**Patsy Flanagan in conversation with Jerome Carson.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Mental Health and Social Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>MHSI-07-2018-0026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Case Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>motherhood, suicidality, depression, spirituality, education, JK Rowling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Remarkable Lives Series.

Title: Patsy Flanagan in conversation with Jerome Carson.

Authors: Patsy Flanagan and Jerome Carson.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a profile of Patsy Flanagan.

Design/methodology/approach – Patsy provides a short background to her life story and is then interviewed by Jerome.

Findings – Patsy shares with us a journey of suffering that started when she was only five, to today where she feels she has been saved by motherhood and would like to save others through her books.

Research limitations/implications – Case studies illustrate the complexities and the richness of human experience and help us understand mental health and mental illness better.

Practical implications – Patsy makes a heartfelt plea to those contemplating suicide, “I beg of you, reconsider. Life can improve.”

Social implications – To tackle the mental health epidemic we are witnessing, Patsy says we must start conversations about mental wellbeing in childhood. Schools have a vital role to play.

Originality/value – Patsy states that creativity and empathy can arise from suffering. Her own story bears witness to this.

Keywords Motherhood Suicidality Depression Spirituality Education JK Rowling
Introduction

I have known Patsy for three years. Over that time I have read and marked several of her essays. Sometimes that is how I get to know our students, through how they express themselves in their assignments. This often reveals their uniqueness of thought. Yet the story Patsy tells in these pages is not one that was familiar to me. How many of us hide the wounds we all carry, for no doubt a variety of good reasons? This blinds us to the richness of the human spirit and the triumph of survival against the odds. When I was a clinician I sometimes reflected that the only reason I sat on one side of the room and the client on the other, was because I had experienced a certain set of circumstances that was more favourable to me than theirs was to them. Like many, I was always conscious of the saying, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Patsy had just such an unfavourable background, but let us hear the remarkable story that Patsy has to tell in her own words...

Brief biography of Patsy Flanagan

My earliest thought of suicide was aged five. There are some who would doubt the validity of this statement. Of course, I was unaware of the word ‘suicide’ and I was not clear about what it meant to die. But I knew I didn’t want to be a person anymore, and I strongly suspected it might hurt to achieve such. In comparison to the pain of life though, it felt preferable. My other early memories were of violence; screaming and tears and the crashing sounds of picture frames being thrown at walls. My mother crying. My sister, a toddler, also crying. My father, a terrifying tower of rage and me. And me an empty shell of a person who somehow felt responsible for it all.

We, my mother, my sister and I, ran away from that home in the middle of the night and although the thoughts of death stopped for a while, my mental health was still wavering. I had extreme anxiety for much of my childhood and continue to suffer with anxiety on occasion to this day. I behaved erratically, obsessively cleaning bathroom walls at school and biting down on pencils so hard there would be shards of wood around my school desk at the end of each day. My teachers described me as a solemn and withdrawn child. My
mother observed something wasn’t quite right. And yet, mental health support wasn’t then as readily available as in current times. As such it was suggested I was ‘probably just shy’ and that I would ‘grow out of it’. Feeling abandoned to this monster that was consuming me from the inside out, I gave up, withdrawing inward further and further. I spent most of my childhood reading as a way to escape.

At 15, I discovered a way to self-medicate; alcohol. When I drank, I could suddenly socialise, the incessant voices in my head stopped, I could breathe temporarily. By 21, I was sneaking bottles of vodka into my bedroom at my mother’s house, hiding it in my wardrobe and taking a swig every time my anxious thoughts attempted to creep their way home into my brain. And it was at this age, 21, that I seriously attempted to take my life.

I was drunk, as was usual. But the alcohol just wasn’t working anymore. Instead of fixing everything like it used to, now when I drank I became sadder. Less fearful. But desperately hauntingly sad. I was getting into arguments with family members, friends and my employers. I was spending money I didn’t have. I was daring myself to jump in front of trains, to hold my head under the water whilst I was in the bath, to buy a bottle of paracetamol from every shop I entered; just in case. On the night in question I had been drinking for approximately 7 hours. I took a scarf and attached it to a ceiling hook, pulling down slightly as I did to test it. After I let my feet go there was only instant regret. No matter the pain of life, the pain of death is worse. There is the innate fight to survive, a feeling of pure panic. I got lucky. The hook on the ceiling came loose. I dropped to the floor, and my friend upon hearing the noise of me thud to the ground, ran into the room. He was, of course, horrified and forced me to see a doctor the next day.

