

My name is Grainne and I would like to share my story of recovery.

So, as with all recovery stories, my story begins with illness. On 12th March 2007 I woke up in my home, which I shared with my then 8 year old daughter. I started crying directly on awakening. And I couldn't stop. I cried for 5 hours that day. That was the day I threw in the towel and surrendered to what had been a slow descent into depression and anxiety.

I didn't wake up on 12th March 2007 and suddenly find myself in the grip of depression. It was a long path to where I ended up. At age 13 I took an overdose. I say I took an overdose and not that I attempted suicide because I didn't want to die, although I knew obviously that there was that risk and I was prepared to take it. And if you have ever wondered what takes place in the mind of someone who has decided to go to lengths such as that, I can only tell you what was going on in the life of, and in the mind of, my 13 year old self.

I had an ongoing difficult relationship with my mum. I make that statement with no acrimony or blame allocated to either of us and I'm sure many 13 year old girls both then and now could make the same statement. It was just what it was and thankfully it's much different today.

I had become very close to a neighbour and her young family and spent a lot of time helping her look after her kids. At the time she had 3 children and I was always next door at their house, helping out, and drinking tea and whatever. A short time before I took the overdose, Charlene, who was then 6 months, died as a result of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. My mum had the role of a helper in our community and ours was instinctively a house that people came to with problems. I don't think I will ever forget the sights and sounds of that morning.

In those days, people talked about, not to, 13 year olds, and I was struggling with what had happened but was unable to talk about it. If you add to this mix all of the developmental changes that happen for a teenager at this critical time, it was not surprising that I found myself out of my depth with my emotions and in need of help. So I asked for it in the only way I could think of.

I was hurt. I was confused. I was grieving and I had no idea what that meant. I was angry. I felt alone. I had access to a relative's medication. I went to my granda's house, he lived across the street and mum cared for him. I gathered up my concoction of various pills, I went home, I got my favourite glass from the kitchen and I took my pills to the bathroom. Up until the second that I took the tablets, the decision to do so could have went either way. It was in a nanosecond that I decided to do it.

Fortunately I didn't die, unfortunately I didn't get any help either. My mum told me fairly recently that the psychiatrist who I spoke to in hospital reassured her that it would never happen again because I was from a good family. Having a good family is clearly protective, although a somewhat subjective judgement and having a good family does not unfortunately prevent mental illness. That act of self-harm began my pattern of poor mental health and depressive episodes. And the outcome told my 13 year old self that it was pointless to ask for help given the extreme lengths I had gone to only to find myself in an even worse position.

One of the many reasons that I work for aware is embodied in the part of their mission that is concerned with ending stigma around depression. Depression is an illness, stigma can be a killer. Stigma prevents people from getting help.

The Mood Matters program is a one off presentation that promotes awareness of and understanding of your own mental health. It exists in a variety of formats, one of which is mood matters for young people. This program targets schools, currently at ages 14/15 and is a hugely important program. It is important that our teens have awareness, that they have ways to protect their mental health and that they know where to go if they feel they are in trouble.

Another one of the things I am asked to do at aware is to read some of the pieces of research that are done using our groups. One of a lot of interest to me came through 2 years ago. It was by a young woman called Katie Trainor who is also a PhD student at Magee. It was an excellent piece of research, very well executed. It was on the topic of internal stigmatisation which I just found captivating. What we think

other people will think if we tell them we are concerned we may be experiencing depression. So, not only is there the hurdle of actual stigma which unfortunately and undoubtedly exists, but there is also our own internal perceived stigma. Another layer and another barrier to getting help.

Helping young people at this age to gain an understanding of mental health is a good way to help break that stigma, on all those levels. It's a good way to help promote a society where people understand both their own mental health and the need for compassion and support when other people are experiencing difficulty.

So the program is important on a number of levels. Perhaps if such a program had existed for my 13 year old self I may have had more opportunities to address my pain in healthy ways.

I consider I did well to last until 2007 before finally collapsing under the weight of my poor mental health and my inability to cope. Over the years in between I adopted a range of coping mechanisms, few of them healthy, and I became a master of pretence. I would frequently respond with 'I'm grand', to any and all enquiries about my health and wellbeing. In fact when I left a job in Donegal Town my colleagues bought me a crystal plaque with the words 'I'm Grand' engraved on it. By 2007 however I was far from grand, in fact I was in real difficulty. I was aware along the way that I was in trouble and I frequently sought help in the form of counselling, but I felt it made little difference to my life.

