

We need to talk about it – NOW



Hi! My name is Sara. I will start by stating that I love my parents deeply, however this is how I would have described them throughout my childhood.....*a criminal with a love of women and a tendency towards depressive episodes; and, a narcissist with a love of diamonds, an equal fondness for ignoring reality and the most unashamed liar I have ever known.* My life hasn't exactly been what many would assume - I was first arrested at 10 and again at 25 for the suspected attempted murder of my drug dealer (yes, this really happened)! You see, I somehow fell through the cracks growing up, as outwardly, I was part of a nice normal family and things like this don't happen to us, and if they do, they certainly don't get spoken about..... until now.

In 2008, I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, aged 21 years. At the time, I was severely unwell. I had a cocaine addiction, was at times self-harming, I was borderline anorexic with severe body dysmorphia and I had attempted suicide at least once (I can't remember the number exactly). I was an incredibly angry, sad, frightened and lonely girl who was screaming, in every sense of the word, for someone to love me and take care of me. I was completely broken. So.... how does someone come to be just 21 and have all these problems? Well, this is something I am still working out and, as I learn more about my family, I am able to see what happened to me from a different perspective and realise that I was in fact a victim of severe and chronic emotional abuse throughout the large part of my childhood and all of early adulthood. Over the years, multiple fingers have been pointed at my supposed perpetrator(s). I was always led to believe that my problems all stemmed from my father and my relationship with him but over the years I have slowly, and painfully, come to realise that this only ever a small part of the truth.

My parents divorced when I was 7 years and 11 days old. Well, that's when they told me that my dad was leaving. That was a bad day. So, my dad left and I watched my mother suffer. I was too young to know if she was anorexic, but looking back, I think she was. I never forget one day in the kitchen, I had broken a toy and needed it fixing. My mum sat at the dining table and began to press down hard on my broken toy. Being a rather intuitive seven-year-old, my eyes quickly scanned her cup of tea, and then I heard the arms beneath the fold out table begin to creak. I tried

to stop her, but she was so determined to fix my toy, that she pressed down on the table so hard that it collapsed and her tea went everywhere. And then she broke down. Even at a young age, my heart ached for her. I could see her pain and I could feel it. It is only now that I am 31 years old and have recently had my heart broken, that I realise what my mum might have been going through. Such a beautiful, vibrant and loving woman, completely broken. Sadly, my mum has never talked of her pain with me. She never really talks to me about anything real but I still hope that one day we might have that conversation. So, my dad left, but he didn't leave me! I saw him every weekend without fail. I loved my dad and idolised him as many little girls do their fathers. Except, just like my mum wasn't perfect, neither was my dad. He was a troubled soul and didn't always make good parenting decisions. The worst being involving me in his criminal enterprise. I started "working" with my dad when I was around 8 and finished around 16/17 from what I recall.

The picture painted above seems pretty obvious, right? My dad's a bad man and my poor mother a victim? Except that's not how it is. It was never that way, and it's taken me the best part of 20 years to see it. I had a lot of issues growing up – addiction, eating disorders, recklessness, risky behaviour – all the stuff you associate with BPD. So, that's what people always put it down to – BPD. But I always knew there was more to it than that. There was a reason I did the things I did. There was a reason I hated myself. There was a reason that I doubted every single move I made and sadly, the biggest reason was the emotional abuse largely at the hands of my mother. Things were tough when my dad left but I do remember being happy. My mum worked hard to provide for us. I used to be so proud of her when I saw her pull up outside my grandma's house in her red VW Golf, in her white dental nurse uniform, with immaculate hair, makeup and nails. I could see she was exhausted, but she kept on going. She was doing it all, she was my mummy and I loved her very much. She eventually met someone new and we were all really happy. A few years later, when I was 10, my step brother was born. From there, everything changed. I don't know exactly what happened in my mums' psychology – perhaps she was trying to protect her new relationship for fear of it ending like her marriage with my dad – I don't know – but from that point on, my life changed and my mums' behaviour began to worsen. I was treated like "Cinderella", excluded from pretty much everything you would expect and want from a normal family life. It was as though I was viewed as nothing more than my father's daughter. I used to be shouted at by my step father for the way my dad had treated her – I was a 10-year-old girl. I was also told that I made my mum "unwell". Over the years, the unkind treatment of me continued. Nothing was off limits – my body, my friends, my behaviour – everything was criticised or ridiculed in some way and this continued until I was 19 and couldn't stand it anymore, so I moved in with an older

