

P Patient Story

When we first meet I he is wearing a pair of skinny jeans, a check shirt and a beanie hat covering his long brown hair. He has a backpack on to which is hooked a small blue skateboard. He is instantly warm and open if not a little shy. We sit in a corner of a cafe in the centre of town and I starts to tell us about the fact that this is his favourite skateboard, one of three (that cost £80 and came from Australia). The other two are cheaper and get used when the weather is bad.

I has a wide range of interests and hobbies. Within no time we are hearing about his interest in technology and his skill with social media. He is constantly upgrading his mobile phone model and fiddling with operating systems. He likes android because it allows you to customise. He has never liked Apple products, which he sees as too mainstream. I is drawn to things that are a bit different.

He is a keen photographer, who carries a digital SLR around in his backpack ready to snap. At the moment he is trying to build his Instagram following, having been an avid and highly skilled user of social media for a long time. At one time I had 30,000 followers on his twitter feed, an extraordinary number for a boy who at the time was 15 years old, and primarily tweeted about his everyday experiences.

It was through social media that I met his girlfriend, P, who he has been with for 3 years, and lives in Leeds. She responded to one of his tweets and they got chatting before eventually deciding to talk over Skype, and then meet in person.

They started meeting in Halifax, a middle ground between Rochdale and Leeds. Now, every weekend P comes to Rochdale to stay with I and his family. This time is clearly hugely important to him. She will come over on a Friday night and “chill” for most of the weekend. This won't involve doing anything that he wouldn't do normally, other than hanging out in his room, watching TV, going on the internet, possibly going to Manchester or visiting his nan.

I has met most of his friends through social media. He has another particularly close friend that lives in Leeds that he goes to see regularly. He describes himself as someone who enjoys his own company, and prefers not to be around other people for too long. This can be challenging in his relationship with , but she has come to sense when he wants to be on his own and gives him his own space. I has another close friend that he met through social media that also lives in a town in Yorkshire. He travels to see this friend quite frequently, but much of their relationship happens over social media

Beyond his family, the rest of I's social network comes from his work for a local youth project and charity. He works for the project every day between 11:00 and 16:00. He describes his responsibilities as 'all-sorts', anything between reorganising files to shifting boxes (the project has recently moved premises). He has also driven lots of the projects social media activity, particularly on Facebook which he describes as the platform that the largest proportion of their target audience use.

I's is a story of a sensitive and emotional young man who has refused to comply with society's expectations of men his age, and has struggled to cope with some of the challenges that have been thrown his way.

Family life

I is an 18 year old man who lives in Rochdale with his mum, P, and his dad, R. He is very close to his mum, who is incredibly warm and supportive, as well as being quite anxious. She gets worried about where he is and who he is with and calls frequently to check. He is also close to his auntie on his mum's side and her daughter, who he frequently sees when visiting his elderly grandma who has dementia. He describes his mum's family as 'chilled', 'they won't go crazy if you tell them anything'.

He is less close to his dad who he describes as a "typical man" who "doesn't do emotion". Their relationship has clearly been a source of pain for I in the past, and although he is philosophical about it now, it is clearly still something that bothers him. In the past I has described feeling like perhaps his dad didn't love him.

His dad is huge Man City fan who has a season ticket, and spends much of his free time watching football or walking the dog. He "is not a talker", and according to I is much more comfortable communicating with the dog than he is with other people. I did go with his dad to the football when he was much younger but stopped being interested.

School

Whilst he didn't give much away about his time at school, I hinted at having experienced difficult moments. At primary school I had lots of male friends, but by the time he got to high school he was predominantly friends with girls. He described being uncomfortable with the way boys in his class interacted, and hinted that he had at various points experienced some kind of bullying.

I wore a hat throughout his time with us, and it only transpired later that he had a slightly disfigured ear which also led to the impression that he might have experienced bullying at school.

A sensitive man

I has clearly always been a sensitive man. At school, he described instances in which he would leave class crying because he was really upset about something. But he also hinted at a real resilience, describing times when he would stick up for other friends or classmates who were experiencing bullying.

Throughout our time with I he seemed unsure how to relate to his own sensitivity. He was extremely good at putting a brave face on what had clearly been extremely traumatic experiences, and was reluctant to share too much. Despite his stated reluctance to accept gender norms, it felt to both observers as though he was still struggling to consolidate the strength of his emotional experience with deeply ingrained assumptions about what it was to be a man.

Difficult times

After I left high school, he started attending a local college. He didn't enjoy the college at all. This was partly because he didn't enjoy the work, but also because (in his language) he didn't 'connect' with the people. Again it felt like he probably experienced bullying, but he didn't open up about this directly.