If you didn't know me well, and even if you did, taking a look at my life in 2007 would have made you think I had it fairly much made. I had a lucrative career in IT, I had a beautiful 4 bedroom semi-detached house, I drove a brand new MR2 convertible sports car which I paid cash for, I had a gorgeous wee girl, we had regular holidays and breaks, I travelled the world with my job.

The reality however of who I was couldn't have been more different than the exterior. I suffered long term, ever present anxiety and frequent low moods. I was afraid most of the time. I hated myself. I never felt good enough. It never mattered how many people told me I was good at, for example, my job. I didn't feel it and I didn't believe it.

I was lonely. I felt desperately out of my depth with motherhood. I felt I was failing my daughter. I felt guilty at leaving her while I went away to work, especially when she started to directly tell me that she didn't want me to go away. My daughter wanted her mother, a perfectly legitimate request.

The conflict of knowing that she needed me and that I wanted to be there, as sometimes, week after week, I got on a plane and left, was really difficult to cope with. And I have to tell you, it's a humbling moment when you find yourself apologising to your child for the things that were not as they should have been when she was small. Because we all think we're going to do things differently and things will be perfect for our kids. Like our parents undoubtedly planned to do for us.

As time went on I felt different from, and more and more removed from, other people. It increasingly felt like none of my relationships were real when all I wanted was to feel real connections. I spiralled downwards into a cycle of despair and the sadder and lonelier I felt, the more I pushed people away. Because the ability to keep up the facade I had created became harder and harder and I didn't want people to see who I really was.

And all of that finally collapsed on 12th March 2007. I consider that a light went out inside me that day. I got myself and my daughter into the car, to my parent's home and my mum took me to the doctors. I think this is as good a time as any to mention how amazing my mum and dad were during this time. How they never once judged me or pushed me or particularly in the case of my mum, failed to understand what I was going through. And it's a fair job to sustain that level of support for 3 years which was ultimately what was needed.

I was signed off work and prescribed anti-depressants and off I went home to wait for them to work. I was a 36 year old, very well educated woman, with a lot of life experience. I had read every self help book probably on the planet. Depression had been a part of our family life for many years. I knew some stuff. And I truly thought

that if I took these tablets, and just did that, that they were going to make me happy. But they didn't.

There is much debate around the use of anti-depressants and I am neither pro or against. I can say from my own experience of listening to people in our support groups at aware, medication is certainly important for many people as part of their recovery. Recovery like depression is an individual experience. My personal view is that you try all your options and decide what works for you. It's very much your decision, because it's your recovery. Recovery looks different for different people in their own unique situation.

For me, by the beginning of 2010, things hadn't changed much. By then I had my second daughter. The pregnancy had been difficult. I had been unable to receive any treatment for my depression, either medication or talking therapies, during that time. The pregnancy had started as a twin pregnancy and I had miscarried one of the babies fairly early on. That was a strange and awful emotion, equal measures of devastation for the wee life lost and relief for the wee life spared. And as a single mum, pregnancy can be a lonely place. But by now I had another beautiful girl and she was 2 years old.

I was living full time back at home. A year after my diagnosis and a few months after my return to work having had my youngest daughter, I had been made redundant. I could no longer afford to live in my home and it was rented out to subsequently be surrendered to the bank. The sports car was long gone – no room for a baby chair in a two-seater. I had been doing a string of minimum wage, part time, very difficult jobs so that I wouldn't be a complete financial burden to my family but I had to all intents and purposes lost everything material.

I abused my medication so that I would feel nothing and remain fairly comatose and I lived to get into bed and sleep. By that stage I was on a mixture of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication.

About 3 appointments into my care by my excellent GP, I described to him that the tablets weren't working as I still had this terrible feeling that I carried, that something awful was about to happen. I was flabbergasted when he identified that as anxiety.

Again, it's amazing to me that with all the life experience and knowledge I had, I had no real connection between the knowledge I had and the feelings I had. I was genuinely surprised that this was anxiety although I could have given you the dictionary definition for anxiety.

I just didn't connect that with my feeling because I had that feeling for all of my living memory and I thought it was a feature of being alive. Thankfully as it turns out, it's most definitely not.

