

I was born into the Fry family on the 18th November 1957.

My father was a farmer, we lived in the country and at that time I was the only baby girl around so there was great excitement and lots of photographs taken of me. I had one older sister and two older brothers. Later I had two younger sisters the youngest of which died. She was just 6 months old and had never been home from hospital. I had two younger brothers.

My parents were hard working and always loved and cared for us. We were always praised for anything we achieved no matter how small. My journey of depression probably started before I was even born. I wasn't very old when I remember my dad being unwell, he spent hours and days just lying in bed only getting up in the evening when mum sometimes had invited friends for a meal. Mum enjoyed people and entertaining, she hope this would help to lift his mind. I was too young to understand my dad had depression, he was on a lot of medication, he saw many professional people about his illness, he was admitted to hospital on several occasions and he had shock treatment.

He did have some good times but depression ruled his life. I often think mum had little or no support in those days as depression was a taboo subject, having a stigma, sometimes people would say to her just tell him to give himself a shake and get up there's nothing wrong with him. They just had no understanding of the illness. Mum always loved and supported him when it wasn't easy for her. When I was 6 years old my grandfather died. This was my first encounter with death. My mum noticed I was very nervous about going to bed and wouldn't sleep myself. I had neurotic symptoms for 3 years , anxiety, fear, depression (physical symptoms that do not have a medical cause) common in a child with depression, wouldn't be able to go to school or attend any activity at times. For the next three years I had recurrent ear infections. I was sent to a consultant about these infections and my weight loss, I had no interest in food. I was admitted to hospital for a mastoid operation in my ear but nothing was found. My symptoms were very similar to my dad's, I wouldn't speak for days, couldn't express what was wrong, wouldn't eat, couldn't go to school, didn't want to go anywhere, I was afraid, cried for hours when I went to bed .

Mum was distraught, she didn't know what to do, she sought help, took me to the GP and eventually I was referred to a child psychiatrist. I attended the department of child psychiatry in Belfast City Hospital where I saw a Mr Maxwell and Dr McAuley. They talked to me about my family and my relationships with my brothers and sisters. I got on well with my brothers, my favourite being my younger brother who was the baby at that time. I told them I disliked my older sister also my younger sister whom I thought got all the attention as she was born deaf and had lots of difficulties growing up. I told them I had a great relationship with both my parents but would never confide in them for what reason I didn't know, wouldn't go to school, wouldn't go out of the house. I attended the clinic for many weeks and couldn't understand why these men were asking me so many personal questions, now I know they were trying to get to the root of my problems. On the way home I would never talk about any of this to my mum. I was around 11 years old at this time. I had lost both my granddad and granny and I was frightened of death. I would especially miss my granny as I shared a room with her, she was good to me and let me store my personal things in her drawers but I was terrified of the sight of a large linen box

under her bed (I thought granda was in that box) but I would never tell anyone of my fears. I was so alone after my granny was gone and so afraid. I didn't tell anyone of my fears I just kept it inside, this was a huge part of my depression. I know now id I had been able to talk to someone it would have helped. My mum took me to see grannys remains, this helped me accept she was gone, but I decided I wouldn't go the funeral I couldn't say goodbye. I didn't like anything to do with death. I didn't tell the psychiatrist any of this, I thought it better to keep it all inside. I felt I was weak and ashamed that I was unable to face up to things and deal with them. I was given medication, 3 to 4 months and my mum reported some improvement. Mum was told I had a mental breakdown. I am very thankful that even at this young age I got help from professionals even though I kept so much from them.

I'm sure it must have been so difficult for mum to deal with me as well as my dad yet she never complained and was so loving and kind. I returned to school and despite being off so much with illness I enjoyed school, had good friends and left with 5 O'levels, my best subjects being book keeping and domestic science.

At the start of my teens I came to faith in Jesus Christ. This was a new beginning for me and my mum assured me that God would be with all through my life, school, work, my health and hopefully marriage and family life.

Something else happened to me when I was growing up (off and on for about 9 years) something quite horrific. I could never tell anyone about this, I was raped and sexually abused by the same person, no relation but a family friend. I only mention this awful experience to advise anyone in a similar situation to talk to someone and not go through the fear and worry I did. I felt ashamed and didn't think anyone would believe me as this person was well known and respected in our area.

This only added to my emotional problems, but I couldn't talk about it. I kept it all inside.

