



DISTRESS IS NOT ILLNESS



by Carolyn Spring

I'm not comfortable with the term 'mental illness'.

I know there's a lot of rhetoric around 'parity of esteem' for physical illness and mental illness, and that's why the term has been pushed to the fore. But for me, mental illness and being traumatised are two different things. One is a malfunction, a disease - something that has gone wrong in the brain, such as dementia. The other is the way that our brilliant brains have adapted to something that has *gone wrong in our environment*.

If I hadn't been abused in the first place, I wouldn't have developed a dissociative disorder. Simple. There has never been anything wrong with my brain.

And yet I am full of paradox, because I don't mind the term 'disorder'. When I look at how life was for me after my breakdown, my life was very much disordered, and

I wanted it to click back into straight boxes. It was unbearable to live like that. Suffering drizzled out of me day and night.

But I wasn't ill. I was just *distressed*.

It's a strange thing that as a society we pathologise sadness and hurt and fear. On the one hand, *yeah*. Because when life is disordered, let's not pretend that we were meant to live like this - terrified of eating, terrified of trees, of dogs, of people, of new places, of anything and everything that ever resembled our original trauma. That gut-gripping terror is not how life is supposed to be.

But on the other hand, do we tell people they're *mentally ill* so that we can euphemise their pain? This isn't someone - we say - who's distressed because she's lost her family, her children, her very *life*. This is someone who's 'mentally ill'. Puts the emphasis on something being wrong



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with *her*, doesn't it? And takes the pressure off *us* to be compassionate – to sit with her in her suffering, to mourn with her, grieve with her, protect her, sustain her.

People talking about mental health is a great thing, because everyone has mental health, and we shouldn't be surprised when we have big emotions when big things happen to us.

It doesn't worry me when someone responds to the death of their child with vehement emotions – when they can't stop crying, or they're too numb to cry, when they can't sleep or eat, or they can't stop sleeping or eating. It's normal that our natural, bodily and mental mechanisms go awry after such an enormous event. Of course they should. It's our grief speaking.

It's more worrying when we think that they should 'act normal' and contain our emotions into a narrow tube of socially acceptable behaviour. If we love deeply, we will hurt deeply. Our feelings spray out of us like watercolours depicting our experience. Of course we feel feelings when we are hurt: big feelings, overwhelming feelings, feelings that we never knew we had, feelings that we don't even know are feelings and transmute into somatic symptoms. Feelings are meant to be felt. Let's not call them mental illness.

Being distressed by distressing events is normal. Being traumatised by trauma is normal. Calling someone ill when they're being normal isn't normal. Surely? •