Someone who was closely involved in supporting me and caring for me, and who loves me deeply, said to me during that time that my main problem was my belief that happiness existed. That the sooner I realised it didn't, the better off I would be. Scary stuff for that person. And I remember looking at them. I didn't say anything, I wasn't saying anything much that whole time, but I remember thinking, 'No, that's not true. I know people who are happy, lots of them. And if they can be happy, I can too'.

But for then I had no idea how. I slept too much, I ate too much, I watched the worst of daytime television. Every morning I woke up and my heart sank. Because I was awake. Because I was alive. I used to fantasise that I would simply die in my sleep so that the constant misery would just end.

And you know, every day was not terrible, I went to work, I made friends even, I'm sure lots of people had no idea how awful things were for me. That putting on the mask technique carried me through a lot. There were days when I even had fun and laughed and felt better. But I just couldn't hold onto that for any length of time and as a depressive state goes on, and as you continuously slide back down into that dark, lonely place, it just gets harder to keep trying.

My own visualisation of depression was just this hole far down in the ground, cold and wet and completely silent with slippery walls, that I just couldn't get out off. I felt

like everyone else was miles away, up in the brightness. So I went back to the option of taking my own life, something I fantasised about a lot but it went up a gear as I began to see no way out having been in more or less the same position now for 3 years.

This time I had no supply of tablets to hand. I decided paracetamol was the way to go but I needed to research what I needed to take. I turned to the internet. Changes to search engines made this a difficult task. When I googled suicide techniques or anything to do with overdosing on Paracetamol I was bombarded with website after website of what to do to get some help. I am thankful for that now and it's an important step in the right direction for internet protocols.

And there was another issue which perhaps highlights most of all how distorted my thinking had become and how dark a world I lived in. I had a baby daughter, a beautiful, beautiful wee girl. I decided that it would be too cruel to leave her behind, so she would have to come with me. I decided that my 11 year old eldest daughter, would be ok. I don't think I need to go into detail nor do I want to dwell on how terrible that was and how scary. That thought process is clearly not rational, but to my mind at that time it was the only plan I could think of. And alarmingly, it seemed kind to me.

I think it's of critical importance that parents, both mums and dads, have the space to talk about how overwhelming it can be to have a child. It is hard for a woman to say, I don't like being all parts of being a mum. This is not what I imagined in my dreams of motherhood. And let me make it clear, I did not have 'difficult' children on any level. I had the difficulty. Some women are natural mothers and I know many of them. Some of us struggle to adjust. And particularly if you are trying to deal with your own mental health issues, it can be impossible to focus properly on your children. For me this spiralled totally out of control and combined with all the other pieces of the puzzle, I arrived at these terrible thoughts.

What is needed is help, support. Not condemnation, not judgement. I think internal stigmatisation probably has a large role to play here too. It's not nice to feel you are failing at the one thing that women are told they are designed to do. I can personally

tell you that it is possible to both love and resent your children at the same time. Difficulties around parenting can only be resolved by giving support, by allowing people to speak of the unspeakable, of their darkest fears and feelings. And I think it's important to always, always remember the vast difference between a thought and an action, between ideation and attempt. If people have the freedom to express a thought without judgement, right there is the opportunity to help and intervene.

I knew my thoughts and my plan weren't good. Thankfully those internet searches on the lethal doses of paracetamol for a 39 year old woman and a 2 year old baby proved fruitless. Thankfully I confided in a long term friend and she came with me to the doctor to be sure that I shared these thoughts. It wasn't until the doctor used the phrase, 'you are feeling homicidal towards your daughter', that I realised the gravity of how bad things had become for me and my wee family. Thankfully a referral was made to get my family the support we needed. There was no condemnation, there was no judgement from that GP. My care with the primary care liaison team was excellent. Social services were involved and at no point was there any suggestion that my children would be removed from their home.

For me, at this point, things started to shift, I went back again to counselling with Zest and some changes were made to my medication.

I vividly remember the day that the light inside me came back on. Well ok, it was more of a wee spark to start with. I looked terrible on that Saturday morning. By now I was 13 stone and I was abusing alcohol as yet another way to attempt to deal with my situation. I felt worse than I looked but I dragged myself off to have lunch with 2 persistent friends who refused to give up. Two of my best friends. The kind that love you even when you don't love yourself. When we talk about that day they say that the absolute lack of emotion I was displaying was the scariest thing.

