



testimony

loss, hope & healing

Kathryn Coalter writes
about her own battle with
depression and anxiety as a
nursing student

I celebrated my 21st birthday the way I think most people dream of. Friends travelled from near and far to be with me on the occasion. My boyfriend at my side, we shared cake and stories and celebrated in my beautiful countryside home. By the same day the following year, I was two suicide attempts in. Alone, I spent the day trying to keep my breath and not let myself give in to attempt number three.

As you can guess, a lot had changed in that year: I lost my boyfriend, some best friends, my self-esteem and my career as a nurse. The cord through it all — developing anxiety and depression.

Although I was a nursing student, I rarely thought about my own health. On the occasions when I did, seldom was my mental health the focus. I had written an essay on mental health, spent six weeks working in psychiatry and seen depression amongst my friends. I thought I knew the signs of illness. I thought I knew how to deal with it.

After five months of tiredness shifting into exhaustion and my desire to do anything relentlessly decreasing, I yielded to the well-intended advice to attend counselling. For someone who loves helping others,

being helped felt like hell.

I hated those first months of counselling. Yet, finally having someone who genuinely wanted to listen to me made me feel that actually, maybe, I deserve to be listened to. So, I finally started speaking out. I finally spoke about my anger I felt from being hurt by others and of harmful experiences I encountered as a child and in doing so, they became a reality that I finally had to face.

I had kept my feelings from these experiences so deep inside, that when they finally came out they came as a tsunami wave.

The rest of that year, I was largely consumed with anger. Anger towards what others had done to me. Anger towards the rejection I experienced when I asked for help. Anger towards services and healthcare professionals who seemed to do very little good. Along came the panic attacks that kept me from going out and most things I considered good. I began cutting myself, desperate to find a source of relief, yet it quickly transpired that it was always short-lived.

Now 23, I'm spending my life doing the scariest thing I have ever done: learning to love myself. I'm learning what it looks like to

give my body what it needs. I'm learning that eating well, resting and developing an exercise routine that works for me are holy and sacred things. It has been a steep and unsteady learning curve, and one that I am so graciously overjoyed to be walking with Jesus.

I now often joke that my mental breakdown was the best thing to happen to me because in this process I have learned so much. And so, if you associate with my journey, I want to share some of the lessons I would tell my 21-year-old self. I hope that this advice respects and supports you. And I want to say to you, if you love Jesus and love others walking through this difficult journey and have no clue what to do, then I hope that my words equip and challenge you, and that my experience gives you even a glimpse of an insight into what your loved one is going through.

advice to 21-year-old me

1. people may give you bad advice

I acknowledge the irony, but I feel that this is the most fitting point to begin with. Your illness can be so stressful to those around you if they don't know how to cope or what to do. Therefore, people who love you may give you terrible advice based on their own bias. Yet, for better or worse, no

one knows your body like you do. So please listen to it.

Sleep if you need to sleep, exercise if you can, stay away from public spaces if you feel you need to. Take medication if it helps, but talk to your doctor about stopping it if you feel like it's doing more harm than good. See a therapist if it helps, leave it if it doesn't. It is so important that you start listening to what your body is saying, not what others are.

2. fight the pressure to be healthy

Stop making excuses for your health and accept the fact that right now you are not well. Your illness does not need to have a physical manifestation to be legitimate. It is okay that you are not well. Repeat it with me: 'it is okay that I am not well.' You are not defined by an illness. You are not a failure because of what you can or cannot do. Your worth is not decreased by a diagnosis!

3. know who you are

If you are a follower of Jesus, you are complete in him. He loves you, thinks you are to die for (literally) and rejoices over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). He calls you a masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10), knows

you deeply and has a beautiful plan for you (Jeremiah 29:11). None of this changes because of the pain you have experienced. None of this changes because you never felt loved. None of this changes because people reject or leave you. Your Creator still has the best and final word.

4. ignore the lies and learn to fight

Mental illness is not just a chemical imbalance in your brain and it is definitely not a consequence of sin. It is not caused by distance with God or a lack of faith and does not become worse during a full moon! I hope you're laughing right now but believe me – they've all been heard. And I'll let you in to a secret – the Devil does not want you to be well. He wants you to lose all trust in Jesus and humans and frankly, make your life a living hell.

That is why you need to fight every day. You need to read up and work out why it is you are ill, and what you can do about it. You need to do all you can to look after your body and learn how to reach out for help. You need to thank others when they support you and call them out when they verbalise thoughts and fears about your illness that are not true!

advice for friends, Christian carers and the church

5. you are called to love, not to risk-manage or fix

Now is one of those beautifully golden times that you get to step up, show up and get your hands dirty by loving. Accept the fact that your relationship may seem one-sided for now and as best as you can keep giving. I know it will be messy. I know you may doubt yourself and feel like you don't know what to do. But there is only one thing you can do: love. Anything else is unhelpful. I find that a good way to test if you are loving is to think about the words you are using: Are you using words such as 'should' or 'ought'? (For example, 'You ought to stop self-harming'; 'You should see a counsellor'.) These words are never congruent with grace.

Are your questions focused on who they are and where they are at, or are you trying to place them where you want them to be? Compare 'are you still taking medicine?' with 'how do you feel today?'. If you're only walking with them to feel like you've done your duty and to praise yourself for a job well done, it may be best now to walk away.

You are not defined by an illness. You are not a failure because of what you can or cannot do. Your worth is not decreased by a diagnosis!

6. love in boundaries

Don't tell them you are always there for them unless you really mean it. Don't say they can call at any time if you know you can't or won't pick up the phone. Not only is it extremely harmful, but you will likely lose their friendship by killing their trust. If your loved one asks you for help in a certain way and if you can't, that's okay. It may initially hurt them, but their life is not your responsibility and you are not their keeper. You need to honestly weigh up how you can and can't help them. Maybe you know that you can't help them with their grocery shopping, but that you can drive them to appointments. Maybe you know that you can't meet them for coffee every week, but you can always pick up the phone. If you're feeling overwhelmed or confused by the gravity of their illness, why not ask them how you can help. They probably know best what they need.

And I plead with you, do not let their illness excuse bad behaviour. If your loved one is being unkind, unhelpful or unfair, call them out on it – don't make their illness an excuse. We need to keep our behaviour in check just as much, when our minds are turbulent.

7. love through prayer

Although you are brilliant, you are human and therefore flawed and limited in what you can do. Yet you are powerful with God on your side. So, invite him into this. Not only does he deeply care, he loves your friend intimately and he has the power to make them well. So, gather by their side in prayer. Rejoice with him in the good days and weep with him in the bad. Encourage yourself and your loved one by reaching out to him.

This article can only ever scratch the surface of what it is like to be mentally ill – even if I could give you a full account of my story, experiences are so broad and varied, even if the diagnoses are the same. For those of you walking through this, and for those walking alongside you, I'll leave you with one thing that in the murk and confusion always rang true. God never once left me alone in this. He was listening in my dark days when I prayed for an end to it all; he was with me in the disappointment when faith-filled prayers of healing seemed not to be heard and he rejoiced in the good days with victories so important although seemingly miniscule. You are not, and will never be alone in this. You may doubt, but your Father is always good. 🍷

Kathryn is a former student nurse who, after a break to recuperate, is now studying for a degree in health and social care.