

Natasha founded and created *Free Your Mind* in 2013. Natasha brings: 10 years of experience in marketing and communications; an Honours Degree in Media, Communication & Culture; her ongoing training in Mindfulness and her personal experience of mental illness and recovery – along with her infectious passion for healing. She is First Aid and Mental Health First Aid trained (Youth and Adult) by Mental Health First Aid England. Natasha has also recently been appointed to 2 committees – one for Rethink and the other overseeing mental health provision in Waltham Forest – and has just been elected Council Governor for North East London's NHS Foundation Trust and a few other advisory groups. In 2013 Natasha was nominated for an *Inspirational Woman of The Year Award* by national newspaper *The Daily Mail* and in 2014 was *nominated for 3 other awards: Motivational and inspirational business woman of the year by EBR, a National Diversity award, A back to black at Bafta award, a Beffta Award and recently won a social entrepreneurship Award by Unltd and finished 2014 with a certificate of recognition at the London Leadership and Peace Awards and recently was awarded a Star Award at the Lift effects Extraordinary lady speaks conference.*

In September 2014, Natasha published a book on Mental Illness called *Free Your Mind – The Anthology*. The idea came when she realised how healing it was for her to write and share her story. 'I wanted to help others speak out and share their experience and voice so I did a call for submissions online and was overwhelmed by the response. The book is now out on Amazon and the aim is to Encourage, Educate and Empower everyone about the realities of living and recovering from a Mental Illness.

'My mental health problems stemmed from childhood. As a child, I witnessed the most horrendous violence against my mother, as well as suffering myself, until we escaped from the perpetrator one day with just the clothes on our back. The many and regular episodes of violence, threats and intimidation, had a traumatic effect on my psychological development.

'Feeling both guilty and innocent tore me apart – guilty because I thought I could or should have done something to stop it, although I did try many times fighting him off my mom; but then also innocent because none of the abuse done was . Trying to make sense of these issues when you're young, especially when you feel you have nobody to turn to or confide in, is horrible. I turned to food for comfort and soon became overweight, ballooning to 14 stone at 11 years of age, my largest being a size 20, and I was bullied at school. I yearned to be liked so badly.

'Like many people with mental health issues, I didn't let on to anyone what was going on inside my head for many years. I suffered from what I now know as post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and panic attacks. It was like I had a cloud over my head all the time, which would sometimes get thicker and darker to the point where I would shut myself away from the world to cope. I was paranoid about whom to trust, so insecure that old friends teased and called me the 'Pied Piper' as I attracted all kinds of people who would hurt me when I thought we were friends. I always thought I was an over-thinker, a bit paranoid and odd, but everyone had their issues and this was how life was, so I never really questioned it but deep down I knew something wasn't right.

'It affected everything from relationships, with friends and boyfriends, to the many short-lived jobs I had. I was bullied and harassed by one manager, belittled by another who caused me to have a breakdown. I spent many months unemployed because I couldn't face the prospect of putting my trust in another boss. During this time, I was then diagnosed with SLE lupus which caused me to be constantly unwell. The worst part of it all was that I started losing my hair, which took me further into the depths of despair. On a night out in 2010, my drink was spiked, which left me lifeless and an ambulance was called. A friend thought I was dead because there was no sign of life from me. Instead of receiving any understanding, I was left embarrassed, ashamed and shut out by friends and a family member for it happening; again, everything my fault. I was so embarrassed and angry at myself, it just added to the drama fuelled situation that my life had become and I shut myself off from everything for a while.

'I regularly thought about suicide and once started looking up 'painless ways to die' on the internet, but stopped when I came across a website encouraging me to change my life instead. Around two years ago, I decided to seek help. I'd been sitting in my mum's spare room, staring into space for days on end with no job

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or idea of where my life was going; I had hit a wall. I saw a woman on TV describe her depression and panic attacks, and realised what I had been this experiencing all this time. A friend encouraged me to see my GP, which I did. I told him everything and was immediately put on antidepressants and booked to see a cognitive behavioural therapist.

The Turning point: Free Your Mind

'A friend angrily contacted me why I hadn't been in touch,(my health in general was a mess, I'd lost weight, and my blood pressure had become dangerously high). I'd had a panic attack that very same day that was when I decided to WRITE out my feelings in a blog, knowing I wanted her to hear what I was going through. The next day I emailed it to all of my friends and family, hoping they would read it and finally understand.

'I was completely overwhelmed by the support received, messages telling me how brave I was, how well I'd hidden so much. A friend cried reading it because she really had no idea things had been that bad. It turned into a regular blog 'Free Your Mind - Pain to Peace', which gave me a different perspective, looking at life 'inside out'. I was never a good talker, but found that writing really helped and felt comfortable.

'In February 2013, I met an inspirational counsellor called Ursula James at a talk who told me that my blog was the perfect therapy. She gave me confidence to focus on my writing to get better and also help others. As time went on, the blog received more and more followers, some of whom commented that writing was something that they were curious about using to try to express their feelings, but didn't know where to start. I then went on to make a Facebook page including a closed group to support people experiencing mental health problems linked to domestic violence, encouraging them to start to write creatively.

'In the space of just 12 months, I've attracted over 30,000 followers to my blog social media sites. I went from contemplating suicide to creating a supportive organisation that now helps people rebuild their sense of self, through the medium of writing their own story via our website or on their own, and educating others about mental health in creative ways. By looking at the milestones in your life, you can start to look at those feelings and situations from an outside perspective like you would when advising a friend. This is how we can help others to learn about and discover themselves. It's a lonely process and in a way it should be, because your interpretation of your life should be just that - yours.

'We also facilitate school workshops and run a local support group for people experiencing similar problems, in conjunction with Rethink Mental Illness. We have gained amazing support from the public and the press. The best reward is when I receive testimonials that my work has saved people's lives when they've been a dark place.

'I believe that those who have dealt with a mental illness, know and have seen life in ways so many others won't, they know a pain and perspective so many never will. You could say that those people have had a lucky escape, but we are the lucky ones. WE have faced incredible, tragedy, pain, confusion hurt and sadness and we are still here, still going, still trying, still breathing.'

Natasha K Benjamin – [Free Your Mind CIC](#)

Book: [Free Your Mind – The Anthology](#) by Natasha K Benjamin

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