



A DCU Student Experience

If I was to do a big quantitative analysis of all the tears I've shed across all the locations I've cried, DCU's Glasnevin campus would come second only to my bed. Years hence when I'm famous or infamous for revolutionising the world in some fantastic way, tour guides will gesture towards a velvet roped bathroom stall in the canteen and, with greatest gravitas, announce that yes, THE ugly student cried on the phone to her mam in this very spot. The visitors might ooh and aah and say isn't suffering so poetic, so nobly romantic, and snap pictures of the little snot puddles on the floor with their iPhones. The tour would migrate slowly across campus, wending its way through the labyrinthine corridors of the Henry Grattan building, before culminating in the Featured Crying Spot – my counsellor's office in the Counselling Service. This place, the tour guide would say, holds the record for highest concentration of my Tears this side of the Liffey.

I was reluctant to start counselling. Although I had been to psychiatrists here and there since I was fifteen and was very much in need of consistent help, I squirmed at the thought of seeking it here. Everywhere else had been separate from daily life, neatly cordoned off into its own context. You go to school to learn, you go to your therapist to learn to not want to die all the time. The thought of the two contexts overlapping - myself as a college student and myself as a mentally ill person - was uncomfortable and frightening and oh god please don't make me do it just let me suffer privately. Everyone else, annoyingly, thought that seeing a counsellor in college was a great idea, including my psychiatrist. He said it'd be a bit pointless to rot on a waiting list for my turn to pay loads of money to a private therapist who I mightn't even get on with when there was a free and reliable service already available to me. Since I was already registered with the Disability Support Service, I only partially took his advice on board and met with them instead, but then I cried and they sent me to counselling anyway. So I sat in the waiting area shakily sipping water from my tiny cup, listening to RTE Lyric FM, trying to let it soothe me and failing.

The main thing I remember from that first session, and the thing that I feel sums up where my head was best, is describing how I wanted to be a fish. I wasn't suicidal, I didn't want to die necessarily, but would have preferred to cease existing as myself, or transform my consciousness into that of a salmon. Or maybe a goldfish. Either way, fishes' great strength is that they are very stupid. They have no concept of achievement or fulfilment or how megacorporations' unethical practices are causing global warming contributing to the earth's next mass extinction. Fish just swim and eat and poo and make more baby fish and don't give a **** about any of it, which is very admirable. Additionally, I had recently read something about how fishes' tiny brains haven't developed the part that we would call pain response, and despite flopping around objecting to negative stimuli, they don't really "get" suffering. Things just kind of happen to fish and they just go about their fishy lives without having to hurt or reflect or grow. I, on the other hand, was a college student, a young woman with maybe too much awareness of the ills of the world and not enough energy to fix it. I knew suffering too well and had been railing against it for too long and would like to just chill out please, just take a bit of time away from the stresses of being a person and float downstream, empty headed and content.

Unfortunately, phenomenal as she is, my counsellor does not possess the power to change someone's species. Instead, she helped me identify why I felt this way - I think too much about the bigger picture versus the realities of the present, I focus on achievements and destinations as opposed to the journey that takes you there, I see myself as a problem to be solved instead of a person with patterns that need to be adapted - and build a plan to change it. Not to fix me, or alleviate all my suffering, but to recognise mental routes I tread so often that lead to such distress and then try a different approach. We had to be careful to treat my counselling not as a means to an end but a process in which every step is worthwhile. The steps didn't even have to be in a specific order, they didn't have to fill up a numbered gauge to tell us we were x percent of the way towards Excellent Mental Health. This attitude would have fed directly into the destination-oriented mindset we were trying to alter. Instead we had to practice doing things and saying things and being there, doing mindfulness practices and asking what was important right now.

I liked my counsellor straight away. She conveys a sense of genuine kindness and empathy that makes her easy to open up to. I always felt when talking to her that she was trying to see from my perspective and understand me as a person first and foremost. She never made me feel like a patient or a problem to be solved, never seemed to be racking her brains for names to put on things or other cases to compare to: instead she let me name my feelings using whatever twisted analogy I felt fit best and tried to relate to it. She saw what I saw and asked me to tweak the angle a bit, approaching the problem differently and pulling explanations or responses from some deeply hidden part of me that I had never thought to consult. A lot of the time when I have shared my difficult feelings with others, they've asked me have I tried this or that and put their knowledge on to me in a way. In contrast, my counsellor trusted that I had the necessary wisdom somewhere inside myself because, after all, I am the person who knows me best. She asked the exact right questions to guide me towards this and access it, and feel a huge rush of relief that this worry isn't so impenetrable any more.