That's the thing about depression, the lack of anything. It is complete emotional flat lining. I heard a great description of depression from a gentleman called Dr Stan Papenfus who is a psychologist practicing in Co. Down. Dr Papenfus comes from South Africa and had to leave when he married his wife as their marriage was deemed illegal by the apartheid state. He's written a number of self-help books on

depression and he's an extremely interesting and engaging character. If you ever get the chance to hear him speak I recommend you take it. I was lucky enough to hear him speak as a guest at one of our support groups in Downpatrick. For someone who has never experienced depression, his description was amazingly accurate and it reflected for me exactly how I felt. He described the process as a slowing down, and a slowing down, and a slowing down. Until you practically stop. Until you're hardly breathing. Until no-one notices you and you can be left alone.

And that's how I felt as I sat at this lunch wishing I was in bed. Asleep. In the dark. I was counting the seconds till I could escape and get home to bed. Meraid started talking and I was half listening. She said something that I'm pretty sure I'd heard by that stage very often. She said that I could do something about how I was feeling and that only I could do something about it.

And I don't know why, maybe just timing, but right at that second, that wee light that had gone out inside me slowly and cautiously flickered back into life. It was just a wee spark but I knew something important had happened. I started to entertain the possibility that I could do something about this situation I was in.

And honestly before that, it never entered my head that this was something in my control. In spite of all I had read, all the people I had seen. And you just never do know the moment that you will say something and it will be heard. And that's the moment that my journey to recovery started.

Rachel also stated that I should really go off and do the Psychology degree I had dreamed of doing for 15 years. I no longer had the restrictions that I always thought I had. I consider now, that I was very lucky to have experienced complete financial annihilation as a result of my illness and I never thought I would be saying that. When you have nothing left to lose it is easier to start completely anew.

So the next day I did 2 things. I started researching recovery and I applied for the Psychology degree here at Magee.

And this is the part of the story I really like to talk about. It's why services aimed at supporting people are so important. It's why everything that you say to a depressed person is important. And people who are experiencing depression can be very frustrating. I know I was a pain in the ass, which as it turns out is more of a feature of my personality than a symptom of depression.

I know my family must have wanted to shake me on many occasions. The lack of hope and negativity and the inability to try something that might help can be very hard to watch. But really what has to be remembered is it's not that a person doesn't want to try, it's that they just can't. Because if you think about it, if you stop and think about where that person is at, who would choose that? Who would choose to hate themselves, to feel bad all day every day, to dread waking up in the morning, to want to be dead? It's hard to witness but it's not a choice.

It's something that even with my personal experience, I have to constantly remind myself of. I want people just to try something, anything. But that is counter-productive. Me pushing a person to do something doesn't change a single thing for that person. It just makes them less likely to approach me. Suggestions of small steps and gentle encouragement are far more likely to have an impact. Because there is something that is usually happening even in a depressive state. Listening. It may look like there is no response, but there is usually listening. And lots and lots and lots of thinking.

Once a person does make a decision to try, there needs to be help. There needs to be guidance. There needs to be places to go. There needs to be things to try. Every person, I believe, is responsible for their own recovery, but they need help to develop the strategies which will ensure their ongoing good mental health. They need ideas, they need techniques to try, they need people that are interested and that know how to help.

The golden nugget at the heart of recovery for me is the belief that you can recover. The moment I started to believe I could recover, I started to recover. It was a slow process and very cautious at first. And all those years when I tried different things to help myself, all the hours of counselling I had felt did me no good, well they just

started to fall into line because they were important. And as my recovery progressed it grew in speed.

And the more courses, and techniques I tried, the more options I had, the more I was able to re-engage in my life. I found the things that worked for me and I took them and I ran with them. I think I tried every self-help strategy known to mankind.

I continued with my counselling. I had a fabulous counsellor, Gary, at Zest in the town, and he was a man which helped blow away some of the stereotypes I had formed about people in helping roles and indeed about men.

I did a self-esteem course at Derry well woman. I used the Aware Defeat Depression support group. I had regular reflexology which started as a compliment to my counselling with Zest. I did Reiki down at The Gate Lodge. I attended well-being courses. And there are many, many avenues and resources available in this town and beyond. People just need some guidance on what, where and how.

One of the many resources on offer both in Derry and throughout Northern Ireland by Aware Defeat Depression is a 6 week CBT based course for adults experiencing mild to moderate depression. The aim of the living life to the full course is to employ CBT strategies to interrupt the negative thinking style that comes as a feature of depression. To build a toolkit, to practice techniques which help build resilience. I think the title tells you all you need to know about this course, it's a way to help you deal with life and live it.

