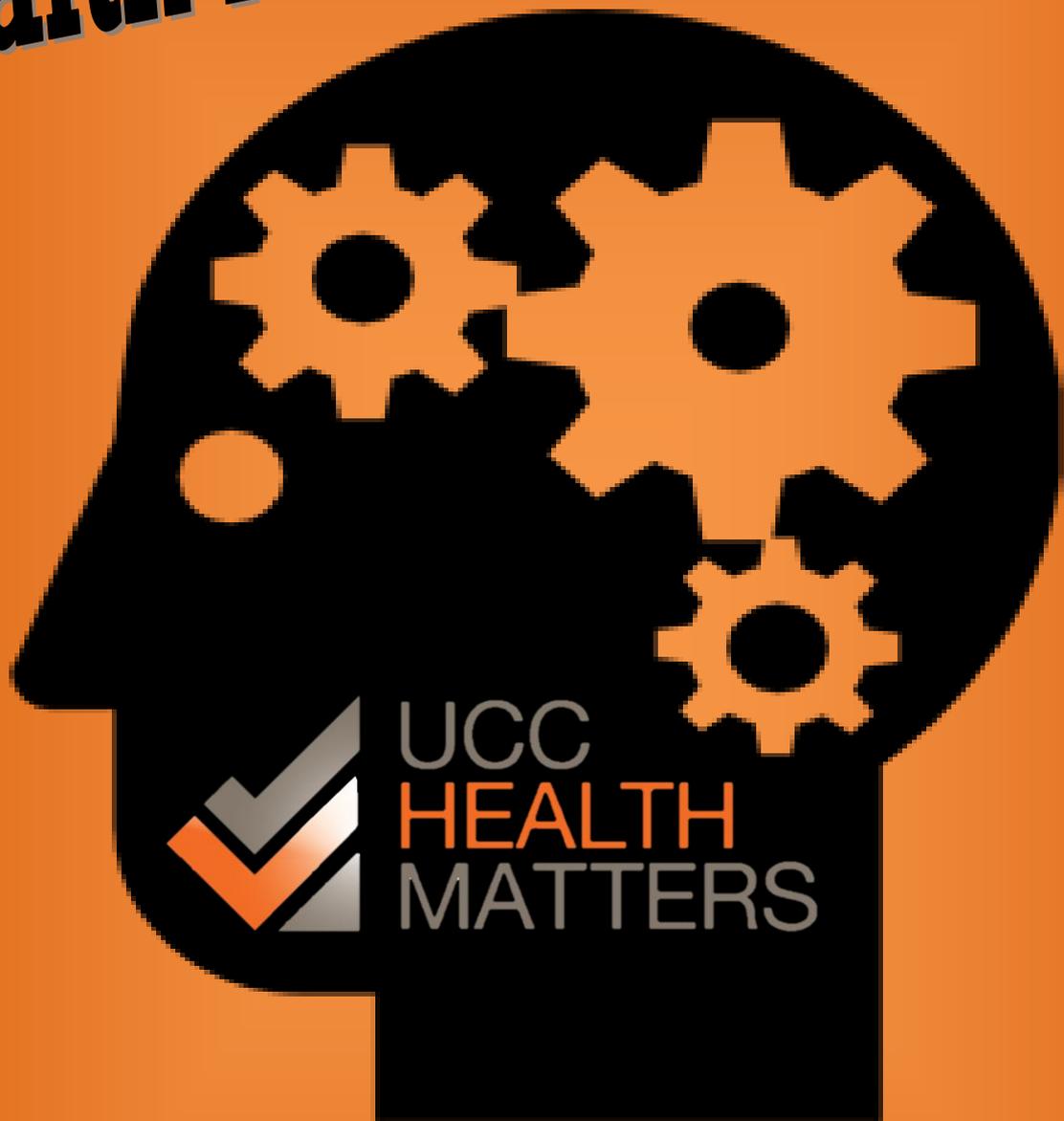


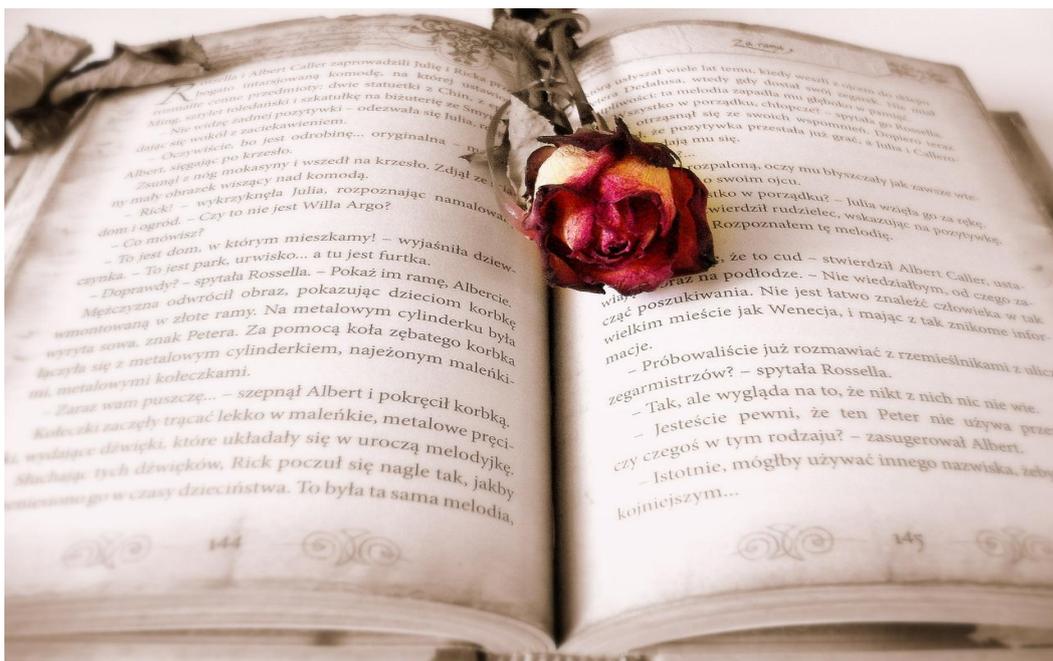
# My Mental Health Matters



**Insightful, Inspiring, Real  
Life Stories: Written by the  
Students and Staff of UCC**

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## Foreword

*Donal Walsh, the Kerry teenager who touched so many lives when he came to prominence through his writings and subsequent appearance on Brendan O'Connor's 'The Saturday Night Show' is being honoured by his native county. Donal who fund raised tirelessly before he lost his battle to cancer had the Donal Walsh #Livelife Foundation set up by his family primarily in order to promote his anti-suicide message. The foreword below has been written by Donal's mother Elma.*

There are many writers in this booklet and each one of them gives a gift to the reader, a gift of Hope, this is one gift that should never be underestimated. I can imagine that it wasn't easy for any of them to pour their hearts out, but by doing so; they have given the reader courage to seek the help they might not know they need.

Its hard work to keep from relapsing & usually it takes more than one attempt to ask for help. Remember the Black Dog starts off as a pup and if there is early intervention that dog could turn out to be a Dalmatian where we have good & bad days & are better able to cope with them, as is the case with most people.

Donal understood this and wanted his friends & young people to Climb their Mountains. He wrote;

*I've climbed Gods Mountains, faced many struggles for my life and dealt with so much loss. And as much as I'd love to go around to every fool on this planet and open their eyes to the mountains that surround them in life I can't. But maybe if I shout from mine they'll pay attention.*

Donal knew that a mountain is a challenge & not easy and maybe sometimes on the way up or down we all need to ask for help.

Giving help to someone when they are going through a time of disorientated thoughts & feelings and finding life difficult is giving Hope and I thank each writer for their own personal story and for spreading the message of Hope.

Elma Walsh

*This booklet was produced with the help of a generous grant from the **Donal Walsh #LiveLife foundation**. Find out more about the foundation here: [donalwalshlivelife.org](http://donalwalshlivelife.org)*



## Introduction



This booklet contains various pieces, which were all written by students and staff of UCC who volunteered to share an insight representing the broad experiences of recovery and dealing with mental health issues. We hope that while reading this you learn something new about mental illness and are inspired by the brave people who made a contribution. Our goal is that these contributions will in turn help to break down the barrier of stigma surrounding mental health issues in the UCC community.

