

## Uncovering Dodie

She shares her  
struggles with  
mental illness  
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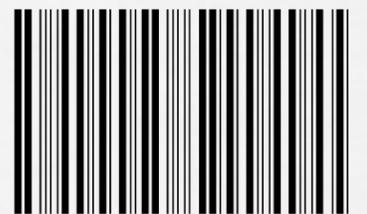
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PC: @doddleoddle



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Will I ever stop  
feeling as though  
I'm living in a  
dream?



By sharing her music on YouTube, singer-songwriter Dodie Clark connects with more than a million subscribers – yet she struggles every day with a disorder that makes her feel as though she can't engage with the real world. By: Dodie Clark

If I had to describe my brain before I started experiencing darkness, I would say it was deep-thinking, excited, but most of all it was busy. If you were to dive into my brain at seven years old, you'd find vivid fantasies, colossal complex worlds of made-up characters and storylines, where in each one I was, of course, the star. Then several things happened: my granny passed away and I experienced grief for the first time in my life. I watched my mum shrink and fall into depression. I started to love a boy, went on hormone-altering contraception and realised too late that he liked to shout at me.

At 18 I was a shell of a normal girl. There was just one overriding emotion: a vacuous, overwhelming feeling of despair. After a few months of empty smiles and dark headaches I asked my mum to book me an appointment with the doctor.

'What can I help you with today?' A rosy-faced woman beamed at me. I pulled out my phone and shakily read her the paragraph I'd typed up in the waiting room, on how I would run home as quickly as possible so I could shut down and not have to think any more. How I'd wake at 3am nauseous from the nightmares that felt like black holes inside my being. I skipped over the scars on my thighs from the nights I dragged the edge of scissors along my skin, relishing the distraction of surface-level pain, the closest I'd come to feeling anything at all in ages. She looked down with a slight smile while I mumbled through. 'Are you studying, Dodie?' I plastered on a polite smile and told her about my move to Bath as a student and the future I hoped for when my brain was working again. 'I don't think you're depressed. It's very dangerous to give someone so young a label like that. You're doing so many activities, making new friends – it's certainly more than I did at your age!' I felt the back of my neck get hot and tears welling. I wanted to shout, 'What's the point when I don't really experience or enjoy any of it?' But I nodded instead and stretched my smile, whispering a thank you and grabbing my coat to walk out before I started crying. I wasn't going to be listened to or believed. It took me three years to build up the courage to go back to the doctor to talk about my mental health.

*"What's the point when I don't really experience or enjoy any of it?"*

For some reason I couldn't get the help I really needed. The medical numbers I called asked me if I was signed up to a GP – which I wasn't – and then told me if it was an emergency and I was suicidal I should hang up and call 999. I didn't want to die; I very much wanted to live. But I was in a weird limbo: technically 'alive' but not getting anything from existing but pain. I knew that if that was all life was going to be from now on

I couldn't go on. Nevertheless I kept trying to find ways to get better. I found a ketchup-stained gas bill from the beginning of the year, proof of address, which I could use to register with the local GP. 'Hello, I'd like to sign up to this practice please.' The receptionist grabbed two pieces of paper from a drawer. 'You'll need to fill these in and bring them back with a proof of address and ID.' 'Thanks. I couldn't find a recent bill. Will this one be all right?' She unfolded the crumpled paper. 'This is from January' – as if I didn't know. 'You'll need to bring one from the past three months.' She looked behind me at the next person. I stepped away, my throat closing, and bolted out of the door before I started sobbing in front of everyone. I sat alone in my flat, wondering if there was a way to detach my brain from my body so that I could go for a walk and get a break from the spiralling. I knew that I was sinking deeper and deeper but I stayed in the same spot for hours, filling the room with loud, ugly crying. I cancelled all my plans for the next few days and went home to Epping, Essex, to my childhood bedroom, still clinging to the idea that familiarity would help.

My mum did her best to look after me, layering me in blankets and making me cup after cup of tea. She placed her hands on my body and tried to will away the pain, like she used to do in my childhood days of stomach migraines; except I wasn't a little girl with a poor tummy, I was a woman in her 20s who had completely forgotten who she was and how to exist with black holes in her head. I can't remember the order of the ways that I found myself again but there were distinct pillars that grounded me and gave me enough hope to claw my way back. Talking to old friends helped. They fed ropes down the hole I'd been digging and even if they couldn't pull me up, they at least reminded me that there was a world beyond this.

