This Much I Know about Mind Over Matter

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Preface

The knock on my door was more urgent than usual. Our normally imperturbable premises manager looked concerned. As we walked at pace down the technology department corridor he briefed me on what had happened. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for what I found behind the store cupboard door. The horror of it remains, years later.

As a state school head teacher I encounter students' mental *health* problems on a daily basis. Fortunately, only a handful of students have a serious mental *illness*, like that student in the store cupboard who had attempted, unsuccessfully thank goodness, to commit suicide.

This book has emerged from my attempts to manage the seemingly inexorable rise in the number of students with mental health problems, an increasingly demanding aspect of my job. I am no psychiatrist, yet I am expected to manage students' mental health with little experience and shrinking resources.

To engage in the children and young people's mental health debate has proven challenging. The more I researched, the more challenged I became. I interviewed Natasha Devon, the erstwhile Department for Education children's mental health champion, and found myself agreeing with her every word, only to read Ecclestone and Hayes' book, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, and be utterly convinced that our navel-gazing curriculum has caused the so-called mental health 'crisis' in our schools.[1] By the end of my researching, I had begun to present symptoms of acute cognitive dissonance.[2]

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1 Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

2 'Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours': Saul McLeod, 'Cognitive dissonance', *Simply Psychology* (2008, updated 2014). Available at: http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html.

Ultimately, no matter how contradictory some of the views might be regarding young people's mental health, we are where we are; as Professor Tanya Byron says in her interview in Chapter 21, whatever one thinks about the extent and nature of the issue, 'we have just got to get on with the business of trying to address this challenge of increasing mental health problems in young people'.

You will find in this book illuminating interviews with professionals working in the mental health field, an exploration of some of the key issues surrounding staff and students' mental health from my perspective as a head teacher, and a modest proposal for structuring help for those working in schools to support students to manage their own mental health more effectively.

Finally, amongst a series of autobiographical vignettes, is my account of living with a parent suffering from an acute mental illness: my mother.

Chapter 1

Un-love letter

Engagement day, 24 July 1956

My mother's maiden name was Browning. Her first name was Elizabeth. The poetic connection might account for *my* love of words. *She* can certainly write, that's for sure.

Despite her promising name mother wasn't educated, having had to leave school when she was just 13 years old. She was a manic depressive, now known as bi-polar. For all that we might consider children's mental health problems a modern phenomenon, they are, in fact, nothing new.

In 1939 electroconvulsive treatment, or ECT, was introduced to the UK. ECT was devised by an Italian professor of neuropsychiatry, Ugo Cerletti, after he had observed, during an abattoir tour, the passivity induced in pigs

by pre-slaughter electric shocks.[1] Mother was one of the youngest British recipients of ECT.

Sylvia Plath's description of ECT in *The Bell Jar* is probably the most vivid I have read: 'Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite.' She goes on to describe how, 'with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break'.[2]

Like all ECT patients mother remembers very little of the shocks, something considered a positive feature of the treatment. Of all the senses, however, smell is the greatest evoker of memory. Graham Greene said that smell has a 'power infinitely more evocative than sounds and perhaps even than things seen'.[3] Mother can't recall what the doctor said to her. She can't even recall what the room looked like. The one thing she can recall is the odour of her singed hair when she awoke from the therapy.[4]

Mother met my dad when he was delivering letters on his post round. She had been tipped off by a friend that the postman was quite dishy. She sat in wait for him on the wooden gate to the house. When he arrived, he offered her one of his Player's Navy Cuts. She was impressed.

The next line of this romantic tale should be, 'from that day forth they lived happily ever after'. But, to be honest, over the next thirty years the many joys were offset by more than just a few moments of despair.

Mother married my dad when she was just 20 years old. She tried to break off the engagement. She knew her manic bouts would test him. She knew her dark days would wipe away his smile. She knew she would bring him an

1 See Norman S. Endler, *The Origins of Electroconvulsive Therapy: The Myths and the Realities* (New York: Raven Press, 1988).

2 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 151.

3 See Marie-Françoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 34.

4 Electroconvulsive therapy has improved considerably since those early days. Today, around 4,000 people with severe depression are treated successfully every year in the UK with a course of ECT.

unfair share of misery. Before they wed, she wrote to dad to end their relationship, but her father found the letter and destroyed it.

