimes it's like a mental toothache - a nagging irritation that I have to tolerate until it gets bored and leaves me alone. At other times, it's a sucker punch to a good mood - a spiteful little pin to my happy balloon. It will introduce itself as a schizophrenic whisper in the ear. It's a con man, a liar, trying it's hardest to convince me of terrible untruths. It will fill me with fear without reason. It will make me doubt myself. It will make me deeply and unapologetically antisocial. It will make me feel frightened but not give me a reason why I feel that way.

It will create arguments in my head. I will pre-empt situations, focusing on potential conflicts with certain people and act things out in my head. It's like Japanese knotweed, escalating like wildfire: I'll think of what someone might say to me or about me and then come back with a counter argument. This will go back and forth, over and over, in my head. As I'm rowing with myself, I'll feel hurt, spite, rage, rejection. It will be exhausting.

And then nothing will happen. Nothing at all.

All my fears will be unfounded. It's a bit like the Millenium bug or those people who take to the streets to warn us that the end of the world is nigh: lots of panic, hard work and stress for nothing. As I mentally sober up, I'll feel like I'm going crazy. Anxiety will smirk as it hands me over to its partner in crime, self-loathing.

So what helps?

I try and do mindfulness, but it's hard. I try and breathe and stay with my breath, but my mind races. It's like I'm trying to find sanctuary in the eye of the storm but once I'm there, I struggle to ignore the raging mess flying around it. I can do it when I'm in the mood, but I need it most when I'm not in the mood which is ironic.

Music helps. I have a playlist to fit every mood. It drowns out the negativity. It distracts me until I forget.

Exercise helps. It's just that I often can't be bothered. Anxiety see. It tells me not to!

Talking helps. I'm lucky because I have a fantastic circle around me. That said, I worry because I don't want to inflict my anxiety on anybody else. The last thing I want to do is drag people down with me. I fight this hard and make sure that I do open up and talk to someone. I also talk to the universe. I suppose it's a bit like a prayer. That might sound weird, but hey ho. I start most days by putting out there what I want to achieve that day and what I can offer in return. Sometimes I feel ridiculous doing it but I persist anyway, because afterwards I feel better.

Writing helps. I feel better when I let my fingers loose across the keyboard. It's therapy. Speaking of which, I highly recommend it. Being free in a safe space is liberating for the soul. I don't care how that might make me sound. It's true. Stuff has come out in my therapy sessions that I didn't even realise was there. Over the years, certain things - emotions and feelings - had become stuck without me even realising. Being able to address and reframe them has helped no end. There's no shame in going to see a counsellor. For me, it's mental magic.

Positive self talk helps. Consciously reminding myself that my anxious voice is wrong helps. It's a constant battle when I'm afflicted, but again, I try and force myself to do it.

Cleaning helps. Pass me the Hoover and the bleach, will you? What's that about? Control?

Being kind helps. I don't care if there's no such thing as a truly altruistic act. I like being kind to others. Someone once told me that compassion, courtesy and kindness costs nothing and therefore we can afford to be generous with it. It changed my life.

I wonder if this will be a lifelong fight. I hope not. Like everyone, I just want to be happy and for the most part, I am. I really am. But now and again, this thing comes at me and I have no choice other than to mentally adopt the crane pose from The Karate Kid. I will not be beaten!

I'm not quite sure how to end this diatribe so all I will say is be kind to yourself and to other people. You really don't know what they're going through.

If you're reading this and you recognise elements of yourself or your own experience, I invite you to come and talk to us. The kettle is on. Check out the external support directory on the mental health and wellbeing section of the website. Reach out. Get help. Get happy.

Harrow Horizons <https://b.barnardos.org.uk/harrowhorizons.htm>

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

0800 58 58 58

Young Minds Parents Helpline:

0808 802 554

Mind Harrow: <http://directory.mindinharrow.org.uk/>

Take care,

Mr Courtney