

# SATURDAY 18TH AUGUST 2023

*With Lavinia Donling*

## SCOTLAND'S NEW ACADEMIC YEAR

The new academic year has started in Scotland. The exam results came out yesterday for the likes of Yasmin. Unlike so many other young people who would have been very nervous awaiting their results, Yasmin thought it was next week and so was oblivious until a college friend texted her to ask if she was going to collect her results. Yasmin had no time to be anxious, which I am grateful for, and so will now have to wait for the results to be posted. I cannot stress enough that exam results do not define you, no matter how much the world wishes to emphasize this. Education is important, but education is not learnt in one way only. Life was never designed to be like that, but some people who design education are looking for ways to measure intelligence, to acquire the intelligence of those academically gifted for much needed research, and ultimately to employ compliance. I know, I sound cynical.



But, for those broken young people who are brought to me to help repair their mental health, well, it can be breaking. I am reminded of my discussion with a dear colleague who stated that what does years of listening to life stories of trauma do to the individual mental health nurse? I am reminded of another discussion in the last fortnight with a client where we were talking about how they have the LA funding their child, but another parent has not been so lucky. This parent and I alike can only focus on our children/young people. We cannot do everyone, but the ones we can support and help, we can make a difference.



This resonated with me as I was writing a report about a young person. Their mental health is breaking down due to being in the wrong environment (mainstream education) and there is no way they will cope with secondary school as their mental health has been declining since starting nursery. The meltdowns are getting worse, the self-harm continues progressively, and the suicidal ideation is increasing. It is a familiar life story, especially with school dismissing the possibility of Autism and ADHD, and the parent having to painstakingly and determinedly save the money to then get private assessments for both whilst all the while the young person continues to deteriorate with their mental health. But this young person now has a fighting chance of recovery because of the parent coming to me.

#### WRONG ENVIRONMENT

Exams do not define us, but put in the wrong environment can have a major negative impact and define how we deal with life events. In the period of two decades of the 50s through to the 70s, especially in the UK, academic researchers studying Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) were associating both with brain damage. There was also a very strong assertion that children grew out of ADHD, but many parent groups in the USA linked up and lobbied for this to be challenged. Why? Because many of those parents had been diagnosed as having ADHD/ADD as children, and were now parents. Whilst the Hyperactivity had reduced physically, it had not mentally. They themselves were living proof that young people did not grow out of ADHD. Ross & Ross (1976) were pivotal in their research by looking at over 2,000 published research trials to consider the results of so many studies which ruled out brain damage, but did show an educational disability.

ADHD remains the most well studied of childhood disorders. There is now a further understanding that some children can present as having a sluggish type of ADHD manifesting in sluggish cognitive development, and social passivity and predominantly the subset of Inattention. There showed an understanding that there was an overlap of ADHD and Bipolar type 1 which continues to remain controversial, especially with the development of the internet and parents networking now challenging professionals.

Further, it is accepted that psychotherapy is ineffective for ADHD. Other research looked into the genetics and found that if a parent has ADHD, then there is a 57% risk to offspring (Biederman et al, 1995). Others looked into research of twins and found concordance of 81% in identical twins, and 29% in un-identical twins (Gilger, Pennington & Defries, 1992).

My point here? Well, if school is unaccepting in supporting Autism and/or ADHD, this will impact on our young people's mental health which compounds the original issue. The young person feels a failure and does not thrive, but ultimately is left with the responsibility that they are not doing well and the exams will further reflect this. I have Autism and ADHD with a PDA profile, as well as Dyslexia. Exams terrify me, and I struggle in lectures (even more so in lessons as a child), yet it took me a delayed start to go to university to study Mental Health nursing, and another decade before I started my Masters, and another 5 yrs after that to start my Doctorate with a HUGE amount of personal repair work on my mental health to be able to attend these institutions. My family and the education system combined are wholly responsible, where I was rejected, belittled and abandoned as a failure. I was left with the responsibility to sort out the mess that I never willingly signed up for. And so I cleaned up the mess, and slowly, painstakingly, at times very distressed and others fuming, picked up what I needed to do the job I wanted to do. I have had the real pleasure this week of working with parents who have done similar and we are acknowledging the difficulties, but also have the understanding and compassion to support our children who will, undoubtedly, turn into amazing individuals. Why? Because we do not define them by their exam results, but more by their specific interests that creates their thirst for learning more and, thereby, providing their education that is real and practical.

Have a great weekend everyone!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lavinia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping initial 'L'.