

At War with My Mind // Damon Woolf

I thought I was too resilient, too determined and too strong to be broken. Yet there I was, staring at my breaking point. My eyes welled, my hands clasped and my voice cracked as my doctor looked on with sympathetic eyes and knowing nods. Overwhelmed and exhausted, battered and bruised, I raised a white flag. My decade-long battle with anxiety and ADHD – and with myself – was no longer a secret.

I was no longer alone.

It took ten agonising years to make that appointment with my doctor; ten agonising years at war with my mind. Too often I had become crippled by fear about the most ordinary of things or nothing at all, enduring a constant state of panic that would suffocate me for weeks.

I would fixate on every insignificant thing and become consumed by thought, often agitated in my search for an answer that I did not need to know. I would problem-solve everything even when there were no problems to solve. My heart would race and my chest would tighten while a franticness consumed me beneath a carefully crafted exterior. I could sit in silence but my mind would be loud and busy and full, racing at a speed where nothing made sense as a pressure built from within like a bomb waiting to go off.

I resented my impatience, crippling perfectionism and the seemingly uncontrollable shifts between extremes...

Explosive energy or utter exhaustion
Laser sharp or disengaged
Oversharing or zoning out
Impulsive or paralysed
Overstimulated or under-stimulated

Addiction, hyperfixation... The list went on and on, hand in hand with the shame.

But I was also a brilliant problem-solver, harnessing unique pattern recognition skills and a wild ability to read and retain copious amounts of information to find innovative solutions amongst all the complexity. I was extremely calm under pressure because challenging situations stimulated my focus rather than provoking fear. I was a compelling communicator and an intuitive negotiator, connecting deeply with people in an instant. I was an out-of-the-box thinker generating a million ideas about a million things at a million miles an hour...

I was just *different*.
Not better. Not worse.
Just different.

My brain was a strength, but it was also a burden, and thinking differently – and *being* different – in a world designed for uniformity felt like a problem to manage rather than something to nurture. I lacked the knowledge to fully understand myself and I lacked the support to fully accept myself.

It was exhausting.

For ten years I battled against my mind, convinced that this was a battle to fight alone. I couldn't be the friend or the colleague with a 'problem', the one with a 'weakness', the one who was struggling. I was always seen as an overachiever and full of life and in control, and that's the person I needed to be.

That's the person I needed them to see.

I was unwavering in my belief that my years of hard work would be unravelled in an instant if my colleagues knew about the internal challenges I was grappling with; my reputation shattered by stigma and judgment.

I couldn't let that happen, so I masked up.

I suppressed my true self at work and in social occasions, burning all my energy just trying to blend in. My social media projected the 'right' things, just not the real things. Self-medicating also ensued, turning to gin to numb the turmoil ricocheting within.

One shot, two shots, three shots, four. Triples usually, sometimes more.

I had lost control.

I needed help.

So there I was, staring at my breaking point. My eyes welled and my hands clasped and my voice cracked as my doctor looked on with sympathetic eyes and knowing nods. Overwhelmed and exhausted, battered and bruised, I raised a white flag. My decade-long battle with anxiety and ADHD – and with myself – was no longer a secret, and I was no longer alone.

Finally.

Ever since that day, ever since my diagnosis, I've been on a journey of self-love, self-discovery and self-mastery. I've worked with medical professionals, wellness gurus and mindset coaches to understand who I really am, how I actually tick, and what I need from myself and from others to be well, live authentically, and fulfil my potential.

Finally, my differences make sense.

Finally, I make sense.

I'm sharing my story now because this is part of my journey; owning my experience feels liberating and empowering when it once would have been humiliating, so I feel a strength in this vulnerability. For others, of course, their experiences will be less intense and more manageable or more devastating that I could ever comprehend. Different people have different journeys because we're all built differently, and that's so important to remember.

I'm sharing my story now because change is required, especially in the workplace.

It's critical that we have more mindful conversations about our minds, more often, to ensure that mental wellbeing is better understood and better supported, and because neurodiversity is an incredible gift when it's embraced, valued and nurtured to allow individuals to flourish.

I'm sharing my story now because change will be rewarded, especially in the workplace.

Healthy minds are happy minds, and happy minds make for positive, passionate and productive teams that propel an organisation forward. Likewise, unlocking the value of neurodiverse thinkers is a competitive advantage when it's understood through a business-capability lens. After all, innovation is considered critical to the long-term success of any organisation and to do things differently, you have to think differently...

I'm sharing my story now because changing the narrative around thinking differently, from one of disability to super ability, has become my passion and purpose.

I'm sharing my story now in the hope that advocacy, education and engagement will make your path a little less lonely than mine. A little smoother, a little safer.

I'm sharing my story now because I'm not ashamed anymore.