

OUR PERSONAL RECOVERY STORIES

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The 'Our Personal Stories of Recovery' Committee

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*Aengus Guckian, Avril Carroll, Freddy Kelly, Jonathan Mullen,
Ken Murphy, Laura Meade, Martine Moeykens, Theresa Ahearne,
William Finnegan.*

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Our Personal Stories of Recovery' project is designed to share the personal journeys of mental health recovery that have happened and are happening throughout EVE Limited.

Our main aim was to produce a booklet that will act as a resource to inspire hope for people in recovery. We first put the idea to the group of EVE participants that gathered for World Mental Health Day in October, 2007. We had an excellent response from all of our centres and accumulated a large number of stories.

In this booklet, we have presented a number of stories that represent the broad and varied experiences of people's recovery. We hope, that by reading other people's stories and sharing in their recovery journeys, that you will learn something new about recovery and draw inspiration and hope from the many brave people, who were willing to share their personal stories.

The views expressed in this book are personal statements and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.

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WE WILL BE THERE TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER

My name is Angela. I am 57 years old. I was 24 when I got mentally sick. My life has changed so much since I got sick. Before I was happy go lucky. I used to go out dancing every weekend. I went to England and went dancing in the Empire Ballroom in Leicester Square in the West End of London. I had a boyfriend over there for about four years and when we broke up, I got sick. I then stayed over there for about six months before I came home.

I went back and forth to England for a while but I kept getting sick. Now I depend on medication. I could not close my eyes without sleeping pills. I went through very bad times such as having to have E.C.T., which frightened the life out of me. I must have got it 30 times. I never felt it did me any good.

During all my sickness I had a son. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. When I had him first, I was not able to look after him. My family was a tower of strength. I had a nice doctor in hospital and she arranged for me, to bring my son with me providing transport for both of us to attend every day. After a few weeks, I got used to bringing him in and looking after him.

This went on for about 2 years. I was discharged from hospital and started to attend a day centre. The doctors there felt it was not appropriate for me

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to bring my small son there. I decided to stay at home and mind him, and also look after my father, as my mother was working.

Looking back this was a good decision. I kept well for a few years but I had set backs, when I had to go into hospital.

I am now attending EVE and I find it keeps me well as all the staff are very nice. I talk to the other people and enjoy their company. I like the self care session where we look after nails, skin care, massage etc. I also enjoy the art/ceramic group where I weave on a loom and make nice scarves. I was a weaver for a couple of years. I also read OK magazines and keep up with the gossip.

My son is going to Australia next week. I am afraid of what the house will be like without him as he is always there at night playing his Playstation. I am very sad at him going. I know everyone is going to support me and I will need to keep positive.

My nurse visits me every week and this is a great help. I have very good friends in Celbridge. They come down every Friday night and we usually have tea and a chat. They also keep the front garden nice for me. My neighbour next door is very good to me. Her son is going to Australia with my son so she will be on her own as well. We will be there to support each other and share all the good news 'Down Under'.

THROW OUT THE RUBBISH THOUGHTS

My life was fine in 1972, when, suddenly, for no obvious reason, out-of-the-blue, I suffered from what was known as a 'breakdown'. I was admitted to hospital. A consultant made a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and I was admitted and discharged from hospital many times over a period of years.

I found it difficult to manage my thoughts, and several doctors found it difficult to maintain my mental health. In 1977, I married, but by 1983, my marriage was 'on the rocks'. My spouse and I had argument after argument. She thought she had the right to instigate disagreements, and due to the pressure, I felt that I would never be happy again for the rest of my life.

Around 1988, I was attending a day centre to try to build me up, and after a couple of months, my consultant said that I was not suffering from schizophrenia, but, in fact was suffering with anxiety. I was in the day centre for a year, but in all of that time, I was not recovering. The family moved house and I was breaking down. And as a result, I was in and out of hospital because my marriage was disintegrating.

During a spell in hospital, my consultant at the time made another diagnosis. I was told that anxiety was never my problem, and that I had

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bipolar disorder, (also known as manic—depression), and any previous diagnosis had been incorrect.

I informed my doctor that I preferred not to be administered injections, which were doing me no good, and he agreed to discontinue the injections. I was prescribed oral medication, in the form of tablets.

In 1994, I separated from my wife. I missed my three children and my home, and this kept pulling me back into unhappiness. I remained unwell and unhappy and in 2001 my wife died of leukemia on October 9th. I returned home to my three children, but I suffered another breakdown, and I was admitted to hospital. Three weeks later I returned home. I thought I would have to do something, and so I started to take time out and go into my mind, and ‘throw out the rubbish thoughts’, I was thinking.

I found that by doing this, I got to know myself better. Now, only every three months, I go to my consultant to get my prescription for medication. I have not been admitted to hospital for four years. I am so much happier at home with my children. They would do anything for me. I am so happy, and my life is great. I befriended my old pals at home, and I enjoy a great social life as well.

BEING ABLE TO SAY I AM HOPEFUL

Now, some dozen years on, it is sometimes difficult to accept that I have an illness. When I am having a “bad” day or period, the emotions that prevail are mainly of anger and frustration at having to start again and stopping myself thinking that enough is enough. This might seem an unduly pessimistic start to the story but if I am honest and realistic I would have to admit that the progress and hope attained over the past six months would have seemed impossible over the past few years.

In short, I feel that I am making progress and good progress at that. I can now see the tunnel and believe that soon I will see the light. I have never, luckily, been physically ill. My current and past diagnosis seems to attain a new name every year; this helps psychiatrists sell more books and appear more often on TV. Basically I have been treated for persistent clinical depression for about twelve years, with the past few years being particularly bad. The most annoying thing about the condition is the lack of explanation and lack of warning as to when it could strike.

When first diagnosed all things seemed to be well in my life, work, relationships, family etc., I could not accept that I was ill; this does not happen to me. I did not notice that most things seemed to be deteriorating. My passion for and love of life was ebbing away slowly as I

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became more and more isolated. This was all my own doing. I shied away from all things that involved commitment or stress. My inability to communicate seemed to be extremely selfish. At the very worst of times, when everything became so black, so empty, so hopeless, the most peaceful thoughts were those of ending it all and killing the pain.

