



# On the record

Looking at ordinary people's tales of living with their mental illness



## Michelle Baharier

**Age:** 46 **Title:** Chief executive, CoolTan Arts **From:** London  
**Status:** Has a partner

### When did you become ill?

The problems started when I was 14. At the same time as I was diagnosed with depression my father was dying from brain cancer, so I am not surprised I appeared melancholy. I had difficulty identifying with the label 'depression' and accepting that – given my circumstances at the time – what I was feeling was abnormal rather than normal grief.

### Were you given a diagnosis and any treatment?

I was put on a heavy dose of diazepam (Valium). I gained a lot of weight and, as a teenager, that was really difficult to deal with. I was also told I had somatisation – presenting symptoms of illnesses I didn't have. This has led to terrible problems accessing proper healthcare for physical health problems throughout my life. For example I had a growth in my throat that wasn't properly investigated for two and a half years.

### How did you feel when you were ill?

Seeing a psychiatrist as a teenager in the 1970s was difficult. There was a lot of stigma around mental health and I experienced a lot of bullying. It was a hard time and I felt suicidal – it was not a nice place to be. Luckily I have never been in hospital. I went to art college and used art to explore my feelings. I was setting fire to things, exploding eggs and making talking blankets – things which because they were 'art' weren't considered 'crazy'.

### How has having a mental illness changed your life?

I would say it has shaped my life. The labels I have been given have followed me throughout my life, and shaped the way I have been seen and perceived by professionals.

### Were you able to work throughout your depression?

I was employed as a play worker running centres for children. I was having a really hard time suffering from panic attacks and then I was medically retired when I was 28. I was homeless and living in squats at the time and I think that when people's surroundings are uncertain, the fears and anxieties escalate and get out of control.

### Was there a treatment that worked for you?

I went to see a private psychiatrist who was great and I had Gestalt therapy, which was not available on the NHS. For me, this has been the most enlightening thing I have done.

### Tell me about setting up CoolTan Arts

I got involved with a group of people who met in an old suntan lotion factory. I made art with them and exhibited my work. My friends suggested I got involved after I had been retired. I had been referred to a day centre that was an awful mix of an old people's home and a youth club where all we did was sit around, smoke, drink tea and play pool. It made me more anxious and depressed, and I hated the whole atmosphere and the environment. I felt like a failure – I just wanted to curl up and die and thought my whole life was pointless. Getting back into my art was great for my self-esteem.

There was a group of us during the day and we started to run workshops, tai chi classes and photography sessions. We started

to realise our mental health was improving. We felt better and wanted to continue using art as a positive healing force.

We decided we wanted to set up a charity and help others as well as get ourselves back into working. It took us a year to set up and another three years before I was a paid employee, but we persevered.

### Have you found it difficult to access sustainable funding?

The primary care trust says it is too busy to come and visit us. It wants to save money but won't come and talk to us about crisis prevention. I really feel that projects such as CoolTan keep people out of hospital.

We have about 25 sources of small funding, but it is a struggle. We are overrun with people wanting to come here, yet we are still in a warehouse coping with a Portaloo.

We don't want people with mental health problems to be car-parked in horrible, out-of-date day centres and be treated as children. We want to see empowering, creative centres where people can grow and achieve.

At CoolTan we have a public facing programme with an art gallery and events such as our monthly walk and fashion shows. This means people stop being patients and start being people who are valued by their friends, family and society as artists.

### Do you have a message for professionals?

I think there needs to be a more holistic approach to mental health and a wider definition of what healing can encompass. When I was told I had depression there was an automatic assumption that I needed medication rather than being given a choice in my treatment. I think the medical approach can be extremely isolated in its thinking.

To find out more about CoolTan's work, visit [www.cooltanarts.org.uk](http://www.cooltanarts.org.uk)

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