The 'My Mental Health Matters' project was undertaken to inform us of how our class mates and colleagues have dealt with and are currently dealing with their mental health issues. Our main aim is to

reduce the stigma when discussing mental health and to encourage people of all ages to talk about their mental health and well-being.

This booklet shows that there are many steps involved in the improvement of your mental health. We hope to raise the awareness of the many people in our university community currently living with mental health concerns and of those who have faced them in the past. We want to display that there are many ways to deal with these concerns and go on to lead a full and happy life.

The decision of students and staff to contribute to this booklet required careful consideration and thought. As people who have suffered from mental illnesses they can offer hope and insight to those who are currently struggling. They have the ability to inspire others to talk about their mental health concerns while also celebrating the journey that they have travelled. Their willingness to share their personal story about their recovery to the public is the kind of brave action that will help stamp out the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

*The views expressed in this booklet are personal statements and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UCC Health Matters.*

## Personal Stories

*The story below has been written by twenty-one year old UCC nursing student, Linda Creedon. Last year during mental health week in UCC, Linda shared a silent video about her own struggles with mental health. Her video has now reached over 200,000 views and continues to urge people who are suffering in silence to speak up and seek help.*

Hi there! My name is Linda Creedon, a final year general nursing student here at UCC. First of all, I am so proud to be part of a university who is not afraid to push the boundaries of recognising mental illness by compiling this booklet full of student and staff experiences. You do not need to read this all in one go, but keep it close by. Reading a positive message or story can really do wonders for the mind, especially if it's one you can relate to.

Most people recognise me on campus as 'the girl who made the mental health video' which of course is something I am very proud of and honoured by the overwhelming positive response. I hope you will allow me to share a little bit more of my story and get to know the girl behind the video.

My own battle with mental illness began approximately 3-4 years ago. Previous to this, I had always been quite a confident person, an avid thinker

and a go-getter. My personality is quite offbeat or some may say 'quirky'. I like to find the unusual in the most natural things and all my opinions are made after long investigations into a subject, not simply taken from what people tell me.

As I got older my personality didn't really fit into everyday events and situations. Instead of finding activities that did suit me, I began to adjust and change myself to fit in. Ultimately, I began to suffer with anxiety, and panic attacks because I wasn't comfortable with who I was. Everything in my life became affected by this. Relationships with friends didn't last because, like me, they didn't understand what was going on. Hobbies I enjoyed had to be stopped because I second-guessed myself with everything I was doing. Social situations became a nightmare to be a part of in case I became anxious or panicked and had to leave. Sometimes I would have to leave a nightclub, or friend's house because something would trigger in my head, I would begin to feel panicked and would need to leave the situation to calm down. Of course to everyone else it looked like I was in a bad mood and ran off but for me it was necessary in order to take time to regroup. When friends asked me about this I didn't want to tell anyone how I felt so I would make an excuse for this behaviour. Eventually people just stopped asking me to do things because I would probably leave halfway through anyway.

Slowly I withdrew into myself. I wouldn't sleep at night, every worry and anxiety I had would play in my head again and again until pure exhaustion would kick in sometime around 4am and I'd eventually drift off only to be up for college or work again in two or three hours. I stopped questioning the world around me and lost focus in my studies. Everything anyone said to me had to have an ulterior meaning. I would over-think every situation trying to analyse its meaning. An exhausted, nervous wreck, I was completely and utterly at breaking point. At this point, I had a slight inkling that I had some level of depression but couldn't figure out why. I (or so I thought) had no valid excuse to feel this way. I was young, highly educated, came from a loving home. How could I possibly validate these feelings when there were so many people in the world worse off than I was? I knew it was something to do with me. I was the problem. I was the issue. Since I couldn't see or justify these feelings at the time, I had to make them visible to myself. Destructive, self-harming behaviour came into the picture. It was also becoming more and more tempting to just end everything then and there.

My parents are wonderful people, truly amazing, selfless, hardworking, individuals. I was able to hide how I was feeling for a very long time until it eventually consumed my entire being and it was evident to them that something was wrong. They researched and

researched every available service in Cork City that would help me to overcome this illness. I went to a few counsellors but didn't particularly 'click' with any of them. They told me all the usual things you'd tell someone with depression but I just didn't take it in. I didn't believe any of them. Now please don't get me wrong, these counsellors were all wonderful, kind, selfless people. Their particular methods just didn't suit me.

Then, Pieta House opened its first centre in Cork. I was reluctant to go but my parents made sure I went to my appointment, and wow, thank God they did! First the centre is easy to find, and beautifully kept. The receptionist team are just fab, always knowing your name when you arrive offering tea, coffee, whatever you like. You're lead into a spacious waiting room where I would normally meet one or two other clients. Here, there is a sense of understanding and an unspoken bond between us. We're all here, in it together. A place where we can simply be ourselves. No judgement.

I began working with a counsellor who didn't tell me what to think or do. It all had to come from me. Sometimes thirty minutes of an hour long session would be spent in silence as I would normally be asked a question and the answer had to 100% come from me. I was never prompted or given an example answer. It's

just too easy to nod along and pretend you agree even when you don't. I attended this service for weeks and weeks, understanding and analysing my depression. I developed my own, unique ways to cope with anxiety and control my panic. I don't even remember a particular point but my self-harming stopped and the scars began to fade.

I was back baby! I began sleeping again, and flew through my final exams. I knew exactly who I was and where I was going. Depression had seized and taken control over my life. Not anymore. I had taken that power back!

I believe very much in things happening for a reason and the challenges we face in life are only there to allow us to grow and develop. If we don't learn from it the first time, something else is thrown our way until we are forced to take notice. For me, my mental illness was an absolute gift to my nursing career. I now have a great ability to bond with patients on a much more personal level and a connection and understanding with a patient psychologically often helps their physical recovery.

I no longer tolerate negativity of any sort in my life. I have removed any potential source, not because I am trying to hide from it and not face it, I just feel, why bother with it? If something doesn't contribute to your

growth and development, you have no business entertaining it.

Finally, I want to congratulate you on picking up this booklet. Every small step we take towards advocating positive mental health is a step towards a society free of stigma and negative attitudes towards mental health.

I always say we will never get rid of mental illness. There is no vaccine to prevent it and life is too unpredictable. But by talking, and learning we can ensure that no-one goes through this alone and it will only make us stronger as a community.

I hope you enjoy reading the UCC My Mental Health Matters booklet.

Linda.x.

## A Spell of Darkness, a Future in Colour

I don't really know when I started to have mental health issues. I was never medicated or told I had depression, but I don't believe you have to be 'diagnosed' to feel low. For me it just always felt like I could never be happy. I'm 21 years old and this is the first time in a long time that I am okay with being me.

From towards the end of primary school, I felt low, sad and angry. I guess it stemmed from living in a house where I was the only one who wasn't sick. Each member of my immediate family; Mum, Dad, sister, all had various kinds of really serious illnesses. I grew up perfectly happy and healthy. I think the minute I realised that I felt guilty. I used to get annoyed when I was asked to help around the house. And as soon as I felt that annoyance, or anger, or upset, I immediately felt guilty. This began to build up until I began to see myself as a horrible person.

I never felt like I could express how I felt. I saw it as being selfish to ask for help. I saw it as attention seeking. It wasn't right for me to do when there was someone who needed actual help. So I did the jobs and any time I caught myself being negative about it, I used to tell myself that I was a horrible person. It built up until I felt numb. I just didn't want to be a burden. I hid away, bottling up everything for as long as I could. It didn't work at all. I just felt like I was becoming even

more of a burden. I began to hate myself so much. I believed I wasn't worth anything. I just used to sit in my room and think "everyone would be much better off if I was dead" or "If I wasn't here, it would be easier for everyone".

It's ridiculous now but when I look back, we were always encouraged to talk openly about our feelings. Meditation, spiritual healing and counselling, were always talked about by my mum. It was difficult for me to ask for it though. I just didn't want to cause extra hassle. We lived in a house where so much had to be done, I saw it as selfish to ask for help.