Just before I turned 18 I met my future husband and got married at 21. Life was good, I was happy, we had a house of our own and everything we needed.

My husband knew nothing of my illness as a child and I seemed very content. Our son was born two years later, I was able to leave work and look after him. We were blessed with a very happy, content baby who seemed to sleep all the time.

It wasn't long before I became unwell, I couldn't sleep, didn't eat, cried a lot and only wanted my husband and my baby. My husband didn't know what was wrong and neither did I, I had a perfect son, I loved him but something was wrong. My mum was the first to notice and encouraged me to see the GP who told me I had post-natal depression and gave me medication.

I slowly improved and eventually started getting out with my son. I was very protective of him and rarely left him with anyone, except my mum. By this time my sister in law was diagnosed with cancer, she had a baby girl just 6 months older than my son.

Her cancer was terminal and she passed away leaving my brother to look after his daughter. This was hard for me and set me back again. I managed to go to the funeral as I felt I had no excuse but I found it difficult.

For months and even years after that, I would wake up at night crying and praying that I would always be there for my son at least until he would grow up. Like before, these fears were very real to me but I couldn't talk about them to anyone, I kept it all inside.

Dad was still suffering with his depression. Mum was having to keep going with the added burden of my brother and her granddaughter. Dad had less good spells, his medication didn't seem to help.

One night he became very unwell, mum had to send for an ambulance, he had suffered a heart attack but later stabilised in hospital. Shortly after that my dad passed away suffering another heart attack and lastly septicaemia.

Dad was only 60, very young in my eyes. I was devastated! He never had time to enjoy his grandson or see him grow up. As well as this trauma, we had just sold our house and were moving to a new one.

I missed my dad! We were very close and now coming to terms with the loss and also trying to support my mum. Time passed, we moved into our new house and this gave me something to focus on. I would say things improved for myself. I started working part-time, always being able to be there for my son as he was growing up.

A few years passed and a complete shock, I was pregnant although only finding out when I was already 3 months. Something inside told me that things weren't ok but again I never told anyone, instead telling everyone I was hoping for a wee girl.

Four weeks later I was at my sister's house for a family get together when suddenly I had to go the bathroom and there I lost my baby. My sister, was great despite the upheaval, as she was a nurse and knew what to do. I spent that night in hospital, crying, trying to come to terms with the shock and trauma this brought. It was very difficult, yet again I had lost something very precious.

For a long time I was both physically and emotionally unwell. I couldn't cope with seeing other babies or anniversaries etc. I always had a special bond with my son but now it was different, I became very protective of him. I could never imagine what life would be like without him.

As he grew up he never got into any trouble or caused any worries. He did well at school, got into employment, bought his own house, only sleeping there at night, coming home for dinner. I would do his washing and cleaning weekly. I found it not too difficult him sleeping away from home as I felt I was still looking after him. Friends of mine couldn't understand why I acted like this towards my son, as I had a good husband, but I felt he was all that was part of me.

My mum passed away suddenly when she was 75. A part of her had gone already. She was diagnosed with dementia. Part of me could accept her death as life had

become difficult for her and it was hard to watch, but I knew I would miss her terrible. I went into a deep depression and wasn't coping well. I wasn't sleeping or eating very much. It took a long time for my medication to work but gradually things started to improve. My older sister and I became closer since losing our mum and we would meet up more often and talk of the good times we had with mum. Talking was helpful but sometimes the good memories made me feel sad, now that she was gone. My sister became ill shortly after that and passed away just 3 years after mum. This was another sad time for me, losing my sister, she was just 58, and watching her family suffer her loss. I tried my best to comfort them and help in whatever way I could, always hiding my own grief. I didn't want anyone to think I couldn't cope.

Life settled down again, my son got a girlfriend, got engaged and planned to get married. At first I didn't know how to deal with all this change, but I was happy for him and I wanted him to settle down and be happy. I liked his girlfriend from the started and I just hoped she could look after him the way I had done.

When they got engaged she said to me one day she hoped he would be as good to her as he had been to me. He was a wonderful son. The date was set for the wedding and by this stage I was very excited about buying my outfit, telling everyone I knew about the wedding. I was so excited I don't think I ever thought how my son getting married and going to live in a new area would change my life forever. I bought my outfit, complete with shoes, bag and jewellery in January 2009. The wedding was in September of that year.