I spent some time in hospital, five times in all; though never having been physically ill, I had an intense dislike and fear of them. I now acknowledge that they served their purpose when times were most dangerous. My life has changed dramatically over these past years; my most important relationships have ended, my business failed. However, for the first time in a long time, I have begun to feel hopeful.

Acceptance of the illness and acceptance of help are, I think, some of the most important means to recovery. For years I bottled things up, giving the impression that all was well, when inside I was totally fearful. There were many times that I did not have the confidence to go to the shops to buy even a paper or cigarettes. There were many urges to self medicate with alcohol.

Though the frustration at “starting again” after bad times still exists, I now realise that I am not starting from the same low place. In better times, I have made progress and most of that can’t be undone. Going on the

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principle of one step at a time, however small, has greatly speeded my recovery.

Looking back on the past few years, it is extremely heartening to see the changes in my outlook and actions. The total despair has all but vanished and I can handle bad times much more successfully. In the past six months, I have participated in courses in the day hospital and EVE, something I would have previously avoided, citing pride when it was really fear. I often wish that I had started these much earlier, but am more than delighted with the help received and progress made.

Hope is a more constant feeling and being able to say “I’m hopeful” is a massive bonus undreamt of for a long, long time. Being happy in the acceptance that I will not get my old life back, but can build up to and start a new life is a calming feeling. I know that there are many challenges ahead, some may be very difficult, but as I said before, one step at a time. It works. Now I’m hopeful.



BEING HAPPY FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY WHOLE LIFE

When I was in school, I was bullied for being overweight and I developed an eating disorder. I became very depressed and was admitted to a psychiatric unit. I was in there for a while and they diagnosed me with a borderline personality disorder. My family could not take any more of my mental illness, so they asked me to leave my family home. So I moved into private accommodation.

I became unwell again and I was in and out of hospital all of the time. I lost my flat and I was very unsettled for years. One night I was very unwell and I was in my parents' house. My doctor put me on an injection and I soon began to come round. At that time, I was about to lose my flat so my sister rang up a housing agency and they said there was a place for me in a transition house over on the north side of Dublin. I moved in, and began to feel a lot better in myself with the help of a support worker.

I was there for a year and a half and I finally got an apartment in Tallaght, near my family and friends. Now with the medication and injection and my support worker, I am a lot better and I can enjoy life and be happy for the first time in my whole life. My hopes for the future are that I finish the course in New Horizon training centre and get my certification so that I can get a job. I have also started in GROW which gives me support so that I am not alone.

OCCUPATION TAKES ME AWAY FROM ...

Years ago in London, I was happy working. I worked as a service mechanic on the buses. Conditions were good and the pay was good too. The perks were good e.g. subsidised meals and free travel on buses and the Underground. Then I got sick in September 1970 and I said to myself "Better sick in Dublin than in London". A month later, I was admitted to hospital (involuntarily). I didn't want the stigma of mental illness. I spent the next 20 years up to 1990 trying to keep down jobs as a mentally ill man. I was trying to hold down a job as a bus mechanic, and as a kitchen porter.

I was attending a psychiatrist and he told me that the government has more respect for people that give them tax than those who give them no tax. He was trying to help me, but he hurt my feelings. He was applying reality therapy. My sisters got very worried about me and said that I should have a second opinion. The second opinion, which I received, said that I should be sent to sheltered employment. There was a big difference between sheltered employment and open employment. I have been in sheltered employment ever since.

However, throughout this time I was still reading up on cars with the hope of returning to open employment. For most of this time, I was living at

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home with my mother. My mother was getting older over time. I had to take over the roles she used to do e.g. paying the bills, getting messages, cooking and looking after the house in general.

I was a service user and a carer at the same time. After a bad fall, she was admitted to a nursing home, at age 91. I am now living independently in my own home with a little support from my sisters.

I went to an EVE Centre as a halfway house to work. I have since been attending another EVE Centre for the past 16 years. I will be 60 years of age this year and have finally come to terms with my situation. In my secret world, I have this notion of two jobs, one for a livelihood and one for a pastime. My EVE Centre is the job for a pastime. The job as a car mechanic is the job for a livelihood. I am faithful to my medication.

I use the library maybe three times a week for browsing. I am happy reading science fiction and adventure stories. I also read children's books for information. Children's books get straight to the point whereas adult books have to be read through. I am happy with my domestic work at home and in the centre. I find occupation takes me away from thinking about myself. For my daily treat, I have a pint of Guinness after work.

MIND SCOPE

Days that can feel like the night
With broken dreams that negate all hope
How supporting my bed can feel
When connections through feelings get severed

Voices that indulge my mind
Voices that drive the wedge
In this place they become real
Through them this place is real
But only existing inside these walls so thick
It's so often a prison without residents

How strange that the value of fond memories soars
The intention of this place can seem purposeful
Dwelling in a night so very lonesome
Where the journey of recovery can seem, so far away
Taking backwards just to point me forward
Intervention is so hard a goal to reach for
Bearing a naked soul before strangers
But a push can go a long way

And a new hope can be a simple goal realised

THERE IS ALWAYS A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

My name is Noel and I am now 66 years of age. I was born in Mullingar General Hospital and we lived a few miles from Mullingar out in the countryside close to a bog. I loved my parents. My father worked for a Colonel Bellingham, who was one of the 'gentry'.

From an early age, I hero-worshiped my father. One of my earliest memories is of him coming in with 4 or 5 rabbits after being out hunting for rabbit. Rabbit stew was our staple diet at that time. My mother was very good too. She was a great cook and knitted all my clothes. I was the eldest, then came my only sister, and then my three brothers were born later on.

Then came a big change in my life. When I was nearly 5 years of age, the nearest school was miles away. My parents foreseeing the difficulty there would be in getting to school, as there were very few means of transport around at the time, decided to move to County Kildare to be near schools.

