

Anorexia Boy Recovery

A mother's blog about her teenage son's recovery from anorexia

Part V – 2015

BEV MATTOCKS

© Bev Mattocks 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

The blog posts on which this book is based are written from a personal perspective and express personal opinions and points of view. Therefore they might differ from someone else's perspective and opinions of the same events. However, to the author's recollection, all events described here did take place. To protect identities and respect confidentiality, most names have been changed. Any resemblance of these names to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Please note: this book is written as a source of information only and should never be treated as a substitute for advice, decisions or judgment of a medical or other adviser, clinician or practitioner.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

The content for this book is taken from my blog. As a result, it is written like a diary. Accurate English grammar and correct sentence construction were not at the forefront of my mind; I simply wanted to get my thoughts and experiences down “on paper”. Therefore, in places, it might not flow perfectly. I also dart around from one topic to another, some days looking back and others writing about whatever was going on in our lives at that present moment. There is also some repetition; I may describe the same event a number of times to remind my readers of a key event that occurred earlier in my son’s journey to recovery.

As you would expect from a blog, there are days when I’m angry, days when I’m frustrated, days when I’m reflective and days when I offer advice based on our own experiences of what worked and what didn’t. It’s important, therefore, to judge these posts as being “of the moment”, chronicling my current point of view and feelings. What you see here is also my own personal recollection of events. Other people’s opinions and recollections of the same events might differ.

Most importantly, the information provided in this book is not meant to be used, nor should it ever be used, to diagnose or treat anorexia, bulimia, EDNOS or any other eating disorder or medical condition. For diagnosis or treatment of anorexia, bulimia, EDNOS or any other eating disorder or medical problem, please consult your own physician.

Every individual is different and the strategies used and outlined in this book, may not be suitable for another family’s situation. Also, any references are provided for information purposes only and do not constitute endorsement of any websites or other resources. Readers should also be aware that the websites and other resources listed at the end of this book may change.

JANUARY 2015

A summary of our story in the lead up to treatment

In case you're new to this blog and are unfamiliar with our story, I've pasted in the introduction from Volume II of my new book below (2012 posts - see below right for details). This should give you a rough idea of how my teenage son, Ben, found himself on the road to anorexia (and eventually, thankfully, on the road to recovery).

BACK AT THE START I HAD no idea that boys got eating disorders. Like many people, I thought anorexia was something exclusive to girls. I assumed it was a "diet gone wrong", that all they needed was a good talking to and they'd snap out of it.

But of course eating disorders aren't like that. Not one bit.

At primary school, my (only child) Ben was overweight. He was quiet, well-behaved and most definitely not "sporty". Then, at the age of 11, he won an academic scholarship to a fabulous independent secondary school with a reputation for sport – especially rugby.

Surprisingly for a sports-shy boy, Ben took to rugby like a duck to water. He has a natural talent for the game and was immediately given the position of Number 3 in the team, a position given to the biggest, toughest boys. Soon, Ben was playing rugby virtually every day of the week, including local club rugby on Sundays.

Before long the puppy fat disappeared to be replaced with an awesome athletic physique. Being good at sport at a "sporty school" also carried a distinct kudos. Soon Ben was one of the most popular boys in his peer group and he revelled in the change. He was good at other sports, too. In the summer of 2008 – one year before the eating disorder began to manifest itself – he and his dad did the Coast2Coast cycle ride across Northern England, up and down some of the most challenging terrain in the country. Ben was a star on the athletics field and in the cross country running team. In fact I think the only sport he wasn't good at was cricket.

But, before long, Ben began to tire of all this sport and exercise. He felt increasingly lazy. Yet he was worried that if he didn't keep it up he might lose the athletic physique and the kudos he'd earned as a rising star in the rugby team. Worse, he might get fat again. And, being a growing teenage boy, Ben

loved his food! During the spring of 2009, as the rugby season came to a close, Ben gradually discovered that, by eating diet foods, he could consume the same quantities and do less exercise, without putting on any weight. Great, he thought to himself, I've discovered the magic bullet...

Unfortunately things didn't work out like that. In the event Ben began to exercise more, not less. But diet foods and generally cutting down on intake meant he was consuming less calories and fats. It wasn't a great mix for a growing teenage boy.

For us, as parents, the alarm bells began to tinkle during the summer of 2009. It began with our summer holiday in France where Ben was swimming 100 metres of the villa pool every day and going for gruelling runs in the heat. He was also reading all those "Men's Health" magazines packed with diets and exercises to develop bodies like the impossibly toned models in the photographs.

Getting a "six pack" became Ben's Number One goal. Back in the UK he joined a gym and went seven days a week supplemented by yet more gruelling runs plus hundreds of daily sit-ups, press-ups and crunches. Meanwhile he devised even more low calorie, low fat meals. Cooking became a passion. But at the same time, eating was getting more ritualistic, for example chopping fruit into tiny pieces before carefully arranging on a plate. He was also avoiding certain foods – more foods than he was actually eating.

We noticed that he was getting increasingly depressed and withdrawn. He'd have sudden and distressing outbursts, sometimes violent, which became more and more frequent. And, over that summer, he completely cut himself off from his friends.

Worryingly, Ben was losing weight, very, very quickly. During that summer of 2009 Ben lost one quarter of his body weight. Something was seriously wrong.

It wasn't until late September that I was prompted to take him to the doctor. I simply didn't know what we were dealing with. Was it just a teenage phase or was it something more sinister? Worse – because sometimes Ben would eat and behave normally – was it simply my imagination?

I don't think the GP was too sure, either. The problem was that, to anyone that hadn't seen Ben as a rugby forward, he didn't look like the stereotypical anorexic i.e. skin and bones. He was skinny by this stage, yes, but then that isn't that unusual in some teenage boys. Neither is fussy eating.

I took him to the GP a few times but each time Ben was simply instructed to "eat sensibly and come back in a couple of weeks' time". In the end it was the school nurse that suggested I get Ben referred for treatment. The staff were becoming increasingly concerned, especially Ben's rugby coaches. Already he had been invalided out of the team after having been moved to less aggressive positions. I used to worry that if Ben played rugby at this stage, he'd snap in half.

It took a while for the penny to drop – that Ben was developing an eating disorder. My husband and I were horrified. We didn't know what to do or where to turn. In the end it was the school nurse who told me about CAMHS (the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). So we went back to the GP and insisted Ben was referred right away.

We assumed we'd get an instant appointment but were horrified to find we might have to wait five or six months just for an initial assessment. Meanwhile Ben was disappearing in front of my eyes. He was doing strange things – because anorexia doesn't just affect your weight, it affects your mood and your behaviours. He was becoming out of control at school, his personality was changing into someone we didn't recognise... basically everything was imploding.

Then, in January 2010, while still on the waiting list for treatment, Ben was admitted to hospital with a dangerously low pulse rate of 29. Thankfully this meant we were able to get him fast-tracked into treatment and he spent the next two years being treated for anorexia.

It took a long time. It's difficult for people with eating disorders to acknowledge they have a problem and even if they do, they are often powerless to do anything about it. This is not an illness you can just snap out of. It is all-consuming and debilitating. Left unchecked it can destroy lives. Indeed eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

Through my blog – and now my books - I want to do everything in my power to “fast track” other parents through this massive learning curve and point them towards good, solid, evidence-based support in a world where there is still precious little awareness about eating disorders, especially in boys.

Of course I'm not a clinician or an expert; I am just an ordinary mum writing about the day to day experiences of living with a teenage boy recovering from anorexia. But when you suddenly find yourself on this devastating journey, it can be so reassuring to know that others have been along this road too. To know what they went through, to know what signs to watch out for and to know what worked. And, importantly, during those many false summits and disappointments, to know how they found the strength to continue fighting as they helped to guide their child towards recovery. This is why I write my blog.

But the problem with my blog is that, by the end of 2012, it was getting extremely long. There are now 418 posts in total which makes it difficult for other families to plough through everything. Blogs aren't like books. You can't just read through them from start to finish and you can't easily refer back to something you found particularly helpful or relevant. You're clicking here, there and everywhere. Worse, much of the earlier information – for example from 2011 - risks getting overlooked altogether. And there's some important stuff in there! I know, because I've had so much positive and encouraging feedback from my blog followers.

I hope this PDF proves useful to you.

Best wishes,

Batty Matty, January 2016.

Tuesday, 13 January 2015

In memory of Charlotte Bevan who passed away from cancer one year ago today

Here's what I've posted on my Facebook page:

Many of you will know that Charlotte Bevan was the best friend and support that anyone could have while battling with a potentially life-threatening crisis in the family. Anorexia Nervosa is still a much misunderstood illness with the highest death rate of any mental illness (Research has found that 1 in 5 sufferers will die prematurely as a result of it).

And it is a notoriously difficult illness to treat. (If only it were as simple as 'just telling them to eat'!!!!!!)

For a number of years, from 2009, my teenage son suffered from this deadly condition which, like any serious mental or physical illness, doesn't just affect the patient but affects the entire family. If you have read my books, you will know that this experience can only be described as 'sheer hell'. Actually, that's an understatement, it's worse, as many here will confirm.

According to Charlotte's Helix: 'Scientists have known for some time that there is a genetic link [for developing anorexia / eating disorders], but now ... we finally have the opportunity to "crack the code" and understand what makes some people more predisposed to an eating disorder. This opens the door to new insights and effective treatments.'

Today is the first anniversary of Charlotte Bevan's death from cancer. Who was Charlotte? Well, apart from pioneering Charlotte's Helix in the UK (virtually right up until the day she died, one year ago today), Charlotte was the #1 person you could rely on to be on the phone in a flash whenever you were going through some hellish episode - with a blend of sage advice, sympathy, empathy and - often - a 'good, no-nonsense talking to' which motivated you, as a parent, to carry on and do the right thing for your child.

And Charlotte did this for dozens of other families across the UK, and beyond. Even when she was so sick with the breast cancer that she couldn't get out of bed. But, then, that was Charlotte for you, always thinking of others.

There is so much that is good to say about wonderful Charlotte that there simply isn't room here. But, today, in memory of this incredible woman, we are donating to Charlotte's Helix in the hope that one day the world may be able to stop deadly anorexia and other eating disorders (equally as deadly) - for good. (And, as you may know, Paul Osborne and I are doing our January Dry Athlon for Cancer Research in memory of Charlotte, too.)

Dear Charlotte, there are hundreds of people across the world who will be remembering you today. Our thoughts are, of course, with her family on this day, too. If you feel able, please donate in her memory today.

Tuesday, 13 January 2015

While I'm back here, this is where I'm at right now...

As you will have seen, I've been AWOL from this blog for much of the past year. It's a real pig, but I've been battling with this darn Post Traumatic Stress Disorder thing which began to rear its ugly face just over a year ago. It's really annoying because, like many of these things, you can't just 'snap out of it'. No matter how strong you feel you are, you can't just push it to the back of your mind and get on with things. It's doubly annoying knowing that it's now my turn to admit that, OK, I need help to get my head back together again and, yes, it's not surprising when you think about it that my brain has suffered an adverse reaction to the years of extremes which it encountered as a result of my son's struggle with anorexia.