boyfriend. My life continued to spiral at this point, I was heavily addicted to cocaine and essentially, just an incredibly hurt young woman. I absolutely hated myself and wondered what it was that I must have done in a past life to deserve to be treated so cruelly by those who should love me. My problems continued to peak and trough. Somehow, I got myself through university, I got a job, met a boy and in 2014 we got married. But my problems continued and had been continuing the whole time. I felt trapped. I had achieved everything on paper that I thought would make my family (especially my mum) proud and maybe she would be kinder to me, but nothing changed. I felt abused and controlled. I should add, no one forced me to marry my now ex-husband, but I have to admit that part of me was doing it to make my mum happy and to try to fit the “perfect daughter mould”. I was so frequently reminded of how I was the “black sheep” of the family that I would have done anything at this point to make my family love me! So, emotionally abusive mother to controlling husband. He was so controlling in fact, that by 2015, we’d made a move from the UK to Switzerland, because his career was the most important thing in his life. By 2016 I’d had enough and I left him. Saturday 12th March 2016, 09:20 – best moment of my life! It took over a year for me to realise, but when I left my husband, I didn’t just leave my husband. I left my past behind. And I left my mum.

Since then, I have experienced huge highs and equally huge lows (I fell in love, I got an amazing job with an international organisation, I fell pregnant however none of those things worked out) but the most enlightening experience for me over these past two years has been the realisation that, whilst diagnosed with BPD in 2008, I do not fit the exact criteria by a long shot. I am lucky that I am not frequently hospitalised and can work and maintain positive relationships – things that often acute sufferers struggle with. My belief is that my BPD was brought about largely by my environment. I believe that the elephant in the room for my entire life is my mums own struggle with BPD, or certainly something similar. I’m beginning to realise that I was conditioned by my surroundings, and adopted maladaptive coping strategies through watching both my mum and dad struggle with life. This has been a profound realisation for me and is shaping the way in which I manage my condition. If this behaviour was largely learned, it can be unlearned.

Over the years, I have experienced mental health professionals in various capacities – crisis clinics, the NHS, private Swiss Psychiatric Hospital and everything in between and the overarching theme has been that mental health services are simply not good enough. I appreciate that certain illnesses need medication in order to keep the sufferer safe, but I believe that we are too quick to medicate those who suffer with mental health issues. If only we stopped to listen to people and understand

their individual stories – I truly believe if we understood why people behaved the way they do, the stigma surrounding mental illness would reduce drastically. In July last year, I checked myself into a psychiatric hospital. I believe I suffered a breakdown. I was in a relationship that had far too many challenges and I had recently had to give up our unborn baby for a whole host of very sad reasons. I was receiving little support from my family at the time and I was using cocaine heavily again to cope with the failed pregnancy and the mess that was my life. I was hurting like I'd never hurt before. The first clinic I went to was great – they offered loads of alternative therapies including acupuncture and aromatherapy. It was the perfect break I needed to recharge and begin to try to piece my life together however after a week, I had to move. The next clinic I went to was, for me, truly horrifying. The nurses were cruel, the doctors didn't seem to care and I was housed in-between a drug rehab clinic and a secure prison unit with a 25-foot fence. I couldn't sleep, they gave me medication I told them I didn't want and worse still, everyone spoke Swiss-German so I rarely had a clue what was going on and felt totally out of control of my own wellbeing and health. But, language barrier aside, what I did realise is that there must be a better way than this! So, after gaining 7 pounds in three days from horrible medical, I decided to take a “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest” approach and began hiding my meds in my cheek. Over the next 11 days, I felt better and better and eventually, I asked to leave. Thankfully, they couldn't stop me but everyone advised against it. I was told I wasn't strong enough to be okay on my own. That was July 2017. Nearly one year on and I can finally say that I am on the road to recovery but, wow, it's a long road! I anticipate that in fact the road will never end, but I think that's the point of life, isn't it? Not the destination but the journey? A constant process of learning and evolution? If so, I'm cool with that, and very excited for what the road has ahead.

