

## Mental Health battles in Indie Development

I would describe myself as a creative person, and like many creatively minded people, I have suffered with mental health problems – self-esteem, depression, social problems – I am also on the Autistic spectrum, which has plus and minus points!

I've only ever made video-games, it was my first full-time job, and I have been doing it ever since – which is about 27 years now.

When I formed by current studio, **Super Icon**, we lived in Richmond, which is a borough of London. Rental costs were crazy high, and constantly increased while we were there.

I am married and have 3 children, back then they varied from late toddler age (my youngest, Spencer) through to final year of junior school (my daughter Holly).

We had struggled for money for several years; our games didn't sell very well so we saw a lot of income spikes, long periods of little income while developing new titles, which we were self-publishing. It was very hard, and incredibly stressful, but we got by.

Things took a turn for the worse when when we got evicted for the first time for being late with rent. The landlord had insurance to cover his rental risks, and these insurers were rock hard. We were a few days late, and we got evicted. That was how those type of policies worked, risk mitigation. You then have a couple of months to find new housing, which in a place like Richmond is tough, expensive and near impossible when you are out of money.

The long and short of it was, I broke. Coming off the back of quite a few years of financial ups and downs, a personal bankruptcy and daily struggle to cover the bills, plus ongoing depression, my mind fell apart. I began self-harming, drinking, crying randomly, suicidal. I felt so guilty, letting my family down, and such a failure for getting us into this position. I also felt hurt, deeply hurt really – we had done nothing wrong, yet were treated so very badly.

Later I also discovered I had a brain tumour, a benign one, but one that caused some quite profound changes to hormone levels. Essentially, it was a tumour on the pituitary gland, and what it did was stop testosterone production. As well as the more obvious physical effects, mentally it messes you up, and extenuates the effects of depression, stress and so-on. Imagine permanent puberty type hormone flux. Not fun.

This situation continued for quite a while, with a steady deterioration of my mental health and the stability of my family. We continued to have major money problems – and the very worst of times came when we had to move again because we couldn't afford the rent.

We had a dog called Dexter, a beautiful Vizsla, and when we had to move again we couldn't find anywhere to rent we could afford that took pets. We had to re-home Dex, fortunately to a lovely new family where he gained a new sister, another Vizsla, and I know he has had a wonderful time with his new family. This was the lowest point. The day before they came to pick him up, I remember in the evening, sitting on the kitchen floor with arms pouring in blood, hugging Dexter and sobbing, knowing this was my final evening with the dog I adored.

Just the lowest point; I felt such shame and despair, god it was so bad. Constant suicidal thoughts – you convince yourself that your family would be much better off without you. The tough times never seemed to end, and then, for the third and final time got evicted again for falling behind with rent.

This time we had to make a heart-breaking decision to move away from the area, as it was just too expensive. I should add we always managed to pay up our late rent – it was the usual cashflow difficulties associated with running a studio; late payments, cancelled projects, delayed projects, etc.

It was heart-breaking because of the children – perhaps most of all for my middle child, Lucas. He has Asperger's and struggled at times with school life, but the school he was in, they were like a family to him, they were kind, supportive, understanding – they were wonderful. Lucas loved them and we had to take him away. All three of the children were doing so well in their schools, we were so proud of them. What a wrench that was – but we had no choice, so we relocated.

## Starting Again

After the move I started getting treatment for the tumour; testosterone supplements, so mentally I was starting to really pick up. It is always a battle, but despite the tough times, one I am winning more often than not now.

I also found out that early forties can be a tough age for men, it is the highest suicide demographic in men:

- <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chester-bennington-chris-cornell-suicide-men-middle-aged-a7854476.html>
- <https://www.bps.org.uk/blogs/dr-funke-baffour/male-suicide-silent-epidemic>

I look back now, and I remember how it was, how out of control and helpless I felt. There was no remorse, no support.

I tried to get help a few times, I remember being referred to an NHS mental health unit in Richmond. I went along to my appointment, but I walked in the wrong door to the complex, and after hunting around and trying to find where the hell I was supposed to go (there was no-one around) I finally found the correct place. By this time, I was ten minutes late.

The guy came out after I had sat waiting for a while, and all he did was tell me off for being late. He wouldn't see me, and wow, did he make me feel shitty. I was angry, confused – my wife picked me up and we were driving somewhere, I was breaking down – I jumped out of the car while we were driving (fortunately, only slowly) and ran through the traffic sobbing, completely melting down. I couldn't process how this person had treated me, when I was so vulnerable; it seemed like some sort of twisted, sick joke.

I see people now, glimpses of arms covered in scars, putting on brave exteriors. It makes me so very sad, as no-one seems to care. Or, maybe they do, but they don't know how best to address it.

How do you approach someone who has signs that they are hurting themselves, that they are mentally breaking? For me, in some ways it was almost a way of hurting and punishing myself for failing, for being a useless person, a lesser person. Or, because you hate the way you look, the way you speak, the sound of your voice, your body, your personality, your everything. You see other people, and they seem so much better than you; confident, smarter, successful. Everything you are not.

The funny thing is, you can walk into a room with an arm (or arms) covered in livid fresh scars, and every single person there will completely ignore it. There is a mental health stigma, for sure, I just

wish there was more of a way of reaching out and receiving help and support, without this ever-present stigma that comes with mental health.

Even now, as I write this, I am deeply embarrassed to say it out loud. I think, hell, I'd never get a job in the industry now, who would ever want to work with or employ someone like me?

It fucking sucks! And I would like to add this; to each and every person, in games or whatever industry/life that suffers – I feel for you, and I wish things would improve for you. It is a cold, hard, remorseless twisted shit thing. There is always hope though, and doctors and medication CAN help, can make all the difference. Don't give up, ever, even if you have setbacks along the way. There is no cure, but it can be managed.

*Originally written in March 2019, updated September.*

Richard Hill-Whittall