I lived with that feeling for so long. I wouldn't let anyone in. It was mum who finally brought me to counselling. But I didn't get on well with the counsellor so I left feeling unheard and misunderstood. But I continued on and I was happy for a spell, until the stress of the leaving cert came steam rolling in. By the end of 6<sup>th</sup> year I was tired and excited to move on with my life. I had had too many ups and downs, both at home and with friends. I needed a change to find out who I was. At the start of first year I was completely caught up in new friendships, a new sense of independence. It was such an amazing time and yet I was worried. A small part of me was filled with doubt and that grew. I recognised it though and so I decided that I deserved to be happy. I chose to go to

counselling and I realised issues from my past that were unresolved. I was open with my family about how I felt then. It completely changed me. I was happy, without feeling guilt. I was proud because I allowed myself to be honest with my emotions.

This year my uncle became really sick. He has since passed away. This brought my old feelings back and although I had been through counselling. I didn't know how to express my feelings. Again they built up but it wasn't just today's stress of college and struggling to get the balance between study and socializing, it was also all the old feelings of the past coming back. I didn't know how to deal with that. I struggled with admitting that I wasn't okay. I didn't want to admit that I needed help. I would say that this time around was the worst. I had never once wanted to physically hurt myself, but I began to hate myself so much, for everything that I couldn't do. I felt like I was pulling away from everyone again. I was terrified that everyone I loved would leave me. I knew I needed help but I wouldn't let myself reach out. I knew I could go back to counselling but I just felt that it would be taking away from someone else who really needed it. I felt absolutely crazy. It began to fester and build, so that by the end of semester one, I would find myself sitting in my room trapped with this numbness wishing I could feel anything. I started to get this tingling feeling in my wrist. It freaked me out so much. I used to grab hold of

my neck and squeeze until it was gone, screaming in my head, “What is wrong with you!”

*The poem below has been written by this student about her mental health difficulties.*

This will kill me.  
It will turn me inside out,  
Upside down,  
And eat me.  
It will torture me,  
Until I can't hold it anymore.  
But I cannot let it out.  
Even in the remote,  
Tiny kind of parcels,  
Just to let them know,  
That I am not okay.  
It is worry.  
It is stress.  
It is all that I possess.  
I am not okay.  
I don't know how to BE anymore,  
How to stay connected  
How to live this life.  
I've been rejected,  
I can feel it.  
It drags me down.  
It's dragging me down to forsake me.  
I am unprotected,  
Living a lie.

Rejected.  
No one knows  
No one sees  
I am already losing grip once more.  
Shielded in a bubble of secrecy,  
Finding comfort in the lie that they would not care.

I realised before Christmas, a little while before I wrote this poem, that I was terrified of living. For all the want in the world I couldn't allow myself to just be present. I was jumping straight to the 'what if's' and leaving reality out. I was scared of being who I am. But I can't be all that bad. I have amazing friends who love me. They're on my side. When I let them in, just a little bit, they understand.

There are still bad days. Sometimes I freak out and jump straight to the conclusion that because I'm having a bad day I'm automatically going to go straight back to 'my dark place'. It's hard, but I try to put my feelings into perspective. I take a deep breath and ask myself to look at reality. I say it's going to be okay. The worst day can only last 24 hours anyway. I find a way to think positively and look for something to make me smile. I write down all the bad stuff, then all the good, as a way to see that everything's not all that bad. Then I just rip it up and let it go. Or else I find a friend to talk to about it, just to let out whatever is in my head, because when

my heads all messy and I can't think straight it's great to just talk. My words tend not to make sense, and I stumble over them, but I believe it's better to let them out in whatever way I can. It acknowledges them and helps me feel a little less crazy.

If there's one thing you are to take from my story. It is that mental health issues can affect anyone in any sort of way. It is not selfish to ask for help. It is not weak. It is the bravest thing a person can ever do. Asking for help was the hardest thing for me to do. I am in awe of anyone who can. Everyone deserves to be happy.

---

Female Student, Age 21

College of SEFS



## Recurrent Nightmares

Another long day pulled to a close and she drearily pulls herself back to her room. A sense of relief washes over her as the familiar sight of her room emerges before her. She glances around, another bloody mess. Clothes scattered on the floor like the remains of withered, dead bodies lying on a battle field, like fallen soldiers, lying limp. Another body drops to decompose amongst the rest of the victims on this deserted battlefield as she scrambles from her khaki jacket.

Disconnected from her surroundings she trips and stumbles across the no man's land to her trench in the corner of her bedroom. She climbs into her bed and pulls the warm, heavy duvet to her neck and writhers her naked body into the covers, searching for warmth and comfort. Again she glances around her room to survey the mass destruction she can't seem to escape.

What's more unnerving is that, in this waste ground she found some peace. As unsettling as the scene before her may have been to an outsider, this was almost comforting to her. At least there was something in her life which she could resonate with, she thought - a common ground was found in this battlefield. Here lies the evidence of mortality. She had to come to a realisation when she could see this destruction before her that she had habituated too. She is not so blind-sighted anymore. Her room which was once a tranquil

heaven has been transformed to a discarded waste ground. They say that your surroundings are a reflection of your state of mind, as though it were a choice of interior. Who would chose to have such destruction brought on oneself? That room should be present to make love, not war.

Her moment of serenity is over as through the silence she can hear missiles in the distance. They are encroaching upon her. She'll be in for a long night. She closes her eyes to deny the reality before her but the war is returning. We have not yet learnt from our mistakes. She feels paralysed.

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Female Student,  
Age 22



## Mise agus an galar dubh

Le tamaillín anuas airítear an-chuid cainte ar an meabhairshláinte agus an tionchar a bhíonn aici ar dhaoine agus go háirithe ar dhaoine óga. Tá aird tarraingthe ar an gceist le gairid, ag daoine mór le rá. Tá mórchuid alt scríofa uirthi agus níl amhras ach go bhfuil daoine níos mó ar an eolas ina thaobh, ach fós féin, braithim ná pléitear minic go leor í. Ba dhóigh leat áfach, gur rud é seo nach mbaineann le Gaeilgeoirí. Ní mórán atá feicthe ná cloiste agam fuithí sna meáin Gaeilge. Bíonn tionchar aici ar gach éinne, agus deirtear go mbíonn ar gach uile dhuine plé le tréimhse thinneas intinne ag pointe éigin dá saol, Gaeilgeoirí san áireamh. Níl anseo ach cur síos gairid ar an taithí atá agam féin ar an tinneas agus mo thuairimí pearsanta ina thaobh. Ba mhaith liom go dtuigfeadh daoine nach máchail atá i gceist, ach tinneas, agus is féidir teacht slán.

Ag cuimhneamh siar ní dóigh liom go raibh mé riamh sásta ionam féin. Thaitin an scoil go mór liom - go dtí gur shroicheas na déaga, pé scéal é! Is dócha go raibh brú ag teacht orm an t-am san. Bhí buachaillí i gceist agus bhí scrúduithe le déanamh. Is tar éis dom scrúduithe an Teastais Shóisearaigh a chur díom, sa bhliain 1998, a chuaigh rudaí in olcas. Ní raibh mé socair ná sásta ionam féin. Bhraith mé nach raibh mé dathúil go leor, tanaí go leor, cliste go leor agus ní raibh

suim dá laghad agam in aon rud. Is cuimhin liom gur ghlaoigh an príomhoide isteach orm lá amháin, timpeall an ama sin, chun fiafraí díom cad a bhí ag cur isteach orm. Thosaigh mé ag gol. Ní raibh a fhios agam cad a bhí orm agus ní raibh uaim é a phlé. Chuir sé isteach orm gur thuig an bhean seo go raibh fadhb agam ach nach raibh a fhios agam féin cad í an fhadhb a bhí ann. Tá sé deacair é a mhíniú. Bhí mé ciúin agus cúthaileach agus bhí easpa féinmhuiníne ionam. Bhíodh fonn orm páirt a ghlacadh sna ceolchoirmeacha a bhíodh ar siúl ar scoil ach bhínn róneirbhíseach tabhairt faoi. Is minic a bhíodh orm a bheith tinn roimh dhul ar stáitse. Bím ag plé leis an neirbhís sin i gcónaí. Is dócha go gceapann daoine go mbím ag iarraidh mór is fiú a dhéanamh díom féin, ach dar liom féin is cuid den tinneas é. Rud atá cuíosach aisteach ná gur imigh mé thar lear ag rince tar éis na hÁrdteiste agus bhí mé ar stáitse gach oíche. Bhí buaite agam ar an diabhal rud seo, nó sin a cheap mé!

