

# CherWellBeing

## Stories of Change and Understanding



As this CherWellbeing is about the impact of severe mental and physical illness on families, it seems apt that *The More You Ignore Me*, the film based on Jo Brand's book, is being released at the same time. Set in the 1980s in rural Herefordshire, Alice, a teenager with a crush on Morrissey, tries to help Gina, her mentally ill, drugged-up, moping mother, by reducing her medication. The impact it has on her family, including the lovely gentle husband, is manic. While it doesn't shy away from showing the difficulties of someone who is severely ill, this is not a dark drama, but tender and touching with laugh-out-loud moments. Brand said in a Radio 2 interview that she wanted to do something hopeful: "People are always so pessimistic about mental health issues and I just wanted to portray an ordinary family struggling with it, but a family that were a laugh and kind of had a warmth about them and what looked like a positive future."

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Whether in Year 7 or about to retire, we all have stories of how we have dealt with life's challenges.

CherWellBeing is a space for us to share them. Here you will find interviews and articles written by staff, students and parents. Stories can be anonymous to allow us to write freely.

The aim is to gradually populate the Wellbeing tab on the school website so that when we are feeling as though no-one understands us or we can't deal with an illness or difficult situation, we'll see stories of people who may have dealt with similar experiences, as well as tools and links to help us.

If you would like to contribute or link us to online content that you found helpful, please contact [cherwellbeing@cherwell.oxon.sch.uk](mailto:cherwellbeing@cherwell.oxon.sch.uk).

If you're finding it difficult to cope with a person who's ill, Rethink, specifically for carers of someone with a mental disorder, can help. Call Julie Males on 01865 904499 or email [oxfordshirecarers@rethink.org](mailto:oxfordshirecarers@rethink.org).

## Caring for My Dad

This article is about how I coped with being a young carer for my disabled father. I know everyone deals with things differently but I hope this helps.

My dad had a devastating disease which is called Huntingtons Chorea. It is inherited and appears usually between the ages of 30 - 50 years. It causes brain cells to die. This causes mood changes. Also it creates issues with coordination and jerky body movements which often results in falls. There is no cure yet and victims usually die within 15 to 20 years after their diagnosis. There is medication available which helps deal with the symptoms.

Growing up I felt like my dad was different but I still loved him with all my heart. I think everyone who has an ill parent or sibling remembers the day they were told of the illness. I do. I was only 5 years old at the time. When I got back from school my mother said to my father "she will notice when she's older so she needs to know". Then my mother said to me "Daddy's special" and that I would become more aware of why over time. I didn't understand what that really meant so I just said "ok".

Dad used to shout a lot at night because he had insomnia and had many requests like "water". I often got up at night and helped to give him medication. My chores were trying to clean the house, taking dad out when I could and keeping him company watching TV. My parents argued a lot and I would try to separate them.

My mum used to take some pills, so she wasn't there much, mentally, so it felt like it was just me looking after him. I was under 12. I knew I needed help but feared I would be taken away by social services so just

carried on without seeking any. I used to cry uncontrollably at times. I felt so hurt by my father's illness. I found ways to deal with it especially later on when my dad got carers. I read a lot, walked with my dog and went out 24/7 which caused my mother distress, but my social life was my saviour.

Distracting yourself helps but remember to never emotionally detach yourself. I did that and had to deal with more of the pain which I had bottled up. However later, I went on websites to help me deal with this, talking to other people about how they were dealing with it. If you cannot cope get help. Don't worry about being taken away from the relative you love.

I know sometimes they look like a ghost of their former selves and that's hard but try to remind yourself that they are still themselves; they are just being masked by a disease. Try to let this strengthen you, not define you and remember to still live your own life.

A Cherwell Student

"In the end some of your greatest pains become your greatest strengths."

Drew Barrymore

Some sources which I wish I had known about and may help:

Childline: 0800 1111

[CarersUk.org](http://CarersUk.org)

[honeypot.org.uk](http://honeypot.org.uk)

[www.hda.org.uk](http://www.hda.org.uk)

You can also contact Social Services.

## Five Things I Wish I'd Known

My late Mum suffered from a whole range of serious mental health problems. These were also diagnosed in different ways by different professionals over about 40 years – depression, anxiety, bipolarism, schizophrenia, psychosis (although none of the labels seemed to mean anything or were especially helpful). What this meant was that from her mid-30s onwards my mum relied on a range of medication and faced regular episodes which often led to hospitalisation and, on some occasions, sectioning. I first began to understand that something wasn't always right for my Mum from the age of about 8. To me, at that time, all I understood was that 'Mum wasn't Mum' today/this week/this month. Looking back now there were a few things I wish I had known at the time or been told.

### 1. It wasn't my fault

When you have a parent who is struggling with their mental health it is easy to blame yourself. I was a typical naughty boy, up to all sorts at my primary school and around the community. For a long time I connected Mum's episodes with things I or my sister might be 'getting wrong'. I used to get cross with my sister (who is a few years older than me) for coming back late after being out with friends, as I know this worried Mum. As I have understood later in life, Mum's problems were often so acute that nothing either I or my sister did really impacted on this, sadly nobody really reassured us in relation to this, which led to a feeling of guilt.

### 2. It wasn't her fault

As I became a teenager I stopped blaming myself for Mum's problems and started blaming her! This made me feel a lot better! Why couldn't she just be 'normal' like all the other Mums? Why did she say those embarrassing things to my friends? Why didn't she just ignore those voices in her head that kept talking to her and seemed so important. I grew up in a culture which encouraged you to think that the answer to mental health issues was to 'snap out of it' – that this was somehow an indulgence. Other family friends (adults of course) tended to propagate this myth, which didn't help.