Last spring, I began with some private treatment while waiting for NHS therapy (long waiting list... sounds familiar?). Then, in the summer, I had six months of CBT aimed at reducing or removing the numbness that was one of the PTSD symptoms. It was like a mental anaesthetic; I couldn't feel very much - good or bad feelings. Thankfully, the CBT seems to have worked and my feelings are back!

But with this has come a far heightened anxiety - the kind of anxiety that reacts in the extreme to small incidents that don't warrant it; way out of proportion to the problem. The kind of anxiety that causes shouting nightmares, night after night, which make you feel rubbish during the day through lack of sleep and the fact that the trauma of the nightmare's content takes a while to dissipate during waking hours.

I am now on a course of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) therapy which is thought to be particularly helpful for symptoms of PTSD. I have my third session in an hour's time. The therapist is really nice; the location - a tiny room in a nasty run-down inner-city NHS medical practice - isn't.

Meanwhile, I've been having to avoid most things to do with eating disorders, not because I want to, but because I have to: they seem to trigger the PTSD symptoms at the moment.

But I hope to return.

And 2015 is the year that we finally throw off the remnants of what anorexia has left in its path!

PS: The great news is that my son, Ben, now 21, is doing just fine on every front: eating, food, mood and social. Fabulous!

Tuesday, 13 January 2015

More about EMDR - in case you, as a parent, need to use it

Today was my third EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) session in an attempt to fix the annoying PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) which crept into my head just over a year ago -

a delayed reaction to the trauma of getting my teenage son through anorexia. EMDR is supposed to be really effective against PTSD and - on the face of it - it's really weird, but it seems to be working. So what, in my extremely laywoman's terms, is EMDR and how is it supposed to work?

Basically, with PTSD, all the traumatic memories are thought to get trapped in the rear section of the brain - the primeval part which, if you like, assumes the threat is still present. So if you hear a sudden loud noise, for example, you're suddenly on Red Alert primed to face the worst.

This rather silly part of the brain can't get its head round the fact that the trauma is now over; instead it gets into a kind of stuck record position where it replays the trauma / emotions over and over again - hence things like recurring nightmares, extreme reactions to situations, noises, etc which may remind you of incidents you experienced while your child was at his or her anorexic worst.

By a seemingly crazy process of holding a pair of pulsating pieces of plastic, one in your left hand and one in your right hand, and re-living parts of the trauma in a guided way, it's supposed to 'process' these memories and transfer them to the front part of the brain which is sensible enough to know that the trauma is over.

If you get my (extremely laywoman's) drift.

By 're-living' the trauma, I don't mean that you have to take yourself to hell and back again. An example would be where the therapist says to me: "Okay, so sudden loud noises affect you badly, like when your husband's football team scores on the TV. You say this reminds you of the sudden noises your son would make before he'd 'go crazy' while he was sick. So you're instantly in a state of Red Alert and extreme anxiety, feeling sick, with thudding heart, etc. Pick a scene from your experiences where this sudden noise was the most distressing. Okay, you say it's sitting at the dinner table. Something's happened, something to do with the food. Your son is suddenly silent. You know there's about to be an outburst. Now, just stop your mind right there; put it on pause at that scene."

And then the therapist says: "What are you feeling?" I tell her. So she says: "Just feel it. Don't judge it, don't try to analyse it, don't try to force it or take it anywhere; just let whatever happens inside your head happen naturally." And at the same time I'm holding these plastic pulsating things... left... right... left... right... just letting the thoughts flow naturally.

Then, after a few moments, she'll ask me to stop and we'll explore where my feelings/emotions took me and how I feel now.

This is then repeated for lots of different memories / experiences that took place when my son's anorexia was at its worst.

After today's one-and-a-half-hour session I came away feeling as if the inside of my head had been to a kind of spa and cleansed. It felt quite good, actually.

No-one knows why EMDR works; it just does. Apparently.

The EMDR Association UK says: In the process the distressing memories seem to lose their intensity, so that the memories are less distressing and seem more like 'ordinary' memories. The effect is

believed to be similar to that which occurs naturally during REM sleep (Rapid Eye Movement) when your eyes rapidly move from side to side. EMDR helps reduce the distress of all the different kinds of memories, whether it was what you saw, heard, smelt, tasted, felt or thought.

Watch this space to see if the therapy continues to be effective!

FEBRUARY 2015

Wednesday, 11 February 2015

Just found the original of 'that' letter from November 2009

Yesterday I had a bit of a clear out and came across a box full of blank notebooks, so I took out one of them to use for notes, only to discover it wasn't completely blank. Inside was the original of the letter which features in Chapter 7 - Consumed - of my book Please eat... A mother's struggle to free her teenage son from anorexia. I remember it so clearly... Sitting in my car, waiting for Ben to come out of school, frantically writing a letter to him because, by this stage, he wasn't speaking to us. Or at least he wasn't speaking about anything to do with his rapidly developing anorexia. The only way I could get through to him, I felt, was through a letter. I was in despair. So this, in its entirety, is what I wrote (edited considerably for my book)... The love that went into this letter... phew!!

Dear Ben

Please read this letter. Hopefully I can get it all across better without me or you getting upset.

Firstly, if you have anorexia, it is dangerous and must be stopped immediately. The good news is that any damage it is doing to your body CAN be reversed at this stage very quickly. This is why it must stop RIGHT NOW before it gets worse.

Getting back to a normal eating pattern and attitude to food may be a gradual process - just making positive changes every day. We will be right behind you, but you must do what we say.

Once we have all made this decision that, yes, this is going NO FURTHER and will stop, then we will sort out the issues that have caused it. We will sort out the self-confidence and self-esteem issues via a counsellor who is very experienced in this kind of thing. Even if we have to pay.

We will establish rewards for progress, culminating in the double bed you want. Leading up to this you can suggest other milestone rewards you'd like e.g. a games evening, theatre, movies, etc.

The good news is that all of this IS solvable if it's stopped and put into reverse now.

Everything can get back to a normality that we are happy with - and, most importantly, that you are happy with.

Your happiness and health are our Number One priority. I want you to know that we will always be there for you, no matter how sad you feel - and we will get the very best and nicest help for you.

But it needs to stop now at what is still a solvable stage.

You know the value of healthy eating and all the reasons why you need to eat the right stuff and enough of

the right stuff for a growing boy - which means you are much more likely to understand the long list of damage that this could do to your body if it gets worse.

We love you too much to watch this happen which is why, as your loving parents, we need to step in and say "STOP! Enough is enough!"

We will make serious promises to you, as our dearest son, if you make serious promises to us - and keep them.

You are more important to us than you could possibly ever imagine or even know and we want to stop this nasty thing NOW and help work on the root cause.

Please don't think there is no solution because THERE IS. Very much so - and in a few months you will be so glad we all made this decision (especially when you get your new bed!)

But meanwhile, ANY time you feel sad or you feel it's too hard, PLEASE talk to us - about ANYTHING. Don't bottle it up - and let us all start thinking positively now, even if that may at first, or even second, seem hard.

It's not just you that's doing this alone - it's all three of us... our strong family unit.

We will need help, though, through this cognitive thing that Dad said he had [Ben's Dad recommended CBT - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy because it had been useful to him during a stressful period] to change the way you see your body and your self image, to build your confidence back and find a real, proper, true, proven way to help you achieve the popularity and love you want - rather than the wrong way, a way that won't just NOT WORK but could do quite the reverse.

Will you let us 'muscle in' and start the ball rolling towards your wonderful future now?

Again, I can't emphasise how much we love you and will be with you over this.

Is it a deal?

Big hugs x 10 million and even more,

Mum and dad xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Tuesday, 24 February 2015

I opened my mouth and... nothing came out!

It's over a year since I last agreed to be interviewed about our experience with our teenage son, Ben, as he developed and recovered from anorexia. As it's Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I agreed to be interviewed for our local radio station last night - an 11th hour arrangement which left me zero time to prepare. But it wasn't just that I had no time to prepare; when I opened my mouth to speak to the interviewer... nothing came out!

A similar thing happened the other month when I met up with an old friend. It was the first he'd heard of our battle with anorexia and, again, when I opened my mouth nothing came out.

This is just one of the many weird ways my brain has been behaving over the past 12 months as a delayed response to the trauma we went through virtually 24/7 for some four years.

Until this horrible C-PTSD developed (they call it Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because it's a reaction to an ongoing trauma rather than a one-off trauma like, for instance, a car crash) I felt that

the whole eating disorder experience had made me a better person in that I used our experiences to help other families through my books, talks, media interviews, the Around The Dinner Table Forum where I am a Mentor and this blog.

But now, I'd say that it's messed around with my own brain wiring in a way I could never have envisaged. A way that's seen me avoiding anything to do with eating disorders and distancing myself (more by necessity than choice) from the wonderful group of friends I made through the above activities. And from most other people, too.

As I drive off to another therapy session, I actually feel worse than I did a few weeks ago, not better.

Take Friday night, for example.

My husband and I met up with a couple of his friends for a meal - a couple I hadn't met before. They were really nice, relaxed and easy-going. And, on the surface, I probably appeared the same.

Yet underneath my mind and body were like a hurricane. My heart was lurching, my chest was tight and my mind was coiled up like a tight spring. I couldn't eat. I felt as if the slightest mouthful would make me vomit. Even the smell of the food made me feel sick. And my digestive system was in pieces, as was I.

Then I remained in bed for much of the weekend.

Is it just me - or have experiences like this happened to other parents who have battled with anorexia or any other eating disorder in the family?

What I do know is that it's really, really unpleasant.

And worrying.

(By the way, I did manage to cobble together some kind of interview for the local radio.)

Thursday, 26 February 2015

No wonder we parents are all so screwed up, post-eating-disorder!

Following some feedback from other parents, it appears that I'm not alone in struggling with post-trauma problems. The Good News is that our sons and daughters have recovered or are almost recovered from their eating disorder / anorexia / bulimia. The Bad News is that once we, as parents, sit back, relax a little and begin to think about moving on with our lives... zap! pow! our own minds begin to scream out "Aaarrggghh!" Which, when you think about it, isn't in the least bit surprising.

As parents of a young person battling their way through an eating disorder, we have been faced with horrors and emotional extremes that have driven us to the edge. And we have faced this kind of thing, round the clock, day, after day, for months... years... Not knowing whether or not our child was going to come out of this thing alive or dead.

Unlike most other illnesses, anorexia fights those that try to remove it from a young person's life. So our child appears to be fighting us, the loving parents that want to save their lives and get them well.

On top of this we're often fighting the medical and mental health professionals to get diagnosed, referred and treated with evidence-based therapy and not mumbo-jumbo out-dated stuff. Those in the States and other places without a free National Health Service often have to fight health insurers, too.

We have to put up with the finger being pointed at us as parents for 'causing' the eating disorder and for being 'bad parents' when we want to scream that it's 'the way their brain's wired up' - it's NOT OUR FAULT!!!

We have had to face hundreds of experiences that aren't 'normal', such as a refusal to eat when food is a vital part of life. As parents it is in our nature to nurture our children - and attempting to get our heads around an illness that threatens to starve our children to death in a world where food is abundantly available must send our rational minds over the edge.