Bhí deis iontach agam an domhain a thaisteal ag feadh na mblianta ach tar éis tamaillín bheartaigh mé go raibh uaim socrú síos. Tháinig mé abhaile agus thosnaigh mé ag obair in oifig go lán-aimseartha. Thaitin an post nua go mór liom. Bhí fios mo ghnó agam ann agus bhí mé gairid don tigh sa mbaile. Tar éis dom cúpla bliain a chaitheamh ag obair (is dóigh liom go raibh mé timpeall 25 an t-am san), chuir mé isteach ar chúrsa in Ollscoil Chorcaí. Theastaigh uaim riamh a

bheith i mo mhúinteoir, ach cheap mé nár fhreastal ach daoine a bhí sárchliste ar an Ollscoil agus bhraitheas ná raibh an mianach san ionam. Fuair mé litir ón Ollscoil agus bhí orm dul suas chun scrúdú gairid a dhéanamh. Thiomáin mé féin agus mo mháthair suas ach ba chur amú ama é. Cúig nóimint roimh dhul isteach faoi scrúdú ba bheag nár thit mé i laige le teann neirbhíse. Bhí orainn casadh timpeall agus tiomáint abhaile arís. Bhí mé croíbhriste. Is cuimhin liom an turas abhaile amhail is gur inné a bhí ann. Bhí díomá orm dom féin, ach bhí díomá orm do mo Mham chomh maith.

Sa bliain 2013 ansan, agus grá na múinteoireachta fós i mo chroí, theastaigh uaim é a thrialladh uair amháin eile. An uair seo bhí níos mó muiníne agam. Bhí mé tar éis Dioplóma sa Ghaeilge a dhéanamh agus d'éirigh go hiontach liom leis sin. Thriallfainn iarratas a chur isteach uair amháin eile. Ba é an rud ab fhearr a dhein mé riamh! Comhairle don aos óg atá ag cuimhneamh ar chur isteach ar chúrsa Ollscoile – Déan é! “Is aoibhinn beatha an scoláire”, mar a deirtear. Tá mo shaol athraithe go hiomlán. Chabhraigh an Ollscoil go mór liom, ní amháin ó thaobh oideachais de ach ó thaobh fás agus forbairt phearsanta freisin. Tá níos mó féinmhuiníne agam anois ná mar a bhí agam riamh, agus tá mé sásta rudaí nua a thriall. Nílim ag rá go raibh sé fuirist an chéim seo a thógaint - ní raibh, ach ag féachaint siar b’fhiú go mór é a dhéanamh. Anois bím suite sa *Quad* ag féachaint timpeall orm, agus is deacair

dom a chreidiúnt go bhfuilim mar chuid den institiúid iontach seo, Ollscoil Chorcaí. Anuraidh áfach, agus bliain amháin curtha díom agam, thosnaigh rudaí ag dul in olcas arís. Bhí an-chuid brú orm ó thaobh scrúdaithe de, agus ní raibh taithí agam ar an mbrú san le fada. Bhí turas mór le déanamh agam gach lá, agus bhí cúpla rang ar siúl agam chomh maith, sna tráthnóntaí, tar éis na léachtaí. Mar atá luaite cheana agam, bhí an galar dubh orm ón am go rabhas ar scoil ach níor chuir sé isteach go rómhór ar mo shaol. Is cinnte gur chuir sé bac orm rudaí áirithe a dhéanamh, ach ní dócha go raibh a fhios ag mórán daoine go raibh sé orm. Bhí mé go maith in ann é a cheilt. Is cuimhin liom a bheith ag léimt isteach sa leaba ag a cúig a chlog sa tráthnóna. Chaithinn na huaireanta a chloig ag gol istoíche nuair ná raibh aon duine timpeall. Conas go mbeadh a fhios ag éinne?

Mí na Nollag an bhliain seo caite, ní dhearmadfaidh mé riamh é. Bhí greim ag an ngalar dubh orm agus in ainneoin mo chuid iarrachtaí ní bhfaighinn an nasc a bhriseadh. Bhraith mé go dona. Bhí pianta agam de shíor, i mo cheann, i mo bholg agus i mo chroí. Ní raibh uaim a bheith beo agus theastaigh uaim lámh a chur i mo bhás féin. Bhraith mé chomh tinn sin gur cheap mé ná faighinn leanúint orm agus bhí plean éalaithe agam. Tá sé deacair é seo a scríobh fiú amháin, ach ba mhaith liom go dtuigfeadh daoine go bhfuil slite timpeall ar an bpian sin. Tá sé deacair é a mhíniú ach bhí na

mothuacháin chomh láidir sin gur bhraith mé ná raibh aon smacht agam ar mo chuid smaointe. Tá an t-ádh liom go raibh mo chlann mórthimpeall orm. Bhíodar an-chabhrach agus thugadar an-tacaíocht dom. Tháinig mo mhuintir agus duine nó beirt desna cairde i gcabhair orm, nuair ná raibh a fhios agam conas cabhair a lorg. Tháinig mé slán de thoradh a gcuidsean tacaíochta. Cé gur tháinig feabhas ar chúrsaí, is rud leanúnach é an galar dubh. Seans go mbeidh mé ag plé leis go deo, ach ar a laghad tá a fhios agam ná fuilim ag imeacht as mo mheabhair. Tuigim anois cad atá i gceist agus conas plé leis. Fuaireas comhairle dochtúra agus tá mé anois ar bhóthar mo leasa.

An rud ba mhaith liom go dtuigfeadh daoine ná nach máchail é. Níl ann ach tinneas agus dála aon tinneas eile, tá leigheas ann don ghalar dubh chomh maith. Ní haon chúis náire é. Cé go bhfuil sé i mbéal an phobail i láthair na huaire, bíonn leisce fós ar dhaoine labhairt faoi. Caithfimid, mar phobal, iarracht a dhéanamh a bheith sásta é a phlé go hoscailte. Níor labhair mé féin le héinne ar feadh na mblianta, rud nár chabhraigh pioc. D'éirigh rudaí níos measa toisc gur choimeád mé ina rún é. A luaithe agus a lorg mé cabhair agus a labhair mé amach, is ea a luaithe a tháinig feabhas ar an suíomh agam. Tá an-iomarca le déanamh agam amach anseo, seachas a bheith in ísle brí an t-am ar fad. Tá uaim a bheith i mo mhúinteoir lá éigin, agus an bhliain seo chugainn, le cúnamh Dé, beidh céim sna

hEalaíona bainte amach agam. Tá uaim an t-eolas atá agam a roinnt ar dhaoine óga. Braithim go bhfuilim níos láidre mar dhuine agus tá dearcadh i bhfad níos sláintiúla agam ar an saol. Tá go leor botún déanta agam i mo shaol ach ní cheart go gcuirfeadh san, ná an galar dubh bac orm sa todhchaí. Ní féidir dul siar, ach is féidir liom a chinntiú go mbeidh saol cuíosach sona agam. An chomhairle is mó a chuirfinn ar éinne atá ag fulaingt leis an ngalar dubh ná: labhair le duine éigin. As an gcaint a thagann an leigheas is fearr agus má bhíonn drochsmaointe agat cuimhnigh ar an ráiteas *'suicide is a permanent solution for a temporary problem'*. Ní fál go haer é!

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Female Student, Age 32

College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences



## Consistency

Nothing was ever really consistent. I think that's the best way to describe it. I mean, I wasn't in a low place all of the time, it came and went. There were high periods in between, but they came and went too. The worst part about it was I never knew when the next low was going to come. I just had to wait until that feeling of dread took over.

This whole thing really started over 3 years ago when my best friend killed himself. Dealing with that at a young age really does change who you are and how you look at things. It wasn't something I noticed straight away really, mainly because everyone was messed up initially after it happened. At first I didn't talk to anyone, I felt that I should be there for other people because they were hurting more than I was. I learned pretty fast that I needed to talk though. Keeping it inside made everything more negative. To be clear, I wouldn't say I had a problem straight away after the suicide it's more that this trauma stayed with me and ate away slowly.

The last three years haven't been all bad, far from it actually. I've had a lot of good times and made a lot of friends for life who are supportive and who I support in return. As I said, no feeling was ever consistent. Things would be good for a month or so and then suddenly, those feelings in my throat and stomach came back.

