

#1 Stories of stress and coping



A few of the people we spoke to talked about experiencing high levels of stress in their lives, through school, work or due to their personal circumstances. The sense of feeling under pressure, and of that pressure not being understood by key people around them – family, friends and teachers – was palpable in some of the stories we heard. Some of the young people we spoke to explained that they had felt pressure to take subjects at school that they did not enjoy, or that they were pushed to take exams or study at university before they felt ready. Others were attempting to manage multiple stressful situations at the same time.

The story of one young woman characterises the kind of journey some of our younger storytellers had been through. Throughout her early life this storyteller had a difficult home situation. Her mother was at times unwell with a mental health problem and, consequently, she lived with her grandmother from an early age.

Her mother did not always respond well to this situation, which led to a complicated situation at home and with local authorities.

[Storyteller's mother] was calling the police and making accusations about me being locked up in the house by my nan and granddad and she would [say I was locked in] the basement sometimes. Obviously the police would come by and I would get annoyed by police now whenever I see them because they were like, "Are you alright? We have just got to check. We are just doing a job."

At the end of the day, from however many years ago from then to now, I have tried to contact the police [from the local area] just to say, "If my mum calls or makes allegations saying that I am missing..." She used to say I am missing as well. I said, "Don't take it on. Try and block it if you can. Put a note on your system to say call me." I wanted them to check. [Storyteller 2]

Throughout her narrative she describes a complicated family situation, involving a history of mental health difficulties on both sides of the family. At times, we felt a sense of her feeling quite alone both within her family and at school, and of needing to take responsibility for herself at a young age.

In her early school years our storyteller spoke about feeling clever and doing well. She felt supported in her school environment and did well on assignments and in exams. This situation began to deteriorate as she approached her GCSE and A-level exams, and this sense of being left alone to cope with difficult things was again present in her story.

In primary school, my teachers knew that I was a young carer, so they looked out for me. In secondary school, my teachers knew that I was smart, so they pushed me. In sixth form, they didn't give a shit – sorry for the language, but they really didn't.

Around this time she also found herself distracted by pursuing relationships with men, which she describes as contributing to a loss of interest in her education.

[...] All of those hormones really made me focus on men and I wasn't really thinking about my education. Because I was naturally smart, I just thought I would ace the maths and I did ace the maths. I didn't even do any revision and I still got an A. I thought I would be able to do that in all of my subjects, me being big-headed. Plus, I had just won Student of the Year for Key Stage 3. [...] I wanted to put that in. That is

an achievement. [...] Yes. I decided to do it again thinking I could get A and then get A in every other subject. I was predicted at least three As, apart from maths. [...] Yes. I got a B in my physics. I got a B in all of my exams but I got an E in my coursework and at the time, when I was doing my physics coursework I was in a relationship and he was very controlling.*

She felt support was not provided to her through the later stages of her education, potentially due to a lack of understanding on the part of her teachers. This had an impact on her ability to succeed in the subjects she was studying.

...my teachers weren't really helpful – they didn't really understand or, maybe because I wasn't diagnosed or had a learning disability, or learning difficulty should I say, sorry, they didn't see anything. They thought "you know, this girl got twelve/eleven A-C grades; she is capable of doing A-levels, we don't need to help her, let her do the work". So, that is what I'm thinking, so that must be what they're thinking as well. At the end, when I finished the first year of sixth form, I didn't – because I failed the whole year, I thought "no, I have put all my time, all my effort into it. I don't bunk". I started bunking near the end, because I was just like, "no, they're not helpful and it's like no-one understands".

So, because no-one understood what I was going through, I didn't even understand what I was going through, so I didn't have any help like that, so I guess I definitely developed the psychosis, and they diagnosed me with anxiety and severe depression as well.

Our storyteller described how cannabis had been present in her life from a very early age, which may have resulted in drugs feeling like a familiar coping strategy to reach for. She had this in common with a number of storytellers who spoke of using drugs as a way to manage or escape from stress.

She pinpointed a particular moment when she felt that stress resulted in her turning to “weed”:

I tried to do maths at A-level and my sixth form didn't help me. [...] I just wanted to do science and maths and that would have equated to three or four A-levels but they said I had to do Health and Social Care as well which was a BTEC so that is like an extra two A-levels. That would have been me doing six A-levels and everyone else was doing four. They wouldn't allow me to just do the three. [...] I didn't really understand Health and Social Care and I [wasn't] interested. I should have moved school but I liked the head teacher of the sixth form, who was my ex-sociology teacher and I got on with her. Most of my friends were staying there as well and I hadn't been to a lot of schools. I was a bit timid and shy as well and wasn't ready to meet new friends yet. I was just a bit in my own world really. [...] Yes. I think that's where it got stressful. I was getting really agitated. I started smoking weed when I started Health and Social Care.