After a few months he dropped out. This was a particularly difficult time for I. Very quickly he started to feel like his family and friends were judging him for not being in education or having a job. In some instances this was true, and some would actively get angry at him for not pulling his weight. It was made worse by the fact that P's parents (who were quite religious and traditional) refused to let I come and stay at their house in Leeds until he got a job. He described this as a real blow to his self confidence. "If they think it is easy to get a job why can't I get one?"

I described having applied for over 60 jobs during this time, with no luck and very little feedback. He received some support from a local charity to work on his CV but had very little support in terms of setting any kind of direction for his life. Over time he felt increasingly desperate and isolated, utterly lacking in purpose.

Help seeking

I didn't know what to do with this emotion. He felt like he was letting down his family and friends. He didn't want to upset his mum, or make her angry, until one day he saw that she had responded to a post on facebook with an incredibly warm, caring message to someone who was feeling low, and realised that she would probably be react in the same way with him. Her display of empathy and resilience had opened him up to communication.

As soon as I told his mum about how he had been feeling, she took him straight to the GP who referred him on to CAMHS, where he was given a worker, and spent six months attending various forms of counselling. Before he plucked up the courage to open up to his mum, I had sought support on social media, researching and communicating with others. At the same time, he was explicit that he much preferred getting help from people face to face, rather than over the phone or computer.

Self help

I described this year of his life as one that stood out to him, because it felt like he was someone else. Throughout this time, and ever since, I has demonstrated a real determination to help himself. He has listened to the advice his various CAMHS workers have given him, taken up exercise (occasional running) and has become involved in voluntary activity (which eventually led to a job).

He persuaded his mum to get him a guinea pig (he now has 22 - he spends most of Sunday afternoon cleaning out their hutch and has considered starting to breed them) to give him something to focus on at home. This commitment to helping himself also manifests in his desire to obtain a diagnosis from CAMHS.

I repeatedly stressed how frustrated he was that his CAMHS worker hadn't been open with him about whether or not he had a diagnosis. He stressed that if he knew his diagnosis he would know what he needed to do about it, something that other young people he had come across also described as being important to them - "Do I have a diagnosis or am I just being

a stupid teenager?” This also seemed to reflect his lack of comfort with his own emotional self. It seemed easier for him to sit with a diagnosis than with the possibility that he is a very emotional person.

In more recent times, after what he described as a set back in which he again started feeling very low and ‘did something stupid to my arm’, he again took things into his own hands and went to the GP before telling his mum. He was clear that he wanted his mum to know that he could handle anything that is thrown at him so she doesn’t worry.

Service experience

I described having a really positive relationship with his second CAMHS worker who was compassionate whilst being calm, and showed a genuine interest in his life and how was feeling. He also continues to be extremely close to another professional locally who again has taken the time to dig deeper into how he was feeling. He contrasts these experiences with others in which people didn’t really seem to be interested in him or how he was feeling, “you can see it in their face”. To I, it felt like some people were with him because it was their job. They didn’t really care about him or where he was, and would just do what they were there to do.

In one particular instance, after I had gone to a local GP to talk about his setback, he was greeted with, “you’ve done what? Why have you done that?”, followed by the GP quickly leaving the room to get help. This is an isolated example, but one that represents the kinds of interactions Isaac values, and those he doesn’t.

Now and the future

Ever since I first came to be involved in CAMHS, he has been getting involved with user groups. It was through these user groups that he came across the project that he currently works for. I has become a champion of local mental health provision. He is passionate about making the experience of other young people in the Borough better, and continues to benefit from being given a chance to exercise this passion. He really enjoys his job.

At the same time, it still felt like I was slightly lost. He didn’t seem to have a sense of where he was going with his life or what he wanted to achieve, not that this is in any way unusual for young people his age, but it did seem to be causing him ongoing anxiety. It is also grounded in a reality about I’s life that is difficult to come to terms with, both for him and those that support him. His prospects are not necessarily that great. He doesn’t have many qualifications, has little meaningful experience, and shows little interest in getting back into education.

At the same time he is funny, charming, highly capable and interested in the outside world. His achievements on social media alone would be enough to create opportunities elsewhere in the country. But there are few opportunities locally for people like I. This is a difficult reality and one that he seemed to be aware of, even though he was also determined not to let it hold him back.

Conclusion

I is a young person fundamentally lacking in self-esteem but with huge amounts of potential. Above all he is a sensitive young man who has struggled to cope in what has proved to be a

harsh world (both in relation to his experiences at school and in the job market). I has never quite come to terms with how he experiences the world, but continues to demonstrate real resilience and grit.