All in all I had a happy childhood. Life was very good in the local primary school and I had a great attendance record. When I was 14, a momentous event took place in my life. A recruiter for the De La Salle Brothers came round to the school and I decided to go away from home to join the De La Salle Religious Order, which is a teaching order. At times, when I was in the

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boarding school, I felt very home-sick but I struggled on and after a good Inter Cert and Leaving Cert, I entered the De La Salle Teacher's Training College.

After I qualified, my first experience of teaching was in Dublin. Then I was transferred to County Cork. While I loved teaching the young boys, at the same time it was hectic, as the classes were really overcrowded and there was not enough time available to tutor those boys who were slow learners.

Eventually the pressures got too much for me and I underwent a complete and utter nervous breakdown and entered a psychiatric nursing home in Cork City where I remained for the best part of a year. After being discharged, I spent some time recuperating but then I got bad again and this time I was admitted to hospital in Dublin. During this period, after agonising over it for a long time, I decided to leave the De La Salle Order. I think I was around 27 or 28 at the time.

At this time I had a great friend, the Brother Superior of the De La Salle Brothers. There was nothing he wouldn't do for me. He came frequently to see me in hospital, was always very kind and sympathetic. He even came to see me after I left the Order. Sadly he was killed in a car crash while he was only in his mid-thirties. He was a good Corkman. I loved the De La Salle Order; and had the privilege of knowing some wonderful men among its

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members. But I always say I have no regrets joining the Order or leaving it, as it was all in God's plan for me.

I worked in offices in Dublin for a while afterwards before becoming a Bus Conductor. During this period (which lasted 14 years), I was admitted to hospital on a couple of different occasions, where I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Also while working as a Bus Conductor, I suffered the most horrendous panic attacks at times.

When I left that job, it was recommended to me to attend the EVE Centre in Usher's Island. It was a great move as the staff were all very kind to me and I was among others who had mental health problems. Then after a couple of years there, I transferred to another EVE Centre. Apart from one minor hiccup when I was hospitalised again, I have never looked back. I am here now 10 or 11 years.

The staff are absolutely brilliant, willing to listen to problems, giving great advice. I get on very well with my fellow participants. So my advice to people with mental health problems is to hold in there, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Anyway the longest hour is only 60 minutes. Finally, it is very important not to neglect your medication.

RENEWED HOPE AND OPTIMISM

When I was 33, I went to the World Cup in Italy. Before I left, I held down a responsible job and was raising a family of four. I had suffered a few bouts of depression during my teenage years and twenties but had never received treatment or been hospitalised.

While I was away, I became elated—whether it was due to the excitement, the climate, the drinking or what I don't know. When I came home I was hospitalised for a month and was diagnosed with manic depression. I was put on medication and it stabilised me for a while. However, I stopped taking the tablets after a few weeks and soon became manic again.

For a while, it feels good to be manic—you're on a high. However, after a while, it becomes a bit frightening for both the sufferer and the people around him/her. I was hospitalised again, this time for much longer and a new diagnosis was given (Schizoaffective).

This is a mixture of manic depression and schizophrenia. Basically I suffered from highs and lows as well as psychotic thoughts. My treatment was changed and I now lead a fairly normal life. However, I have missed a lot of my children's upbringing and can never get that back.

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All in all, I have come out of the illness without any bitterness. Once the doctor came up with the revised diagnosis and treatment, everything fell into place.

I no longer suffer from paranoia and realise that the psychotic thoughts were in my imagination and that I was also having aural and visual hallucinations. At the time, these were very frightening but with counselling and treatment, I now understand the illness much better and look forward to the future with renewed hope and optimism.



REMEMBER LIFE IS NOT MEANT TO BE PERFECT

In my childhood, I was a shy and a nervous person. I was not good at games or sports, and was not a clever child as regards schoolwork. I was very afraid of girls and rarely spoke to them. My father died aged 48 from a heart attack. I was 7 at the time and this dramatically changed the course of my life after it happened.

I went to a private boarding school at 11. As I was shy, I found it very tough at first. I was ragged and bullied a good deal. As I got older, things in this area got better. At 13, I started to suffer from depression. At 15, I went into a private mental hospital suffering from depression. Things just got too much for me.

My experience of first having mental troubles was confusing as I had never heard or had any knowledge of this type of thing before. I had no idea of what was happening to me. Hospital was frightening but the social life in there was not too bad. When I left, I went straight back to school.

During the next few years, I had depression from time to time and also developed Schizophrenia. At the time of sitting my Leaving Cert, I had a massive breakdown. Leaving school, I became unemployed and stayed

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that way for two years. This was depressing and boring. I lost interest in looking for work and in life in general. Then in 1984, I left hospital for the final time and to this day have not been back in any mental institution of this kind.

It wasn't easy staying away from hospital but I was determined not to go back. I became aware of sheltered centres and the like at this time. I then started a long run of attending workshops, courses, day centres and sheltered occupation. I am attending a centre at the moment. I find it rewarding and pleasant attending this EVE Centre now.

My mental state has improved greatly, although the illness comes back from time to time for short periods, it has never been bad enough to send me back into hospital again. I still have to take medication and attend a psychiatrist every three months.

My future looks good. I know it won't be perfect. I just hope I can keep free from too much mental anguish. I am keen on art and it would be great if I could make it in this field and become successful or sometime soon hold down a real job. You must believe in yourself and remember life is not meant to be perfect but can be very rewarding. I find this good.

THERE IS A LIFE FOR EVERYONE

My name is Virginia and up until I was 31, I had perfect health. I held down a full time fairly stressful job in hotels since I was 17. Then at the age of 31, I got married to a beautiful man and thought my whole life was ahead of me, with hopes and dreams etc. It was not meant to be, because after one year and three months he died of a heart attack. My whole life was shattered. I felt I couldn't live without him.

After about two years, I was still grieving a lot but I also noticed I wasn't behaving in a proper manner, i.e. like driving the car too fast, making rash decisions, hanging around with the wrong people, spending a lot of money, with nobody going fast enough for me etc. I had at this stage gone down to six stone in weight from burning up all the energy. I still didn't know what was wrong with me. My doctor called by chance one day and saw the state of me. He suggested I go to hospital. I reacted against this and said 'I'm not mad'. He said 'It's nothing to do with being mad; you just need a bit of treatment'.

