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Creative Expression Provides a Route to Recovery

Carolyn Jess-Cooke

I have suffered from anxiety and depression most of my life without realizing it. I remember frequently waking up in the middle of the night at the age of 7 unable to breathe, and with the benefit of hindsight can see it may have had something to do with the fact that I went to bed every night convinced that I would wake up and learn that my father had killed my mother. Living amongst such circumstances as childhood abuse makes you normalize terror, and so it wasn't until my mid-thirties that I realized that anxiety and depression were not part of who I was. Also, I knew a lot of people who had experienced trauma - I grew up in Belfast during the tail-end of the Troubles - so I didn't fully grasp that my home life was abnormal and that mental illness existed until I had my own children.

My Dad committed suicide when I was 13. He had been abused as a child and grew up during the Troubles at their absolute peak. The effect of frequent bombings, shootings, murders, 'knee-capping', road-blocks, riots and hunger strikes upon a city's denizens does not involve the level of fear and trepidation you might expect (if anything, blasé-ness, as evidenced by my mother's decision to cycle blithely through a riot in Belfast in December 2012 - twice). Belfast then was the sort of place in which a boy was not permitted to be left-handed. It was the sort of society in which a boy could go to school covered in bruises inflicted by his father and no one would bat an eyelid.

As a result, my father was violently abusive towards me and my mother. It took years for her to summon the courage to leave him – I had my own fears he would kill us – and when she did he attempted suicide several times, one of which I witnessed. He succeeded on the morning of my thirteenth Christmas. He was thirty-five years old.

During all of this I had never had any kind of counselling – counselling was highly shameful, and only lunatics saw therapists. I find it no small coincidence that I began writing prolifically at the age of six, producing seven novels and a poetry collection by the age of fourteen, and on revisiting these works as an adult it's very clear that I was expressing everything that was happening around me. I published my first poem at the age of seventeen and went on to get a scholarship to do an MA in Creative Writing at Queen's University, Belfast, followed by a PhD in Literature. Writing continues to be my way of making sense of things and finding balance, though in a highly unconscious manner. In other words, I never intend to sit down and write about real life situations, but they always find their way on to the page.

In late 2013 and early 2014, I had a significant psychic breakdown – a combination of postnatal depression, sleep deprivation and turning thirty-five, the age my father was when he died – which forced me to get counselling and also drag myself to a GP for help. Asking for help is something I find very difficult, especially when it comes to mental illness, but I was so reduced by anxiety that I would have done anything, absolutely anything. Anxiety is not just feeling scared – it makes your hair fall out, it makes you drop weight faster than any diet, it robs you of sleep, it gifts you with frequent diarrhea and acid reflux, at its worst, it feels quite literally as though you are having a heart attack, it renders you incapable of most banal

activities, like posting a letter. It makes you an inversion of yourself. You start thinking about suicide as a completely rational option. In short, the word ‘anxiety’ is not nearly sufficient to convey the horrors inflicted by this illness.

Recovery is, shockingly, not a word used often in mental health discourse. It’s one of the reasons James Withey set up his amazing Recovery Letters project (<http://therecoveryletters.com>), after his own experiences with mental health services that side-stepped ideas of actually *recovering* from depression. As an academic at the University of Glasgow, my own research has veered – perhaps unsurprisingly – towards the relationship between creative writing and mental health. I’ve found a huge gulf between clinicians and therapists who use writing as therapy and creative writers who write for therapy. *Creative* writing, most therapists argue, is product-oriented, whereas writing-as-therapy – which usually involves writing directly about one’s life – is process-oriented and thus therapeutic. I don’t agree. Creative expression has been without a doubt the most important route of my depression and anxiety. I’ve composed, photographed, painted, but I always come back to writing and find that my mood starts to slide if I don’t write. The self always shows up on the page, whether one is writing a YA zombie rom-com or a lyric essay. Creative writing *does* involve a ‘product’, if you like, but that’s the other benefit of it: creating something that is perhaps beautiful and helpful or enjoyable for others.

We are talking a lot more about mental illness these days but it’s really not enough – 70m antidepressants were prescribed in the UK last year, which is more than double the amount prescribed ten years ago. When I first went to my GP – shaking, crying, and in a complete state – I asked for counselling. Bizarrely, he said no. My husband encouraged me to go to another GP, who prescribed antidepressants. And yes, that 20mg-a-day of Citalopram lifted me back to normality again (I also got private counselling), though not without side effects (read: a three-stone weight gain). When I finally attempted to taper off Citalopram, the withdrawal effects were absolutely horrendous: nine months of brain zaps, dizziness, vomiting, stomach cramps, extreme fatigue, confusion, embarrassing forgetfulness, mood swings, and a sharp return of panic attacks. My GP had no idea why I was reacting so badly, though a friend – who happens to be a clinical psychologist – informed me that I must have a little-known condition called SSRI Withdrawal Syndrome. With 70m annual prescriptions, how can something so horrendous (and surprisingly common) not be more well-known?

I won’t rule out taking antidepressants again (obviously, I don’t say that lightly), but writing remains the most reliable instrument in my mental health First Aid kit for the long-term. I have found enormous well-being in challenging myself as a writer, trying out different genres (I recently won a major prize for a short story, a form I never thought I’d get the hang of, let alone win anything for), and raising the bar with each project. Research into the benefits of writing for mental health is in progress but not quite there yet. It’s difficult to measure, but one of my aims to launch a large-scale study next year which involves devising creative writing workshops for service users and interviewing them over a period of time to find out the impact of writing on their mental health. My hope is that others will find options for their long-term management of mental illness and – dare I say it – a route to recovery.