What interested me at the beginning was that these feelings never returned when I was around friends. I was always alone. I found it difficult, and to some extent still do, to be on my own for extended periods. I guess my brain just went into over drive every time it got a chance and my mind would dwell on all the negatives, over-thinking every little detail. I think it actually made it worse in the early days that I realised the lows only came when I was on my own because I started to dread being on my own and would actively avoid it. Even keeping my mind busy seemed to work so I became fixated on school and college work just to keep myself from thinking, alongside over training just to be doing something.

Looking in from the outside then, I didn't look like someone in trouble. I appeared as a happy guy, excelling in my academic work, plus doing pretty well in sport. Because the lows only ever really came when I was alone, I was never really sad around my friends. Regardless of whether they knew it, my friends were a release for me; they made me feel a lot better about everything, just by being with me. They knew about my friend dying too. I'd be very open about it anyway. But to them, it looked like I had made it through and had actually become stronger when, in reality, my achievements were a result of me trying to distract myself from my thoughts.

It was within the last year that everything peeked and I finally accepted I needed to go talk to someone. Before this year, I'd only get lonely when I was on my own so I could counteract it by being around people. Recently though, I began feeling alone when I was with my friends. I started to feel like nobody wanted me to be around and that I didn't really fit in. The low periods really started to last longer then, because I had no escape. I felt bad when I was on my own and when I was with others. It seems like a cliché but it is a real experience, feeling lonely in a room full of people. You sort of feel disconnected from the rest of the room.

When that started happening to me my close friends began to notice that there was something wrong too. At the start I didn't want to talk about it. I kept denying the idea that there could be something wrong with me. I suppose I didn't want to be labelled as someone who needed help. Eventually I started talking to a few friends about how I was feeling and that did help temporarily. It felt good to get it off my chest. Unfortunately, that was just a temporary solution and after a couple of weeks the feelings of dread and sadness returned. It all peaked one night we were out I think. I remember getting into the car after a night out and just crying. I wasn't even sure what about. I think I just realised I was tired of everything in my head being so negative. It was then that I decided that I'd go and talk to someone.

I'd never even thought of the counselling services in UCC until a friend recommended it to me. I think it's a service not many students realise is there. I remember walking out of my first session with a smile on my face because I knew I'd made the right call and I knew I was on the road to getting better. I'm currently still attending sessions but I do think the counselling provided by the college has made a big change in the way I feel daily. As well as that, I think just being open about how you're feeling and not hiding it from anyone really helps. I know it's difficult to admit you need help in the beginning, and the fear of the stigma surrounding mental health can be hard to overcome, but in the long run being open with your friends makes everything a lot easier.

I'm not 100% there yet but I am definitely in a better place now than I was a few months ago. The biggest thing for me was having people who I felt I could talk to and be open with, without judgement. There's nothing worse than when you feel you're being pitied by your friends. Just because you're going through a rough time doesn't mean that it defines who you are. That's important as well; remembering who you are outside of your mental problems.

For me, it all comes back to consistency. I couldn't maintain a consistent level of happiness. It was only when I really committed and continuously sought out

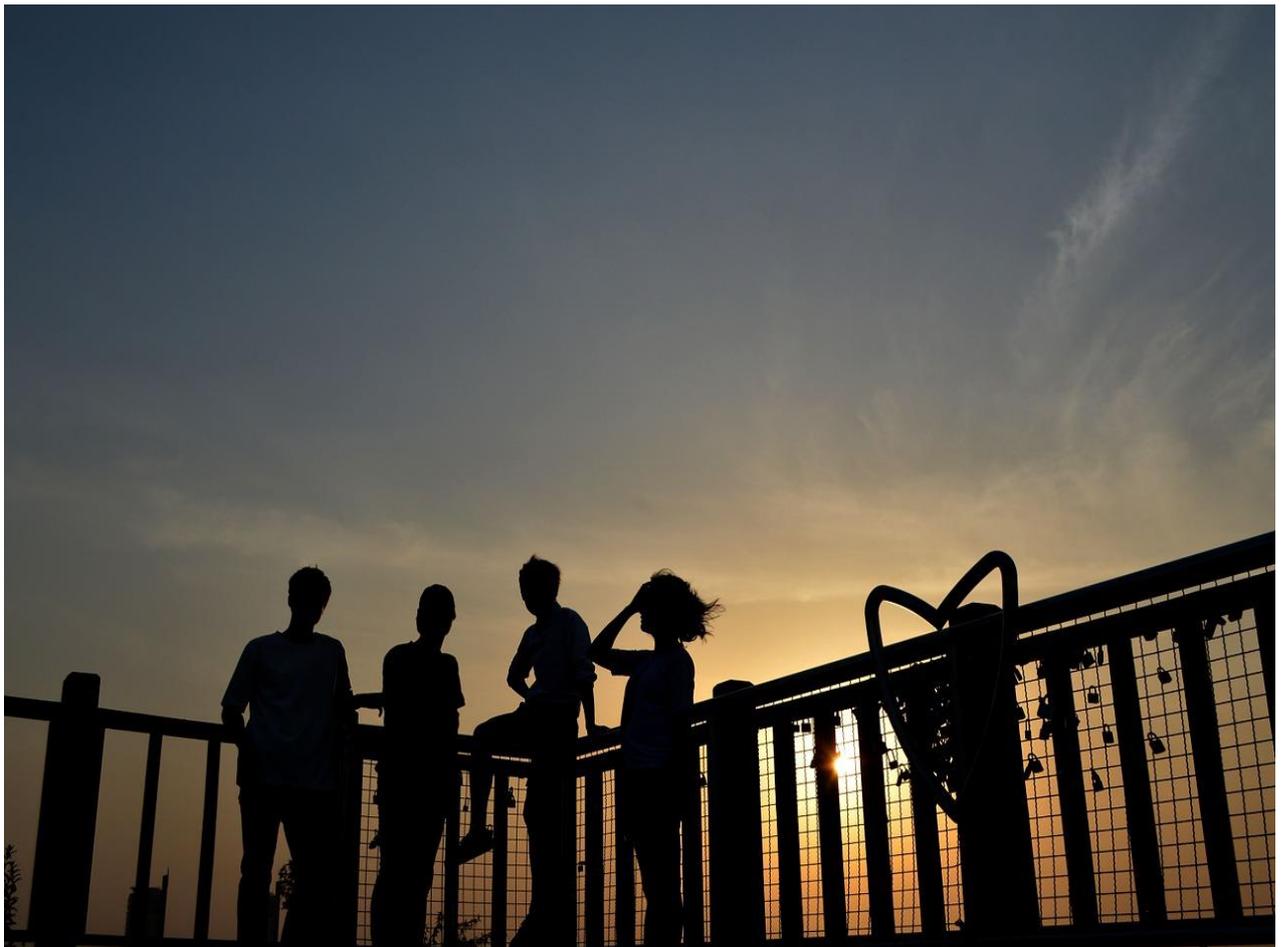
help that I began seeing results. Mental health is like anything else worth having, you have to be willing to work for it.

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Male student,

Age 20,

College of Arts Celtic Studies and Social Sciences



## My Mother killed my Black Dog

I never thought I would admit that Winston Churchill and I have a lot in common. I always thought I had more in common with Churchill the nodding dog from the insurance commercials. However what Winston Churchill and I probably had most in common was that we both had a black dog for a large portion of our lives.

My uncle has a black dog that has enriched his life in a way our family never imagined possible. I have always been so proud of him and I love that dog, mostly because of how happy she has made my uncle. Like my uncles dog I have had to live with my own black dog since my twenties. However my dog is invisible and the only one who has had to walk him daily for years was me. For the most part I carried him on my shoulders and not behind me on a lead. The black dog I speak of is one that many people carry around daily. It is depression. It is something that I have had to deal with over the last 8 years and I am not at all ashamed to admit that. I am proud to say that while that dog lived with me for years he has now gone.

My struggle with depression began after a bad break up. I was in a relationship that was destined to fail. The girl was somebody that I really cared about and after a period of time of me wooing her we had a brief courtship. I now realise that this wasn't a realistic

relationship. I was too intense, I expected too much and she was scared off. The relationship was like a jigsaw. My life at the time was nearly the full picture; I had my dream job, a loving family and great friends. The only thing that was missing from the picture was the girlfriend. I had the wrong piece for the jigsaw but I tried to jam it in regardless. The pieces were wrong and the picture fell apart. I am glad that this happened because I have now married the right person who is the love of my life and I worship the ground she walks on. She for me is not only the whole picture, she is my whole life.