My husband and I had a holiday in April 2009. When I arrived in our hotel I didn't feel myself, I thought it would pass, but I kept feeling anxious and found it hard to settle. I did enjoy myself as best I could, not telling my husband how I really felt, instead just saying I was tired and hoped the rest would help me. I didn't want to worry him and just kept it to myself. I wasn't looking forward to coming home, I was even more worried about the travel and the thought of returning home really concerned me.

I came home and returned to work but it wasn't long until I knew I was unwell. The least thing stressed me, in fact getting up in the morning and getting to work was difficult. I found it hard to cope, my concentration was poor, I just tried to get through each day and get home eventually feeling exhausted. I didn't know how long I would manage to do this. I went to my GP who discovered my blood pressure dangerously high and gave me medication. I told him I was constantly tired and had no energy but didn't mention how I felt emotionally. He said I was to have complete rest and gave me a sick line. In one sense I was relieved as I knew I wasn't coping at work, but I knew within myself things were going to get worse. I knew with being off work there would be less money coming in and this was a huge concern. I worried about money although I never told anyone, not even my husband, when I was able to be out shopping I would spend more money than I should on things I didn't really need but which I thought would make me happy. The reason I mention this is to warn others in a similar situation of the danger of getting into debt. My overspending led to debt, and while this wasn't the cause of depression, it was a huge burden, a burden I kept to myself and was able for a long time to hide from my husband. I know that if I had been able to sit down and talk I would have saved myself a lot of

worry and fear and nothing was so bad that couldn't be sorted. It taught myself and my family to be very careful about spending and I am now able to sit down with my husband and sort out bills and manage our finances instead of taking all the responsibility myself. One of the things I do now to keep well is check our bank balance regularly and make sure bills are up to date.

It took many visits to my GP and dosages of medication to stabilise my blood pressure and even then it continued to be raised. I also suffered vertigo which made me feel sick. I continued to see my GP regularly and only later did I admit, that despite being already on medication for depression I was feeling very low and just couldn't cope with life. At this stage I was able to hide it from my family and friends, telling them it was only tiredness, due to my high blood pressure and vertigo.

Things got worse, I didn't want to leave the house, I would stay in bed most of the day, with the blinds closed, only getting up at dinner time and going back to bed. This was the only place I felt safe. I didn't pay any attention to my personal hygiene or change my clothes, in fact the only day I washed and dressed was my husband's day off when he would usually have to drag me to the GP. He would try to take me shopping or visiting or for coffee but eventually I wouldn't be able to get out of the house. At this stage I admitted I had depression but didn't want to talk about it or tell anyone how I felt, I didn't think I could. I didn't answer the telephone or the door as I couldn't face having to talk to anyone. By this time I was on a lot of medication for all the symptoms I had, I was constantly losing weight and no interest in anything. It was only a few weeks now until the wedding and I was dreading it. My left leg started shaking uncontrollably, I could hardly walk, just dragged my leg, my mouth was drooped at one side, making it difficult to talk. I found it hard to even use cutlery or hold a cup. I was just a mess, having lost 3 stone and a half stone, you would hardly have recognised me and I thought things couldn't get any worse. At this point the only comfort I got was staying in bed, although I didn't sleep night or day despite medication.

Thoughts of suicide were now in my mind and although I loved my husband family dearly I could see no other way to escape from what I could only describe as torture. I thought that by taking all my medication and starving myself I would eventually die and go to heaven to meet others from my family. I thought this would be better than what I was experiencing.

My husband didn't know what to do, and my son by this time was fearing that I wouldn't be able to go to the wedding, he knew if this happened I would never get over it. The crisis team came to see me and an OT visit was arranged. I was referred to a psychiatrist. In the meantime my husband and soon took me to the GP who confirmed I had parkinsonism, I had been over medicated. I was given a tablet to reverse this condition and quite quickly my body came back to normal physically.