Mother could have finished with dad without having to serve her own decree nisi. Why didn't she just tell him it was over? The answer to this question is lost forever in the thick mist of time. She was young. She was cowed by her father. She probably snatched at the chance of happiness. After all, we all want what Raymond Carver wanted, don't we, 'To call myself beloved, to feel myself | beloved on the earth'?[5]

So marry him she did. Miss Elizabeth Ann Browning became Mrs Ernest Harry Tomsett. And for purely selfish reasons, I'm glad my granddad found his daughter's un-love letter.

5 Raymond Carver, 'Late Fragment', in *All of Us: The Collected Poems* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), p. 294.

Chapter 2

Mind over matter

> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
>
> John Milton

We use the phrase 'mind over matter' to describe occasions when someone has performed a seemingly impossible physical feat, like single-handedly lifting a car to free a trapped pedestrian caught beneath its wheels. More commonly, it is used to encourage people to show greater determination when faced with challenging tasks. It assumes that we can control our own minds to control our bodies. And that is a huge assumption.

For fifty-odd years I have been able to control my mind and have done pretty much what I wanted to do in life, despite the barriers I have faced. My close friend, Lester, said to me recently that, looking back, he thought that my success at golf was down to my mental strength more than any golfing prowess, and he's probably right.

In my experience, luck has never been a major factor in what I have achieved. I subscribe to the aphorism often attributed to Seneca: 'Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.' Determine to work hard and you'll be rewarded. On the odd occasion when I confess that I am worried about something or other, my wife will deliver the wounding jibe, 'Come on, it's you who always says we can control what we think.'

Despite my own sense of mental strength, one might argue that it is odd for me to subscribe so fully to the 'mind over matter' mantra, since my family has been so blighted by mental health problems. Indeed, how we, as a family, have lived with my mother's manic depression forms the narrative thread of this book.

It is a challenge, then, for those of us who have, thus far, been spared depression to understand why on earth sufferers cannot just 'snap out of it'. In Matt Haig's quite superb book, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, there is a short chapter

entitled, 'Things people say to depressives that they don't say in other life-threatening situations'.[1] 'Why do you think you got cancer of the stomach?' is a sharp rejoinder to the insensitive amongst us, and 'Ah, meningitis. Come on, mind over matter' is a cracker in the light of this book's title.

The difficulty of understanding mental illness from the outside looking in was illustrated with utter clarity during a BBC week-long special on mental health, when journalist Lynn Barber interviewed the comedian Ruby Wax. The conversation explored Wax's severe depression. At one point Barber asked a question which she knew was provocative, but she asked it anyway:

> Lynn Barber: I probably shouldn't … I'll make a million enemies by saying this, it does strike me that a component of depression is self-obsession, do you think?
>
> Ruby Wax: Well, it's exactly like a physical disease … And nothing goes with it. It is just something broke … Something broke. They lost … They lost chemicals, they got chemicals. Nobody knows the answer.[2]

Now, from my experience, I know what Barber means. When I have witnessed someone's manic or depressive phases, it has seemed to me that the person in question cannot see beyond herself, she loses all perspective and over-dramatises her life. The trouble is, untrained cod diagnoses are unhelpful. It is hard to say the right thing when talking with someone about her mental illness. Wax finished her conversation with Barber by saying, only half-jokingly, 'I'm not going to you when I have depression!'

So, from the non-sufferer's perspective, depression is hard to comprehend and difficult to talk about without being insensitive. In the interview with Barber, Wax differentiated between physical illness and depression. Talking about friends who have contacted her to bemoan their cancer or their hip replacement – afflictions which impact upon their bodies rather than their minds – she says, 'They are far more stoical with, as it were, physical illness than I am. The depression is worse. The cancer, I want to live, and the

1 Matt Haig, *Reasons to Stay Alive* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2015), p. 26.

2 'Lynn Barber' [video], *Artsnight*, BBC Two (26 February 2016).

depression, I want to die.' Very illuminating; indeed, the theme of inequality between mental and physical health in our culture emerged strongly whilst researching this book.

Talking about mental health is, it seems to me, essential if we are going to support those amongst us – children and colleagues – who are genuinely suffering. The snag is, people are reluctant. To talk or not to talk; that is the question? Alastair Campbell explores this conundrum in his blog post on the Time to Change website:

> I think it's a very, very difficult area this, because all I can say is it's always benefitted me to be open. I can't in all honesty say to everybody in all of their different circumstances 'It will benefit you to be open.' Because the truth is I'm afraid because of the stigma, because of the taboo, because of the discrimination that does sometimes exist, it could be worse for some people. And I think if all of us could somehow make the leap together to be more open, then all of us, the ill and the non-ill, would be better off.[3]

Campbell's hesitant tone indicates his genuine uncertainty about being open about his illness. And this is *Alastair Campbell*, who worked for years in Downing Street, who has met Nelson Mandela, who was with Tony Blair at the very moment he was informed about the 9/11 attacks. What chance, then, has an intelligent 17-year-old lad from down on the estate, who doesn't understand why he feels so blue, whose emotional support is non-existent and who is slowly dropping out of college?