This leads me to a point I would like to address and that is the stigma surrounding mental health and its sufferers. I have long been an advocate for talking about EVERYTHING and ANYTHING. Some people I know hate this, and I have a tendency to make others feel uncomfortable, but I make no apologies. For as long as I can remember, I have experienced discrimination due to my mental health. Somehow, when I was younger, no one seemed to realise I had a problem. Each time I tried to commit suicide I ended up getting a taxi home from the hospital and every time, the driver would say “Who have you been to visit?” I never had the heart to tell them the truth. I remember one lovely Indian man, telling me about his daughters' job at GE, and he called me an “English rose”. I was 20 but I will never forget that. I thought to myself, “You wouldn't have said that yesterday if you were the one who found me and called the ambulance”. I didn't say it of course, I just took his lovely compliment. So, whilst the general

public don't seem to have cottoned on to me yet (LOL), people in the workplace most certainly have. This is sadly where I face my biggest challenges. I am a very emotional person, BPD or not, I know this is just the way that I am, but sadly we live in a world where emotions seem scary, so we decide just to hide them. I am unable, and actually unwilling, to do this. This has caused me countless problems in the workplace and I am sure has contributed to my very recent job loss. Another issue I face in the workplace is "sickness". The bad days are getting less and less frequent, but I do still have some where I cannot face the world. On those days, I feel misunderstood and completely discriminated against. In April this year, I had four days off work for Easter – great! However, for me, it was a very difficult time, as I was alone and everyone else it seemed was with their loving families. I got myself into such a terrible state that, come Tuesday morning, I couldn't function, so I had to call in sick. I don't even think I called, I wimped out and sent a text message. The next day, I was told the following (and I don't blame the person, I actually understand), ***"You know what Sara, when I first got your message I felt sorry for you. But then I was angry. You've just had four days off!"*** That comment really hit home for me but in a way that it's never hit before. Rather than making me feel sorry for myself, or crying at being misunderstood, I used the opportunity to look at my situation from someone else's perspective and the penny finally dropped – no wonder people misunderstand me at times because if we don't talk about mental health illnesses, then how do we expect people to understand them and know how to respond? I always say, the brain is an organ too, just like our hearts, kidneys, liver – we talk very openly about heart disease, don't we? Diabetes? Sure, let's talk. Cancer? Absolutely, let's beat this thing! So why don't we talk openly about MENTAL health? We could call it "Brain Health" – perhaps that's less scary? **Whatever we call it, all I know is that we need to talk about it – NOW.** We don't need to hide behind medication, we don't have to do what we are told.



We don't have to accept a "one size fits all" treatment plan. When I left the clinic in July last year, I began to introduce exercise and healthy eating into my life and it unlocked so many doors for me. Put it this way, I have smoked since 15, used more drugs than I care to admit, I like a drink, I've never competed in anything but last month I completed an 18km Strong

Man run! This for me was an unreal achievement and I am not ashamed to admit that I slept wearing my medal for a week afterwards and took it to work with me in my handbag each day! I

grew up being told I wasn't good enough, so now I'm doing anything I can to show myself that that's not true. That is was never true.

So, what now? A lot of people ask me how I manage to stay so strong and positive despite some of what life has thrown at me. Well, firstly, I am not always strong. Sometimes I need to go behind closed doors and cry and that's okay! Trying to keep pain inside us is like closing the door on a flooding room. The second you open that door, you'll be knocked to your knees by the ensuing water.... you see my point? Crying is part of healing. But what keeps me going are two things. For as long as I can remember these things have been an absolute constant in my life. Firstly, my love for my baby brothers Edward, Lawrence and Marcus. In my darkest, darkest times, it was, and still is, my love for my brothers and my dreams for a better life for them that keeps me going. Because of them, I know I could never truly give up. Secondly, I knew that one day, when I was strong enough, I'd take all this pain, all of this anger, all of this rage and fear and I will live to help others. I always believed that this pain was for a reason and that when I was through the worst, I needed to hardness this pain and turn it into something great and I am just beginning to embark on this initiative. I am delighted and honoured to be featured in this newsletter as my first step on the road to inspiring others. I have been metaphorically knocking on a lot of doors in the Mental Health arena recently and Movement for Global Mental Health (MGMH) has answered – thank you!

To close, I would like to say to anyone suffering from a mental health illness is, no matter what it is, no matter what or who caused it, there is hope. I have nearly died too many times for me to remember. I have been in incredibly dangerous situations but I am still here. I have hurt myself to such a degree that my body almost gave up. But I am proof that the mind is a very powerful tool and is capable of anything. When we really need to fight, I truly believe that our physical body has very little to do with it. Our real strength lies deeps inside. We have so much potential within us, so many dreams to be realised. There is so much light and love in this world and everything to live for. Never stop believing in yourself. Never stop pushing boundaries, and most of all, never give up.

To support my work, I would be grateful if you could follow me on Instagram @sillysara86

Thank you!

Silly Sara