So I gave in after hours of him begging me. I spent 12 weeks in there and was diagnosed with bi-polar illness. I came out feeling a lot better than when I went in. I also got a better knowledge of what mental illness is and it's not to do with being mad. I got myself back to work and was well able to drive again but as time went on I thought 'Sure I'm fine now, I'll stop taking the tablets'. The lethal trap to slip into. I landed myself back in hospital again.

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This pattern was to continue seven more times before I saw the light and decided to take all the medication that was prescribed for me daily. That was a long time ago now and I can honestly say that I have good mental health now.

Two years ago, I left my full time job after 28 years. That was a big blow to me as my friends were all work mates. I stayed at home for one year and felt myself getting a bit low. These are the warning signs for me. I had to nip it in the bud and go and do a course. A friend of mine told me about an EVE Centre. I went along and was grateful to get the course. The first day was a bit strange but after that I blended in nicely. I can honestly say it has given me great motivation, e.g. getting me up in the morning, washing myself at the right time, not hanging around in my dressing gown for half the day etc.

I would recommend my EVE Centre to anybody as I have come on leaps and bounds since I have joined there. I like the courses as we do computers, the gym, independent living skills, cookery, arts & crafts, yoga and personal development. So all in all my mind is well occupied. The staff are lovely also. I am in my EVE Centre for one year now. I have another year to go and hopefully after that, I will get a FAS course.

Well to sum it up, I think it's an accumulation of things that keep me well. My doctor is very important. Also, I have my dear friends to talk to; my course I'm doing; my home life and also my leisure activities that I enjoy, like gardening. My mind never strays when I'm in the garden. I sincerely hope this true story will help someone else because there is no doubt about it, there is a life for everyone.

GETTING MY CONFIDENCE BACK

My name is Thomas. When I was 35 years of age, I was living with my aunty. We had some problems but mostly things were fine between us. Then out of the blue, my brother had a massive stroke. Then 3 weeks later, my aunty died and that was when I had a nervous breakdown.

When I first became ill, they told me that it was just because of the drink but I knew myself that it wasn't, as I heard voices and was very unwell. I was taken into hospital where I was put on medication but that didn't help me so they changed it. I eventually spent over four months in hospital. They recommended I start in an EVE Centre – this was about seven years ago.

When I first came here, I was shocked and thought “What am I doing here with these people?”. Some of them were very unwell, and it frightened me that I was thought to be like them. I suppose it was the stigma that is attached to mental illness. I certainly lost some of my old friends after I was ill.

Eventually, when I got to know people here and made a few friends things became easier for me. One of the big things, was that I had lost all of my

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confidence and could barely leave the house. It takes a long time for that to come back.

Now I work a lot in the kitchen, which I really enjoy. I am learning a lot about cooking and preparing salads. I am also doing FETAC courses which I never thought I would do. It gives me a lot of confidence as I never thought I would get a certificate for anything and I have also learned a lot more than I ever did in school.

My brother and his wife came out for the Achievement Day and didn't really know what to expect. They were really impressed and thought it was a great place. I think it can help with the stigma of mental illness that they will give a positive view of EVE to other people outside of the centre.

For me, the most important thing was always about getting my confidence back. Meeting people and mixing again really made the difference for me. I am learning so much now, getting more responsibility and I am being treated like an adult and not just someone with an illness.

MEETING PEOPLE VERY LIKE MYSELF

My name is Michael, and my illness began just after I became an apprentice carpenter. I was learning the trade but I wasn't taking it seriously. I never said to myself 'Where would I be after finishing my apprenticeship?' or 'What things could I do in the future in the building trade?'

Eventually, having no interest in what I was doing, I became sick and was put on a certain medication to help, but it didn't feel like it helped – it felt like human torture. My father brought me to the clinic every week and stuck by me all the way. I eventually had no social life and wasn't dating any girls. This was hard to accept as all my friends were enjoying themselves. The house became a prison and I eventually got so fed up, I had to be admitted involuntarily to the hospital because I was really down in the dumps.

One day, I had to leave my job as I went stone deaf in my ears. The nurse that attended to me came down to the house and offered me a place in a sheltered workshop and foolishly enough, I agreed. After working for four years there, I was then transferred to an EVE Centre. I worked there for three years and when my time was up, I had to leave.

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I was then sent to another EVE Centre where I am now, and the medication I am on now has no side effects. The things that helped me in my EVE Centre were meeting people very like myself. Even though some of them were very sick, they were very down to earth people. I got on great with a lot of them.

We have a pool table and nearly everybody joins in. I came runner up in one competition and was very pleased. I also do kitchen work which involves a lot of work and a lot of concentration, as there are certain safety rules which we must obey in the kitchen. There is a personal development class which got me back to reading again and we do crosswords and Sudoku games.



WE ALL NEED TO HELP ONE ANOTHER ALL THE TIME

At two and a half, I was found to have a benign brain tumour and I had a shunt (a very small valve) put in my head. At times, it would block and I would have to have an operation to have a new one put in. I was in hospital a lot but the teachers in my national school were nice and helpful when I returned.

After I left national school in June 2000, I had a trip to hospital and things went a little wrong. I got a new shunt but I was unable to walk. I had no balance. I was told it would return in time (days, weeks or months nobody would say, only that it would return). I was due to go to secondary school in September 2000 but that did not happen.

I was a patient of the Central Remedial Centre and I went there on my normal visit. When I saw my doctor he said that I could go to the Central Remedial School as they were well used to all sorts of problem patients. They could cope with everything as they had doctors and nurses there all the time. I was picked up at 7.30 every morning by taxi and we all had great fun going into school. There were two people in the taxi in my classes and the taxi driver was very nice to us all.

Secondary school came in September 2001 and that was a different story. Life was harder as I was different. I was on a walking frame because of my balance but I was lucky there were only 13 in my class.