I was diagnosed with severe depression. I was prescribed citalopram and referred to the local mental health team. Not to undermine the importance of both diagnosis and appropriate medication, but for me I found the medication made me feel strange and ‘high’ which I didn’t like. The turnaround in my mental state came in the form of spirituality. I cut alcohol out completely for a number of years, until I could exhibit better self-control. I took walks in nature. I meditated. I started keeping a journal, and writing poetry, and reading again. I learnt to accept that anxiety was a habit I had cultivated over an entire lifetime. That
it was ok to feel fear. Natural even. That I could control only my response to fear, and not the actual fear itself.

Two years after my suicide attempt, I gave birth to a beautiful and gregarious daughter. So full of life, so joyful that she is, it is my absolute belief she was sent to save me. She gave me purpose, a reason to not only survive, but to thrive. Inspired and motivated by my desire to make her proud, I returned to university. This year, 2018, as my daughter turned six, I graduated from the University of Bolton with a first class degree with honours in Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling. I am hoping to continue onwards with my education, to complete a master’s degree in social work or teaching, to be a voice for children like me who cannot see a way forward. I have also begun writing a series of children’s books based on the themes of mental health, grief, and meditation. I am a huge believer that to tackle the mental health epidemic we are witnessing, we must start the conversations in childhood. Prevention is a better approach than treatment.

For anyone reading this in the grips of mental illness or who is considering suicide as a solution, please, I beg of you, reconsider. Life CAN improve. The pain you experience does not have to be something that defines you, or something that breaks you. The pain you feel can be a gift in disguise. It can be a path, leading you towards others just like you. It can be the fuel to inspire you to reach out your hand to others. Don’t deprive the world of you. You are special. You are loved. And you are needed.

Patsy in conversation with Jerome.

Jerome: Looking back do you think the source of your mental health problems originated in your childhood upbringing?

Patsy: I personally feel there were a number of factors at play. I am a very sensitive person; my mother describes me as a particularly fussy baby. I would argue that I had an increased propensity towards sensitivity, this coupled with a history of mental health issues within my
family and the tumultuous, volatile family environment created the perfect conditions to develop a mental health condition.

Jerome: You mentioned that the turnaround in your mental state came from spirituality. What part does spirituality play in your life these days?

Patsy: For me, spirituality plays a key role in my day to day wellbeing. I meditate most days, and I have a strong belief in a higher power. For me, the sense that I am being guided and supported by something greater than I am provides me not only the strength to continue, but the faith that improvement will come and the reassurance that any suffering will be for a higher purpose.

Jerome: While you say suicide was something you contemplated as a child, you made a very serious attempt at 21. What keeps you going nowadays?

Patsy: My daughter without doubt keeps me going. I still have bad days with my anxiety in particular. However, knowing I have a little person watching me, relying entirely on me, modelling herself on the behaviours I demonstrate, gives me a reason to hold on in those days. I also feel I am much more prepared for those bad days. I know they will pass, that it is acceptable to take time if I need it and that I have fought my way through before.

Jerome: Reading was for you a way to escape from a troubled childhood. You are now writing children’s books to help them understand and cope with themes such as grief and meditation. Would such books have helped you?

Patsy: I feel that certain books, although not implicitly about mental health, hold metaphors and overlaps relating to mental health, and for me those books were my escape. I also find with my own daughter, we have such an open dialogue, and I talk candidly to her about mental health, and she shares her “worries” with me. For some children, there will be no conversations or acknowledgement that it’s ok to be different or struggling or scared. I think
to use books is a really accessible, simple way to open the dialogue between parents, teachers and children. In that regard, I think it may have been a real asset to me in my own childhood. I was extremely shy and would never have volunteered information regarding my feelings or concerns without prompting in some way. I am sure that applies to many other children.