I feel it would also be remiss of me not to speak of our support groups at Aware. My own area and one of my passions. I co-ordinate 7 of our around 18 groups that operate throughout N.Ireland. I get immense satisfaction from my job. It is both interesting and fulfilling. And never more so than when I speak to people who have come through our groups or done one of our courses and tell me that they don't believe they would be here without our services. And changes are not always so dramatic, but they are always important.

I love the dynamic of support group. People probably have a lot of preconceptions about a group of this nature and what goes on and what type of people are there so I can tell you what type of people are there. People like me. People like you. All sorts of people, from all walks of life. Depression does not respect colour, class, religion, gender. And what I see in the groups is warmth, support, acceptance, a place for people to breathe and where it's ok to feel how you feel and talk about it.

It can feel like you're a terrible burden when you are experiencing depression and the nature of how relentless it can be, means that there comes a point when you sense that even your closest friends and loves one are just sick of hearing the same negativity. So a room full of people who understand can be a very liberating thing. The groups are full of hope and they're uplifting.

Often if I have to cover a group it means that I'm travelling in the evenings and I'm tired and possibly a little resentful at the interruption to my plans. I never leave a group feeling anything less than inspired and uplifted and happy to have been there. I truly believe we're walking amongst heroes everyday and if we had half an idea the battles people are fighting we'd smile at each other a hell of a lot more as we go about our business every day.

And I found everything in your life can act as therapy. I'd like to talk a bit about the Psychology degree I just completed here at Magee. 20 years ago next year, I started a history degree at Queens. The first year was a selection of general arts modules and one of the modules I selected was Psychology.

I bought the text book and I opened it and I looked at the chapter titles and it blew my mind, I thought it was the most fascinating subject that I had ever looked at. I ran away from Belfast shortly after that and I came back to Derry and I enrolled on the Applied Computing degree here at Magee.

I got a first class honours and went on to have a lucrative career. I use the word lucrative and not the word successful as the definition of success for a career can surely not involve you being miserable and unfulfilled. Having said that I had many amazing experiences, I saw a lot of the world and I earned a lot of money.

Anyway, having decided finally to go for the degree I really wanted to do as part of redesigning my life, in 2010, I found myself again buying a first year psychology text. And I opened the book. And I looked at the chapter titles. And I just exhaled and sighed with the relief of finally being where I wanted to be. It may be cheesy but it was a dream come true.

That degree was everything I thought it would be and more. I loved it. Every module taught me something, some of them that I had no interest in that particular area. One of the modules in second year is the developmental module, taken by Dr Jamie Murphy. Jamie is enthusiastic and passionate about his subject. And it's a very interesting topic.

Two things about that module stand out for me. On day 1 Jamie told us about the research that he is involved in which is centred on the causes of psychosis. When he was finished speaking I didn't hear much of the rest of that lecture because I was blown away. It struck such a chord with me because more knowledge means better treatments can be developed and causes which expand beyond genetic predisposition expand the possibility of recovery. Having listened to Jamie in our first developmental lecture, I just thought, I am going to be part of that research and I having passed that degree with a first class honours mark in every module covered over the 3 years, I now am enrolled in the PhD program as part of that area.

The most powerful message any health care professional can give a person experiencing mental health difficulties is, 'I believe you can recover'. When I sat in my doctors surgery and told her that I had thoughts of taking my life and my daughters, she said to me, 'I know you are going to get better'. I didn't believe her then but she was right. And like I said, always with the listening.

The second thing that happened in that module, in the initial weeks was that we covered the young mind and how a child learns and develops in those most precious years. And also all the conflicts that can happen and the consequences for development if things are not as they should be.

Never was I more glad that I always sat at the front of class and the only person who could see me had a sea of faces in front of him and so couldn't see the tears that welled in my eyes in those initial weeks of the module. It acted as a final letting go for things that were not as they should have been for my young self. And for the first time, I didn't feel the need to allocate blame or make people wrong to make myself feel justified; it was a great sadness but a great letting go.

That module set the necessary context for me and my lovely mum to forge a healthy bond as 2 adults. It was the first step in me being able to release the guilt I felt for the things that I regretted around my own children and their early life, particularly my eldest girl.