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All the teachers were very nice to me because they all let me out of the class five minutes before the bell went and two girls came with me to carry my bag. A teacher said to me if a person is annoying or pushing me on the corridors, 'you clip them on the back of the heels with your frame'.

Every year, I took part in all the school's plays and other events. As a student, I was there to study and enjoy my time at school. It was a mixed school and I found some of the girls could be very unkind by not including me in things while the lads were OK. I found it easier to get on with students younger than me. I had a counsellor while I was at school and she was great as I had no confidence in myself. I am still sorting out that problem now.

I did the Junior Cert and Applied Leaving Cert. I have not been back to hospital and things could now only get better. My problems were balance (I would wobble walking over rough or uneven ground) and memory (my short term was not there). I have a memory book now and I write things down that I have to do. I can get confused easily at times. How can I sort that out? I do not know. Any ideas?

I joined EVE in August 2006 and I have had a great time meeting people with different types of problems not like mine. We all help one another where we can, talk out our ups and downs and try and send them on the right road.

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I made a great friend. She is visually impaired and she has helped me a great deal in overcoming one of my big problems, which is heights. I can now look over a balcony and go up on the escalator with no problems. You may ask how could someone who is visually impaired help me to overcome that problem but she did.

She has finished the course. She texts me now and then to ask would I like to meet up and go for a cup of coffee and have a chat, go shopping or go to the pictures. It is just the two of us. We both help one another. She has also helped me with my problem of getting on buses.

When I was in the C.R.C. school, I got talking to a girl and she started the discos. She ran the discos for six years and then moved on to a new job. We now have a nice lad running the discos instead. It is really a meeting place and they are a great social night.

Talking, helping and meeting people with different problem makes you think about your own problems and you then see them in a different light. We all need to help one another, all the time.

I CAN JUST BE ME

My name is Sean. I was born into an Irish family in New Zealand. We lived and worked on a farm where we worked long hours milking cows every morning and night. For this I got very little credit and no respect. In fact, I was often told I was lazy. My people would make up rules and regulations and after I would follow them, they would change them to suit themselves. This made me angry sometimes and left me with very low self-esteem.

At the end of November 1999, my life got very dysfunctional. I had gone to New Orleans. I had a job but couldn't find myself a place to stay. I seemed to always be getting into controversies with people. Also, at work I would get involved in things that were none of my business. Even my girlfriend asked me if I was on drugs. For a week, I ended up sleeping in the back of a van on the street.

Then I was in a homeless shelter which was much better. On a Saturday, morning I moved into a place called 'The Abstract Café'. It was run by a High Court Judge. He ran it for alcoholics and drug addicts. He asked me if I was an alcoholic. I said I didn't think so. He then asked me ten questions about alcohol addiction and I said yes to every one of them.

For the first week, I had to stay in the tank. I was only allowed out to go to work. It was alright during the day time but around nine o'clock at night, I would get the shakes and the sweats.

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Then I would start seeing stuff that was not there and then came the cravings for alcohol. It was so bad I thought that if I didn't get any drink I would die. The door was locked at nine o'clock every night so people could not go out drinking. The sad part about this is, I would have gone and drank if they had let me out.

I believed it wasn't really drinking if I didn't drink on Friday and Saturday nights but went for one or two pints during the week. I thought 'I only drank beer, how could I be an alcoholic'? I didn't drink spirits or methylated spirits like alcoholics do. I then made a couple of attempts to give up drinking. It was seven months later before I finally accepted I was an alcoholic. The first three weeks after I stopped drinking were the hardest but the more I stayed off it, the easier it got. Also, I gave myself a big pay rise.

As the months passed, the bad days were better than the good days I'd had the month before. I started to go to AA meetings. At first, I thought that I wasn't as bad as these people but the more I went to the meetings, the more I realised that I had a disease. In the AA meetings, I heard the truth about this disease and that I'm not the only one who has it. A lot of people helped me, help that I needed but didn't think I deserved.

One thing is that none of us deserve this disease. I am eight years off the drink now. I don't get hallucinations, the shakes or blackouts. I don't feel isolated or feel sorry for myself. When I came to EVE first, I had a low level

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of self esteem and didn't feel like speaking to anyone else. EVE has broken my isolation. I am treated like a human being in EVE.

I find the teachers a great help in many ways. When I make mistakes, I am shown what I have done wrong and am encouraged to try again. The teachers also encourage me to listen to other points of view as well as to express my own. The teachers have helped me to be less hard on myself which has resulted in me being less hard on others. The AA meetings are also a big help. I am better able to take on responsibility. The AA meetings have encouraged me to take on additional responsibilities which I wouldn't have felt confident in doing before, like taking notes at the meetings.

I now have confidence in myself to do things. Instead of doing nothing except complaining and expecting someone else to solve my problems, I am more the person I always wanted to be i.e. a human being who is capable of taking things as they come. I now try to help others in a better way. I first ask people what they need and want and then I see what I can do. I don't try to impose solutions as I would have done in the past. I see more room for improvements but I now realise how far I have come.

I feel good now and able to cope. I feel I am able to deal with life on life's terms. I don't feel I have to be the centre of attention or a hero. I can just be me.

I HAVE A GREAT RELATIONSHIP WITH MY FAMILY NOW

My name is Thomas. As far as I can recall I had no problems in my background, so when I became ill it hit me like a bolt from the blue. It was a big shock to me. I felt my stomach rolling and felt physically unwell. I had no idea what was going on. This was nearly five years ago. The next day I went into hospital. I had tests done etc. and ended up in the psychiatric part of the hospital. My diagnosis was paranoid psychosis. I lost it with the shock of everything and ended up in the green room for several days. I got an awful fright when I came too and realised what had happened. It was very hard to accept that it was a mental breakdown.

At this stage, depression set in and I spent six to eight weeks in the hospital. I started to lose a lot of weight. When I got out of hospital, I attended the day hospital. I was extremely anxious and got this thing into my head about taking my tablets at the correct time and this was the only thing occupying my thoughts. I was also attending my doctor at the day hospital and he suggested I attend an EVE Centre to see how I would get on. I was very withdrawn from my family at this time and didn't want to talk to anyone.

