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OPINION



MENTAL HEALTH, AUTHENTIC SELF: KEEPING MY BIRD FLYING HIGH

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Ellie Angell.



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In the latest instalment of the [Keep Talking series on B&T](#), TrinityP3's Ellie Angell, takes time to reflect on her own mental health journey and how one must be true to themselves to be truly happy.

My response when asked to contribute to this series was an immediate 'yes, of course'. But as I accepted, I felt the bony fingers of impostor syndrome closing around my writing hand.

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I haven't lost a family member to suicide. I've lost a friend, but we weren't super-close. I haven't suffered that grief.

However, as a trans woman transitioning later in life, I've experienced a profound, lifelong struggle with mental health.

My relationship with suicide has been present throughout. I visualise suicide as a bird of prey, forever circling the grey skies above me. Sometimes distant, other times with bared talons, swooping low in an attempt to carry me into the clouds.

My family, over the last couple of years as I completed my transition, experienced the grief of me ceasing to be who I was to them. To them, I self-terminated.



It took me decades to fully accept myself as a trans woman. I grew up internet-free, Catholic, suburban. My parents were – are – loving. But my private thoughts, confusion, shame and guilt were massively outgunned by forces surrounding me – the patriarchy, religion, societal norms of the chattering classes, the media, parental and educational expectations.

From childhood to midlife, I locked my identity in a box of shame. I labelled myself as a guy with a dirty secret. I couldn't comprehend that I may actually be trans. I masked from myself. I tried to control my impulses. Looking back, the signs, in terms of things I did and felt, were there. But I couldn't confront my reality. I wasn't equipped.

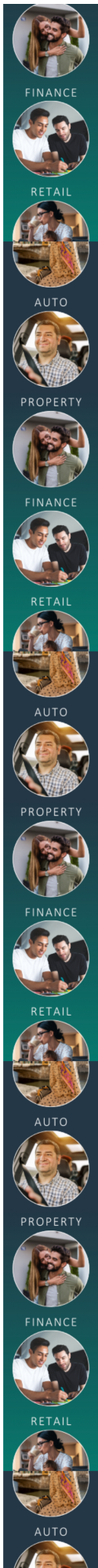
By the time I accepted myself, I had responsibilities. A career. A family of my own, who I loved – who I still love. So, I tried to suppress myself again. For them, and for me. I couldn't bear the thought of failing them, or losing them.

But, like waves over a rock, that struggle eroded me. For a few years, my mental health was at low tide. I contemplated my options; suicide, abandonment (running away), or communication – confronting the truth and living as my authentic self.

The agony of choosing between those options will never leave me. Any way I turned would hurt someone. Eventually, I chose communication – to talk to family, parents, friends, work colleagues. To live authentically.

The demise of my previous self, and the accompanying sense of betrayal, has caused understandable grief to those I love most. And has caused me to lose some of them. But my alternative was not being here. It's as simple as that.

What does this tell me about mental health?





It tells me that mental health is owned by authenticity, and truth, and self-acceptance, and communication.

These are superpowers, often withered by self-perception, guilt, fear, and shame.

People feel they have to fight alone; that they can't fully reveal themselves. That they can't communicate their truth, their problems, their failings, their struggle. When that happens, mental health is in peril. At least, mine was. Consumed by pain, they can lash out at others, or retreat into themselves. I know I have. They can kill themselves. Or they can, at times, come close. I know I did.

I've fought without therapy. I don't have space to explain why. I certainly don't recommend this strategy.

My alternatives have been to employ self-developed coping mechanisms to maintain balance and to keep that circling bird of prey high in the sky.

I practice perspective thinking – reminding myself that I don't own pain, or problems, or poor mental health; and of how privileged and lucky I am in other ways. I exercise. I write poetry. I focus on single steps. I talk to and hug my dog Jasper, the keeper of my secrets. I try to control my alcohol intake. I use experience to be self-vigilant. I take comfort from friendships and I communicate with them, but I respect boundaries – they aren't my unpaid therapists.

While I have often failed, I believe these practices have helped keep me alive. I am, I think, kinder to myself now.

But here's the thing. That bird of prey? It has great eyesight. At any time it can drop like a stone from the sky, with me as its target.

Self-vigilance is everything. Recognising warning signs, is everything. Communicating...is everything.

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