We have had to be primed, 24/7, to face emotional, distressing, sudden and often violent outbursts from our children. It's not normal to have to pull our child away from a solid brick wall which they're crashing their skull against or pull them in from a second-floor attic window as they try to climb onto the roof. It is not normal to have stuff thrown at you or to be violently pushed to the ground by your child. Nothing that we have been through is 'normal'.

And, as we all know, the above is just the tip of the iceberg of what we've been through, as families, with this devastating illness.

No wonder our experiences come back to haunt us at a later date. No wonder our brains, which are 'plastic', have been re-moulded in ways we no longer recognise. No wonder we are totally screwed up and need therapy ourselves.

So a huge big warm hug to all those parents out there who are still suffering, long after their child has passed the 'finish line' and come out the other side.

Our reaction to this trauma IS normal.

MARCH 2015

Wednesday, 11 March 2015

For parents, life doesn't just ping back to 'normal'

At the end of this very excellent article (<http://ucsdeatingdisorders.tumblr.com/post/113180794943/q-my-friends-child-was-just-diagnosed-with-an>) about how relatives, neighbours, teachers and friends can assist and support parents as they battle to get their child through an eating disorder, Jennifer Denise Ouellette (a member of the Parent Advisory Committee at the renowned UCSD Eating Disorders Center) says: "...this is not a case of just waiting for everything to return to 'normal.' Our lives will never be the same again and it helps us to embrace that. In the best cases our children will fully recover and we, and our families, will still be fundamentally changed by the terrifying experience of seeing our child slip away and having to pull him/her back to us inch-by-excruciating inch." Too true, but all too often ignored by relatives, neighbours, friends, etc.

I know I am not alone in struggling to get my own mental health back on track after my mind was battered and bruised as a result of years of battling to get my son, Ben, through anorexia. It is now 6 years since his symptoms first began to emerge (in 2009). I can't place an exact date on his recovery as it was a very gradual process; there are still some issues that need sorting out, but I feel confident they will iron themselves out naturally over time, which is reassuring.

Around 18 months ago (as you'll know if you've been following this blog), I started to experience symptoms which were eventually diagnosed as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) - or, more accurately, Complex PTSD because the disorder is a result of prolonged exposure to trauma. Over the past 9 months or so I've undergone CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) in an attempt to get my head back to 'normal'.

I know I am not alone and that many parents experience post-eating-disorder trauma of their own plus a range of other illnesses. All of us struggle because our lives, in the months and years following our child's recovery from the eating disorder, simply haven't returned to 'normal'.

Sure, I suspect that most of the people around us think that now our child is moving on with their lives, we are OK. We should be, after all. Our child is getting on just fine (much of the time) and we're back at work or whatever. We're out there again, at the gym, socialising, working... To all intents and purposes we can all put this unpleasant episode behind us.

The problem is that we can't.

However, like many of these 'unseen' illnesses, no-one except our therapists (if we are fortunate enough to have one) and anyone else we may have opened up to is aware of this.

We behave normally; we do things that other people do. Yet, inside, we know that it's just a very excellent act.

Part of the learning curve of the eating disorders experience as a parent is learning how to be the World's Best Actor, with a performance worthy of an Oscar. At the time, many outsiders never even knew that our child was sick (unless they were unlucky enough to be present when she / he was throwing a wobbly in a cafe, restaurant, at school or whatever). We, as parents, just pretended to carry on with life as if nothing was happening in our homes. God only knows how we did this, but we did.

One of the reasons we acted like this was because of the misconception that parents 'cause' eating disorders. We, naturally, didn't want people to point the finger at us, adding to the burden we had to bear. And also the 'shame' that's still wrongly attached to mental illness. Plus the sheer lack of understanding or knowledge about eating disorders in the wider world. Are you familiar with the blank look you get when you attempt to 'educate' outsiders about the complexities of eating disorders?!

So we parents are still acting, still pretending that everything is OK. Our children are well and so are we. Life is back to normal. Phew.

Sorry, but for many of us it's not.

And because of the reluctance to talk about mental health issues and the natural inclination to brush everything under the carpet once a family is 'back to normal', we suffer in silence and isolation.

Apart from those wonderful people that 'get' this - primarily other parents that are going through exactly the same experience, for exactly the same reasons.

And to them I am grateful. You know who you are!

Wednesday, 11 March 2015

I need a break from campaigning, but I've been volunteered onto a 'cause'!

I've got a bit of a dilemma. Before and during my son's eating disorder, I was the kind of person that campaigned for things. During the eating disorder it was, obviously, to raise awareness of eating disorders in boys through this blog, my books, talks and so on. Now, post-eating-disorder, I am completely burned out. The very thought of campaigning for anything sends me scuttling for the security of my bed. It's why I've had to put any eating disorder advocacy 'on hold' for the moment and why I've been somewhat AWOL with this blog and my Facebook page.

The other week an old school pal nominated me to help with a local campaign. Me, being me, was unable to say no. It was OK while it was fairly low key; just a Facebook page on this particular cause and nothing more. I think he asked me to help because I'm a copywriter and might be able to write

compelling Facebook posts, etc.

But now this campaign is getting BIG. It's attracting lots of local interest from councillors, the media and so on. It threatens to grow from a simple Facebook page to something MASSIVE that will demand a heck of a lot of input, energy, research, lobbying, campaigning, fundraising, liaising, etc etc etc.

My dilemma is that this development has triggered my anxiety levels to stratospheric levels.

I simply can't face being a key campaigner at this new, explosive level.

Not only am I completely burned out on the campaigning front but, after the eating disorder, I'd find it virtually impossible to get fired up about any cause that didn't involve life-and-death issues, no matter how worthy or worthwhile.

My dilemma is that I don't want to let the old school pal down. He's a nice guy. I just need someone else to come on board and take over from me before this tips me over the edge. Which means that I'm going to have to tell him about what I'm going through (the PTSD) and why i.e. my son's anorexia. And I, like many others, hate the idea of 'airing my dirty washing in public' i.e. admitting to having mental health issues which, to many people I expect, may mean I'm a little crazy.

But mainly I don't want to let this guy down.

Thursday, 12 March 2015

Thank you, some great responses on Facebook

I recently came across an old Chinese saying which went along the lines of (and I paraphrase!): Look after Number One before you begin to think about looking after anyone / anything else. Or something like that. So I wrote Look After No1 in my desk diary for this week, just in case I forgot to follow that wise advice. And, from the responses to the link to yesterday's blog on my Facebook page, it seems that everyone is saying the same. I shouldn't feel guilty about saying sorry, no, I can't take this on - and this is why... And that my own recovery comes first. Which is, of course, totally true. Thank you to everyone that came back with wonderful, caring comments. I really do appreciate it.

So yesterday I attempted to explain to the guy that this cause / campaign thing was getting too big. I could just about handle it at a low level, while it's still little more than a Facebook page and a couple of press interviews. But a massive campaign that may require enormous commitment, lobbying, researching, meetings, committees, fundraising, blah blah blah, well sorry but I can't do that. If things get that big then he will need to take someone else on. Probably a whole committee. And these people will need to be passionate about this cause in a way that I can't be, no matter how worthwhile.

I reminded him that I'd said a few weeks ago that I was 'campaigned-out' after all the eating disorder 'stuff' which I'd already told him about in a very brief nutshell.

I told him that I was supposed to be studying for an MA this year but had had to postpone it due to ill health. I told him that I was being treated for PTSD as a result of the fallout from all the eating

disorder 'stuff', although I'm not sure whether he really got that or not. The thing is, because of all this, I simply can't commit to this cause in the way someone should...

Anyhow, I put my case across. But I agreed to have one more meeting with Someone Important which Someone Important had been offering to have with us. So I'll arrange that and attend, and then delegate...

I knew I'd done the right thing, but I did feel pretty wretched. Mainly because I really do hate 'airing my dirty washing in public' and admitting to stuff that I tend to keep to myself.

Except to people that 'get it', like you all do.

Friday, 13 March 2015

This kind of experience would have freaked him out in the Bad Old Days...

So, around 2.30pm yesterday, I collected 21-year old student, Ben, from the railway station. He (with his dyed 'blackcurrant', straightened hair, long black leather coat, steam punk waistcoat, drainpipe black trousers, etc) flopped into the passenger seat and began to devour a huge bowl of chicken couscous salad, a packet of crisps and other goodies. "Boy, have I got a story to tell you!" he exclaimed. And, without doubt, this is the kind of experience that would seriously have freaked him out when he was under the influence of the eating disorder. But yesterday he just took it in his stride.

"I just made it to the train at YYYY when the doors closed. I was still on the platform, but my shoulder bag had got trapped in the train doors. Luckily the guard noticed before blowing his whistle, ran over to me, called me a stupid idiot and gave me a lecture on how dangerous this could have been. But he let me on the train. And a woman behind me managed to nip onto the train, too. She thanked me profusely and we moaned about the grumpy guard. She was really grateful she'd caught the train as if she hadn't she would have missed a spa session with a friend who she was meeting at XXXX.

"Then the same grumpy guard came over and asked to see my ticket. I'd lost it!! I tried to explain that I'd bought a return ticket when I travelled down on Monday and I had the 'outward' section to prove it. But of course he didn't believe me and went mad, threatening to throw me off the train, fine me, etc. So I asked for ten minutes' grace while I searched for the ticket. I still couldn't find it. And he wouldn't accept my credit card to pay for a replacement.

"So I had a lightbulb moment. I charged off to find that woman who'd got on with me, explained the problem, apologised but asked her if she'd buy a replacement ticket for me and I'd pay her back at XXXX station. She agreed and when the guard came back we pretended we knew each other and she paid for my ticket.

"After that we chatted all the way to XXXX and when we got there, I went to the cash machine and paid her back.

"So that's why I'm having my lunch so late!"

PS: Ben is still achieving 'firsts' in his university study with a professor's comment "this was a joy to read" on his latest assignment. (Proud mum!!!)

Friday, 13 March 2015

Why the secrecy?

I've been doing a lot of thinking lately, especially after my recent PTSD-imposed 'break' from reading, writing and talking about eating disorders. Today I had a kind of epiphany moment and it was this... I have two Facebook pages: one for everything to do with eating disorders and another for everything else. And never the twain shall meet, kind of thing. But why? Why do I keep so silent about eating disorders on my 'main' Facebook page? I mean really WHY do I ignore eating disorders on that Facebook page?

If this were some other illness or issue that had affected our family, I wouldn't think twice about talking about it. A family death, for instance. Or if my elderly mother got sick. Or if someone developed a potentially fatal illness - like cancer, heart disease or whatever.

But because it's eating disorders I keep silent.

Why?

Especially when my other eating-disorder-world friends do not.

Digging deep, the reason has to be that it's a reaction to knowing that, in general, 'the wider public' don't really think about eating disorders. The term 'eating disorder' sounds as harmless as, say, 'nasal disorder' or 'ear disorder'. "Oh that's sad. But worse things happen at sea." Blank, switched-off look.

Then there's the fact that anorexia (in my son's case), like other eating disorders, is a mental illness. And people don't like to admit to mental illnesses, despite the fact that one-in-three of us will suffer from mental health problems at some point in our lives. So if we ourselves don't get sick with some kind of mental health problem, the chances are that someone close to us may.