My progression to the EVE Centre started in the garden and I really enjoyed it. I got plenty of help from all the team and I started to improve. The more

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time I spent in the EVE Centre, the better I became. I started to mix more and go out a bit. I have started to become involved with club football again.

I did art and yoga for the first time ever and it helped me and I enjoyed it. I have gone on two holidays with the EVE Centre. I am also involved with Schizophrenia Ireland and have gone on holidays with members from our Phrenz club also.

I am now trained as a facilitator for our weekly meetings. Since that time five years ago when I was in hospital, I have never had a relapse. Even though I don't remember anything different going on at the time I got sick, my wife has told me since that she recalls me being very quiet and withdrawn just before I became unwell and that I would go to bed extremely early which was unusual for me. The more I go out and meet people the better I feel.

I have a great relationship with my family now and I do some part-time work with my son. I have my confidence back.

GREAT TO KNOW THE SAFETY NET IS THERE

My name is Patrick, and I first felt sick at the age of seventeen. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital for three months where I was on various different medications during that time. I found that when I got out of the psychiatric hospital my confidence had fallen greatly. I had been involved in sports all my life and worked in pubs. I would say I did have a good deal of confidence and mixed well with others, but, this illness I got, seemed to control my life. I didn't want to leave the house and I was very uneasy moving from room to room. I also couldn't concentrate for very long. I generally felt uncomfortable around others. If I could describe myself, I would say the best description would be that I was a walking zombie.

I was attending a day hospital but all I seemed to ever do there was sleep and chain smoke. It just felt pointless trying, or even thinking of changing my life around. I then was at a stage where I didn't really need the day hospital anymore and once again I was confined to my home. I was then asked would I like to do one or two hours back in the pub I used to work in. I didn't think I was up to it but my parents encouraged me to, so I went back doing one or two hours here and there. People in the pub knew I wasn't well, as I would normally not be paying attention to what was going on and had a glazed look in my eyes. I used to have a habit of dropping my

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jaw, staring into nowhere. The times when I was paying attention I automatically thought if the customers were having a conversation about something, that it was about me.

I then heard about a rehabilitation centre which I decided to join as I had very little to do during the day. The bus collected me and brought me to Kildare. I used to spend the time on the bus sleeping and when I would get to the rehabilitation centre I would fall asleep there. I used to do arts and crafts when I would come to. But I had never really been into arts and crafts. There was a computer course (ECDL) over there. But there was normally nobody to help you accomplish this and my concentration levels were still not the best. I started to get fed up and depressed again. I wanted to leave after about a year and still had nowhere to go. Then, I was visiting my doctor and heard about Clubhouse. I thought it might be the same story as the day hospital and the rehabilitation centre but said I would visit it any way.

I arrived at the Clubhouse. My mother accompanied me and one of the members actually showed me around, which I thought was odd. I had a chat with the member and the way he was talking about the place actually got me motivated for the first time and even enthusiastic about the place. I talked to staff after that and found out from the staff that I had applied to join a year or two before. I was that sick that I couldn't even remember this.

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I told them I would come the next day for a full day. I was told by the staff to attend for about a week or two to get a feel of the place and then make my mind up. It was like there was no pressure involved which helped. Also, I was told that I would not have to be there nine till five. If I wanted to, I could go downtown, take breaks and come back.

I attended for the two weeks and I actually felt good about myself again. I worked in the kitchen and on the computers in the Admin. unit. I guess the reason I got involved was, funny as it may seem, that I was asked to do things rather than being told to do things. I really enjoyed it. My mother informed me then that I would not be able to attend any more as she just couldn't keep up the long journeys over and back to the Club and once again I got depressed. I came into the Clubhouse and went up to the library to sleep.

A staff member came up and asked me what was wrong. I told her my situation. We talked and she said not to be getting upset about it, that they would work something out. Within a week, they had organised transport over and back to the Club. I couldn't believe it. I was delighted.

That was four years ago. Today I am still attending the Clubhouse. When I first joined I was only doing small jobs, emptying bins and doing a bit of shopping for the Club. Gradually I went on courses that would be going

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on in the Club and outside in the community. I have gone on socials with them and actually feel comfortable with the various different members and staff. I have worked in Transitional Employment. I went to America training in the Clubhouse Standards, and more recently have finished a two year VTOS course through the Clubhouse.

The reality of it is, I have recovered by attending the Clubhouse. I am back to the person I was before I got sick. That to me, is better than all the wealth in the world. The members in the Club help one another. It is like a home from home. I can help members by just listening. I show prospective members around. I have made a lot of new friends by going to the Clubhouse. These are friends which I know will be for life. The Clubhouse does help people stay out of hospital, but more importantly it helps you regain your self worth and normality. I don't owe it all to the Club. There are friends, family and my few hours work. But the Clubhouse has definitely played the star role in my recovery.

I don't intend to attend the Clubhouse for the rest of my life as I will move on. But it's great to know the safety net is there. When I look back four years ago and see where I was then and see where I am now, there is only one thing I can say—that is amazing! Thanks to everyone that helped and thanks for listening to my story.

IF I CAN DO SOMEONE SOME GOOD

I was the youngest of four children. My mother and father were of a different generation, kind but very reserved. There was no closeness. Going to school was difficult for me. It was too noisy and boisterous. To avoid attention I could not handle, I became invisible. I was six, when I lost a fight with a kid on the road. A month later, he rubbed some blackberries into my face. I did nothing. I did not like myself after that.

From then, it was hard to stick up for someone you do not like. In secondary school, I was bullied for a while. I started to do weights as I was pretty weedy. At home my mother had Alzheimer's. At the coming of age, I was starting to get 'screwed up'. I found it difficult to move out in the world. Getting summer work and going to discos was very stressful.