Like several other storytellers who had used recreational drugs, or who had cared for someone who did, this storyteller explained how her experiences of using drugs had happened around the same time as she felt her mental health was deteriorating and she received a diagnosis of psychosis.

So, yes, I thought I was going mad, but I didn't think it was anything to be brought up about, so I kept it to myself. Obviously, my friends saw because they had me on the Messenger, but I started smoking, after that, when I left school, after my GCSEs, and I lost my concentration in my work, in everything, really, and I guess it was just like a big decrease. Rather than me being elevated and being like, “yeah, I'm studying A-levels now, I'm doing this, I'm doing that”, it was just like neutral, and I felt like I was still in school, just having to do what I have to do, but I didn't really think “this is

PERSPECTIVES ON STRESS AND PRESSURE

Gary

“ I could identify with the experiences of stress and pressure our storytellers talked with us about. Leaving a job which offered little hope for the future gave me hours of unstructured time and I was struggling to survive on benefits. I couldn't afford to feed myself properly and lost a lot of weight. It was around this time that my voices became more frequent. ”

Dolly

“ I can personally relate to the school pressure scenario. I started to hear voices at 14 when both my school and my home life were difficult. The school did not know how to handle it, which added to the pressure, saying things like ‘pull your socks up’ and ‘you are not concentrating hard enough’. You don't get a complimentary pair of socks when you enter the mental health system. ”

another big step, I need to focus on it". I just took it for granted, and I think that is – the smoking as well; the smoking makes me lazy. [...] Yes, so I started smoking weed between when the GCSEs finished and my A-levels started, and I think that whole gap was where it kind of escalated, the whole poor mental health – that got poorer.

She explained to us that she had been unaware of the connection between cannabis and psychosis and that she needed more support to understand the link than was on offer.

I think that, if I knew that it was the weed that made me into that state, in the first place, I wouldn't have picked it up. If I had someone telling me, assuring me, "don't smoke the weed; it's not good for you, it's bad for you, that's why you had this episode, it will do it again", but I got – someone said 'psychosis' and I got a print-out, that had some symptoms on it. At the time, my concentration was very, very, very poor.

Immediately after her diagnosis she was cared for at home by her grandmother, and the home treatment team. She had a relatively good experience with the home treatment team, who helped her adjust her medication.

The home treatment team came to do a referred review and they asked me how I was feeling. They always ask that. The first time they came I said, "I am not feeling well." I felt so much better because I was actually able to talk without stuttering. I said I was having hallucinations and didn't know what was going on and they said maybe it was the medication. They changed the medication and it got better. The hallucinations stopped and I am on the same medication now. It's quite good.

However, during this time she was encouraged to move out of her home to live independently. The process through which this happened remains unclear to her and has left her with feelings of rejection.

I had my own room and stuff, so it wasn't like I was in the front room or – I was living there for twelve years, maybe, then my Nan asked me if I wanted to leave and I didn't know what I said, but I must have said yes, because she – I don't know, whatever happened, my care-coordinator was telling me that if I wanted to go to the housing, or something – something happened, I don't know, but, anyway, I went in housing and they put me in emergency accommodation and, reflecting on it – not thinking, at the time, but reflecting on it, I thought that my family didn't want me, but I've talked to them and stuff and that's not the case, but the fact that they asked me to leave, I thought "what's wrong with me? Am I turning into my mum?", because my mum has severe mental difficulties; she is severely mentally challenged, and I think that's where I get it from, from that gene or that inheritance of DNA or whatever.

There was also a sense of further 'aloneness' and isolation in her narrative as she talked about her new housing situation, which felt unfriendly, and at times unsafe.

I have just been looking after myself. I have got other problems, like rent arrears and my neighbours chatting, saying that I'm – complaining about me, but they are false allegations. So, they are all males, in my block, in my flat, and two of them have – one said that – there are three people, A, B and C, and I'm C – so, A, B, D, should I say.

A said that B likes me, then A said that A likes me, and then D had his friend over that tried to do something to me, and I told the police about it – a bit late though. I only told them this year and it happened like a year and a half ago, but I didn't think anything of it. So, now that I have told my housing officer and she started getting on to me about people saying that they're complaining, or whatever, it's like everyone is trying to make up stuff against me now. So, some underneath me are saying that I'm stamping on the floor every night and banging and I broke his ceiling light, by stamping on the floor, so I don't understand how that is possible.

