

Identity and Mental Health

Zoe (she/her)



– questions that once my mind became too familiar with, were replaced with the belief that “there’s something wrong with me”.

I’ve never been super confident in who I am. There have been phases where I felt more or less confident, but often my sense of identity has been [hidden by layers of trying to ‘fit in’](#).

When I went to uni I started feeling like maybe I could find my sense of self. I didn’t know whether I wanted to pursue teaching or psychology but I enjoyed the subjects for both, so I was feeling hopeful. Except I wasn’t a party-er and I didn’t have big travel plans, so I didn’t feel like I fit the stereotypical “student/in your twenties” profile.

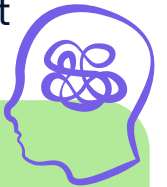
I felt like my mental health challenges were somewhat seen (including by myself) as being caused by a difficult finish to high school but that I would likely find my feet.

Then when I landed in hospital, I thought that maybe addressing my mental health would give me some answers so that I could get ‘back on track’. Whilst it was somewhat validating to feel like my mental health was being taken seriously, I didn’t feel like I got any sort of explanation for why I felt the way I did. I thought about pursuing an autism diagnosis because maybe that would explain why I always felt different and like I didn’t fit in, but at that time it wasn’t a priority so it got put on the back burner (future blog post about neurodiversity...?).



If you’ve questioned whether or not you’re behind in life or relate to this feeling, first off, **you’re right where you’re meant to be**, second of all, go [check out my other blog post about ‘Feeling behind in life’ HERE ;\)](#)

After a while in and out of hospital and some not so helpful comments by psychiatrists, *I felt like my illness was my identity*. This was not an unfamiliar concept after having battled an eating disorder as a teenager, but this time it felt different. It felt like my depression lived in every single cell of my body, weighing down my arms, slowing my legs and clouding my brain with a dark fog. It felt like no matter the treatment, my illness couldn't be eliminated without eliminating me.



Side note

I think we underestimate the impact that mental health challenges have on a person's sense of identity and worth, specifically due to self-care challenges, like washing or dressing. It's amazing what a difference an 'everything shower' can make, but it's often not doable when you're really struggling. In my case, lounging around in pjs for days without showering, with oily hair, ultimately pulled me further away from who I was.

To the nurses I was a "frequent flyer", to services, a "complex case" and to myself I was just an illness in an empty shell of someone who once had vibrance, hobbies and passions – the depersonalisation was REAL.

In the midst of it all, my psychologist suggested that I join a local youth council to share my perspectives. I didn't realise it at the time, but this was like *finding the key to my journey of self-discovery*. Slowly I started pursuing an interest in mental health advocacy. As I started sharing my thoughts on advisory boards and councils, I began to realise that

maybe my experiences meant that I could help others to have better experiences.

I don't like the phrase "it all happens for a reason" but I do believe that the opportunities and jobs I have today would not have arose if it wasn't for the difficulties I experienced.

So, how did I strengthen my identity you ask?



A big part of my recovery journey was about **making a life worth living**, which helped build my sense of self. This involved doing a lot of values work, **trying hobbies** to see what I enjoyed, pursuing **jobs that made me feel like I was making a difference**, wearing fun clothes that I liked rather than what was "cool", **experimenting dying my hair** and continuously working on not being influenced by others' opinions.



While I still sometimes struggle with feeling like my illness is still a big part of me or that I miss the sick me (**check out my friend Tara's blog post about 'Struggling with wanting to be well' HERE**). I have things that I can do to ground me and live a life aligned with my values...

take my dog on a walk and soak up the fresh air

buy a favourite food



do a mindfulness exercise



Pick a value of mine at random and choose one small related task (eg. environmental sustainability -> pick up 5 pieces of rubbish outside)



So, while I might not be the most confident person on the planet (**yet**), I have a strong sense of who I am, what I'm **passionate** about, what things bring me **joy**, I work in jobs that feel **purposeful**, and I surround myself with **authentic** people who accept me exactly as I am.

All the best, Zoe xx