Beyond the actual content of our sessions, my counsellor was still fantastic. She asked if I wanted to book the next one straight away, which I often did, or drop her an email when I felt I needed a session. I could contact her when a big deadline was on the way or I needed extra support, and when I did she always responded quickly. The sessions themselves went at a comfortable pace and never felt rushed or like they finished abruptly, I always got to say what I needed to in the time we had. Often, what I needed to say was a giant mess of metaphors and comparisons which might eventually lead to my actual point, which makes it extra impressive that we kept to time at all. My counsellor also helped me with dreaded admin by writing letters for my extenuating circumstances forms and finding out from registry exactly which hoops I had to jump through. This alleviated so much stress and anxiety for me when the thought of talking to people and Sorting Thing Out was just too much, and made life so much easier. My counsellor never made me feel like a burden or an inconvenience which was really important to me. I'm immensely grateful to my counsellor for being such an excellent confidante - I always felt both in and out of our sessions like I was talking to someone who genuinely cared about me, rooted for me, and saw me as a good

person who is working on her struggles, rather than a human Rubiks cube.

I don't think I realised, when I started counselling, that I wasn't doing a great job of rooting for myself. I thought that my self criticism and excessive analysis was proof that I was genuinely trying to get better, rather than the source of distress it really was. When my psychiatrist recommended compassion focused therapy, which my counsellor seconded, I thought they were nuts. I don't need this! If anything I'm too nice to myself! Just let me keep listing my woes and giving out to myself for causing them! I eventually came around to the idea, figuring my little depressed brain might not be as reliable at decision making as trained professionals, and started the four month therapy course. This meant taking a break from sessions with my counsellor, in order to focus fully on one course of treatment, which was daunting as we had developed a pretty sound routine. It proved to be the right course of action: when I came back after finishing up CFT, we did some of our best and most useful work.

Having laid a solid foundation of self compassion in CFT, my counsellor and I developed my ability to be a nice person who enjoys things. It's so simple to say "get on with your life, smell the roses!" when experience and brain chemistry are on your side, but for lucky folks such as myself, this stuff has to be learned. We did a lot of mindfulness practices where we focused on the present moment - the weight of my body in the chair or the warmth of the breath in my lungs - without evaluating it. Time flows in a big weird river and you have to be there for all of it. One of my favourite sessions involved taking advantage of the early spring sun and taking a walk around Albert College Park, seeing the birds and the dogs and the tiny crocuses popping their heads up for the first time, chatting about things entirely irrelevant to my mental health. It was refreshing. That day reminded me, in the kindest and gentlest way, that being a person who is alive and able to enjoy a spring day is enough. I don't need to have my life together or a load of money or to have "made it" to feel the sun on my face or laugh about a really enthusiastic lurcher trying to lick me.

I also found, through lots of talking and mindfulness practices and exercises that gave the spotlight to lesser shared parts of me, that I learned to get on with myself. Instead of a jailer, I became my own best friend. Turns out, you don't have to entirely overhaul a tricky brain to make it work, you just need to adapt: learn to live with its awkward idiosyncrasies while enjoying the lovely ones. This is who I am, these are my struggles, none of it has to be validated or justified, it just has to be recognised. A person is a big, complicated, ever-changing thing, which is actually pretty cool. This person, all twenty two years and nearly six feet of her, can be goofy and capable and tired and weird and talented and decent and all of it is fine because she's trying her best. In fact, I'm her biggest fan. I genuinely don't think that I could have reached this point without my counsellor's particular wisdom and insight and kindness. Her faith in me, especially when I was all grey sludge and tears, was an endless source of power and inspiration.

It's really difficult to condense such an important and lengthy experience into a few words. It's also really difficult to reflect on such an experience with total clarity, especially when you spent chunks of it feeling like you're wearing a helmet full of bees. It has taken me far too long and I have said far too little, but the main thing I'm trying to convey here is my gratitude to the counselling service, the disability support service, and most especially, to my

counsellor. I feel incredibly lucky to have gained so much from my counselling experience, and for it to have wound down at just the right time, after I graduated with a first in my degree. It's scary and exciting going into the world with one of my greatest safety nets removed, but I'm confident in the skills I've gained through my counselling experience. I really hope, and have faith, that the counselling service will be as helpful to other students. It's been some journey. I'm quite glad I'm not a fish.

A DCU Graduate