I started to write in a notebook: little but important things. I ran through moments in my head that would spark any sort of joy in my heart and jotted them down, numbering them so that I could count them up as a collection. On the surface they looked superficial, but each of these things was a reminder of who I was, what made me happy and a reason to live. I found myself again in 'opening a window when there's been rain' and 'first kisses' and 'good books and the worlds you get lost in'. I had lived and loved in this bedroom and this world, and if I had been happy before I could be happy again. I woke up the next day feeling lighter. I made myself breakfast, showered and moisturised for the first time in days. It was like the day after food poisoning – taking life in little bites, being cautious and gentle with myself, worried I was teetering on the edge of relapsing again. But I was OK. I was just OK. I went to a picnic in the park and sat staring at my hands, wishing I could join my friends in the vivid world I seemed to have lost. We walked to the shops after the sun had set and while they babbled and skipped around each other, I hung back, staring at cars driving past and wondering if they were going fast enough to knock me down.

My friends had placed daisies on my head to make me giggle, pulling me by the hand and daring me to cartwheel on the damp

grass. The next day I went on a water slide with my mum and sister, and I raced them down a hill, tripped over my feet and landed in a heap of limbs, relishing the sounds of my family laughing all around me. The day after that I did a little bit of work, and then over the next few days I eased myself back into life. There have been times when I have crashed back into that same dark hole. But then I bring out the list of little but important things, climb into Hazel's bed for her to stroke my back and remember the lessons I have learnt since hitting rock bottom: that I have been here before and I have got up and out of it every time. I have depersonalisation disorder (DPD), a feeling of detachment from reality. It took me years of researching my symptoms to find a Wikipedia page about it and then I spent a day crying with relief that there were other people who felt as I did. It affects me in different ways at different times. The world looks flat and fake and my peripheral vision seems very dark or very light, as though I am

*"I ran through moments in my head that would spark any sort of joy in my heart... numbering them so that I could count them up as a collection."*

looking through a filter. DPD also affects my memory and in my dazed state I find it difficult to feel present in the moment. I have to ask friends about the moments we have spent together, things I said or did. I also find that it causes depressive episodes and anxiety. I found out a lot about my condition and became able to manage my depressive episodes a lot better. I healed open wounds and broken friendships and insecurities and I improved the way I dealt with being spaced out – but I was, and still am, spaced out all the time. It took me five years to get an official diagnosis after multiple appointments with patronising doctors and a lot of confusion and pain.

Since I found out about DPD and opened up about my experiences, I have had friend after friend reach out to me saying they know someone who's been feeling like they're dreaming all the time or that during conversations they find their souls up on the ceiling rather than in their own body. I don't know whether I'll ever feel 'present' again, but in the meantime, there's not a lot I can do except look after myself and share my experiences to empathise with people who are also in the 'Am-I-really-here?' club.

This is an edited extract from *Secrets for the Mad: Obsessions, Confessions and Life Lessons* by Dodie Clark, to be published by Ebury Press on Thursday, price £16.99. To order a copy for £13.59 (a 20 per cent discount) until 12 November, visit [you-book-shop.co.uk](http://you-book-shop.co.uk) or call 0844 571 0640; p&p is free on orders over £15

## Dodie's ✓ Do's and ~~✗~~ Dont's

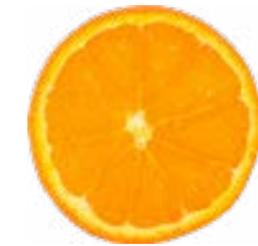


If you're feeling consumed by bad thoughts, practise laughing about it. Brains are weird and sometimes the lies they spew are so ridiculous you have to laugh

Accept that sometimes you've got to ride things out. Get support from doctors, charities, therapy and medication, and remember you will be OK. This will absolutely not last for ever – take it from someone who was 100 per cent convinced it would



Prioritise self-care and eat healthily. Your body won't work properly if you don't treat it well, so you can't expect your brain to either. You will feel there is no point in doing anything, but there will be tiny things that add up to help you feel better



Make sure you balance time spent with people with space for yourself. I feel a lot worse when I haven't had enough sleep. Mental health problems can kick in at any time but sometimes there is an obvious reason: you have to give your brain what it needs



Don't give up! There is always another pathway you can take. You are learning and growing every day. There is so much time to find new ways to help yourself