People also (wrongly, of course) tend to feel shame at having mental health problems - as if they failed in some way as a human being. Or there's something wrong with them that they could fix easily enough, if only they knuckled down and got their act together.

Also, I suspect that many, many people still point the finger at parents of young people who develop eating disorders. "She must be a bad mother. I always thought there was something a bit intense about her. What did she do to cause her son to get sick?"

Then there's the fact that my son has recovered from his anorexia. So I should move on with life. It's history. As a teacher at my son's school said, just before he left in 2012: "It could have been much worse."

But mostly I keep quiet because eating disorders are still very much brushed under the carpet. As if I were speaking up about an embarrassing, secretive illness like an STD.

But why?

Why should I keep quiet about an illness that nearly took my son's life? That devastated our family for 5 years and which still leaves its imprint today? An illness that has killed other young people, and threatens to kill yet more? An illness that has such little publicity and public awareness, education and understanding that, if a family suddenly did find themselves a victim, they almost certainly wouldn't know what the heck to do or where to turn.

So why the secrecy, Bev?

Why hide it?

I guess there may be another issue here. The fact that my son is a 'friend' on my other Facebook page and, at the moment, we tend to keep our eating disorder talk to a minimum for the simple reason that it brings back horrendous memories for him.

Also, there's the anonymity aspect. Which is why I have always changed his name on this blog and in my books. (Although this was my choice and not his. He hates the name 'Ben'.)

But, again, why so secretive?

Friday, 13 March 2015

One of the (many) bits I really like in Jennifer Denise Ouellette's article...

Despite the fact that, very sadly, not every family has access to such a wonderful and clued-up eating disorders treatment programme as that offered by the UCSD Eating Disorders Center, I really do love this article by fellow mum Jennifer Denise Ouellette on how relatives, neighbours, teachers and friends can assist when a family is battling with an eating disorder. I hope the author won't mind me reproducing one of the best bits below. It's relevant to my earlier post about how 'the public at large' may interpret an eating disorder:

Judgment:

Please, don't judge us; you have no idea what it is like to have a child with a deadly illness that is made more complicated by societal misunderstanding.

Please, don't judge us; we didn't cause the eating disorder and there's no "underlying cause" (there may be additional issues; that's not the same thing).

Please, don't judge us; we are likely hanging on by a thread with the umpteen appointments we have to get to, the grocery shopping, the cooking and having to supervise our kids meals to ensure they get the nutrition their bodies need.

Please, don't judge us; small talk will likely not be something we can do well right now. It's not you, it's us.

Please, don't judge us: the "tantrums" you may see from our formerly well behaved children are akin to the side effects of chemotherapy as a cancer treatment. Food is our child's medicine, but a spoonful of sugar

does not help it go down. Our children need your grace and so do we.

Thank you for this great, useful article, Jennifer Denise Ouellette.

It is so very important that people learn not to judge us: the parents, the family and the young person battling with the eating disorder.

Wednesday, 18 March 2015

It's nearly 2 years since I met with our MP to talk about eating disorders. The result?

On 27 March 2013 I met with my local MP Fabian Hamilton (Labour) to talk about the problems facing 18+ year olds who are still suffering from an eating disorder but, because of their age, are being discharged from CAMHS (the UK-based Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services) and either transferred to Adult Services or left to their own devices - because, as a 'legal adult', they are permitted to choose whether or not to continue treatment. So what happened?

My MP took a great interest, even promised to get an Intern he had working with him involved in researching into the issue in more depth. He promised to get back to me.

But he never did.

I heard nothing more.

Nothing.

Zilch.

Thursday, 19 March 2015

"So can I have a big present, then?"

... asked Ben a moment ago. You see I've been transferring my 2013 blog posts into a PDF (more linear for people to read) and I told him how stark the contrast was between the Ben of 2013 and the Ben of today. "I am so proud of you!" I said. "You've come on leaps and bounds in the past 18 months!"

As for a "big present", I said "Who bought you the latest Game of Thrones DVD last week [because we were thrilled with how he's getting 'firsts' in his university work]?"

"Actually dad bought me that."

"Okay, so who took you in the car to Sheffield on Monday and took you out for lunch, then brought you back again today with all your stuff for the Easter vacation?"

"I would have got the train only I needed to bring all my dirty laundry home."

"Okay, so who does all your dirty laundry, then, when other students use the university launderette?"

And so on...

"I tell you what... I'll give you a big present when you've put on a further 5 kilos. How does that

sound? You're already fantastic looking, but you'll look amazing with a few more kilos on you. The girls will go crazy! And it would make me happy,, too."

Stroke ego, stroke ego. And I know he's pretty keen to get a girlfriend.

Saturday, 21 March 2015

Normal service is resumed; I am soooooo much better

As you probably gathered, for the whole of 2014 and a few months either side, I was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In total I must have undergone 50-odd (private and NHS) sessions of various types of therapy. Last week saw my final NHS appointment with Zoe, the truly amazing and lovely (primarily) EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) therapist.

As you may also have gathered, I have been back in the world of eating disorders - back blogging, back on my Facebook page, back creating PDFs of my blogs for anyone that would like copies (get in touch if you would like copies), talking to other parents and back on the incredible ATDT (Around The Dinner Table) forum (for parents of young people with eating disorders). After switching most eating disorder related Facebook notifications 'off', I have today switched them back on again.

For the first time for well over a year I am able to face the world of eating disorders without any PTSD triggers, flashbacks or whatever.

For me, considering how my mind has been over the past umpteen months, this is a massive step forward. A step that, during the worst PTSD days, I wasn't sure I would ever be able to make again. Until I found myself deep in the depths of mental health problems, I don't think I entirely understood how helpless you can feel when you are unwell in this way - helpless to 'just snap out of it', to do anything, really, except ask for professional help.

But thanks to that help I am back, pretty much as I was before I fell sick. The numbness has gone altogether. The anxiety is being successfully processed and tamed. The flashbacks have been processed. And it is mainly thanks to my two fantastic NHS therapists, Hannah (CBT) and Zoe (EMDR and general 'talking' therapy i.e. just being incredibly nice and supportive).

And the CBT workbook I've been slowly ploughing through which I've found extremely effective. Plus some excellent hypnotherapy downloads.

There are still remnants, for instance I still have anxiety nightmares. But hopefully as my daytime anxiety diminishes, it will help to get the nocturnal anxiety under control too.

Tuesday, 24 March 2015

Example of successful CBT in practice from yesterday

As you know, to help overcome my acute anxiety issues that remain following my therapy for PTSD

(Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) (as a result of training my brain to realise that my son has recovered from anorexia and is not still in the throes of it).... I have been using a combination of CBT tools learned through therapy and further CBT tools from the excellent Anxiety & Worry Workbook. Yesterday was a superb example of CBT in practice - and how it can be very successful. It may be of use to anyone else going through episodes like this.

Situation: Loud swearing and banging from Ben's attic bedroom. I froze - a carbon-copy response of how I reacted when Ben was sick with anorexia. "What's up?" I called. "I am having an 'angry moment'," he said, "I don't know why or where it's come from, but please don't come up here, just leave me alone until I get over it". More swearing, banging and crashing... I freeze again, head in hands, tears smarting behind eyes plus my mind pinging into 'blank mode' in a bid to feel nothing.

All of this is exactly how I would behave when my son would bang and crash around as a result of the anorexia driving him crazy. I recognised the reaction instantly.

What I did next: I grabbed a pen and paper and got to work with a CBT exercise.

The idea is that you write down the most catastrophic outcome of an anxiety-provoking situation. Next, you write down the most ideal outcome. Finally, you write down the most likely outcome based on evidence for and against any of these outcomes actually happening. Then you distract yourself by doing something else. In my case, I drove off to the gym.

Here is what I wrote.

Catastrophic outcome: That Ben is relapsing back into his eating disorder without realising it and this is why he is angry - it's just the start of it all again and this time it will kill him. I couldn't cope with facing the eating disorder again. I couldn't handle it. I will implode. Aaarrggghhh!!

Ideal outcome: It is just a one-off 'man thing', probably hormonal / testosterone / frustration fuelled, maybe stress of academic work (tons of reading and three essays to write in succession). It may mean a few effs and crashes while he gets it out of his system and, yes, this may trigger me into my classic 'red alert' mode, but I'll just accept that this is the case, accept the anxiety rather than fighting it and be mindful about how my body is reacting. It is a temporary situation, like a train that arrives in a station, stops and then leaves - and is gone.

Most likely outcome: Not sure, but hopefully close to the 'ideal outcome', but I do know that I am best steering clear of him while the red mist is down. Men get like this on occasions. He just needs to get it out of his system. At least Ben warned me to stay clear, which was thoughtful of him! He will come through this and will probably talk to me about what happened, later when he's calmed down. But I will let him know I find it frightening and triggering. It is probably caused by a mix of stuff, as above, and probably work pressure, but this is something people need to learn to deal with, so I'll just let him get on with it.

Followed by...

Evidence FOR the catastrophic outcome: None, not for a year or so.

Evidence AGAINST the catastrophic outcome: He has been fine for the past year or so. Sure, he has his moods; we all do; it's only natural. No way would he let himself succumb to the eating disorder again; he knows what it stole from him and he has too much to lose. This is likely to be a combination of hormones and frustration plus the pressure of work.

So I went to the gym and when I came back he was fine. He explained to me that he had no idea where the anger came from, but he wondered if it was something to do with his own delayed development because of the eating disorder i.e. the kind of anger an adolescent might experience, delayed because his development was 'on hold' for all those years. It also might be the pressure of work.

He was still a bit wound up for the remainder of yesterday, but this morning he was back singing at the top of his voice.

And, as I have said before, when Ben sings, all is right with the world.

Oh, and he said my reaction (i.e. to leave him alone and go out) was the best one!

CBT success!

Thursday, 26 March 2015

It's liberating to know it's not me, it's the way the brain works...

"Well, don't," has been one of my husband's favourite responses over the past 16+ months as I've struggled with the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress. He would ask: "What's wrong?" I'd respond with something like: "Well, you know... I'm just feeling a bit down and that..."

These days, thankfully, we make a bit of a joke about it. When he responds with: "Well, don't", I say: "Ah, if only it were that simple, the Health Service would save a fortune on mental health treatment".

The thing is, it's so natural to respond with comments like: "Cheer up... Snap out of it... Worse things happen at sea..." and so on.

As this great article explains, this just makes us feel worse. We know we 'should' feel OK, we know that others have undergone far worse traumas in life and have handled them impressively, the problem is that our biological brain won't allow us to 'snap out of it'.

This article explains the three ways that trauma affects the brain - and for anyone that's going through PTSD, it's like a breath of fresh air - a 'get out of jail free' card. We are not guilty; it's our brain's fault!

And, these days, I tend to feel that my biological brain, although housed in my body and responsible for my thinking and physical actions, isn't 'me', as such. The 'real me' would be something separate, not governed by the way my brain happens to be wired up at any one time. The 'real me' screams out that 'THE TRAUMA IS OVER!' - my son is recovered from anorexia - but my silly brain doesn't appear to 'get it'.

