

My mind as a giant mansion

Like many others, I feel there are so many layers to layers to my life. The last 6 years have been a consistent ride on the self-discovery roller coaster. But the last 18 months, I have really found myself sitting and reflecting on all that I have experienced in the 32 years of life I have lived so far.

I have suffered with anxiety my entire life. The more I have learned about the mind, about emotions and also belief systems, the more I have understood and accepted that so many of these innate responses and feelings we experience were programmed when we were children.

For a long time, I didn't think I had ever suffered from any significant trauma as a child and I often wondered where my consistent, sometimes severe, anxiety had stemmed from. It wasn't until learning the power that words, experiences and stories, from the stress levels of those around you could have such an impact.

Room 1: fear

When I was three years old, a girl I knew was abducted and murdered. She lived next to where we used to spend our holidays. She was taken from the main road while riding her bike. She was only a few years older than me. Since I was young, and I do not remember this, but it was often spoken around me in detail. There was more stress around letting us kids out to play; more stress around letting us out of sight. In the years after this incident, I even learned to ride my bike on that very strip of footpath that she was taken.

Knowing what I know now I have no doubt in my mind that that was a major driver of my anxiety. I was scared to be alone. I was scared to get in trouble. I was so paranoid about doing the right thing and I was afraid of strangers. These fears

manifested in different ways. I often became quite shy, especially around people or places I didn't know. I was so afraid of doing things and getting things wrong that I became a high achiever and a people pleaser.

Due to interactions and relationships with some of those around me I learned to place my self-worth on my ability to do the right thing. I needed to have the answers to questions so I get everything "right". My whole life I have had a fear of being wrong, not because I liked to be right, and therefore in control or powerful, but because the feeling of being wrong made me feel so small. I think I valued my own worth on my ability to contribute, and I assessed my ability to contribute on how much information I had and what I could pass on.

Room 2: mask

Another variation of the fears and anxiety drivers described above was my strong need to not cause anyone else any pain or stress. Now I am certain I did. I am human, and sometimes this was through my attempts not to cause problems, but for the most part I usually tried to keep my problems to myself, and in some cases even from myself.

My first exposure and experience with depression was when a close family friend attempted suicide. I was 13. I knew suicide existed, I knew depression existed, but it was a topic that in reality I knew nothing about. I learned a lot from these experiences and my mind and awareness of the world was opened. But it also fed my anxieties and my need to people please. Whenever anyone mentioned they were down or depressed, I would feel an immediate sense of panic; what if they weren't just joking around or exaggerating? What if they really meant it? What if they did something?

My exposure to depression and suicide at that age made me so aware of what others were saying around me, but looking back I had zero tools to deal with any of these situations. I didn't know how to deal with these comments, what questions to ask or what to say. One thing I thought I knew was that if I ever mentioned anything bad it might make it worse, so I was best to keep all my problems to myself. I did not want to instill fear or panic in anyone.

Room 3: worthy

As I got older I started to have more health problems, I had glandular fever quite severely for a second time when I was 16, I never completely recovered from this and it developed into chronic fatigue. I remember one particular occasion where I was away with friends. I was asleep on the couch in the middle of the day. I was just waking up and I heard the other girls whispering about how weird it was that I could sleep so much and there must have been something wrong with me because it wasn't normal. Now their comments were likely coming from a place of curiosity and empathy, but as an anxious, people pleasing teenager, who felt that my worth was dictated on my ability to be "right," I now felt that my health and my body had failed me, there was clearly something wrong with me and people judged me for it.

This was a reoccurring theme for years. My health failed to improve, there were always people that made comments, regardless of the intention of those comments they always made me feel like the smallest most useless person around. There is a strange conception that those that sleep in in the mornings or just need more sleep are worthless dropkicks who are wasting their lives. There are people who wear their lack of need for sleep as a badge of honour; that the fact they can be up and about for 19 hours a day somehow makes them superior.

It got to the point where I honestly believed that if I could just get healthy enough that I needed less sleep I would succeed. I would be worthy. I would be accepted by those around me.

I worked hard on my health, and it improved. I was newly single, coming out of an 8 year long relationship, I went back to uni to complete my masters. I took on more work. I was being social and making new friends and I wasn't slowing down. I was taking full advantage of my new lease on life and my new energy levels. I was on a journey of self-discovery, of learning who I really was and what was important to me. I finally felt like I had done it. I was living a life that was one of success, one that made me feel good enough.



It didn't last. Surprise, surprise. It came crashing down and I came crashing down hard with it. My anxiety came back with a vengeance and it bought its friend depression with it. My physical health journey was beyond challenging and complex, but what I wasn't ready for was the mental health challenges that came along with it.

Some people seemed to distance themselves from me. I no longer had the energy to follow through with plans, or even create them. I am sure those people thought that I was no longer interested in spending time with them, when in actual fact I simply didn't know how. I physically was not able to. I desperately just needed others to take the lead. I was incredibly lucky during this time to have a small, but very amazing support network that helped me through.