After seeing 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest', I knew that was my fate. I had my first depression while working in London. I remember walking around Hyde Park in despair. I did not know what was happening to me. I came home and told no one but tried to keep up a mask. I couldn't share or trust. Going back in autumn to the 2nd year of a computer study course, I had a breakdown. I then studied art and design, which was more me. I was avoiding the big bad world. Over the next few years, I had bouts of depression and anxiety. Then at the age of 23, I got my first psychotic breakdown.

I ended up being fished out of a river. It was not suicide. I really felt I had lost my soul and if I survived drowning I would get my soul back. I was lucky to

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survive as my core temperature went three degrees below life sustainable. After another bout of psychosis, I was told I had Manic Depression. Then later I was told I had schizoaffective disorder, because I could get delusional even if my mood was not high. Also I had mild paranoia, fearing judgement and disapproval.

Being labelled a schizophrenic was a big blow. The “big S” I heard it called in hospital. I was young and wanted to keep up with my peers. I did not want to be a loser. Even though I felt small and inferior, I had a big ego like any young man. For years, I was very unwell. One week down, then high for a while, anxious for a few days, then not sleeping. My emotions were ‘all over the shop’ as the phrase goes. I was in soul pain. A few of my friends I met in hospital died by suicide. I tried it once myself. I was hanging in there. Then my luck changed, thank God. I started a new medication and at the same time went to see a nutritionist.

In a short while, I was feeling a lot better and kept well. The nutritionist took me off mood altering food and drink, such as sugar, coffee, alcohol. I began to eat healthy and avoiding processed food. She sent a hair sample off to be analysed, as people with mental illnesses can lack certain minerals and trace elements. I take supplements for what I lack. Now I’m quite well, just still nervous with people. I admit it takes a long time for your self esteem to grow.

I now live happily on my own. I attend GROW, a self help peer group. I get friendship and support there. In the group, I am not a weirdo, just one of the guys. At this time, I am beginning to forgive everyone and myself. I

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want to move on. I find contemplation helps. I sit twice a day for half an hour or an hour in silence. I settle and grow calm and peaceful. I now take an interest in spirituality, being at the bottom actually helps. There are things more important than the rat race. This helps my self esteem. I found that gratitude and generosity is a cure for feeling poor me, miserable and small. I am beginning to like myself.

I would like to finish with the wisdom of two people that touched me. Visiting a friend in a psychiatric hospital, I noticed a patient. He was very unwell. He looked an oddball and somewhat simple. You could tell his life was very small. Over the weeks, I could not help watching him. If someone gave him a cigarette he would say, "Thank-in-you-please". If he gave someone a cigarette he would also say, "Thank-in-you-please". Then when the nurse gave him his medication, again he would say, "Thank-in-you-please". You could tell he was grateful. That was all he said but it had a good effect on those around him. In a very small humble way, he was giving something back. It was all he could give. This struck me as beautiful. That no matter how bad your condition, there was meaning to life.

Finally, in a peer group set up through the hospital for people with schizophrenia, the facilitator went around the group asking each of us what we thought recovery meant to us. One man said going back to work, for another man being able to leave the sheltered hostel and live on his own. However, one woman said something that meant a lot to me. Her response was, "Even though I may have some symptoms, if I can do someone some good or visa-versa, that gives me a sense of well-being".

NOT HAVE ANYONE JUDGE ME

My name is Gary and it all started in 1997, when I came over from England and started school. The first day I started in the school, I got called all sorts of English names, but I told them in my class that I was born in Mullingar in Co. Westmeath and that I'm not English but they didn't believe me. So to overcome the difficulties, I went to the school principal and I explained to him what was happening, but he said that there wasn't anything that he could do, because my accent was so strong.

But as the years went by, in school my accent changed to a mixture of Dublin and country. I became quite depressed and scared in school. I wasn't sleeping properly and I got very sick at the age of seventeen. I was afraid to go to school in case the lads beat me up. I was very good at talking about my problems to the school principal.

A year later I ended up in hospital and I was diagnosed with Severe Bipolar Affective Disorder. I had no difficulties with my family when I was growing up. They were there to support me and so were my mental health professionals. There were a few setbacks on my way to recovery e.g., when I stopped taking my medication, I ended up in hospital for two weeks. I was then in hospital for six months in 1997 with Severe Bipolar Affective Disorder and this was because I stopped taking my medication as well. My

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doctors, my Community Psychiatric Nurse and taking my medication helped me on the road to recovery.

Help also came from my family and friends and the health care professionals, without them I don't know where I would be today. The greatest challenge that I faced was trying to trust my friends again when I got out of hospital. I had problems with my medication and sometimes it affected my speech. But the speech and language therapy that I'm doing at the moment is helping. The changes that I see in myself are that I have put on a bit of weight, am was eating more than I used to and these changes are positive.

Taking my medication has helped me to recover. Getting help from my family and my doctor also helped. The important part of my recovery is being able to be myself again and not have anyone judge me. I am aware now what triggers my illness but I wasn't a few years ago. I am now well into the recovery process. I am still on medication, but they are keeping me well.

My future hopes and plans are to stay well and continue taking my medication. I don't think I need any further steps to go forward, only to see my health professionals every now and again. I have been doing a course for the past year in the County Dublin V.E.C. and it is going very well. I am there three days a week and I am in my EVE Centre two days a week.

HAVING SOMEWHERE TO COME

I was born, I think, in the Rotunda Hospital in 1949. I was brought up in another hospital until 1952. I developed TB as a small child. I think I was not given the vaccination. I was adopted in 1956 along with my sister and brought to a village where my new parents were shopkeepers. First I went to the convent school and then to the Christian Brother's school.

I was very anxious as a young man, other young lads used to call me names. I was bullied. I went to see a psychologist who wrote to my parents to say she did not know why I was so anxious. My father used to lash out at my mother. He used to throw dishes at my mother whether he was drinking or not. Sometimes he would go on binges for days. He couldn't understand me. I think he thought I was a bit retarded. He used to tell me things several times but I wasn't able to respond to him.