Fact #3 in the article explains how the Prefrontal Cortex part of the brain tends to do three things following exposure to trauma:

1. 'Your lower brain processes responsible for instinct and emotion override the inhibitory strength of the cortex, so that the cortex cannot properly stop inappropriate reactions or refocus your attention'. This is probably why people still react with a start when they hear certain sounds or something triggers a flashback. I guess this is also why many people with PTSD find it hard to concentrate on anything for very long - like reading, work, anything really.

2. Because the 'blood flow to the left prefrontal lobe can decrease, ... you have less ability for language, memory and other left lobe functions'. Could this be why, over the past months, when anyone has asked me about our experience with anorexia, I've opened my mouth and nothing's come out? Also, why I've become less fluent verbally i.e. I tend to forget obvious words, stammer, get tongue-tied and sound generally stupid?

3. 'Blood flow to your right prefrontal lobe can increase, so you experience more sorrow, sadness and anger.' Tell me about it! Depressed, generally 'down', lethargic, lack of interest in anything, mourning 'what might have been' and MASSIVE ANGER at the various obstacles that were thrown in our way from various quarters as I struggled to get my son well.

As I have struggled with PTSD, it has taken me months to begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Months of therapy, processing and CBT 'homework'. Even now I have to approach everything in 'bite sized chunks' and think in terms of small ripples rather than massive tsunamis. And that means everything - from talking about eating disorders through to my career.

But it's so incredibly reassuring and liberating to know that it's not 'the real me', it's my biological brain that's at 'fault'.

And I know that 'the real me' is determined to get shot of this horrible PTSD once and for all and get back to 'normal'.

Sunday, 29 March 2015

***A 'new approach' to eating disorder treatment that points the fingers at mothers again...
Aaarrgghh!***

Gloucester (that is, the Gloucester in the States, not the Gloucester here in the UK), is promoting a 'new approach' to eating disorder treatment in which 'mothers and daughters are educated together about eating disordered behavior, and the family and cultural patterns that contribute to it.' Apparently mothers talk too much about the size of their thighs and such like which triggers their daughters (no mention of sons here) to go on diets and develop eating disorders. Apparently 'learning to think differently about food and one's body is the pathway to changing destructive eating patterns.'

Come on... for God's sake... this blaming of mothers isn't a 'new approach'; it is a decades-old and positively Stoneage approach.

It completely ignores the fact that research is showing that eating disorders are more about 'genes'

than environmental factors. And we can't help our genes, whether those genes come from the paternal or maternal side of a family. Eating disorders are a biological illness.

It also ignores the fact that boys get eating disorders as well as girls. So talking about 'daughters' is also antiquated.

Far from being 'educated' on how we mothers should be bringing up our children, it is often these very mothers who know more about modern evidence-based treatment for eating disorders than the therapists in cases where therapists' knowledge is so outdated.

It is often these very mothers who are amongst the strongest women I have ever met, having stared the potential death of their child in the face almost every day for years and worked tooth and nail to get their child free of this terrible illness.

It makes me mad that people are still talking about eating disorders in this way!

APRIL 2015

Wednesday, 8 April 2015

Going back to my roots - why I began blogging in Jan 2011

Gosh, it's 52 months since I first began this blog about my experience of helping my teenage son to overcome anorexia! Back then I was a bit anxious about starting a blog so I sent a few blogging samples to various friends in the world of eating disorders like the Fairy Blogmother herself, Laura Collins, the founder of F.E.A.S.T. (Families Empowered And Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders), the oracle of help for parents of young people with eating disorders, and its sister site, the Around The Dinner Table Forum.

I also sent samples to Charlotte Bevan, the UK-based mum who worked tirelessly as an advocate for better eating disorders treatment in the UK and set up Charlotte's Helix which researches the genetic aspect of eating disorders as well as blogging about eating disorders and personally supporting dozens of other parents going through this arduous journey. (Tragically Charlotte lost her battle against breast cancer last year.)

Thankfully, everyone was incredibly supportive about my blog. And so here I am. And now you can read my past posts from 2011, 12 and 13 by clicking here (PDFs).

The primary purpose of my blog has always been to raise awareness that eating disorders aren't just a 'girl thing'. Boys get eating disorders, too. Just like my son who battled with anorexia from 2009 until his full recovery around 2013.

My blog is also about helping to prevent other families from having to go through a massive learning curve at the same time as realising that their son or daughter is descending into eating disorder hell. Like most people, and especially parents of boys, I knew nothing about eating disorders. During the autumn and winter of 2009 and beyond I found myself cramming up on everything about anorexia and its treatment. It was a nightmare - like studying for an intensive degree course in a subject you know nothing about while watching your child fall off a cliff.

Another purpose of this blog is to tell parents about the Around The Dinner Table forum. The purpose of the ATDT forum is best described by its founder, Laura Collins, in the Introduction to my

book: *When Anorexia Came To Visit*.

"Around The Dinner Table - [is] an online forum run by parents for parents. I founded ATDT (as it is often known) because I envisioned a community of parents helping other parents to survive this devastating experience. When a parent is desperately searching for information and inspiration, the forum is like a lighthouse in a stormy sea, showing the way to safety. What started out in 2004 with me asking my relatives and friends to "please post something" is now a longstanding institution with thousands of families that have come to us for support.

*"The generosity of the global ATDT community continues to amaze me. There are caring folks online at all hours to offer leads to information, provide inspiration or simply a friendly shoulder to cry on during stressful moments. The moderator team know our vast archives inside out and can refer a parent to relevant threads, whether current or past. British, Canadian, American, New Zealand or Australian families find one another, families facing similar symptoms find one another, and those living close enough to meet up form invaluable local support networks across the globe. By using the power of the internet, even with its drawbacks, ATDT offers support that is found nowhere else. Many practicing clinicians tell us they learned of a new technique, book or other information source from the forum. I regularly hear from parents that ATDT was an essential tool in their family's success. Indeed many of the families in *When Anorexia Came To Visit* describe ATDT as a lifesaver during the darkest days."*

So this is why I began this blog, way back in January 2011. And now, as my son continues with his life without anorexia, I hope it will continue to be of use to parents dealing with this insidious mental illness.

Meanwhile, if you are new to this blog, please do check out my free PDFs - they are much easier to read than clicking to and fro in the blog archives!

Thursday, 9 April 2015

Painting over past memories and nightmares

"You know those test paint patches on the horrible yellow wall?" I said to the decorator yesterday as he began work on our hallway, stairs and landing. "We did those six years ago!" I explained that the reason we'd finally got around to completing the job (see pic on left for completed job) was because, shortly after we experimented with different paint colours, my son had fallen sick. It's only now, six years on, that we've begun to pick up where we left off. "Next is the living room and kitchen, then the back bedroom, the loft, the small bedroom... the whole house needs a fresh coat of paint!"

The hallway, stairs and landing - which, until yesterday, were a horrible grubby yellow complete with the aforementioned test paint patches - featured heavily during my son Ben's anorexia.

The hallway was the place where he'd flee from the dinner table to scream like a primeval animal before banging his skull against the wall as if it would smash.

It was where he would attempt to 'forget' his packed lunch and where I would stand with cold,

clammy fear as he crashed down the stairs ready for another hellish day at school.

I remember trying to hug Ben by the radiator in the hallway while he just stood there, rigid and emotionless because the anorexia had completely changed his personality.

In the kitchen at the end of the hall, I would glance nervously up at the stairwell as I sneaked life-giving calorific ingredients into our evening meal, petrified that Ben would run downstairs and I'd be found out. To be discovered would be a fate worse than death.

And the second staircase leading up to his bedroom... That was where, on countless occasions, I would sit, head in hands, tears streaming down my face, wondering if we would ever get our son back. Or I'd stand outside his bedroom, trying to gain entry, as he forcibly held the door closed. If I did gain entry, he would be violent - or simply sit rigid and emotionless, chanting in that deep, expressionless, robot-like voice that I never want to hear again in my entire life: the voice of anorexia.

Worse, this is the staircase where, on some occasions, I would have a nightmarish image of... well... it's so devastating that I can't describe it here. But it's relevant to my son having suicidal tendencies as the eating disorder imprisoned him in its iron grip.

This is the staircase that I charged up on the evening that I instinctively felt that Ben was doing something dangerous. He was. He was attempting to climb out of the skylight onto the house roof.

Oh my God, there are so many horrific memories associated with our hallway, staircases and landings that it would take a blog post of War-and-Peace proportions to describe them here.

But this week, all of this is being painted over. Gone is the nasty dirty yellow paint, replaced with matt white woodwork and chalky white/blue emulsion (latex) paint to create a restful, coastal look. Gone as well is the filthy deep russet red carpet to be replaced with clean oak flooring and a new contemporary striped carpet on the stairs.

Now I want to repaint the entire house, to help to erase the horrific memories of the past few years - and, if funds permit, replace some of the furniture as well.

Note: I had a break from blogging for a few months while trying to get the PTSD under control...

SEPTEMBER 2015

Wednesday, 2 September 2015

This development could be AMAZING!

Having kept a discreet distance from the mainstream world of eating disorders during my PTSD treatment, I was thrilled to get an email from author and fellow mum-of-a-recovered-eating-disorder-sufferer, Eva Musby (whose story features in my book *When Anorexia Came To Visit*) directing me to her latest blog post about some seriously excellent changes planned for adolescent eating disorders treatment in England.

I won't repeat Eva's post here. But basically plans are underway to cut the time that adolescent eating disorder sufferers have to wait for treatment in England. Plans are also underway to improve the quality of the treatment they receive, hopefully focusing more on evidence-based models rather than 'experimenting', as was the case with my (then) 15-year old son, Ben, and his treatment for anorexia.

I had no idea this was happening, so it's great news. Providing that it actually DOES go ahead.

In her post, Eva Musby states that: By 2020, children and young people with eating disorders will get treatment within a maximum of four weeks (for “routine” cases), and one week for “urgent” cases.

Compare that to our experience in 2009.

Back then, it took around four weeks to get our GP to refer our 15-year old son, Ben, for treatment for his fast-developing anorexia.

Once that referral was obtained and sent off, it took a further four weeks or so for us to get a reply only to discover that it could be a further 18-22 weeks before Ben began treatment.

Good grief, it took ME less time to access adult therapy for my recent PTSD - and that wasn't anywhere near as serious as Ben's anorexia.

That shocking and disgracefully long wait could have killed Ben.

Actually, it nearly did.

Because, as you will know if you've read my book *Please eat... A mother's struggle to free her teenage son from anorexia*, his pulse rate plummeted to 29 beats per minute and he ended up wired up to machines in our local cardiac ward.

And, as this medical article extract says: Anorexia nervosa (AN) is a life-threatening condition, with a significant risk for death, due to cardiovascular complications. It is characterized by abnormal eating

behaviour and has the highest mortality rate of all psychiatric disorders. It has been associated with bradycardia (a heart rate [HR] of less than 60 beats per minute) (up to 95%), hypotension, mitral valve prolapse, and heart failure.

To have to hang around for MONTHS watching your child head towards possible death because they can't access treatment is something that no parent should have to go through.

Ever.

In a bizarre way we were lucky that Ben DID have a heart scare because it accelerated his treatment. However even then it was some FOUR MONTHS on from when we first took him to the GP...

And, as you will know, those first few therapy sessions tend to be more about administration than actual treatment.

During which time your child can descend even further into this deadly illness.