This situation was compounded by a breach of confidentiality by her housing officer, who disclosed something that she had told them to one of her neighbours. This disclosure had negative consequences for her relationship with that person. She also described difficulty in securing further support, which may have been partly due to a lack of understanding on the part of the housing authorities of the impact of her mental health on her.

My Nan came with me to see my care-coordinator, to book an appointment. My Nan told my care-coordinator what was happening, and that breach of confidentiality and stuff, so she – I don't remember, now. [...] She said she was going to make an appointment and then she was going to call my Nan. She still hasn't called my Nan, and we're supposed to go – I want to book an appointment, so that she can come and we can go to book a housing appointment, so they can talk, because they are supposed to know that I am under mental health and stuff, the housing, but they don't take that into

consideration, because if they knew I had psychosis, they would understand that I might do things that – like hallucinate or shout, at one point, and not realise that I'm shouting, or just, if I'm depressed, I'll start screaming – not screaming, but shouting or crying loudly, or whatever. It's just that I'm trying to calm myself down, you know? So, it's not anyone killing me in the property, it's just me, by myself, but then again, I know that I have to take neighbours into consideration, and stuff, but all the things that I'm being accused of, it's not even me that's doing it, it's the other neighbours.

Under these stressful housing conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that at the time of the interview, the storyteller was still smoking cannabis, despite wanting to stop.

Yeah, because it's like – not like you're taking oxygen, but like you're meditating, kind of, when you smoke, like you're taking deep breaths and you can see it coming out and it's like – I think that is what got me hooked onto smoking, as well, was me feeling it going in and out of my lungs and thinking "this is a nice feeling". Not nice effects, long-term effects, but it's a nice feeling, at the time. I don't know. Yeah, so I should be recovered soon, hopefully.

This storyteller described to us her determination to stop smoking and move on. She said that she had taken an active role in researching services that might support her. This suggests a resourcefulness that she shares with many of the storytellers we spoke to. When we met here, she was about to start with a new service that supports people to stop taking drugs.

Yes, so there is a group on Wednesdays. I'm going to go tomorrow. I signed up last week, when I had my assessment, and I passed it because I had high THC levels and, yes, that was the only thing present, which should have been the right thing. Yes, I'm going to go tomorrow and see what they say, because it's like a support group and stuff, where they talk and stuff, so I thought, "yeah, why not", I might go there and let out some feelings. That's what they're for, you know? [...]

I was googling and I was looking for – because, recently, I've been looking for detox clinic and things like that, because I really want to stop the smoking, but I go to my GP and they're not really very helpful. So, I don't know, I called the – I self-referred myself, came in for an assessment and they gave me a leaflet with a timetable of all the groups, for the whole week, and the woman circled the cannabis stuff and they have yoga, as well. So, yes, that was like self-referral and I'm going to go there tomorrow and see how it goes.

Despite all the challenges this storyteller was facing at the time of the interview, she remained positive and had clear plans for the future, even if it was still a struggle to remain motivated at times.

Yes, so I'm starting college again in September. [...] Doing ICT, or IT. Yes, that's like a foundation year, so I'm going to do that and then go to university, but university is where I want to be and what I want to do, specialising in cyber security, mobile forensics, digital forensics, because I've actually got a forensic science level three, but just half of it, but it's still classed as a pass-pass. Yes, it's the

equivalent to one and half A-levels, that's it. So, I want to use that because I know that it's not a waste of my life, so use that forensics, go into IT and make my dream and lots of money. [...] I think that's why I'm depressed, because money doesn't solve all problems, but it solves many problems and I know that there are so many problems that affect me directly and indirectly, that could be solved with money.

So, I'm just trying to say that I have this mindset, where I think, "if I'm doing this, to get to here, to get to there, to be this", so that is my motivation, but it's not always motivational, because I'm just thinking "it's another day, I'm still here".

PERSPECTIVES ON CANNABIS

Gary

“ In my own experience, weed made me 'come back to life' when the medication I was taking was numbing me completely and I saw no point in living. It became a survival tactic. However, the marijuana that was available when I was a user was nowhere near as potent as the Class B skunk that is around now. Any user, for whatever reason, can always become psychologically addicted. ”

Dolly

“ My personal experience of marijuana was instant paranoia so I didn't pursue it. I had had the experience of psychosis beforehand but smoking made it immediately worse. ”