

## Humans of Medicine



I have just turned 60 and have been a medical student then doctor for more than two thirds of my life. Being a doctor defines me but doesn't rule me. I have been happy and fulfilled in my profession and would choose this life again.

When I was in my late twenties working as a GP my niece and sister in law both died unexpectedly in unrelated tragedies. We are a close family and these events rocked my young adult world. Life went on and slowly I noticed that I was feeling anxious and having panic attacks related to the fear of unexpected death; choking, anaphylaxis etc and this made being a doctor quite difficult. I pushed through and used strategies to try and deal with this increasingly disabling anxiety disorder.

Finally, someone close to me, asked if I was okay and this made me realise, I wasn't, and I sought help. The trouble with mental health problems is they can creep up on you and you don't realise they are taking over your life until you are exhausted from just trying to stay well and functional. I never had thought about my own mental health prior to this time but in retrospect those OCD traits that helped me be a productive hard working student then doctor, those irritable bowel symptoms I had prior exams, that fear I had when I was a child of "the deep" should have been a warning that I might be vulnerable.

When I sought help, it was early in the days of SSRI therapy and so the focus was on graded exposure to my fears. This worked for a short time, but it was only when I was prescribed an SSRI that I got my life back, I had forgotten what it felt like to feel normal.

To vaccinate a patient and not be terrified that they would have an anaphylaxis, to feed my toddler and not be praying they didn't choke, all reasonable fears but my anxiety around them was out of control.

Since those days in my late twenties, early thirties I have worked hard on staying well. I seek help if I feel my anxiety controlling me, I work hard but also play hard and when our children were older we bought a small piece of land in the country where we escape the craziness of life, disconnect from technology and just enjoy the earth, the stars and the stillness. I believe this has kept me practicing as an engaged, caring doctor having a place where I can go to be quiet and reflect.