This gave me hope and some respite and took my mind off my depression and I improved somewhat. This improvement lasted for 2 weeks and enabling me to be at my son's wedding. Although not completely well, and my outfit being too big, with the help of a tan and make up, everyone said I was looking well. Most important for me I didn't spoil their day or the photographs. I didn't remember much of the day but I will never forget my son and his new wife standing at the front of the church looking

so happy as if nothing had ever happened. They and everyone else were so happy I was there and thought I had turned a corner. It's good no one knew what was to happen next. I got through the reception very tired, we stayed in the hotel that night and were looking forward to saying our goodbyes the next morning. The morning came and I could hardly get up for breakfast, I knew within myself things weren't good and again I tried to hide it all. I felt unwell but much worse this time. We said our goodbyes and they went on their honeymoon, and for me life would never be the same again. My husband and I came home, I could hardly make it into the house, things got worse and worse. I got confused, didn't know myself, didn't know other people, couldn't sit or rest and couldn't be left on my own. I took turns which lasted 2 – 3 days at a time, when I wouldn't speak, eat, drink or be able to do anything for myself and would have no idea of time or day or night. I didn't know how to hold a cup of tea or use a spoon, I was becoming a vegetable.

My husband would have to do everything for me and couldn't leave me on my own. Night time was frightening for him as I was always worse then. By this time my son and daughter in law were home and you can only imagine the distress they felt. They would have to come after work and at weekends and do everything to support my husband and yet they never complained. I would come out of these turns and wouldn't remember what had happened. I know now this was psychosis when I would go out of own body into another world to try to escape the torture I was in. This was the most difficult time of my depression not only for me but for my family who just couldn't understand what was happening. My appointment with the psychiatrist was soon and my husband went with me. When asked questions, I was unable to answer except for a few, by this time my husband was beginning to be unable to cope with my illness he felt hopeless. A new drug was given, but before I managed to start it I got much worse.

My husband son contacted my OT who arranged for me to be admitted to Tobernaven. My son came from work, and along with my husband and my sister in law, told me I was going to hospital to get my medication sorted and get better. My son came as he was always the one I would do anything for and, along with my sister in law helped to keep my husband calm. This must have been the most frightening experience they have ever encountered. Unknown to me everything was packed that I needed and we arrived in the grounds of Holywell hospital. I didn't say anything, no one spoke, we went in and were met by very friendly staff who took me into a room and asked me some questions. Before I knew I was in my bedroom where I was to stay. Suddenly it hit me, this was where dad had been and he never got better, this was the lowest point that I could go. I started to sob uncontrollable and told my son that he was putting me in there and I would never be home again. Nothing could console me. He talked to me and tried to explain that this was the last resort, it wasn't their choice, but promised me that as soon as they got my medication sorted I would be able to come home and I would get better. I calmed down and tried to settle myself. My son told his dad to bring me anything I wanted from home to make me happy.

My personal belongings soon filled the corner of the room. I really believed I was there to stay. The staff were excellent, and although they had to observed me all the time. They were very kind and always reassuring. I was taken of all medication which I shocked me a bit. I gradually made friends and started talking to them, I

realised others had difficulties like mine. A week later I was allowed to go out for a short walk, I now was more settled and happy that they were looking after me, and for the first time in my entire life, I was happy that everyone knew what was wrong with me, I think this was a big thing in my recovery.

I decided I was going to get better, I still had personal faith, although tested at times, and I asked God to help me and use the professional people to help me get better. I had had enough dark days, I had been imprisoned long enough, had enough of depression and fear and wanted to get better. I am glad to say I did and quite remarkably. I needed to get to this lowest point to realise that people cared about me and wanted me to be well. I realised I could get well and I had to take some responsibility. I realised there was life after depression. Life would be different, I would still face many challenges, but I would know where I could find help and I wouldn't be afraid to speak out. I got home and started a new life, being supported by mental health who continue to support me to this day for which I will always be grateful.

My family and friends have continued to support and encourage me to be a constant support. I will always be thankful for my husband who care for me through dark times when it must have been difficult. I thank my son and daughter in law for giving of their time so willingly and always loving me when they should have been enjoying the best time of their lives, and yet they never complained.

Life for me has changed, I now have my own Depression Support Group, I volunteer for Aware Defeat Depression and now am involved with the Northern Trust. I have just completed a WRAP Recovery Programme which enables me to co facilitate a WRAP group. My passion in life is to reach out to those with mental illness and I will never be ashamed to tell my story. The person I am now is because of the experiences I have come through and I can honestly say it has been worth it just to understand what others are going through. There should be no stigma, depression is an illness which can affect anyone at any time, despite who you are and there is nothing to be ashamed of. I tell my story to bring HOPE in the midst of darkness. I came from darkness to light – so can anyone.