



Thank you for taking the time to answer the feature questions below.

For the readers; please introduce yourself and your work 😊

Hi. My name is Louise Gillett. I have written a book about my experiences of mental illness (which I prefer to see in terms of 'emotional distress') and I also write a blog on the same subject. I have undertaken various work, voluntary and paid, in the mental health sector over the last few years and I am currently employed (on a zero hours contract) with the McPin Foundation.

Would you please share what you were experiencing at the time you came in contact with mental health services?

I was nineteen at the time of my first nervous breakdown. I had been studying at University and was becoming increasingly stressed. The crisis came during the Easter break – I had no home to go to and so I was staying with my sister, sleeping on her lounge floor. I was very anxious and jittery and my brother-in-law gave me cannabis to smoke, believing that it would calm my nerves – in reality, it proved to be the last straw.

I was extremely paranoid. I believed simultaneously that I was a spy and that I was being spied upon. I thought the television and newspapers were addressing me alone. I read a headline about somebody who had put a baby in the tumble drier and thought it referred to me. One evening, some boys outside my sister's flat shot an airgun and the pellet came through the window. I was sure it had gone through my heart and I subsequently became convinced that I was dead. I had all sorts of other delusions – some of which are too embarrassing to detail, even after all these years! I talked constantly, and even when I was aware that I was speaking gibberish, I was powerless to stop. I was terrified, all the time. The situation continued for several days until eventually I was sedated by the GP and woke up in hospital, where I was held under a section of the Mental Health Act.

How did you seek help and start on your road to recovery?

I was always very keen to stop taking medication, which I never felt helped me. I returned to University after that first breakdown, and gained an upper second class degree in Law – a fact that I am still very proud of! However, I was constantly anxious and inherently unstable. I had another breakdown when I was twenty-five and this time I took the medication for several years afterwards, albeit at a very low dose. I recovered to the point where I was functioning, but again I remained overly anxious. I would say that I have only fully recovered in the years since my third breakdown. Having a family of my own calmed



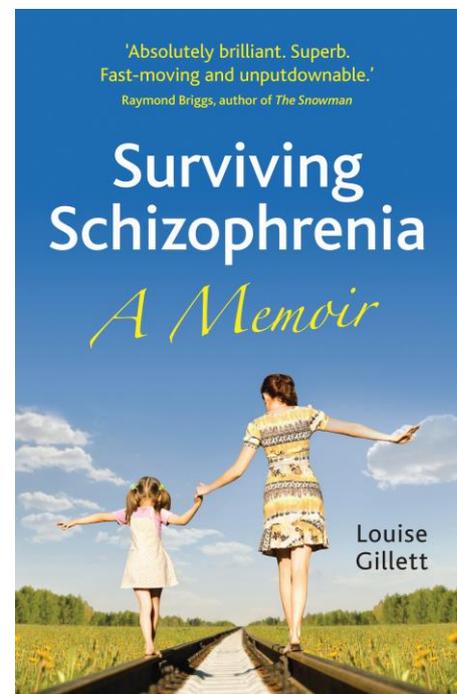
me and gave me stability, and as the years passed and I weathered various personal storms I began to feel increased confidence in my mental health.

Then, a few years ago, I finally addressed the issue of my anxiety, during a brief but very helpful course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which I accessed through the NHS. Now, I feel that I am at no more risk of breakdown than any other member of the general public. (Which is not to say that I am, or ever will be, perfect or completely healed! I am just a lot stronger than I ever was in the past).

On your road of recovery, what has been some of the hardest parts and how did you overcome this? Was there an easy part?

I have had to learn to be emotionally independent, which has been a long battle. I have always suffered from very low self-esteem, due to various things that happened during my childhood. I have therefore always been very reliant on the opinions of others. I was a people-pleaser – and that has been a very hard habit to unlearn! Even now, I often need to remind myself that I am as good as anyone else in the world, and that my opinions are as valid as anybody's. Various self-help books have helped me in this quest.

I have also always been a worrier, something that I now see, with hindsight, as being at the root of my mental health problems. So now I have to make a conscious effort to relax and have fun, and try not to take life too seriously. Luckily for me, my husband is very supportive and I have my children to help me along the way. My mission is to make their paths through life as smooth as possible. So I spend a lot of time with them, teaching them and entertaining them, helping them to feel secure and loved (without suffocating them!) All this is effortless and has boosted my confidence – I know that I must be a pretty good person when I see how well my kids are turning out!



