

“I started noticing that I would respond to social situations with a ‘fight or flight’ response.”

Since 2001, I have experienced social anxiety, with a few incidents where things have come to a head in a very distressing way. I started noticing that I would respond to social situations with a ‘fight or flight’ response. My social anxiety can trigger an anxiety attack, which is overwhelming. It would take me five hours to calm down. The first time this happened, I was on holiday soon after becoming a father for the first time. I had been experiencing anxious thoughts during the holiday, and had been drinking more alcohol than usual to try to relax and brush these feelings away. One morning I had drunk a lot of coffee and experienced my first episode of thoughts of suicide. I had these images that were like opening the door to hell. I felt exposed and needed to feel safe, so went to find my partner. I was very worried I would do something stupid. I talked to my father about it and shared my feelings of anxiety which I’d kept hidden for almost 16 years. On reflection, the alcohol and caffeine I had in the lead up to the attack had a contributing factor, so I made a conscious effort to avoid caffeine, and restricted my alcoholic drinks. There was a second incident where my feelings peaked, and I began feeling suicidal suddenly, while thinking about a family event I was due to attend and that I was stressed about. I remember having a very strong feeling that things would be better if I threw myself under a train I was waiting on. I recognised that I needed to speak to someone, so I called my dad and asked him to talk to me, which helped.

I have told a friend about what has been happening. He was shocked – probably because I am able to hide what goes on in my head, so it is not visible. Talking to colleagues has also helped. I have told my team at work about how I’ve been feeling. I’ve discussed how I felt, and how this may have affected my behaviour. Coming clean has relieved the pressure. I’ve also been able to recognise when other colleagues may be experiencing anxieties, and have been able to talk to them about, and swap books on the subject.

Being able to tell people is a release, although I’ve found you have to be careful who you choose to talk to. It can be a difficult trying to explain mental health issues to people. If they can’t relate to it, then you might not receive the reaction or empathy you hoped for, which can in turn put people off telling others in the future.

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After my first episode of thoughts of suicide, I went to the GP and was put on anti-depressants. Although I did not want to take medication, I do feel it has helped. I was put on the waiting list to see a Clinical Psychologist, and started appointments about 6 months later. I have been diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder and Extreme Social Anxiety. In some ways, a diagnosis has been helpful. I have an increased understanding of how feelings of anxiety work, and how they can relate to trust and anger issues. I have a better grasp of how our brain functions and can understand the triggers for my social anxieties, but I would have found it more helpful to access support to develop better coping mechanisms, such as day-to-day discussions with colleagues and other people, which I find a strain.

“I am being more conscious about my lifestyle choices.”

I have used some of the working arrangements available through Perth and Kinross Council to make some lifestyle changes. I work compressed hours 4 days a week, so I can have a day with my daughter and have a 3 day weekend. I work from home a couple of times a month, which allows me to work in a quiet environment. Through work, I have also been participating in facilitation and leadership courses, which has helped to develop my self-confidence. Now, my mental health is quite good. I am being more conscious about my lifestyle choices. I am trying to eat healthier. I know my limits when I drink, and am careful not to have too much. I get more exercise, and I'm in a stable relationship, which helps me to feel safe and calm. I am not so up and down with my emotions.

“I think mental health is still perceived negatively.”

I want to understand what is going on in my head. What I feel and think does not limit me – I want to continue to develop, so have to put myself in positions which I find difficult. I try to practice on-going 'exposure' therapy - otherwise life can become dictated by my thoughts. I have read books on the topic of mental health, although I have to limit it so that it does not trigger negative emotions. I followed Mental Health Awareness Week online, but felt the messages on my timeline were having a negative impact on me, so I stopped following. On the whole, I think mental health is still perceived negatively. It is not taken seriously, and people have a natural reaction to judge. However, barriers are being broken down by public figures such as Prince Harry and professional sports people, who have talked openly about mental health. Your attitude is shaped by the culture you are brought up in – your family, beliefs, the media, institutions – and this affects who you do and don't talk to about it. I think it will be better for younger generations.

If someone I knew was experiencing mental health difficulties, I would seek to help, as I feel that I would be able to relate and have a connection. I would encourage that person to talk, to a close friend if they have one they can talk to. I would reassure them that it's not anything they have done, they are just a victim of circumstances – they are not to blame for how they feel. Particularly during the early stages, it is about learning how to manage your overwhelming feelings, your situation and your environment. Most men are not comfortable talking about their mental health, as they do not want to be seen as 'weak'. I would encourage someone to talk one-to-one, rather than in a group setting initially. You could reach out to men through their social networks. One way to target men who may be feeling vulnerable would be through family support groups. It can feel like most of the support available is targeted at new mothers, but having a baby can be overwhelming for the father too.

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If you are affected by any issues raised in this case study or are worried about someone, please contact the Samaritans on 116 123, Breathing Space on 0800 838587 or NHS 24 on 111. In an emergency call 999. For information about mental health and suicide, visit www.suicidehelp.co.uk or download the Suicide? Help! app by searching in your app store.