Room 4: chaos

I like to describe my mind as a giant mansion. For a long time, my thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, vulnerabilities were all locked away in rooms. When my health crashed it was like all those doors got locked. My body was simply in survival mode, it was protecting me. I could smile and laugh with friends, but outside of that I honestly felt minimal emotions. It was a feeling of numbness that's hard to describe. As time went on and I worked with various health practitioners, I started to see improvement with my health and some of those doors started to unlock, just slow enough that I could have a peak and see what was in that room. There was a hint of progress, a flicker of light at the end of a very, very long tunnel.

Just as I started to see progress I was involved in an accident that was quite traumatic. Not long after this my mental health deteriorated rapidly. I can only describe it as every single door in that mansion flung open at once and all the contents flung off the shelves and was sprawled across the floors of all the rooms and into the hallways. Every emotion, every fear, every anxiety hit me at once. Everything my body was protecting me from was now exposed. I was also going through some very difficult situations in my social and family lives and the intensity of it all crushed me. My physical health was also going downhill again, this time bringing new symptoms.



It was the first time in my life that I really understood what depression was. My brain had changed, I just felt different. My physical health had always been a challenge. I had suffered anxiety. I had experienced sadness, intense fatigue and overall just feeling down, but none of that even came close to preparing me for how depression

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really felt. My range of emotions was wide, but at the same time not. My thoughts were erratic. I found myself regularly thinking about the concept of suicide, not because I was at that point that I did not want to live, but rather that I was at a point where I completely understood why people make that decision. I remembered back to when I was a teenager and the panic that I felt if people said they were not ok and made the decision to not really tell anyone how bad it actually was. I openly told people I was struggling, but I never really explained that my brain had hit a new level.

Room 5: misunderstood

There was one day in particular that it felt like life just kicked me from every direction, it was the worst I have ever felt. If there was any day that suicide felt like an option it was that day. I messaged a friend to say that I wasn't ok, and despite their quick response and words of support I realised that they didn't get it. It felt like no one could actually understand how it felt to be me in that instant. I felt completely alone and completely lost. In that moment, my dog, who is absolutely incredible, but also hates affection, walked into my room and jumped up on my bed and just laid with me. I got through that day, and the one after that, and the one after that.

I made a decision that I was in control and I could make a difference. Over the coming months I made changes in my life. I made new connections. I continued to work on my health, I focussed heavily on my mental health and tried desperately hard to move forward. More time passed and there were just certain physical symptoms I couldn't get rid of and some that were getting worse.

Room 6: insecurity

Long story short I was diagnosed with a brain condition and underwent surgery a few weeks after diagnosis. And so started the next phase of the roller coaster. The mental and emotional repercussions of the diagnosis and surgery were



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incredibly complex, and are things I am still working on today. About 2 months after my surgery my depression returned to the same level it was. I was so fed up with how slow my progressions were going. I had lost so much independence. I had lost all ability to be the me I had worked so hard in finding. Once again all my fears, insecurities and anxieties returned.

There had been a sense of relief with the diagnosis, I had some answers to some of my physical issues, but I had certainly not prepared myself for the recovery. I had not prepared myself for the 4 months off work, for the days upon days of sitting at home by myself. For the high achieving, people pleaser to have to stop everything she is doing and ask for help all day every day; it was a nightmare.

I was feeling sorry for myself, feeling like I was back where I started, that I was simply going around in circles, when I realised I had actually been given a pretty rare opportunity. My life was fast, even when I was sick and struggling, I was still on the go in some way or another. Nothing had ever stopped me like this and every person, place, idea or job I was scared of losing if I took time off, was waiting for me to recover. I was in the perfect position to reflect and really build the life I wanted.

Room 7: rebuilding

I have been on the way up since that realisation. Now by no means is it smooth, bad days exist, but my mindset is something incredibly different. My mental health is strong, I deal with the negatives and the down phases in just a different way now. I have continued to work with my psychologist and I worked with an incredible life coach who helped

me break cycles and catch myself before I repeated a pattern yet again. I have worked on and I am continuing to work on my mental, emotional and physical health. But I added a new focus into the mix, my spiritual health.

I was recently asked what the term spirituality meant to me. For a long time, I associated the term spirituality to either religion or people that believed in tarot and psychics, and crystals. I do not consider myself religious, but I have always had a fascination with the unknown. I loved learning, I loved ideas and new concepts, I loved the possibility that the impossible could really exist. So when asked that question for probably the first time as an adult, an adult that has worked within the confines of a modern science based model, but an adult that has found exceptional benefit since expanding my mind, I came up with an answer I wasn't quite expecting. To me, it meant to believe that something that has not yet been proven to be true could in fact be possible.

This concept created space for me. Created space for me to feel my emotions without fear of going backwards, to explore ideas, to grow and change and it gives me something to hold onto. Rather

than asking myself the question of what bad thing is going to happen next; I'm asking the question of what good thing is going to happen next, because anything is possible right?

Steph

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