

CherWellBeing

Stories of Change and Understanding



Sabrina Benaim - "Explaining My Depression to My Mother"

Whether we're 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 plus a piece from the archive of experienced schools' counsellor Nick Luxmoore. Stories are 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 within the school community, 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.**



STUDENT

How I got better at science and am following my dream



STAFF

Interview with Schools Counsellor Mr Barnard



PARENT

What I Learned From My Mother



Counsellor's Corner (p3)

Acting Out

Sabrina Benaim



Check out her [slam poem on YouTube](#), recommended by a sixth former.

Useful Website



healthtalk.org provides free, reliable information about health issues, by sharing people's real-life experiences of all ages.

@healthtalkorg on Twitter and Facebook

Bad At Science, Now I'm off to Vet School

I always found science hard. In the end of topic tests in year 7, I would see 4c's and 4a's plastered across the top of the paper. The rest of the class would smile and exchange scores whilst I kept mine secret because I knew that I would be even more disappointed in myself. I felt really stupid because everyone else in the class seemed to get science (or so it may have seemed). I struggled with science in year 7 and 8 because there was so much new content and I just couldn't get my head around it. I didn't understand variables and graphs and physics was almost impossible for me. I remember once we were learning about light and how certain wavelengths of light are reflected and absorbed and this produces the colours we see, for example, apples are green because the green light wavelength is reflected into our eyes. I got so confused about this and remember asking my teacher 'if the lights were turned off, would the apple still be green?'

It took awhile for me to get into the swing of things. In the end-of-topic test about the reproductive system, I remember walking into class and my teacher saying that I had improved a lot. It was an 'easy test' and I had got a 5b, whilst the average in the class was a 6a. I still felt disappointed because I knew I was falling behind but I didn't know how to improve. So, I told my mum about the problems I had with science and from that moment, she became invested in me to help me improve. We went to Waterstones and bought lots of support revision guides and textbooks and I started filling in all the questions as soon as I got home because I was so eager to improve. I also had a tutor in physics every week who would clearly explain all the concepts I didn't understand. As I started focussing on how to improve, I slowly became better and better at science. Then in a Chemistry topic test in year 9, I got a 7b. My life started changing at this point.

My dad remembers it all. The turning point in my education was when we attended a parent teacher night with my physics teacher. I had recently failed the first physics test in the pre-GCSE year. I remember being upset but also laughing it off with my friend because we had done so badly, it was almost a joke. But later that week, I went up to my teacher and asked for the test again so I could re-do and see if I had improved. And I did. My teacher was really impressed with my attitude towards learning and knew that I could do it if I kept working at it. At this moment in time, not only did I have a little more faith in myself, I also understood how I could succeed.

Over the years, my reports got better. In my GCSE'S I got 10 A's and 1B (in biology). I was super happy but also disappointed. I had worked so hard over the years in Science with understanding content but also understanding how to answer the question properly. So, instead of ignoring the grade, I decided to re-sit my biology GCSE in Summer 2017 whilst taking my Maths AS level. I remember results day, I was in London at a musical theatre course and my dad phoned and told me I had achieved an A* in biology GCSE. Finally! All the hard work and determination had paid off. My confidence grew and from that point I felt more ready to apply for University to study Veterinary Medicine.

A-levels have been tough but I have been lucky enough to have received offers from two outstanding Vet Schools; Liverpool and Surrey. Looking back at year 7 and 8, I would have never dreamed of going onto do science at A level let alone University. I think one of the most important lessons that I have learnt is to work with the teachers not against them. If I feel that I am bad at a subject but want to improve, then it is only me that can make it happen. There will be others along the way who will support you but you must start it all.

Acting Out by Nick Luxmoore

www.nickluxmoore.com

Sometimes we act when we can no longer bear to think. The pressure builds up and, unable to bear certain feelings any longer, we explode into behaviour, stomping around, shouting and swearing. Or we storm out of the house, slamming the door. Or we go upstairs and refuse to come down, ignoring anyone who dares to ask, "What's the matter?"

We do these things so as not to feel certain feelings. It's what counsellors mean when they talk about people 'acting out' their feelings: we turn our feelings into actions when we can't bear to feel those feelings inside us. We externalise our feelings.

Usually, we do it at other people's expense – hitting them or swearing at them or frightening them - but sometimes we act out feelings at our own expense – cutting ourselves or getting ridiculously drunk or putting ourselves in some kind of danger.

The need to act out our feelings lessens when we can bear to think about them for longer. And we can bear to think about them for longer when other people are prepared to bear them with us, when other people can imagine what we're feeling, when they can empathise with us, when they can help us talk about our feelings and when they begin to understand.

Our ability to bear the most uncomfortable feelings such as anger, shame and frustration depends considerably on the extent to which these feelings of ours were borne by other people when we were younger. If our feelings were ignored or dismissed or simply punished, we'll have learned from an early age to act them out instead of keeping them to ourselves, and our ability to bear such feelings in later life will have been impaired. We'll have learned always to turn our feelings into some kind of behaviour.

