

Writing my way through anxiety



A story of taming anxiety and panic through a self-developed style of music journalism.

Lauren John

Writing this article feels like the mental health equivalent of standing up in an AA meeting and boldly declaring you are an alcoholic. In the last ten years, I have shied away from writing about my problems. But now that I have found something in my life that has made a difference, I feel compelled to share my experiences.

Written off

I used to suffer from severe panic attacks and still have problems with anxiety and agoraphobia. It affected many aspects of my life, especially social and work activities. Although I am not housebound, and would go stir crazy if I was, I have agoraphobia, with fear of travelling or of having an attack away from home. I find the idea of attending job interviews and 'going' to work every day impossible.

Even before these problems developed, my teachers were concerned about my career choices. I knew there were some things I was good at and wanted to see where it would take me, even though I was shy. But, when I listed media as an option on my university application, I was told that I was not outgoing enough to make it as a journalist. Anxiety and panic came to the fore in grand style around the time I left university. However, somewhat ironically, the one thing

that has slowly and surely been helping me on the road to a better life since then is the one job or industry I was once told I was unsuitable for.

Finding a path

I fell into freelance writing by accident when I picked up a copy of a music magazine which had an advertisement for writers inside it, and realised I could do that. Back then, I did not realise what difference writing would make to my mental health; I was just caught up in the excitement of having my first article published and the professional interest in my work. The buzz of seeing my work in print has been a great mood enhancer, and the work itself a great focus for my mind, all of which helps reduce the anxiety and stress when it comes.

Writing about music

My early articles were all about music, something which I have always been passionate about, and continue to specialise in today. A lot of a music journalist's job can be done with a computer and an internet connection, but neither helps when it comes to gig reviews. Most of my gig-going, up until that point, had been limited to events where I could come and go as I pleased and would not feel at all claustrophobic. I just did not feel I could cope with going into theatres

or bars, or travelling to arenas for concerts.

All this changed when I was researching bands online and discovered one that came from my hometown that I really liked. I wanted to check them out live and write about them, but I was scared stiff of going to see them. For some reason, music and writing mixed together made a connection with my anxious alter-ego where other things had failed, and pushed me forwards to try anyway. I saw the band six times that year. I could not believe I had actually pushed myself to get in the door to see them, let alone stay for the gig and speak to the band. Most people I know would not even think of going into a bar or pub on their own. So, for me to go, and manage to stay, despite suffering varying degrees of anxiety was a big achievement. And it is slowly getting easier.

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Music has inspired me so much and has pushed me to get out more and meet people. I have made a few musical/media friends along the way too. The progress I have made has given me the confidence to explore other opportunities, such as copywriting and blogging, and writing about new subjects. I have found the creative side very relaxing, and it is great to be judged for my skills and abilities and not my mental health problems. I get caught up in the work, and have discovered, when it comes to deadlines and workloads, there is such a thing as 'good' stress.

Creating wellbeing

It has not been easy. Anxiety and lack of confidence have affected me when I have approached people, and there are limits. I may be out and about more, but I can only take on freelance, home based work, which rules out shifts and office roles, along with travelling. I have to decline attending some events too. Freelancing is also a roller-coaster. One minute I am busily working my way through a pile of work, the next I am back on the job sites, with pressure piling to earn some money.

Yet I cannot help but keep going. It is almost like a primeval instinct to

cling on to the one thing that is giving me the motivation and determination to improve my life, the one thing I have control over, and the one thing that is not all about my mental health problems.

While I may not be writing my way to a big monthly pay check yet, I am slowly starting to write my way towards a better mental health. And that is one thing many people would not have predicted. I think the much quoted saying, 'you should never judge a book by its cover,' is true of people too.