I fell into a deep depression and lost half a stone in a week. I barely ate and slept most of the time. Eventually my mother brought me to my GP and I spoke to him about how I felt. This led to my first introduction to anti-depressants, which I took daily for four years. The side effects were awful. My weight ballooned, I regularly broke out in sweats, my sense of taste and smell were drastically altered. Food tasted differently but it didn't stop me eating. Food became my comfort. Family could always tell when I was in a bad mood as there would be food wrappers everywhere. I was numb. For about three years I spent most of my time going from work to a takeaway to my room. I realise now that I wasted these three years.

The main reason I wanted to change my life was my beautiful mother who has been my rock my whole life. I still feel guilty that I put my mum through this pain at a time when she was not very well herself. However she never complained and she was always there to talk to me, to listen to me cry, just to be there. I'm 36 but I will always be my mum's child and she will always be my best friend. My Mum worried so much for me that I eventually realised that I wasn't just harming myself I was hurting those around me. Even at my lowest when I didn't care about myself I always cared about hurting others. That's one thing about me that I'm really proud of. I care about people. I will do anything for those I love. I learned that trait from my mother who is the most amazing, caring mother. I am alive because of her. I can stand proud today to say that I am the person I am because of my parents and their influence on my life. When I got married a year ago I moved out of my parents' house. It was strange for me and hard to get used to as I don't see my parents as much but their influence on me has made me the person I am.

The other thing that acted as a catalyst for me was an episode where I met my brother in town one night. I was extremely manic very upset and on the verge of tears. My brother and I love each other dearly but are very different people. We have a lot in common but we don't have a history of deep meaningful conversations. On this night he could tell that I was at a very low

point. I assured him that I was going home and that I was ok. Two minutes later my phone rang. It was my mother, I could hear the strain in her voice, my brother was really worried and rang her to tell her the state that I was in. I realised at that point how much pain I was causing others and I realised that I needed to get myself together. If I hadn't met my brother that night I know that I would not have made it home. I don't think he realises that by bumping into me he and my mum saved my life.

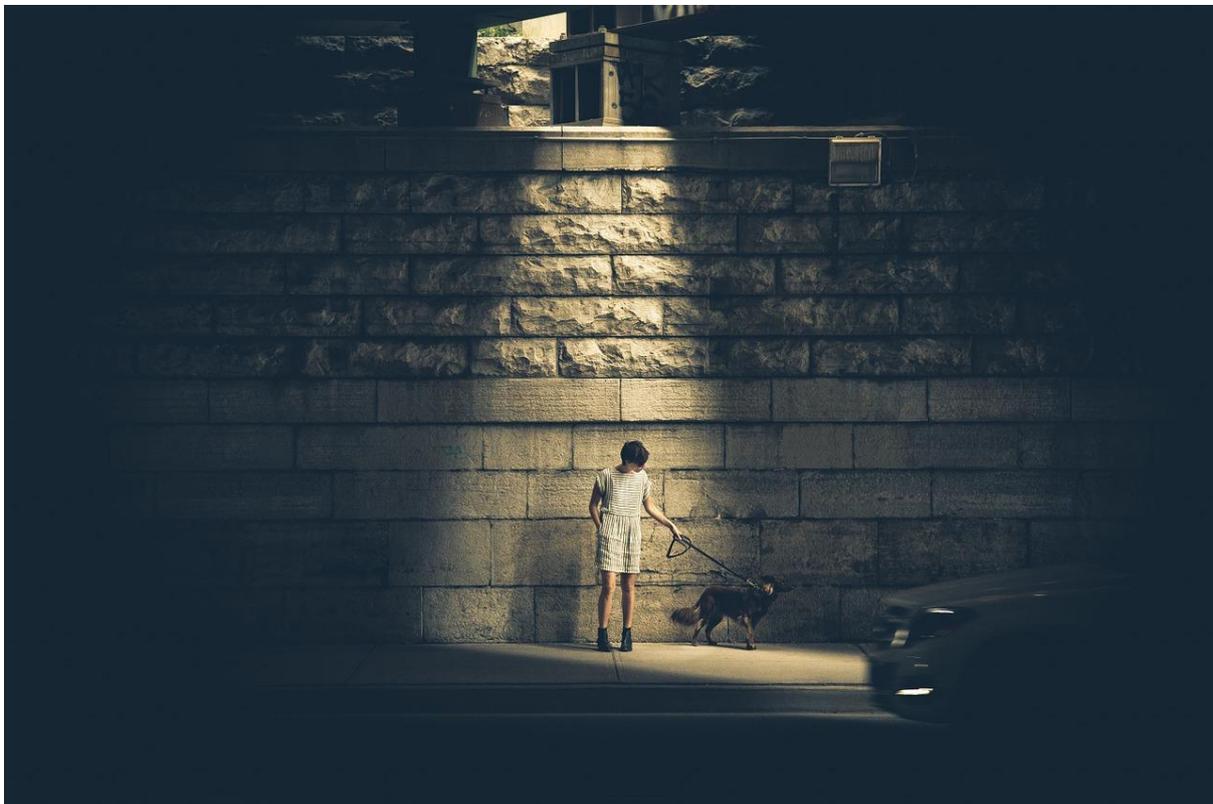
A friend of mine was really the only one to recognise that I was depressed. She gave me a copy of a book called I Had a Black Dog. It is a great book that outlines the nature of depression and how to deal with it. I still have this book in my bedside locker today and it has been more helpful to me than a mountain of anti-depressants could ever be. I will always be grateful to her for her help and how she helped my life. She probably doesn't even realise it. One of the things that I have learned is that a healthy attitude to food and exercise can help in the fight against depression. I now exercise in some form every day. The personal trainers in the gym would probably argue that I am not the best but I go nearly every day and even at my own pace I feel better. I wish I knew how much exercise could help my moods years ago. It would have spared my family and especially my mother the pain that I caused them.

In the end my Mother killed my black dog. I realised that if someone loved me that much and would help me as much as she did that my life was worth living. One of my major goals in life is to have children with my beautiful wife so that I can try to be as good a parent as my Mum and Dad are to me. I'm not ashamed of having depression. I have overcome it. It has made me a better person. I do know that this process has equipped me with tools that I didn't have previously and I am better tasked to kick the dog in the ghoulies if he tries to come at me again.

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JP

Male, Age 36



## It's okay not to be okay.

It's okay not to be okay. It really is. And in fact, it's normal. We can't always be okay. Things happen that are out of our control and affect us in ways we never thought possible. I always thought it would never be me. I would never suffer from a mental health disorder. I was invincible.

But I wasn't. Nobody is. Life happened and anxiety and depression hit me like a tonne of bricks. I felt weak, defeated, and hopeless. Ashamed. How could I have let this happen? I had been through worse things in my life and been unaffected by them, but now I was vulnerable? It didn't make sense. I knew I needed to reach out and get help. I had to accept the fact that I wasn't invincible and I needed help. But I was terrified. Would people judge me? Would people think less of me? Would people treat me differently?

I didn't get help for weeks because the answers to those questions scared me. The longer I waited, the worse I got. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I couldn't focus on college. I withdrew from family and friends and stopped living my life as I knew it. I was terrified of what was going on in my own head. I let it consume me. I needed to take control back over my own life, so I did what terrified me most. I reached out for help.

I reached out to the Welfare Officer in the Student's Union, as well as the counselling service here in UCC. I told the people I trusted most in my life and the ones who could help me. I didn't make a public announcement, most people were, and still are, oblivious to my situation. I couldn't believe the response. Nobody judged me. Nobody thought less of me. Nobody treated me differently. In fact, it was the total opposite. They made me feel strong, hopeful, supported. They made me realise I was not alone and I wasn't the only one going through this.