### 3. At times it was okay to find it funny

When Mum was ill there was always a great deal of gnashing of teeth and associated worry. This was completely understandable given the

impact it was having on the wider family (I spent quite a lot of time for instance living with my grandparents). As a child, much of Mum's behaviour when she was ill appeared comical and bizarre, she did some really funny things (which I won't describe here) but I wasn't able to engage with them in this way – they were always made to feel as if they were scary and alarming. I knew at the time I would have benefited from someone helping me to occasionally smile or laugh. Mum loved a joke so I know this would have helped her too.

### 4. Bottling it all up isn't the answer

I grew up in an era where the stigma attached to mental health was palpable. When Mum first became ill, the word I was given to use was 'depressed' – so if people asked me how mum was I told them 'She is depressed'. Often I remember adults visibly cringing when being told this and usually immediately changing the subject. So I stopped saying this, in fact I stopped saying anything. I barely told a soul about Mum for decades. This wasn't great on lots of levels and if I knew what I know now I would do it differently. I have had great friends all through my life who wouldn't have judged and would have helped if I had given them the chance.

### 5. 'Mum' was still 'Mum'

When a parent is suffering from a serious mental health problem it is easy to try to completely separate the 'good' from the 'bad'. Periods of stability and normality felt like an oasis in a desert. On the other hand, times of illness were dark and unnerving. What I now know is that these were all just points along a continuum. Mum was never completely ill or well. In retrospect some of our closest times were when Mum was 'worse' because she would talk and share things which at other times would be closed off, or taboo. The illness was part of the person she was.

I am so happy we now live in a time where things are changing. There is such a lot of support which young people can access, although that doesn't change the fact that living and experiencing these things can be hard. The most important final thing which I wish I had known was that I wasn't alone; so many children and families go through similar things. The support and help is there.

A Cherwell Member of Staff

## Living with Bipolar Disorder

I was diagnosed with Type II Bipolar Disorder a year ago. In the first few moments afterwards it was an enormous relief and then for three or four months after that I felt awful. It was very hard to come to terms with it, which I didn't think it would be because I'd been pushing for the diagnosis. But now I'm starting to accept it and that has been quite liberating.

Although there are different types of bipolar disorder, the common thread is cycling up and down between hypomania (where you feel invincible and can do anything) and severe depression. You can have times off when you feel normal in between. I have more of the lows – but it's not as extreme as Type 1, there's no psychosis. There is also a mixed state that I experience where you have symptoms of mania/depression at the same time. It makes me feel agitated as I've got the mania, without feeling amazing.

In the months before being diagnosed I had this period of being very high, where I felt amazing, utterly invincible and that I could just keep going for ever. I can now see that I was taking terrible risks in all sorts of ways and behaving in ways that could have ruined my life. It didn't, thank God, but it was totally unsustainable. I wasn't getting any sleep and living on adrenaline, but it was brilliant and I kind of miss it. (I don't want to be that disconnected, numb, blind person, which the meds can make you feel.)

I then switched to being low instantaneously. It was like walking off a cliff and happened as I was opening a door in a pub, where I suddenly had voices in my head telling me that I should kill myself and felt utter despair. I went to my GP and said: "This might sound ridiculous (I thought I was being overly dramatic), but I think I might be manic depressive". And he said he'd refer me to a psychiatrist and that's when I got the Type II diagnosis.

I first started feeling these lows when I was 13. I didn't cope with it very well and when I was an older teenager I drank a lot and smoked weed. I was engaging in risky behaviour, including going home with men I'd just met and not knowing how to get home afterwards.

Being bipolar can be exacerbated by stressful life events and from the age of 17, I was abused by a relative. When I tried to tell an adult, it was handled very badly, which made me feel horrible. In the aftermath I got anorexic and ended up getting CBT through the NHS. The woman I saw totally believed

me and helped me a lot. If I could change anything about that situation, it would be that the people around me believed me at the time.

My husband and two older children care for me. The children are very aware of how I am and keep telling me to have lie-downs. I find it reassuring and helpful, but also I feel very guilty that I should be looking after them. I haven't been entirely open as I've never told them the words bipolar disorder, because I'm worried they'll make more of that than they need to. There is a hereditary component, but it only makes you more predisposed and the risks are still low.

My husband is brilliant at helping me cope. He just holds what I tell him. He doesn't panic, he just hears it and says: "Poor you, you must feel awful and remember you will feel better one day."

Part of being bipolar is understanding I can't change it and we have to move forwards. When I was a single parent to my two eldest I was terrible a lot of the time and got cross for things that weren't their fault. I'm trying to forgive myself because I was also in difficult circumstances. I've had a long chat and tried to apologise for it. I thought I'd made a mistake as they seemed to be very angry with me, but I think they needed to hear it, be angry and then move on, so in the long run I think it was the right thing to do. I also found them therapists and hope it helps them.

I will never be cured, but I'm learning how to live well with it. I can't stress enough how important getting enough sleep is. Mindfulness can also help – it's not a magic cure – but for me, especially when I'm feeling very low, it's not about thinking ahead, just getting through the day with things I know will help me.

My youngest wants to know why I go to see the doctors all the time and I said because there's something in my brain that doesn't work properly and we are trying to find ways to help me live with that. She said: "I don't think there's anything wrong with you, I like you just the way you are."

A Cherwell Parent

Find out more at [www.bipolar.org](http://www.bipolar.org). If any of these stories are bringing up difficult emotions and you want to speak to someone, contact your form tutor or deputy head leader, a friend, or your GP.