

PE1651/GGG

Sue Irwin submission of 12 January 2018

I was born into the post-war baby boom years of the 1960s – the “Age of Aquarius” an age of reform and revolution – and was the youngest of 3 siblings. My parents had lived through the troubled years of WW2 and were kind, generous and hard-working people. I grew up in an ordinary English town and went to ordinary state schools. I gained average grades in secondary school and went on to gain a degree in European languages. I lived for short periods of time in a couple of European countries. I got married, found employment, and gave birth to 2 beautiful daughters. At the age of 35 I became pregnant with my third child and to the outside world (and to me) my life appeared straightforward. But, I had a secret, a secret that I had managed to hide since childhood, and a secret that I shared with only one other person – it was a secret of abuse, and the consequences of sharing this secret with anyone else would be devastating (or so I was led to believe) and whenever I contemplated it, sheer terror would engulf me and I would feel overwhelmed. So much so, that I remained silent – or rather, I was silenced, and so I buried that secret deep within me, in the hope that it would over time disappear. But it was not to be, and I wonder sometimes, how I ever thought it would disappear.

The birth of my son in December 1996, proved to be the moment when this secret reared its ugly head and shortly after his birth, I found myself in need of support to manage my distress. Believing that I could trust in the expertise of professionals, I turned to statutory mental health services for help. I was immediately prescribed an anti-depressant for my symptoms and so began a journey that was to last 17 long and at times desperate years. By November 2013 I was sicker than when I first encountered mental health services. I had become one of those infamous revolving door patients, been given five different psychiatric diagnoses and had lost all sense of personal responsibility for my own well-being. I was dependent on doctors, nurses, locked wards, cocktails of medication (anti-depressants, anti-psychotics and mood stabilisers) and ECT. I began to self-harm by cutting and burning myself, I abused alcohol and smoked cannabis. I attempted to take my own life on more than one occasion, and I’m sad and ashamed to say that at one point I wanted to take my own children’s lives as well as my own. Unfortunately, throughout all those years, I never felt safe enough nor was I able to find someone who I trusted enough within statutory services to disclose the horrifying nature and cause of my distress.

I had lost not only those 17 years of my life, but much more; those first precious years of my children’s lives and the final years of my parent’s lives had passed me by without my

noticing and to this day, I have scant if any memories of my children as they grew up and of my parents as they grew old, became ill and sadly passed away.

By this time, my spirit felt completely broken and I had simply become a label – a set of numbers from the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. I hated myself and the life I was living. I felt disempowered, dehumanised, re-traumatised, hopeless, isolated, afraid, ashamed, guilty and angry but most of all, desperate.

I believed the time had come for me to leave the world for good and I put together a plan – I chose the method I would use and the place where I would spend my final moments. I did my best to write a meaningful letter to each of my children in an effort to explain my actions. I organised my finances so that my family would not have to worry about the cost of funeral expenses and I wrote a will dividing up my estate.

But the warrior within me wouldn't allow me to carry out my plan.

On the 6th November 2013, it was decided that I should come off, overnight, the cocktail of psychiatric medications I had been taking for 17 years, and my world was turned upside down. Whilst this rather brutal decision was made for me and I had no choice in the matter, it proved to be a momentous turning point in my life.

I was totally unprepared for what was to follow, as were my family and friends and the following weeks, months and years proved to be incredibly challenging and at times agonising. I experienced unimaginable emotional upheaval, anxiety and insomnia so debilitating I was at times unable to function, I cried when I didn't want to cry, I laughed when I didn't want to laugh and I felt intensely angry when I didn't want to feel angry. I experienced moments of utter despair, moments of sheer elation and moments of paranoia. It felt like my brain was constantly working on overdrive and I found it incredibly hard to sit still, I felt compelled to be doing "something" all the time. Whilst some of these experiences have improved, I am still experiencing difficulties with sleep, agitation and anxiety. I cannot compare the experience to anything else I have ever lived through.

But however challenging the process has been and still is, I don't regret being taken off all medication – to remain medication free has been one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life, because now, despite all these withdrawal symptoms, I am "living" and not just "existing". Now when I walk down the street, I look up at the sky and I notice the world around me. My curiosity, passion and zest for life are evolving day by day and I can sometimes look in the mirror and smile back at my reflection. Now I am emerging as a person capable of feeling, facing and coping with every human emotion it is possible to experience, and that feels so good. I now have hope instead of utter

hopelessness. Now I feel empowered and have choice and control back in my life. Now I am finally beginning to find a true sense of self and purpose.

And four years later, I continue to remain drug free. I haven't seen a psychiatrist or been in contact with statutory mental health services for over 2 and a half years. I am living independently in the community surrounded by my family and friends and coping with everyday life. After 20 years out of the market, I have returned to paid employment again.