Jerome: What does the concept of hope mean for you?

Patsy: The word hope actually makes me quite emotional. For people suffering with mental health issues you start out with this notion of recovery as a destination. When you begin the journey towards recovery however, you realise that recovery is a continuing road which you will need to walk down indefinitely. Hope doesn’t look like happiness like you expect. Hope is simply a sense of calm and peace amidst the chaos. It’s the days you never thought you would see, and the belief that although you won’t leave this road, maybe there will be some beautiful things along this journey that you wouldn’t find anywhere else.

Jerome: What changes would you most like to see in mental health services?

Patsy: I would love to see mental health and wellbeing being discussed with children in schools. I would love to see employers and teachers and the wider society adopt a more understanding approach. I would love for mental wellbeing to rank higher in importance than money, profit, productivity and “soldiering” on. I think mental health services are doing all they can do. The issue is the attitudes held by the wider society in respect of mental health conditions. For many people the issue is taboo, uncomfortable and often ignored as a result. That needs to change before any significant improvements can be made.

Jerome: What are your views on the use of medication for mental health problems?
Patsy: Whilst I can see the benefits for medication in relation to some mental health issues, I personally think medication alone is like putting a plaster on a leaking swimming pool. There are often deeper issues that need dealing with.

Jerome: How do you think mental health services can best help promote recovery, which is said to be the goal of many services?

Patsy: I think recovery should centre firstly on being completely honest with yourself and others. Stop running from the reality. I think it is extremely important to experience the emotions and pain within yourself, acknowledge their presence, but do not wallow there. I think it is then necessary to identify triggers, make appropriate changes in your lifestyle and to have a clear plan to keep on track with these changes. I think it is then time to start seeking out small joyful moments and experiences. Whether that is a nice meal, a good book to read or a trip with friends. For mental health recovery services, I feel the role is to be a friend, a mentor, a guide and a support through each of these stages. To listen, but also to gently push and motivate and to encourage. Ultimately however, recovery is a journey that only you can walk.

Jerome: Have you been inspired by any mental health or healthcare professionals you have come across?

Patsy: My inspiration comes from other individuals who have suffered mental illness and thrive despite it all. In complete honesty, the mental health professionals I have encountered during my journey seemed overwhelmed and there was no follow up after I stopped attending appointments without notice, however this was some years back and I’m sure not a reflection of current service standards.

Jerome: In terms of people with lived experience of mental health problems, have any specific individuals impressed you?
Patsy: There are so many inspiring advocates of mental health currently, which is wonderful. Personally, my absolute all time hero is JK Rowling. Most likely because I relate so strongly to the notion of being a depressed single mother with nothing but books to keep her going! But furthermore, I feel that she signifies to me that big dreams are still achievable, even after hitting rock bottom.

Jerome: What challenges lie ahead for you? What do you most want to achieve in the future?

Patsy: My biggest challenge is myself. I self-sabotage when my anxiety is high. My ultimate ambition is to have my books published, to spark conversations for children who are suffering and to see not a decline in mental health issues, but simply an understanding that difference can be equally beautiful as it is chaotic. There is creativity and empathy to be found in suffering.

Jerome: What would you most like to be remembered for?

Patsy: I want to be remembered as an amazing mother, a supportive loyal friend and a voice for children. I want in years to come a person somewhere to say “Those books saved me”.

Conclusions.

Patsy see parallels between the life of JK Rowling and herself. Both single parents. Both having experienced depression. Both writers. The transformation in JK Rowling’s life following the success of the Harry Potter novels is probably unique. Perhaps more than anything, each of us as human beings wants to know that we have had some impact on life. As a workshop attender once explained to me, “We are born, we die, it’s what we do in between that matters.” Patsy’s hope is that her children’s books, through their focus on painful issues, may help save others from the suffering that accompanies mental distress. I hope so too.
About the authors

Patsy Flanagan has just finished her degree in Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling at the University of Bolton.

Jerome Carson is Professor of Psychology in the Faculty of Professional Studies at the University of Bolton. He can be contacted at J.Carson@bolton.ac.uk