Do you have 'coping strategies' that you use on a daily basis or that you have learned to use along the way?

Increasing age is useful – the passage of time has helped to calm me down and obviously I can't take credit for this! I do live a deliberately stable life. I don't drink alcohol, I don't smoke cigarettes, I wouldn't dream of using recreational drugs and I only use medicine if it is strictly necessary (I have not taken psychiatric drugs for many, many years now). I exercise daily and I eat well – very little sugar, lots of fruit and vegetables and so on. I am sure that keeping my body in good shape benefits my mind.



I have a good social network – my main companions are my husband and children, but I also have quite a lot of friends, both online and in 'real life'. So I have lots of opportunities to connect with others, which I believe is conducive to good health. I have two dogs – I am a strong believer in pet therapy and the healing power of love. The dogs work on both these counts and the adoration is mutual. I count my blessings constantly – the contrast between my current existence and the loneliness that I once experienced is so great that I don't think I will ever take all that I now have for granted!

On a daily basis – well, all the things I do to keep well are part of my daily routine, but in particular I am very aware of my stress levels. I find a cup of tea is good for both calming me down and perking me up when necessary – but too much caffeine stops me sleeping, so I monitor that. Cooking is also good – the activity grounds me and also I feel that I am providing for my family properly when I prepare a healthy meal with loads of vegetables. And writing of course – writing is invaluable for making me feel good about myself. When I write a story I get the pleasure of creating something and the release of getting emotions out of my system and onto the page. Reading is also great for the mind and for the body – it can be both relaxing and stimulating. I could go on forever, but I had better stop there!

May I ask what are your personal beliefs surrounding the explanation of your experiences?

Well, I think that I was a very anxious person and my body was under a lot of stress because of that fact. The anxiety stemmed from childhood – I had a very difficult early life, by anybody's standards. I also wonder whether my diet was a factor – I now try to avoid too many wheat and dairy products, and think this enables my body to function well and helps my mind to stay calm. I smoked a lot of cannabis when I was young – I think this exacerbated my mental health problems, in fact I wonder whether I would ever have had three such severe breakdowns if I hadn't smoked dope.

I look at it all now as a learning experience. I really have learned so much about myself and about the world over the years, and although I would prefer never to have been ill, I don't think there was a choice – I was so stressed that if I hadn't had a mental breakdown I am sure I would have had a serious physical illness. I also consider that I am lucky to have this opportunity to use what I have learned to help and educate others. I really hope that one day, nobody will be as shocked and frightened as my 19 year old self when they experience the first symptoms of psychosis – they will know what is happening and what they can do to help themselves, which will go a long way towards solving the problem.

How do you think your experiences, both mental health and personal, differ from the twenty-first century experience?

My first reaction to this question was shock – I am not a fossil, I am only forty-five years old! However, that probably seems very old to young people, so I accept that it's a valid



question. The last time I was sectioned in hospital was in the year 2000, after my first daughter was born, and from my perspective things hadn't changed all that much from the two previous occasions, in 1988 and 1994. I think the mental health system will be faulty as long as there is use of restraint and forced medication, because these things prevent people having trust in those who are supposed to be helping them.

From a personal perspective – I never wanted help from the mental health system. I did all that I could to keep away from it, and I never took medication for longer than I had to. Now, I see that people are more willing to ask for help for their problems and a lot of people willingly take psychiatric drugs for depression, anxiety and so on. Indeed, I asked for help myself in the form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and greatly benefitted from doing so.

What does the future hold for you?

I hope that I will always feel as happy, fulfilled and secure in my life as I do now. I would like grandchildren (but not too soon!) And I would like to keep writing books, both fiction and non-fiction.

Favourite Quote?

There are so many inspirational sayings out there. I get a free daily email from The Happiness Project, with a quote each day – check these out, they're great! But of the ones I have come across specifically to do with mental health, I most like the quote;

*'...A schizophrenic is no longer a schizophrenic
when he feels loved by somebody else...'*

- Carl Jung

Although I don't like the word schizophrenia, even used in a positive context!

Web link – For the book: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Surviving-Schizophrenia-Memoir-Louise-Gillett-ebook/dp/B0057P6M46>

Social Media links – Blog: <http://schizophreniaattheschoolgate.blogspot.co.uk/>

Twitter: @Louise_Gillett (https://twitter.com/Louise_Gillett)