As happened with us, and doubtless others, too.

Friday, 18 September 2015

Thrilled to see these young people heading for university!

I'm soooooo thrilled to see some of the teenagers whose stories featured in my book *When anorexia came to visit: Families talk about how an eating disorder invaded their lives* are off to university this month!

It really is a delight to know that they've pulled through this horrible illness and are able to get on with their lives.

Going away to university is such a big step for anyone to take let alone young people who have battled with anorexia and other eating disorders. I know because of the problems my son, Ben, had with going to university, starting in 2012, with a 'false start'.

If you are a parent of a teenager about to go to university and you are concerned about how they might cope with their anorexia or eating disorder, whether the illness is still present or if they are recovered from an eating disorder, you can download a free PDF of my blogs from 2012 via my blog.

If you scroll down this PDF to September you can read about how we coped with the false start at university and what Ben and I learned from the experience. Of course I'm not saying that your son or daughter will pull out of university on their first attempt like Ben did; I really hope and pray that all will go swimmingly as it does for so many young people.

But if you are at all concerned and things aren't going too well, my writings from September and October 2012 might help.

Likewise if your son or daughter is thinking of going to university next September and you're worried that they may not be ready.

Meanwhile, after that last-minute 'gap year' in 2012, I am delighted to say that Ben is embarking on his final year at university, as we speak. He's been elected as Inclusions Officers for the 'nerdy' society

he's a member of. His job is to ensure that the new students feel included and to look out for anyone that appears lonely or awkward.

Having been through this experience for himself, he is the perfect candidate for the position!

He plans to run for President of the society next year when he does his Masters Degree.

Ben has moved into a real dump of a house with four other 'nerdy' boys who he met at this uni society. Hopefully they will all get on well and Ben will have his best-ever year.

More about the ways we managed to climatise Ben to life at university coming soon.

Friday, 18 September 2015

When university didn't work out, the first time round

When things didn't work out for Ben at university in September 2012, we were all devastated. All three of us - his dad Paul, me and Ben - were so looking forward to him finally getting this chance to rebuild his life after three years of battling with anorexia.

Shortly before his 26-month eating disorders treatment with CAMHS (Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services) ended in the March, the CAMHS nurse had said that she "couldn't see any reason on this earth why Ben wouldn't be ready for university in September". To be honest, I wasn't convinced. But, anyhow, we went ahead.

It's so bitter-sweet helping your child to pack for university and all the other arrangements that come with going to university.

Getting advance tickets for events, imagining your child at these events meeting other young people, making friends and having a whale of a time. Picturing the accommodation and everyone mucking in to cook cheapo meals in a pigsty of a kitchen strewn with beer bottles and remains of parties.

At Sheffield University they have a series of 'Give it a go' sessions where you can try your hand at all kinds of things from beach parties, BBQs and discos to scuba diving, quasar, Buddhist meditation, jazz, radio DJ-ing, ghost walks, pub crawls and treasure hunts - an opportunity you will never ever get again in life. I was so excited for Ben. And he appeared to be excited, too, pre-booking tickets for events and so on.

Then you drive your child to the university in a car jam-packed with stuff and settle them into their student accommodation with several other pairs of equally nervous but excited parents doing exactly the same with their offspring.

Driving home can involve tears. And it definitely did with me, but probably for a very different reason than most of the other parents.

Then a few days later, I was driving back to Sheffield again. This time to move Ben out - all the moving in shenanigans but in reverse.

It broke my heart - and it wasn't too brilliant for Ben, either.

But we got through it. And, as I write, Ben is embarking on his final year at university.

Massively well done, Ben!

You can read about our experiences and what we learned from them in the free PDF of my blog posts from 2012, just scroll down to September 2012.

Or you can click through the archive posts on the right.

Friday, 18 September 2015

I realise I sound a bit negative as regards going to university

Please, please don't think that I'm saying that your son or daughter might not settle into university life. Hopefully they will have a fantastic time and continue to be free of their eating disorder.

My last two blog posts are simply aimed at those families that might have issues to show that, if it doesn't work out at university this year, then it's not such a Big Deal when you look at the bigger picture.

Ben's unplanned 'gap year' was a great opportunity for him to do stuff like work experience, make new friends and get rid of the final bits of the eating disorder that were still hanging around. I am immensely proud of what he did do in that gap year - from being a teaching assistant at his old school through to working at the local charity shop.

Then, in September 2013, he gave university another go. 2013/14 was a tricky year, but Ben stuck it out. He found it more bearable by coming home at weekends.

I think the main problem in 2013 was that he was in the wrong student apartment which comprised two foreign students who never came out of their rooms and two other students who partied round the clock.

2014/15 was a better year - the first year that we moved Ben into his student digs without any anxiety or doom and gloom.

Again, the accommodation wasn't ideal, but he stuck it out, coming home at weekends. And during this year he made a new circle of friends - 'nerds' like him. Gradually everything began to improve.

Now, in his final year, 2015/16, he is sharing a house with these 'nerds' and I really, really hope that this year will make up for what he has missed so far.

It is one-hundred-per-cent up to Ben to make it work. He has the openings and opportunities, so the ball is in his court.

Not having heard from him for a week is, I hope, good news...

OCTOBER 2015

Thursday, 1 October 2015

From my other blog: The saddest cycle ride I ever did

Recently I've started another blog about my biking and hiking activities. But today's post kind of overlaps between this blog and that. I've pasted it in below.

Oh, and by the way, Ben is back from university this weekend full of tales to tell. Good ones, I hasten to add.

He's getting on fine with his housemates and various activities, despite the fact that some of his housemates keep going onto him about the fact he eats 3 square meals a day including 2 breakfasts, which they think is strange...

So all is good on the university front!

The saddest bike ride I ever did

In July 2010 my husband Paul, my son and I drove down to a village near Cognac in the Poitou-Charentes region of France. We took our bikes. We shouldn't have really, but we did. The problem being that, for the past 10 or 11 months our son had been descending rapidly into the potentially deadly eating disorder, anorexia nervosa.

No, you don't often hear of males with eating disorders. But we were one of the few unlucky families that bucked the trend.

As well as starving himself, the anorexia meant our son had become addicted to exercising. This is why taking the bikes to France was a bad idea, because he jumped at the idea of cycling just about anywhere he could during what turned out to be the worst family holiday we'd ever had.

Walking, too, proved tricky for the same reason.

But, hey, the medical team who were treating our son had told us to "take a break from the eating disorder" for a fortnight and toddle off "for a normal family holiday".

If you've ever had a serious mental illness in the family, you will know that it's impossible to take a break from it. Mental illnesses like anorexia are with you, as a family, every minute of the day and night.

The saddest bike ride we did on that holiday was when we cycled along a beautiful traffic-free cycle route along the Atlantic coast.

It sounds idyllic and it was.

For other people.

But not for us.

As my son peeled off his tee-shirt and shorts to put his cycle gear on, I found myself weeping uncontrollably.

12 months earlier, my son and husband had completed the Coast-2-Coast cycle ride from the West to East coast of England. Back then, my son's cycling clothes fitted like a glove. He was as fit as a fiddle. He played rugby for the school - a prop, too, a position given to the biggest, toughest lads.

What I was seeing, in this stunning woodland setting running alongside the Atlantic, was a stick-thin waif with the same cycling gear hanging off his bony frame.

Like a wire coat hanger.

It was the saddest cycle ride we ever did and I think we stopped cycling after that.

Far from being able to "take a break from the eating disorder", that holiday became a disaster. Over that summer and onwards towards the following spring, my son went on to lose even more weight and get sicker still.

Thankfully he is now recovered from anorexia and at university.

Yet five years on my son still finds it difficult to go cycling because of the bad memories it brings back.

Monday, 12 October 2015

A really, really powerful post by a US mother and MD

A friend share this link (<http://www.marchagainsted.com/blog/ed-the-demon-giver>) on Facebook last night. I read it and - wow! - its sheer force hit me like an avalanche. I'm still thinking about it today. What this amazing written-straight-from-the-heart article does is to get across exactly how an eating disorder brings havoc and destruction to a family. Everyone in the family - from the sufferer to the parents. And if anyone wants to know what it's really, really like to have an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia in the family, simply read this article. It gets it across perfectly.

Like so many parents, mom Ann Contrucci (who is also an MD) refers to the eating disorder as a 'demon'. If you've read my book *Please eat...: A mother's struggle to free her teenage son from anorexia* you'll know that I refer to my son's eating disorder as a 'demon' throughout. Because this is what it's like. And we're not talking about superstition or Biblical / medieval-style devils or anything like that.

To see your child taken over by an eating disorder is, indeed, to see your child 'possessed' and taken over. Totally and utterly consumed.

Because, as this article so aptly describes, a child in the throes of an eating disorder changes completely.

Curiously the only negative review I have had about my book (on Amazon) from someone who claims to have an "*extensive insight into the world of eating disorders*" says "*Not only did it reinforce stereotypes about eating disorders (calling anorexia 'the demon', it seemed that the mother (the author) was overly invested in the eating disorder and took it upon herself to make it her sole mission to 'destroy' this evil presence.*"

I would say that NO WAY does this individual have an "*extensive insight into the world of eating disorders*"

because, if they did, then they would know that it is indeed like a demon.

Oh, and while I'm on the subject of that review... Yes, I - as the mother - did take it upon myself to make it my sole mission to 'destroy' this 'evil presence'.

But what was I supposed to do?

Allow my son to get worse? Allow him to die?

PS: Two lovely readers rushed in with counter-arguments which you can see here ([http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R2A1S1FCVMS52O/ref=cm_cr_rev_detup_redir? encoding=UTF8&asin=B00BOAJYVG&cdForum=Fx1T6AM8R1S9VMF&cdPage=1&cdThread=TxXF118A4FC1GW&newContentID=Mx26E1Q3K5TS9IB&newContentNum=4&store=digital-text#Mx31JG2CNHH5TBT](http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R2A1S1FCVMS52O/ref=cm_cr_rev_detup_redir?encoding=UTF8&asin=B00BOAJYVG&cdForum=Fx1T6AM8R1S9VMF&cdPage=1&cdThread=TxXF118A4FC1GW&newContentID=Mx26E1Q3K5TS9IB&newContentNum=4&store=digital-text#Mx31JG2CNHH5TBT)). This comment sums it up: "*In a family's eyes when a family member or loved one is extremely ill with anorexia, there is nothing that they would consider 'too much' or 'overly melodramatic' when it comes to saving a life.*"

NOVEMBER 2015

Monday, 2 November 2015

Depression is a lonely place to be until...

As anyone who has visited my recent post on the Around The Dinner Table Forum may know, I've been having a spot of bother over the last two years. The trouble is, my son is pretty much recovered from his eating disorder. But as he continued to move in the right direction and establish a new life for himself, it became clear that I was suffering from the aftermath of everything we had been through during the traumatic years during which I'd battled to help him recover from anorexia.

It began as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) with flashbacks and nightmares. But more lately it's been a vicious circle of Anger, Mourning / Grief, Guilt, Helplessness, Mental / Physical Exhaustion / Burnout and Depression.

Round and round it goes.

And it hasn't been helped by the fact that I've been practically laid up for the last three months due to the bike accident in early August (first broken elbow followed by herniated disc in my lumbar spine).