He used to batter me about the head. He had a gun and he used to point the gun and shoot the crows in the chimney. The Gardaí were called several times and eventually the gun was taken from him. Once he went for my throat. I was about twelve or thirteen at the time. I didn't have anybody to turn to. However, I got on best with my aunt, my mother's sister. I also got on well with my sister. I had a love of books and read Jules Verne's 'Voyage to the End of the Earth'. It was only in the later years that my father began to understand me. My mother said there was closeness between genius

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and insanity. He could put his hand to anything, renovate antique furniture and he built a caravan from the wheels up.

Eventually I got a job as a clerk in the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes and got a flat in Ballsbridge. My supervisor used to tell me I was inconsistent in my job, I would do it well one day but not the next. He would say life is simple - don't make it complicated. However, I wasn't managing very well; I wasn't cooking proper food and wasn't looking after myself, generally. The doctor in the Sweepstakes advised me to go to a hospital. They gave me electric shock treatment and put me on medication. I was there for six weeks. I was terrified of the place.

However, I was able to go back to my job and stayed there for nine years. The doctor told me to join clubs and mix with people. I was nervous around people. My father died and soon after my mother died. I later got a job as a postman but found it difficult dealing with people. I rode a bike, about 10 miles a day but found it exhausting.

The post master was very helpful. I was a postman for about 10 years. I was very pleased with my uniform – jacket, trousers, overcoat and peaked cap, also gloves and raingear. I continued to see my doctor.

My sister died from ovarian cancer in 1996. I was very sad about that. She was good to me and helped me to fight my corner. I was able to help her

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in her last days, including lifting her and giving her sips of water. My quality of life is much better now. I am living in a county council bungalow. It is very comfortable, warm, nicely decorated, just ideal for me. I do all the cleaning, change my bed and everything.

I cook chops or steak on my George Foreman grill, cook potatoes and peas, sometimes stew rhubarb. I have a phone. My neighbours are very good, one cuts the grass. They are always there when I need them. My tablets now are much better than they used to be, and I have a better understanding of reality. I have been attending EVE since 1992. I enjoy the art and ceramics. I have exhibited in the Lundbeck exhibition for a number of years with some success. I have sold some paintings and my painting was chosen for the 2007 calendar.

I also like weeding in the garden and setting tables in the dining room. I have developed a repartee with the other clients. I have seen so many changes over the past sixteen years, people coming and going. It helped me cope with my life, having somewhere to come; I would have been lost without it. I have other people who support me, my brother-in-law and nephew, the nurses in the community and my friend who visits me, does my laundry and helps me in lots of ways. I am happy enough.

I LOOK FORWARD TO COMPETITIONS!

My name is William and I have been in my EVE centre for about 18 months now. Before this, I was at home all the time and didn't get out too much. The last place I had been in didn't really work out. I had been having a bad time when my mother and father died. I had a lot of arguments with my brother and his girlfriend. As well, I didn't know what to be doing with myself. The staff in my EVE Centre have always given me loads of encouragement and I have put myself forward for new things that I wouldn't have done before.

I have met lots of new people and really look forward to coming in. My relationship with my brother and his girlfriend has also improved a lot and things are a lot better in the house. Over the last couple of months, I was encouraged to try for the PINEL course and I really enjoyed the challenge.

I learned a lot there and I even went to Wales with them on an overnight trip which I never thought I would do myself. Through the jobs club, I have recently got a part-time job in the National Stadium. I work there four mornings a week before I go to the centre. Coming here has certainly helped me on the road to recovery and I have got a lot of confidence from

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the different things I do in my EVE Centre. Nobody talks to you like you're stupid and we have a good laugh here as well.

The fun side of things here makes me look forward to coming in each day. I feel much more independent and confident over the last year and I reckon that the encouragement I have received from my EVE Centre has made a difference. I also look forward to the competitions we have like football and pool and hopefully I'll win the pool competition next time around!



OFF THE PSYCHIATRIC MERRY-GO-ROUND

My name is David and my memories of childhood are bitter sweet, very loving parents and siblings and happy carefree childhood days. But then the cancer of alcoholism took hold of my parents and all hell broke loose. The family became totally dysfunctional with all the frills and spills, secrets, arguing, fighting, unease, disease. So from a very young age I had a very old head on young shoulders, taking on responsibilities I wasn't able for, problem solving, people fixing, and I became a father figure.

I grew up with this unknown fear and anxiety, full of worry and nerves. I always had low self esteem and felt different and apart. I became angry with life, full of rage, guilt and shame, the secrets of alcoholism, isolation, looking at life from behind a pane of glass, don't talk, don't feel, become numb.

When I was doing my Leaving Cert, Anorexia Nervosa set in. I was later told at counselling that restricting food was the only thing I was in control of. The attacks of fear in my mind and tension in my stomach were a living terror. I had no one to turn to as I was trapped by this terrible thing that had happened to me. I broke down. Valium became a sticking plaster and brought temporary relief. I never dealt with any of my issues or received counselling or healing.

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I then discovered alcohol which freed me from my mental anguish but this was short lived and my problem rebounded twofold, as I also became hooked on tranquillisers, so now I had two problems: mental illness and addictions. I never had any self esteem and became prone to bullying in the workplace. I had no coping skills so I perceived everyone as a threat. I carried all my baggage into my adulthood. I found it very hard to form relationships so I became very lonely and isolated .

One day, I was out walking in Clontarf and came across a statue of Our Lady. In desperation I cried out for help to Our Lady. Help came. A twelve step programme and brilliant people were put my way to deal with my issues. Today I'm off the psychiatric merry-go-round. I don't delve into a bottomless pit of problem solving. I believe in myself, I'm not crazy or nothing is wrong with me. It's just feelings of hurt and pain that I've dealt with through the help of a brilliant psychoanalyst. I now know that the past and future are not real and 90% of my problems disappear, if I keep things in the day. I can't get back into the past to fix things, but today I treat myself with love and respect.

I believe there is a major problem of suicide among our young male population and everything is brushed under the carpet. Education is the key, especially how to deal with the onslaught and trauma of adolescence and the pitfalls of drugs and alcohol. Today I am working as a trainee PC

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technician in a course run by FAS. The staff are really good for your confidence. Today I look forward to life and I know help is always around the corner when I need it.