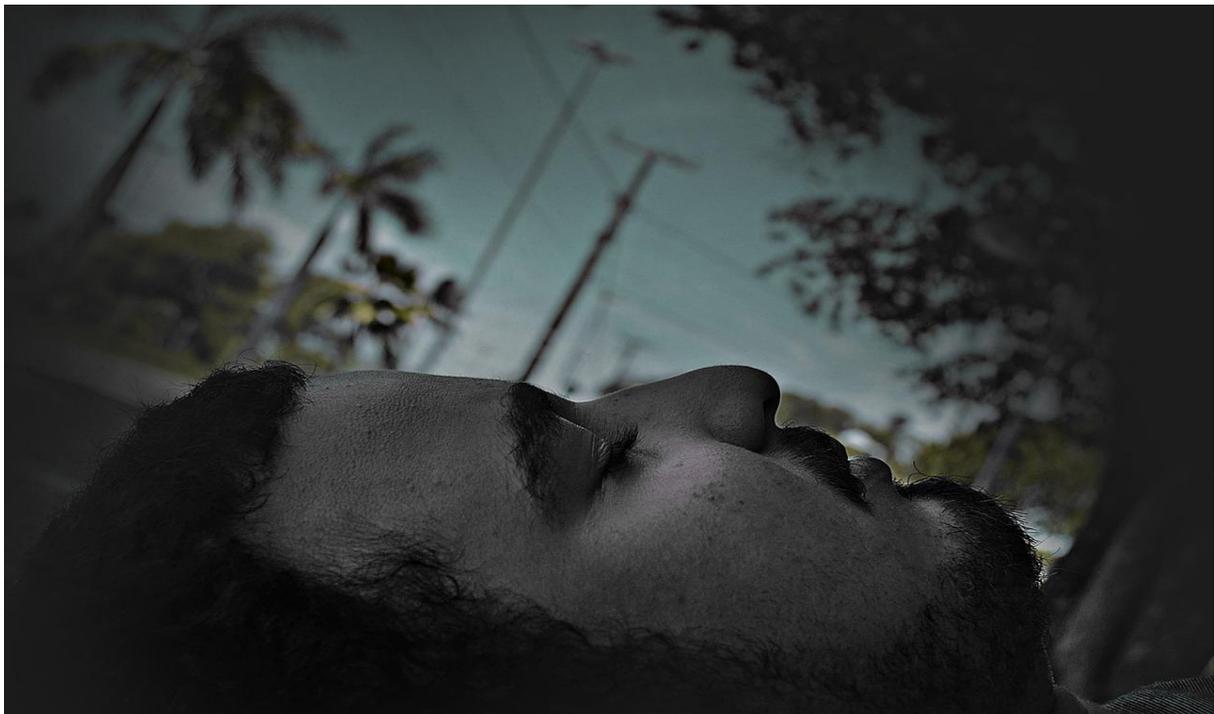
Because I reached out and got help when I needed it most, I'm in a much better place now. Am I completely better? No, but every day I'm learning how to put my life back together piece by piece after anxiety and depression took over. Because I got help, I am happier, stronger, and more mature than I ever was. Experiencing anxiety and depression humbled me, and it's made me realise how strong I actually am. I now feel compelled to help people who are going through a similar situation, and I urge anyone who is going through a difficult time to reach out and get the help that you deserve.

Today I look back and realise the importance of talking about mental health. Not being okay is nothing to be ashamed of. We all have times in our lives when we need extra support and help. Looking after your mental

health is just as important as looking after your physical health. You are not alone. Mental health issues are more common than people think and it's okay not to be ok. It really is. And in fact, it's normal. We can't always be okay.

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Female, Age 20  
College of Medicine and Health



## I'm fine; Living with Anxiety and Depression

In September of 2014 I started studying Zoology in University College Cork. I've wanted to study zoology since I was a boy, watching Steve Irwin put crocodiles in a headlock. I remember staring at the TV in my loony tunes pyjamas at 8:30 every morning and thinking "I want to do that!". Thirteen years later here I am studying my dream subject (Yet to headlock a crocodile however). After years of dreaming and hard work, life was where I wanted it to be, but it wasn't completely plain sailing. I normally cope very well in stressful situations, I didn't bat an eyelid going through the Leaving Cert while those around me were losing their heads, but settling in to college was rough, Very rough. Of the 120 students in my class I had spoken to 3 of them in the first few weeks. Out of my depth with the sheer volume of people here I spent many of my classes on my own in the back row, avoiding eye contact with everyone else. I couldn't make friends; I lost my voice and found it impossible to speak to anyone. I wanted nothing more than for someone to come talk to me, invite me to go get tea, or just acknowledge I was even there. I was alone in a crowd.

While trying to make new friends was hard enough, it felt like my friends from school had left me behind as they thrived in the new environment. I would hear

from them rarely and see them even less. They took to student life-like ducks to water, going out on a Thursday having fun and embracing the new lifestyle in the pubs and clubs of the City. The idea of clubbing terrifies me; huge crowds, drunks and noise. I was in a relationship at the time and had no reason to join my friends on the prowl. They invited me along, but when I say invited, it felt like I was hounded with a chorus of “You should come with us!”. ‘Should’ said like it was something expected of me from day one, something I was obliged to do, that made me feel isolated. I declined the invitation every time, knowing I’d be abandoned like an unwanted pup at the side of the road.

Come October I came to terms with the fact my mental health was slowly deteriorating, the stress of my academic life coupled with the isolation of my social life was taking its toll. I suffered daily headaches, a bad sleeping pattern and a lapse in concentration. And after a long day of college, it all came to a boil.

It was one of those days, nothing went as I wanted it to and the world seemed against me. I had just finished a 3 hour chemistry lab which I hated to even think of doing. I nearly lost myself in that lab, staring at a list of measurements and terms I didn’t understand. One of the girls in the class I had managed to make friends

with must have noticed I was distressed, she came over and asked “You ok?” to which I gave the only answer I could manage: “I’m fine”. Now I was on the train home at 8:30pm after being on the go for nearly 12 hours. I wanted to cry, I just wanted to go home and cry and never have to leave again. My brain felt like it was trying to break out of my skull, I had bottled up 2 months worth of stress and negative emotion and it had come to a head. I had to drive home that night in the dark with my head swimming and concentration crumbling and it showed, I stalled every time I had to stop the car and narrowly avoided causing a side-on collision with another driver. Driving that night was a very bad idea. Half way home that night I had a terrible, horrifying thought that still shocks me: “If I just swerve into that wall, I won’t have to go any further”. It was at this moment I realised how bad I let things get, I didn’t care what happened, my own self-preservation had been blocked out, and it scared me. It made me even more determined to get home, I didn’t want it all to end. At my house I didn’t bother turning off the ignition I just went inside and did exactly what I wanted to do in the first place: Cried. I collapsed against a cupboard in the kitchen and broke down completely in front of my parents who didn’t have a clue what to do. It was the worst I’ve ever felt in my life. Needless to say, I didn’t go to college the next day.

Following this episode I knew I needed help, there was no hiding it anymore and no denying it either. I had serious anxiety. I was afraid of college, afraid to go to lectures, afraid to go out, afraid to face the crowds, afraid to face my friends, afraid to look my parents in the eye, afraid to talk to anyone about it. In the weeks that followed I slowly fought a bout of depression that had reduced me to a shell. I didn't feel anything for a few days, no joy or sadness, just emptiness. Anyone that tried to get through to me got one word answers or a nod. It was especially frustrating for my parents, when I came home every day I'd curl up on the couch and stay there in silence. Dinner wasn't always an option; I sometimes struggled to eat and was unable to stomach food no matter how hungry I was.

On my return to college I met with my mentor, the staff member assigned to help me should I ever need it. I also met with some close friends over a few days, which helped more than I was expecting. Just knowing that others were aware of what I was going through made me feel so much better. I'd like to say this is an isolated and unique incident for me, but it isn't. I still struggle managing my emotions. I still struggle on nights out, when I'm bored, tired, alone, or just have too much on my plate. I still struggle with Anxiety & Depression.

Living with a mental illness isn't easy but it doesn't have to be crushingly hard either: I have a close network of amazing friends and a loving family that understand and care, they check up on me when they notice I'm acting differently, and always offer help should I ever need it. If I could offer any advice to someone reading this that is going/gone through a mental illness, it's to have at least one friend that understands. Let someone know, be it your parents, a sibling, a friend, a neighbour, girlfriend, boyfriend, a trained professional, a teacher or colleague you're close to, or even your pet! To use the cliché: A problem shared is a problem halved.