'We need to do a lot more around helping young people say how they feel.'[4] So says Stephen Habgood, whose son, Chris, died by suicide when he was 26 years old. Stephen fronts Papyrus, a charity whose aim is to prevent young suicide. He goes on to claim that what we do when we talk with

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3 Alastair Campbell, 'Alastair Campbell talks about depression' [video], *Time to Change* (n.d.). Available at: http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/news-media/celebrity-supporters/alastair-campbell.

4 Quoted in Liz Copper, 'Suicide prevention group wants action', *BBC News* (12 August 2014). Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-28753633.

young people about their mental health is to encourage them 'to disclose how they're feeling and to admit that they're struggling and seek help'.

If talking is difficult for the healthy, it is even harder for those who are ill. But talking openly about mental health will help to dispel the stigma, the misconceptions and the discomfort surrounding illnesses like depression. It will assist those of us working in schools to identify the appropriate level of support for individual students who are presenting with some kind of mental health problem.

Talking about mental health with openness, honesty and wisdom is not an easy thing to do. Shifting a car weighing well over a ton will seem a cinch by comparison.

Chapter 3

The signal and the noise[1]

> Usually, when I start a project I am confused. And when I have finished it I am still confused, but I like to think that I have reached a higher level of confusion. And sometimes that's as much as you can hope for.
>
> Dr Ken McLaughlin (in conversation with the author)

So, is there a children's mental health *crisis* in our schools? You will find transcripts from a number of interviews in this book and all the interviewees conclude that there is, to varying degrees, an increase in the number of students with mental health problems.

At one end of the spectrum Tom Bennett told me, 'I don't think there is a mental health crisis in schools' (see Chapter 25), whereas Natasha Devon, in her speech to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, said that the mental health of children in schools 'is worse than we think it is'.[2] So, whether we are facing a mental health crisis is debatable. It is no exaggeration to say, however, that every single head teacher colleague I meet is confronted by their students' mental fragility on a daily basis.[3]

In preparing this book I have collated dozens of papers on the subject. Whilst the extent of the problem depicted varies from article to article, experts repeatedly claim that students are more anxious, more stressed and

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1 The chapter's title comes from Nate Silver's *The Signal and the Noise: The Art and Science of Prediction* (London: Penguin, 2012).

2 Natasha Devon MBE, former government mental health champion and schools adviser, speaking at the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, 'Good Mental Health in Schools – What Works?', British Library, London, 28 April 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5UVJMTjljo.

3 See, for example, Holly Taggart, Stephen Lee and Laura McDonald, *Perceptions of Wellbeing and Mental Health in English Secondary Schools: A Cross Sectional Study* (December) (London: CentreForum, 2014). Available at: http://www.centreforum.org/assets/pubs/headteacher-survey.pdf.

more suicidal than at any other time in our history. In an article entitled, 'Is the crippling anxiety over exams what we want for our children?' Allison Pearson writes that we live in 'an age obsessed with exam grades and league tables, itself a kind of national sickness for which there is only one known cure: AAA'.[4]

According to the last major study of students' mental health back in 2004, one in ten students has a mental health problem.[5] More recently, there has been a significant rise in mental health problems in young women between 16 and 24 years of age.[6] Whatever research you cite, it seems that mental health is a growing problem for our children and young people.

The thing is, a new report on the dire state of mental health amongst the young is published on a seemingly regular basis. For instance, the *Report on the Children's Worlds Survey of Children Aged Eight Years Old, 2013–15*, published in February 2016 by the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB), found that in the UK over 10% of children did not like going to school at all and only 39% of UK boys like going to school.[7] Further analysis found that England was ranked seventh highest for the frequency of children being hit by other children at school, and ranked

4 Allison Pearson, 'Is the crippling anxiety over exams what we want for our children?', *Daily Telegraph* (13 August 2014). Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/11031251/Is-the-crippling-anxiety-over-exams-what-we-want-for-our-children.html.

5 According to the most widely used prevalence data: Hazel Green, Áine McGinnity, Howard Meltzer, Tamsin Ford and Robert Goodman, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain* (Newport: Office of National Statistics, 2004). Available at: http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB06116/ment-heal-chil-youn-peop-gb-2004-rep2.pdf.

