

Right: as a teenager, Kat immersed herself in acting and performing to block out her desperate feeling



Left: being a typical teen with her friends despite how she really felt. Above: Kat today, running to raise money for the charity Mind

Sunday last week, she said, 'I woke crying about everything and nothing. I remember thinking, "What the f*** is going on in my head. Why do I feel like this?" I thought I was going crazy. I was a generally happy child and all of a sudden I wasn't... It's confusing and it makes you feel quite lost within yourself. It wasn't a slow and gentle descent into depression; something totally switched in your mind.'

To try and escape similar confusing and desperate feelings, I threw myself into reading and acting. I loved being someone else. When I was 14, I finally flipped and hit a bully who was teasing me in drama class. I got a bit more respect from other pupils, but by then it didn't matter. I was lost in my own worthlessness.

At the time, I didn't know what depression was and neither did my parents. I didn't know how to explain that my head was fizzing all the time with a constant hum of anxiety and despair. I was frustrated about why my mum and dad couldn't telepathically understand what I was going through, so I behaved appallingly and became your worst teenage nightmare. Looking back, it seems staggering that I never told anyone how I felt, but I just didn't know how to express my inner turmoil; I had no idea that feeling that bad wasn't right.

I spent my first year at university in manic chaos, involved in clubs, college, sports, drama. I was a 'good sport'. I felt valued and it was glorious. I loved this 24/7 living because the minute I was alone the devastation took over. No sleep, just my mind tormenting me to purest terror – that I wasn't valuable, I didn't deserve a happy life – and silent, shuddering crying.

I was so exhausted by my brain ruining everything that I had a breakdown in the holidays after my first term and finally begged my mum for help. She took me to

our local GP, saying, 'If she says there's nothing wrong with you, you'll have to get on with it.' This was the problem: in my mind I had no 'it' to get on with.

The doctor prescribed me with antidepressants but didn't diagnose me with anything specific. Looking back, I had the manic highs and extreme lows that signify bipolar disorder. I'd have a wild night with friends then two hours later be at home, unable to sleep and terrified.

I remember the GP asking if I'd had suicidal thoughts, and telling her yes: I just desperately wanted to not exist. This had crystallised over the past two months as my safety net – university – started to crumble when I began to fail one of my modules. My anxiety was such that even little, fixable things felt like the end of the world. But however desperately I wanted not to exist, I couldn't kill myself because of hurting the people I'd leave behind.

I scrambled through the rest of university trying different medications. I had terrible insomnia, which meant more hours alone with my thoughts. I had lots of friends but in so many different groups that I only got close to a few. I didn't want to risk ruining friendships by talking about what was going on inside my head.

The irony was that I thought I hid it all brilliantly. I went dancing, smiled, got hammered – desperately trying to mask what was going on inside me. This is something Fifi talked about – that she didn't even tell her dad about her depression. She said, 'I didn't want to tell anyone because I didn't understand it myself. I don't think it would have made any difference to how I felt. You can't share the burden of depression. You slap your mask on – you have to.' It's only now I realise it wasn't as hidden as I thought. 'You were quite tiring to be around back then,' a friend told me later. 'You wouldn't talk to anyone about what was going on.' I was genuinely shocked they'd noticed.

The turning point came three years ago, when an old friend killed herself. It came out of the blue and I was beyond shocked – I was furious at this God-awful illness. It made me decide I needed to be open about my own mental health experiences.

So I wrote about it. I joined the media advisory board for Time To Change, a campaign addressing the stigma around mental health. I ran to raise money for the charity Mind. It felt wonderful to be able to say, 'This sh*t in my head is real, and I am not a lesser person because of it.'

As Fifi says, depression is nothing to be ashamed of, although it's taken me years to learn that. Today I'm living a stable, happy life and am in a relationship with a lovely man. I've been off antidepressants and sleeping pills for seven years, but the after-effects of depression cling, so last year I started cognitive-behavioural therapy. Now, I can identify when my brain is being irrational and have developed coping mechanisms to calm me down.

I feel like someone who has escaped from prison – one of shame as well as illness – and who needs to tell the world. You are loved. You are not alone. ■
For help, visit mind.org.uk