Depression (and the cornucopia of stuff that goes with it) was a very lonely place to be.

That is until I posted a Cry For Help on the Around The Dinner Table Forum and loads of my old, trusted friends rushed into offer help and support, via replies to my post and by email.

One, who was visiting family in the area, met me for coffee, armed with flowers and wine (the wine proved especially therapeutic ;)

I was really, really touched by the response I've had, to the point of getting very tearful.

There are some wonderful people out there, with very kind hearts who really 'get' exactly what it's like. Sadly, for many parents, it appears that - once their child is recovered and getting on with their life - they are left with the fallout. Brains have undergone so much trauma that it simply isn't a case that we, too, pick up where we left off and move on.

If only it were that simple.

As I said on the Forum: *Anger... helplessness... depression And burnout. Seriously burned out. 'Lay' people couldn't possibly ever understand and so no-one knows. I can't focus on who I am any more or where I go from here. No energy, just exhausted and dazed. As if I've been beaten up and left for dead, and am just about coming round. Picture those cartoons with stars going round someone's head as they sit there, dazed, with + eyes...*

All of it took so much energy from me, sapped me to the core, like a vampire sucking out blood until there is none left. Empty shell, dazed, burned out. Unable to function properly. Day after day after day.

But the core of the problem is the stuff I've already mentioned: #1 is Anger, #2 is mourning / grief, #3 is guilt and #4 is mental (and physical) exhaustion and burnout.

Monday, 2 November 2015

The 'guilt' feeling isn't what you might think it is

Part of the vicious circle I described in my last post is 'guilt'. But not the kind of 'guilt' you might expect. I don't feel guilt at 'causing' the eating disorder because, as modern evidence is proving, mothers don't 'cause' their child's eating disorder - eating disorders are thought to be a combination of genetic susceptibility and environmental triggers (in my son's case it was trying to get a fantastic six-pack physique without doing as much sport, while eating less). No, the feeling of guilt that is very much part of the vicious circle of emotions I'm feeling at the moment is very different.

Here's something based on what I wrote in my diary app the other day:

Guilt

Irrational guilt, of course, because I know parents aren't to blame for their child's eating disorder.

Parents didn't 'cause' their child's eating disorder and families can't help their genetic makeup. We couldn't control any external circumstances that may have triggered our son's or daughter's eating disorder.

We can't be held responsible for not identifying what was happening to our son or daughter as they began to get sick. This is especially the case for parents of boys. When my son fell sick with anorexia there wasn't the awareness that there is these days that boys get eating disorders too. We had no idea what was wrong with our son. So there can be no guilt attached there.

As a family, we didn't know what help was available through our British NHS. Our GP didn't tell us about CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. And we assumed that what he was advising (i.e. wait and see what happens x a number of visits to the GP) was the right advice. So we can't feel guilt here, either.

We can't have known that it wasn't normal for our son to have to wait up to six months for treatment and that he should have been fast-tracked through the System. We can't have known that our GPs' surgery was unhelpful (to say the least) in saying that we'd just have to wait.

We can't have known just how serious eating disorders can be. At this early stage we knew very little about anorexia. Especially in boys. We can't have known that not all medical and mental health professionals are trained in modern evidence-based treatment and whether the treatment our son eventually received for his anorexia was right or wrong.

We can't have known any of this. And while we were battling with the very worst - with our son, with the highly resistant eating disorder, with GPs, with CAMHS, etc - we were also having to undertake the biggest learning curve of our lives. Bigger than anything we ever learned at school or university. And we had to learn URGENTLY because it quickly became clear that what our son was descending into could be a matter of life or death.

Yet, irrationally, I feel guilty for so much of the above. Probably the least irrational is guilt at the fact I should have pushed harder: pushed for the GP to send off a referral, pushed for that referral to be expedited as urgent, pushed for an urgent appointment with CAMHS, pushed for evidence-based treatment every time I winced at what was being said or done in front of my son... stuff that could be potentially damaging and which often contradicted the information I was reading and learning about in terms of evidence-based treatment for eating disorders at that time.

I should have pushed more, been more forceful, 'chained myself to the railings' and so on...

This is the guilt I feel.

Because if I had pushed, then maybe my son would have recovered faster. And he wouldn't have had to go through all the darkness he went through during the first 12-18 months of treatment as his weight continued to drop, along with his mood and behaviour.

... which leads me to feelings of self-compassion, of wanting to hug the person I was back then and tell myself that it's OK, I couldn't have known any of this.

And even when I had educated myself on everything to do with eating disorders and modern evidence-based treatment, I was just too traumatised and exhausted from fighting my son and his eating disorder, day in, day out, for so many, many months.

At the time, I fought as much as I could - to the limits of my strength.

So I mustn't feel guilty, and instead give myself some loving, knowledgeable support.

Tuesday, 3 November 2015

It's team work: none of us must feel guilt

I spent yesterday afternoon worrying. Worrying that people who had suffered from an eating disorder might read my blog and feel guilty for 'putting their parents through this'. So I immediately put a post on my Facebook page that says: *What I DON'T want to do, ever, is incite feelings of guilt in the eating disorder sufferers themselves (whether recovered or in recovery). They must NEVER, EVER feel guilt at 'putting their parents through all of this'. NEVER, EVER. We, as parents, simply responded with love, exactly as we would have to any life-threatening illness. NEVER feel bad about it. EVER.*

Followed by: *I felt bad about it because someone I know who has been through an ED as a sufferer read my stuff and said how bad she felt that she had put her mum through all of this. I wanted to stress that these young people shouldn't feel bad about it, just as someone who was suffering from - say - cancer wouldn't and shouldn't feel bad about their parents devoting time, energy and emotions, etc etc to getting them well.*

It's so sad that it's still the case with mental illness that people experience guilt in a way that they'd never do if it were a physical illness.

Let's face it, mental illnesses like anorexia 'just happen'. And usually eating disorders 'happen', it is believed, to people who are predisposed to developing an eating disorder; people whose brains are 'wired up slightly differently'. All it takes is some kind of trigger (which could literally be anything - from dieting to bullying, bereavement to stress at school, over-exercising to having a physical illness that causes

someone to lose a great deal of weight) to set it off.

These were just some of the triggers experienced by families in my second book: *When Anorexia Came To Visit* (where I talk to 20 families who have been through an eating disorder).

The eating disorder is no-one's fault.

And it's natural for parents to drop everything and rush to the rescue when their child falls ill. It's natural for parents to worry themselves sick, have sleepless nights, weep, panic or whatever. It's what parents do. Whether it's cancer, heart problems or an eating disorder, it's what parents do.

As I always said to my son: "It's what I do, it's my job."

It'd be weird if we didn't feel like this.

And, yes, the sufferer goes through the mill. And, yes, the parents do, too.

Again, it'd be weird if we didn't.

And both can still suffer from the fallout afterwards.

Because it'd be kind of weird if one day we all said: "Great, he / she is well again. Let's all pick up our lives where we left off. Finished. Job done."

There is bound to be debris that needs clearing up whether it's residual or co-morbid depression, PTSD or a physical illness. And no-one should feel guilty about this, because this is what families do - they care for each other, through thick and thin.

It's a team thing.

And it's 100% natural.

So please, no guilt. From anyone.

Just love and understanding.

Wednesday, 4 November 2015

Supermarket shocking!

Ben is back from university on Friday for 'reading week', so I asked him to send me his shopping list so I could add it to our delivery from Tesco's. Result? DOUBLE the supermarket spend compared to when it's just Paul and me. And Paul and I seem to eat pretty well! It's things like this that make me realise just how far Ben has come since those dark days when supermarket shopping was a complete nightmare.

Wednesday, 4 November 2015

Pizza Express, not distress

Ben's massive addition to my weekly supermarket shop reminded me of the other week when Paul and I drove down to Sheffield to celebrate my birthday with Ben. We went to Pizza Express, a restaurant

where, back in the 'bad old days' when Ben's anorexia was raging, we had some particularly distressing episodes.

But there was Ben, this time round, ordering the larger size pizza with a sizeable list of extra toppings. When it was served, he pointed to his mountainous pizza and said "Does THIS make you realise that I am perfectly OK and that you have NOTHING to worry about, mum?" Because, yes, you've guessed it, I constantly worry, like we parents do and will probably always do...

DECEMBER 2015

Monday, 21 December 2015

Why my own depression went undiagnosed for decades

One afternoon in 1989 - on one of the frequent days I took sick from work - I lay on the bed with the large coffee jar beside me. Its potentially lethal contents, carefully amassed for this purpose over the past weeks during visits to different pharmacies and supermarkets, were just feet away from my mouth. A glass of water sat on the bedside cabinet.

Yet somehow I couldn't bring myself to take the overdose despite being in a dreadful state: absolute fatigue and apathy, deep, dark depressive thoughts, self-loathing, probably drinking too much and the constant jabbing of the inner voice which told me I was a failure, that I was 'different' from other people, that they probably thought I was odd and that it was not surprising that I'd been fired from my previous job for 'not fitting in'.

In desperation I called the Samaritans. I told the woman on the line what I planned to do and why. I desperately wanted someone to talk to, someone who would understand, because I sure as hell didn't understand myself.

I can't remember her exact response, but it was along the lines of 'Pull yourself together, there are thousands of people worse off than you so just think about them for a while'. Basically, like Hannah Betts confessed in a recent article (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/wellbeing/health-advice/why-ive-never-written-about-my-depression-until-now/>) on her lifelong battle with depression, I was made to think that people like me shouldn't feel like this. I had everything going for me - my own house, a secure family background and good upbringing, a brilliant job (even better than the job I'd been fired from) and a good income. Yet I was made to feel as if I should get off the line so she could devote her time to people with genuine needs, not silly 31-year olds like me who should be thankful for what they'd got.

It's no thanks to her but I never did take that overdose. And I got rid of that coffee jar.

But I never did get rid of the undiagnosed depression which had hit me with a sledgehammer for lengthy periods, on and off, since the age of 15.

In the weeks and months leading up to this afternoon in 1989, I'd visited my GP on countless occasions complaining of extreme fatigue and apathy, dark feelings, sleepless nights and nightmares. I'd had numerous days off work because I couldn't muster the energy to get out of bed.

The GP took umpteen blood tests suspecting iron and magnesium deficiency. She felt it was probably something to do with pre-menstrual tension and heavy periods (although mine were pretty normal). Maybe I needed a different contraceptive pill. Or maybe I just needed to give myself a good talking to and get on with life. Again, I felt as if I was taking up valuable time which could have been devoted to people with 'real' problems. As if the GP was thinking "Oh no, not her again..."

Not once did anyone ever diagnose depression.

Yet, thankfully, I was able to put on a great act at work and at play. No-one would ever have guessed that beneath my lively and creative exterior (See? I can prove that my previous boss was wrong when he said I 'didn't fit in'!!) lay this mess. Nor that my slim, toned, attractive appearance took a heck of a lot of hard work - of missed meals, eating next to nothing and punishing myself at the gym every evening. I avoided going out for meals or being invited round for dinner. Unless I could find a bathroom afterwards...

And so I lived through past episodes, that particular episode and more episodes that were still to come until finally, following my son's eating disorder, I was able to get a proper diagnosis and help.