6 Sally McManus, Paul Bebbington, Rachel Jenkins and Traolach Brugha (eds) *Mental Health and Wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014* (Leeds: NHS Digital, 2016). Available at: http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748/apms-2014-full-rpt.pdf.

7 Gwyther Rees, Sabine Andresen and Jonathan Bradshaw (eds), *Children's Views on Their Lives and Well-Being in 16 Countries: A Report on the Children's Worlds Survey of Children Aged Eight Years Old, 2013–15* (York: International Survey of Children's Well-Being, 2016). Available at: http://isciweb.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/8yearsoldreport.pdf, p. 42.

highest for the frequency of being left out by classmates, which was experienced by 50% of the 10- and 12-year-old age groups.[8] The University of York launch page for the report cites Sam Royston, policy director at the Children's Society: 'The Government should consider making it a legal requirement for schools in England to provide counselling and to allocate children's mental health funding to promote children's wellbeing, rather than just dealing with mental health problems after they occur.'[9]

There are myriad other reports I could have cited which come to similar conclusions. With so many voices repeating the same message, the perception that there is a mental health crisis is entirely understandable. A comprehensive review of the recent literature on children's mental health would fill its own book. To understand the current debate on the issue, however, there are a few important publications worth referencing.

Amidst all the noise surrounding the issue of children and young people's mental health the greatest clarity comes, arguably, from the Education Policy Institute think tank (previously called CentreForum),[10] which is led by the tireless mental health campaigner, the Rt Hon. Norman Lamb MP. In March 2015 Lamb launched the seminal report, *Future in Mind*,[11] which was accompanied by a £1.25 billion investment over five years to increase access to the right treatment, in the right place and at the right time for young people with mental health problems. *Future in Mind* challenged local

8 International Survey of Children's Well-Being and the Jacobs Foundation, *Children's Views on Their Lives and Well-Being in 17 Countries: Key Messages from Each Country* (York: International Survey of Children's Well-Being, April 2016). Available at: http://isciweb.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/KeyMessagesfromeachcountry_final.pdf.

9 University of York, 'How do children around the world feel about their lives?' (press release, 16 February 2016). Available at: https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2016/research/childrens-worlds-study/.

10 See http://epi.org.uk/.

11 Department of Health and NHS England, *Future in Mind: Promoting, Protecting and Improving Our Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Ref: 02939 (2015). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414024/Childrens_Mental_Health.pdf.

John Tomsett addresses, with refreshing honesty, the growing problem of the mental health issues experienced by children and young people, offering up a plan for averting a mental health crisis in our schools.

Tomsett interweaves his formative and professional experience with strategies for addressing students' mental health issues and insights from his interviews with high profile thinkers on the subject including Professor Tanya Byron, Natasha Devon, Norman Lamb, Claire Fox, Tom Bennett and Dr Ken McLaughlin. The book is replete with truths about the state of children's mental wellbeing, about creating a school culture where everyone can thrive and about living in the shadow of his mother's manic depression.

This is a moving, deeply personal book. John Tomsett interweaves painfully honest recollections of his childhood with consideration of the challenges we face in schools, as we address the raw reality of mental health issues. A marvellous, thought-provoking read.

Professor Dame Alison Peacock, CEO, Chartered College of Teaching

This book is a guide to moving forward, understanding mental health and doing things that might actually make a difference.

Tom Sherrington, Head Teacher, Highbury Grove School

John Tomsett comes as close as anyone I have met to not just understanding mental health in schools, but having sensible things to say about what to do.

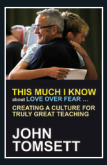
Sir Simon Wessely, Regius Professor of Psychiatry, King's College London, President, Royal College of Psychiatrists

A book for our time, and everyone working with young people should read it.

Alastair Campbell, writer, political aide, Time to Change ambassador

John Tomsett's thoughtful, compelling and provocative book offers practical responses for head teachers, teachers and parents.

Kathryn Ecclestone, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, co-author of *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*



Also available

This Much I Know about Love Over Fear …

A compelling account of leading a values-driven school where people matter above all else.
ISBN 978-184590982-6

John Tomsett has been a teacher since 1988 and a head teacher since 2003. He is head teacher at Huntington School, York. Tomsett writes a blog called 'This much I know …' and is a regular contributor to the *TES*. He co-founded The Headteachers' Roundtable think tank and is a popular speaker on school leadership. He is determined to remain a classroom teacher, despite the demands of headship, and believes that developing truly great teaching is the main responsibility of all head teachers.

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