I'm often asked for the 'solution' to a young person's anti-social or self-destructive behaviour. My answer is that such behaviour always expresses a young person's underlying anxiety and

feeling. Only when those anxieties and feelings are properly understood by the people who matter will the young person ever be able to amend his or her behaviour. There's never a quick fix. Advice and strategies and behaviour plans are great but there's never an alternative to the painstaking process of listening and genuinely trying to understand another human being. That's what makes the difference.

Let's Talk about Mental Health.

Extracts from an interview with Lead School Counsellor, Matt Barnard by Aisha Campbell*

"I believe I've got the best job in the school as I spend the majority of my day talking to students - it's the most important and rewarding part of my day... Increasingly I am working with staff to help them work with students in their care who are experiencing mental health difficulties, but don't need or want to see a counsellor."

"I didn't do well in my A-levels. Life at home had been really tough and influenced my ability to study. At the time I just thought I was lazy and out of my depth... Actually I was deeply unhappy, fearful, lonely and probably depressed. I didn't have any mental capacity left to sit and study so I got a job, but didn't want to stop education entirely and began a degree in Psychology with the Open University."

"Having good mental wellbeing is a fundamental part of our daily life and that does not necessarily include counselling. Having good friends, people that you can talk to is absolutely essential, where you listen to them off-load and they listen to you and keep what you say private."

"Students come to counselling for all sorts of reasons. It doesn't have to necessarily be what you might consider a big issue... anything from the loss of a loved one, anxiety about the future, a difficult relationship with a parent, difficulties at school."

*Full interview is in [The Winter Newsletter](#)

What I Learned From My Mother

When I was a teenager I developed an eating disorder. It was the early 1980s and understanding and treatment were in their infancy (anorexia nervosa and bulimia were only officially defined in 1981), so as you can imagine there wasn't a lot of help or understanding around. There are many reasons why people suffer from eating disorders. I was struggling with body image, thought I was useless and worthless and had quite a difficult relationship with my mother.

Mum was warm, friendly and caring with a great sense of humour. She did lots of things within the church and community. However, with five children and a workaholic husband she struggled and, out of us all, I was the one who clashed the most with her. She often seemed very irritated and short-tempered with me. I could dimly see even then that this might be because I was the most like her. She also struggled with her weight and as we were a similar shape, I picked up a lot about how my shape was not okay and needed to change too. She was ill for about four years in my early teens, with heart problems and depression, which also impacted our relationship.

When I confessed to her about the eating disorder, she took me to the family doctor who referred me to a dietician at the local hospital. As all they concentrated on was my food intake, I felt misunderstood and angry as well as a big, fat failure. To me the problem wasn't what I put in my body, but why I was doing it and no-one seemed bothered about that. I was then sent to see a female psychiatrist who I found cold and patronising. Eventually, it was suggested that I go into a psychiatric hospital aged 17 for a year's programme (it was a general adult programme as there was nothing specifically targeted at eating disorders then, at least not where we lived). After a short visit I decided no way was that happening and discovered my core of inner steel that helped me deal with the illness and everything else in life.

My parents found it very hard to understand why I was behaving as I did, and there was some anger and frustration at my inability to stop abusing food, but their love and support really helped. I knew it was there underneath the anger and upset. As I got older, we didn't really discuss the teenage years, although I knew they were both proud that I had overcome the eating disorder.

They died several years ago and I remember them with love and affection, but there was this stain from my teen years, when I thought I was a failure and felt very lonely and misunderstood. Then earlier last year, I found a wodge of letters from my childhood, including from doctors and specialists. But the real treasure was two letters by Mum written to our family GP during my teenage years; the first where she was explaining how sick I was and that she'd tried to help me but couldn't and the second when I was seeing the cold psychiatrist.

They were a revelation as I learned she was desperately worried, fighting for me, believed in me, also found the psychiatrist patronising and wanted to do her best for me. She had recognised how hard she was on me as a young child, but this was because she saw traits in me similar to her own and, due to the negative impact they had had on her own life, this worried her. Something profound shifted inside. She may be gone, but I had this gift from her, this insight into our troubled relationship, the mixed-up teen I'd been, how much she had loved me and how little she perhaps had loved herself then to want to change me. Very poignant and added a new perspective.

There's a Philip Larkin poem, called *This Be The Verse* with the line *Man hands on misery to man, it deepens like a coastal shelf*. Its pessimism bears no resemblance to the reality of my family life. It may be that in my young years, as Mum was overwhelmed with having five children and a stillbirth in nine years that I bore the brunt of her tiredness, irritation and buried grief and I certainly took in messages that I was wrong, difficult, other (though not just from her). But as she recovered, she tried actively to address and not hand on her 'misery,' her shadow side. I learnt from her that we all hit adversity, it's getting back up that's important, that working on and not ignoring your shadow side is a strength, to be open and honest, and the importance of humour. As a teen I may not have thought this very much, if at all, but she was pretty wonderful, my Mum.

Whatever your age, if you are struggling with an eating disorder, then beateatingdisorders.co.uk may help. For family discord, try *The Parenting Puzzle* by Family Links or *Why Won't My Teenager Talk to Me* by Dr John Coleman, both available at www.familylinks.org.uk.