When I began to feel out of control again, two years ago, everyone thought it was some kind of PTSD - the result of having had to care for my son during his battle with anorexia.

Certainly there were PTSD-like symptoms, but many of those overlapped with those of clinical depression, not helped by the years of battling to get my son well. Thankfully several therapists on, during the past 24 months, I have finally found one that has unravelled the illness for what it is: depression and anxiety.

Proper depression and anxiety. Undiagnosed for decades.

And I have a GP that understands. Like Hannah Betts, I have good medication: Citalopram. And I have amassed a toolkit of CBT-based and mindful techniques which help me through the bad times.

Plus a fantastic group of friends across the world who 'get it' - the mums I've met through the eating disorder carers network.

Instead of feeling weak and a failure, I have come to realise that I am quite the reverse. I am strong. I brought myself through each depressive episode, determined to change whatever needed changing in my life to raise my mood. In the past my coping strategies weren't always healthy ones... And for some time I struggled with my own particular methods of maintaining my weight and exercise regime. Ah, if only I'd had the support, understanding and tools I've been fortunate enough to receive over the past couple of years.

I hated and criticised myself needlessly and destructively for too long.

I also realise now that my dad probably suffered from undiagnosed depression, especially following his retirement when, although fit and healthy, he confined himself silently to an armchair as if he was waiting to die.

And my son, now recovered from anorexia, still has depression. Like me, he is on Citalopram.

I can't explain the feeling of sheer and utter liberation of understanding more about why I am like I am and was like I was. And that there could be genes at work here.

It is not my fault. I never was weak. And I should have been proud of myself rather than self-hating.

How I wish I could go back and speak to that young woman in 1989 as she lay on her unmade bed, the large jar of painkillers beside her, and tell her that she wasn't to blame and that it was OK.

I am now 57 years old and there is a lot of regret that, in my past, very obvious mental health symptoms could go unnoticed and undiagnosed - or treated with callousness because people like me weren't supposed to get sick.

But the good news is that I feel so very much better, simply for being able to understand this thing better and to accept it as part of me and work on loving myself and making a life for myself filled with nice things in a world where it is now much easier to talk about mental health.

And where I am sure that the people who provide vital services like the Samaritans are far, far better trained than they were back in 1989.

Tuesday, 22 December 2015

I feel freeeeeeeeee!

Here's a post I put on my Facebook page today, following yesterday's 'confession': *It's amazing how liberated I feel now I understand it. One of the good things to come out of my son's eating disorder (and my battle to help him overcome it) is that it helped me understand mental health problems, raise awareness of them and recognise that stuff I'd battled with on a personal level for decades and felt 'weak' about and 'to blame' wasn't*

my fault, just as it's not my fault that my eyes are blue. The sense of liberation, the more I accept all of this, is truly incredible. I have also been very fortunate to have excellent support from NHS mental health services over the past 18 months, on and off.

You see I was always a very strong person in the sense that I always fought for what I felt was right. I was very strong-willed, from a very early age, right from the time I decided to walk out of nursery school because I didn't like it (thankfully somebody found little three-year-old me walking down the road and brought me back).

So the episodes in my life when I've dipped deep into what I now know was depression and anxiety, starting with a particularly nasty and lengthy episode when I was about 15 years of age, puzzled me. Because here I was, essentially a very strong willed person, and yet seemingly so incredibly weak that I'd ended up in this mess, unable to find a way out. Not surprisingly, I used to punish myself about it and feel I'd failed massively, and that I wasn't this strong person, I was a total fake.

But now I know that far from being weak during these episodes I was actually extremely strong, especially as on each occasion I managed to pull myself through by one method or another, not always the most healthy methods, but sometimes, unknowingly, they were. Lately, I've had excellent support from the NHS mental health services, been able to draw on the knowledge I already have as a result of my son's eating disorder, and obtain some exceptionally useful self-help books and articles, thanks to the Internet, all of which have led to a greater understanding of why I have felt like I have on occasions over the years.

I also recently read Ruby Wax's book *Sane New World* which gave a superb insight into her own struggles with mental health and offered some useful, easy to understand CBT and mindfulness tools. I am so pleased that, increasingly, mental health issues are coming out of the closet. They are no longer brushed under the carpet, are taboo or something to be ashamed of.

So not only is it incredibly liberating to be able to understand all of this and accept it for what it is, not for what it isn't, it's just really nice to know that I always was a strong person even when I felt convinced and disgusted that I was weak.

And this is really, really good to know.

Tuesday, 22 December 2015

Wow, wow, and wow again!

A therapist friend of mine, who is part of the eating disorders network of people I've met over the past few years and who can always be depended on to provide great insights into things,

suggested I take a look at this book: *Depressive illness, the curse of the strong* by Tim Cantopher.

So I downloaded a sample on my Kindle and very quickly realised I had to purchase this book, so I did. And I'm sitting here exclaiming: "Wow, wow, wow and wow again!" as it describes my personality to a tee.

It is also the clearest description and explanation I have ever read about depressive illness, the kind of depression that is triggered by stress. For instance my current two-year struggle with depression probably came as a result of my brain short-circuiting after having battled with my son and his eating disorder for so many years, round-the-clock.

I'll blog a bit more here about this book as I read on, but I'm just on the first chapter and already I'm recognising myself. And, as the title suggests, people who develop this kind of depression are strong people. Indeed it is because they are strong that they develop the illness in the first place! If they were weak or lazy, they would have given up long before they arrived at the stage where their overloaded brain blew a fuse, so to speak, and plunged them into depression.

I feel as though my eyes are being opened wide in a very exciting way and I thoroughly recommend this book even though I'm only on chapter 1. Thank you to my friend for recommending it.

Wednesday, 30 December 2015

A very Merry Christmas, belated!

I think we had one of the best Christmases we've had since before my son fell sick with anorexia. We just relaxed as a family, in front of the fire and the television. On Christmas Eve Ben put together a fantastic spread of tapas and on Christmas Day he cooked the Christmas dinner and made the most delicious sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce and ice cream that you've ever tasted. He also made a Christmas Arctic roll, with home-made toffee ice cream surrounded by home-made chocolate Swiss roll. Then on the 23rd, on his birthday, we all went to a local pub that specialises in serving stews and casseroles. It was the kind of Christmas I could never in my wildest dreams have imagined when my son was sick with anorexia.

One of the most poignant aspects of Christmas this year was when, on Christmas Eve, we went to the school family carol service which is held every year. We found ourselves sitting in a pew next to Ben's old rugby coach who immediately recognised Ben was delighted to see him, enthusiastically shaking his hand.

This is the same member of staff who, during the bad times, ended up taking Ben to his

office one day when Ben flew out of a lesson in floods of tears and was found cowering, in tears, behind the school chapel.

Gosh, how times have changed...

Thursday, 31 December 2015

I'm speaking at a carers' conference in Edinburgh at the end of February

SEDIG is Scotland's charity for "*supporting, connecting and informing anyone who is affected by eating disorders*" and they've invited me to talk about my son Ben's recovery from anorexia at their annual carers' conference in Edinburgh on the 27th February. So I've been putting together a script over Christmas, updating the script from the talk I gave in London a couple of years ago. Things have changed since then; Ben has come on enormously, so I've cut down the "before" story with the emphasis much more heavily on Ben's recovery.

Until very recently I wouldn't have been able to give this talk because, as you may know, I found it hard to face anything to do with eating disorders; my brain would just cut off and would head somewhere deep, dark and not very nice. It would also go kind of blank; I remember someone asking me, a few months ago, about Ben's illness. I opened my mouth and nothing came out, which of course is your worst nightmare if you're going to give a talk in public.

Even when I agreed to do the Edinburgh talk I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. But as I put the script together over Christmas something struck me: it was the first time for 20 months or so that I was able to revisit our story, and think about it, without any detrimental effects. In other words I felt perfectly okay about it.

It took me a while to realise this. But when I did I suddenly realised how amazing this was!

And, unlike the last time I did a talk, which was the first time I'd ever done a talk (apart from the talk I did at my dear friend Sue's funeral) I wasn't nervous about the prospect of standing up there in front of all those people and talking.

When I did the talk in London I was virtually biting my nails up to my armpits, but once I done the talk I was so full of adrenaline that I wanted to do it again, straightaway!

Thursday, 31 December 2015

"I am so strong I feel like Charles Atlas!"

Just before Christmas I picked up a copy of "Depressive illness, the curse of the strong" by Dr Tim Cantopher – and I think that this book has done me more good than anything else.

What you get here is scientific fact, not someone's airy fairy theory. In the book Dr C shows why the kind of nastiness I've been experiencing over the past two years or so is based on sound biological evidence of real physical changes that are happening inside the brain, as real as a broken bone or a cut hand.

He also shows why it's really only strong people that get this far – by this I mean get so far that their brain just "blows a fuse" so to speak. Other less strong people would have given up long before this happened. And he describes how to go about healing the brain when this happens (through evidence-based treatments like medication and/or CBT) and why it's so important not to let this happen again; if you push yourself too far the fuse will blow again.

For me this makes sense. I'd been pushing myself way, way beyond normal limits during the years my son was battling with anorexia. I was doing this because I had no choice; if I'd given up my son could have died. So one day, and I reckon this was probably about 24 months ago, something just "pinged" inside my brain cut out. And I've been desperately trying to fix it ever since through umpteen different types of therapy and at least three different types of medication.

Some people may feel weak because they've arrived at the stage where, unlike previous occasions when they'd always been able to fix things, they felt stuck and completely helpless. Going back to the title of the book – "Depressive illness, the curse of the strong" – this happens not because you're weak, but because you're strong – you've pushed your brain so far that something has blown inside it, physically - and because it's blown, just as if you'd broken your arm or leg, you need to rest and recuperate, and allow it time to heal. And to do the exercises you need to do to help it to heal.

Having broken my elbow in the summer after the bike accident, this analogy is especially helpful. When I broke the bone there was nothing I could do apart from resting and doing the physio exercises that I needed to do to help it heal and reinstate normal movement/strength.

Because my brain had blown a fuse, so to speak, the circumstances were very similar. So, just as you wouldn't ever feel weak because you couldn't heal a broken bone immediately without help and patience, it's completely ridiculous to ever think that you could "snap out of" this kind of depression/anxiety and be able to fix it immediately or without help, be that help rest, medication and/or therapy.

It's difficult for me to describe the biological process that takes place in the brain when it blows a fuse, so to speak, but apparently it's something to do with the limbic system in the brain and the transmitter chemicals. They malfunction, just like a fuse in a plug, so your brain doesn't work in the way it used to work until it's been fixed.

I'm no scientist or medical expert so it's hard for me to describe exactly how this happens

suffice to say that it is biological thing, a physical issue, just like any other physical problem in your body.

Just knowing this and knowing that, far from being weak, it has happened because I am strong has helped me more than anything else has to date.

It has also helped me kind of admire and actually like myself for a change whereas before I was mega self-critical and saw myself as weak or a failure.

Now I know that this is not the case – and I have scientific evidence to prove it!

So whenever I feel crappy, I'll just remind myself of the fact that, far from being weak, I am strong and it is because I am strong that I feel like this.