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Male Student, Age 19

College of SEFS



## Control or Out of Control?

‘Do you eat at all?’, ‘are you anorexic or bulimic?’, and ‘are you doing this to model?’ unfortunately these were among some of the many insensitive questions that I have been asked. I would like to explain why however, in the hope that you will stop and reconsider the situation before you ask something similar, or even receive similar questions yourself.

It happened fast, my illness, almost as fast as the answers I had developed to snap back in defence to these questions. ‘It’s in my nature’ and ‘I have an overactive thyroid’ were among some of the reasons I used to explain my thinness. I hated these questions and the stares of disgust, people commenting as if it was their right. I felt like everyone was constantly judging me, but none of them knew what I was going through or how it hurt to be called ‘skeletal’ or ‘a bag of bones’. Contrary to what most people think of skinny people (myself included before this happened), I actually hated being thin. Growing up I had a healthy, curvy, athletic body and I must say I was very happy with it too. I loved food and never intended to lose weight or diet. It just happened without me even noticing.

All over the media one is met with tips and techniques for healthy low fat eating and exercise. I loved learning the latest advice as I always had a keen interest in

home-economics and sports in school. Then when I went to college I had to move away from home meaning I could eat what I wanted, when I wanted and how I wanted, in between working out of course. It became my obsession, the one piece of my life that I could exercise complete control over. I started a course that I loved but it was difficult with continuous assessments and projects throughout the year. This was combined with an equally demanding and possessive boyfriend, money worries and my parents divorcing. Therefore I loved having this newfound control over the one thing in my life I could control, my eating.

From reading all about healthy eating and exercise, I knew exactly what to do and eat to keep healthy. I followed these rules like a bible, seldom breaking them. I could tell you exactly when I did binge or laze because these occasions would haunt me until I returned to complete blissful self-control again. As I said already though, it genuinely was never my intention to get as thin as I did, but very quickly my healthy eating became very unhealthy for me. This is when the love-hate affair began. Although I hated being so thin and wanted my curves back, I had grown to love this new control and lifestyle that I had developed.

However when other people started getting involved and asking about my rapid change in appearance, I started to get angry and hostile. 'I am feeling great and I am eating perfectly' I would snap back, and to me that was true and how dare they question it! I had loads of energy due to exercising regularly and I was following every tip and recommendation created for healthy eating so how could they say what I was doing was wrong or bad?

Next it started affecting my social life and friendships. I stopped going out because I hated the skinny remarks I would undoubtedly receive, and because my dresses were far too big for me by then too. I became upset and withdrawn, losing my self-esteem and confidence. I also lost many of my friends as they said they found it hard to look at me and were convinced I had bulimia. Nevertheless I still had my healthy eating and exercise to give me reassurance and comfort. Regardless of what anyone else said or thought, this control was right to me and I needed it.

Things took a serious turn when I was required to receive injections in the UCC Medical Centre for my practice placement. It was then I finally realised how out of control my control issue had become. I learned that I was extremely underweight for my height with a mere BMI of less than 14. The caring Nurse that I met informed me that I should see the Doctor as there was

a risk I would be unable to attend placement due to my weight and she immediately made me an appointment. Of course I quickly defended my weight to both of them as usual, saying that I was feeling great and eating loads, listing the usual excuses that it was hereditary and so on. In hindsight however it is evident that I was still in denial, refusing to see that there was a problem and refusing to give up the control I had over my body and food.

To the Doctor's credit he never accused me of having an eating disorder. His understanding, non-judgemental and considerate nature was a very welcomed revelation. Nevertheless he made his concerns clear and explained that I risked hospitalisation if something was not done rapidly because my body was failing. I was shocked because I believed I was doing everything right, but at the same time a part of me was elated that I was being offered genuine recognition and support. Not criticism.

From then on I went for weekly weigh-ins and check-ups in the centre and maintained a daily written/picture food diary as requested. I was also referred for additional testing to ensure there was no other biological cause for my weight loss. The road to recovery was not easy or fast but I can proudly say that it is definitely attainable. It was through this thorough, empathetic approach by the staff at the UCC Medical

Centre that made me finally realise, accept and overcome my problem. An insensitive question or comment is not the solution but with support, understanding and belief not only from your Doctor but also from yourself a solution is possible.

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Female Student, Age 19

College of Medicine and Health



## Minding Your Mental Health

The following are some tips on looking after your mental health. Minding your mental health can make it easier to handle bigger issues when they arise.

- 1. Accept yourself:** Everyone is different, but there is one thing that we all have in common; we are not perfect. Our gender, sexuality and race, among other things, are part of who we are. Everyone can offer something to the world and we all deserve to be respected. Don't be too hard on yourself.
- 2. Get involved:** Becoming involved in new groups and meeting new people can have a huge impact on your life. Join a club or society, take an evening class or just meet up with some old friends.
- 3. Keep active:** Taking part in regular physical activity can boost your mental health. Take part in something you enjoy, like sport, walking, swimming or cycling, and maybe bring a friend with you. All the hard work will pay off when you start to feel more positive.
- 4. Eat healthily:** Maintaining a balanced diet will change the way you think as well as the way you feel. Eat regularly and aim to include five portions of fruit and vegetables per day in your diet.



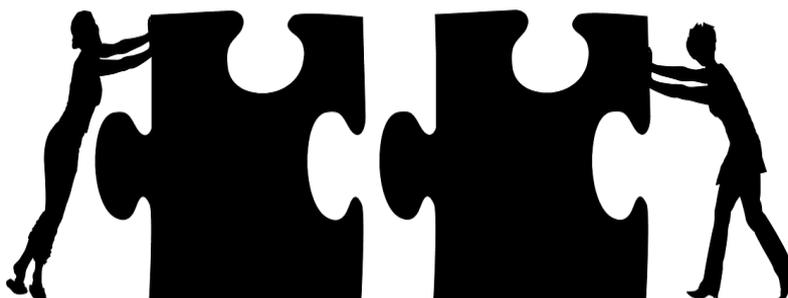
- 5. Keep in contact:** Close friends are vital during difficult times, so it is important to keep in touch. It isn't necessary to stay strong and struggle on your own.
- 6. Relax:** If a hectic lifestyle is bringing you down, try to fit some relaxation time into your day. Try doing things that will help you to unwind, like reading or listening to music. Take time to find what works for you. Just 10 minutes of quiet time can make a big difference.
- 7. Talk about it:** It can be easy to become overwhelmed by issues. Discussing how you feel will help. Talk to someone you can trust. If you feel like you have nobody to confide in, call Niteline, UCCs listening service, on 1800 32 32 42 (available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights from 9pm-1am throughout the academic year).

## Need Help Now?

If you, or someone you know, urgently needs someone to talk to you can contact:

- **Student Health Centre**- 021 490 2311
- **Student Counselling Service** - 021 490 3565  
/counselling@ucc.ie
- **Niteline** - 1800 32 32 42/online @ niteline.ucc.ie
- **Students' Union Welfare Officer** - 086 383 67 94  
/welfare@uccsu.ie
- **Disability Support Service** – 021 490 2985  
/disabilitysupportoffice@reg.ucc.ie
- **CALM** – [www.ucc.ie/studentcounselling/online](http://www.ucc.ie/studentcounselling/online)
- **uLink Peer Support** – 021 4205 188 / pass@ucc.ie
- **Samaritans** - 116 123
- **Chaplaincy** - 021 490 2459 /ionachaplaincy@gmail.com
- **Mature Student Office** – (021) 490 1873 /mso@ucc.ie

These services have a lot of experience in helping the community of UCC to overcome their problems. If you wish to talk to someone in confidence they can be of help, or at the very least they will be able to direct you to the appropriate service.







**54 College Road,  
Cork City,  
Cork**

**Tel: (021) 490 3218**

**Email: [info@uccsu.ie](mailto:info@uccsu.ie)**

**Website:**

**[www.collegeroad.ie](http://www.collegeroad.ie)**



**Student Health Service,  
Ardpatrick,  
College Road,  
Cork**

**Email: [hppw@ucc.ie](mailto:hppw@ucc.ie)**

**Website:**

**[www.ucc.ie/en/healthmatters](http://www.ucc.ie/en/healthmatters)**

**Compiled, Designed and Edited**

**By Fiona O'Donnell**

**A.I.T. Health Science with Nutrition student**