I thoroughly believe that any other teacher, at any other time, would not have created the same dynamic or had the same result for me. So, if you are a teacher, and you feel that you are doing a thankless task, please remember that it's not all about assignments, exams and grades. You have no idea of the impact of your teaching, in your style, because of just who you are. You could be changing lives and futures.

As I said to Gary, my counsellor at Zest, in our final session, in helping me to change my path, you impact my parenting, which changes my children's paths. And that is incredible. In this case, not only the future has been impacted but the past has been redeemed and two women have been able to just let it go. As a gentleman called Glenn Hinds explained to me, each piece of work that we do on ourselves as a parent means a piece of work our kids do not have to do and that concept is central to the emotional evolution of both me as an individual, and of my family.

I think it's amazing the personal journey that you and others can go on when you embrace what you love and use everything in your life to improve yourself. It's why good teachers make a massive difference, why people with a dream of being a counsellor should go for it, it's why I do what makes me happy with the greatest faith that I will end up where I am needed.

My recovery had me at the centre of it but I hope this talk has illustrated the amount of people who had a supporting role, who gave a helping hand, who are out there ready to help. From my amazing mum and dad, my sisters and friends, to the services I accessed on my way to being well, to every teacher that I met along the way, to people in our support groups that continue to inspire me.

I also reflect on how lucky I was, to have the support network I had and I continue to have around me. When I was ill, which encompassed my pregnancy with my second child as well as her first two years, I didn't take any photographs. My wee sister did. Thanks to her documenting every step of the way there is no gap in my youngest daughters photo album, and god they love to look at the photos. My youngest who is about to turn 6 said to me on Sunday – 'the good thing about photos mum, is that you look at them and remember what you did and it makes you happy'. How grateful am I for those photos existing.

I am glad to be physically well and be able to do things like work and exercise. I know that not everyone is so fortunate. People may be dealing with health conditions that result in chronic pain, people may have a dual diagnosis with another mental health condition. Recovery becomes more complicated and every situation is so unique.

At the top of my priority list every day is the practice of the various activities I do to preserve my good mental health. My mental health is my first priority; some people find it a strange notion that I put my mental health as a priority in front of even my children. The reason that I do is that I found out the hard way what happens to children when their mum has poor mental health. You can't focus properly on your parenting if you are consumed by yourself and your own unhappiness. Certainly for the three years that my life more or less stopped, my parents did the parenting of my children. Because I couldn't.

I endeavour to live my life with awareness of what I do and the results of it. I have opinions. I have a voice. I don't watch much TV, in particular the relentless advertising bothers me. I don't buy beauty magazines because I am disgusted at the impact of our culture on our kid's body image. And kids with issues become adults

with issues. They potentially become parents with issues. And they have kids. And how can they not pass these issues on. And so it goes on.

I am very careful about the people I spend my time with, I know now that I don't have to remain in any friendship or relationship or job where I am not happy, I have the right to change and to walk away from anything that isn't right for me.

I make changes when I need to. In March this year I concluded after a turbulent 30 year relationship that alcohol and I had to go our separate ways and I made that change to my life. The ways in which that has increased my health and happiness are immense. I can't believe the freedom that that one change has given me. Who knew that you don't have to drink if you don't want to?

I accept myself and all aspects of my personality. I am introverted and I will never be the life and soul of a party, and that's ok. I love my research work, I am a self-confessed nerd and that's ok. I love my work with aware, it's cause so dear to my heart and I have no problem saying that, because that's ok. I read a lot about everything that interests me. I do courses all the time. I develop new interests in things that inspire curiosity in me. I love to exercise. I love to garden. One of my greatest new pleasures is helping my friend on her allotment, I didn't even know we had allotments in Derry. I love to cook. I don't really mind what people think any more about the nature of the things that generate passion in me, that ensure I feel connected and engaged in my own life.

I don't by any means have a perfect life and I have the usual amount of stressors and losses and challenges to deal with. But now I have healthy ways to deal with them, ways that work, ways that make me feel stronger every time I meet a challenge and deal with it. And I have found my way of coping with life at the same time as being able to see the beauty in life. I am able to take my opportunities to be happy. I used to say to Gary a lot, where the trees always this green? Cos it is in the small things that great joy can be found.

Most of all, now that I have embraced who I am and have made my peace with myself, I can fully concentrate with contentment and proper focus on raising my 2

beautiful girls. I strive to give them everything they need to understand who they are and to become who they want to be and most of all I strive to be a good example to them of a person who is happy and who is achieving her full potential.