

Look after your mental self

Natasha Devon is a passionate campaigner for change in mental health policies – just because we're talking about it, doesn't mean enough has been done



I was really poorly from the age of 17 to 25 – I had an eating disorder, so I just wasn't able

to coherently stand up for myself. Now that I'm well, this has encouraged me to campaign for and represent a community of people who it's so easy to silence, misrepresent and ridicule because they're suffering. I was one of those people.

You'll always get the truth from me, and I won't stop doing that. Working as the first ever mental health champion for schools [a role created to encourage young people to talk openly about mental health] was such a strange time in my life. I now realise that the government's priority is to create an illusion of an action around mental health, without actually having to invest a lot of money and time. I think they wanted a champion who would go out and say how committed the government was to the work that was going on – the thing is, if anyone asks me a question, I'll answer honestly. So, that didn't end well.

I do qualitative research, which means that I chat to people and see if I can perceive patterns. I go into a lot of institutions, and speak to teachers and students about what the barriers to their mental wellbeing are, what the resources are like in their schools, what their school experience is like, what would make their community better. I feed that back to different organisations and also to the

government to get that information to the people who can really make a difference.

I've always been keen not to exclude anyone from conversations about mental health. We were offered quite a lot of money in the early days of Body Gossip [founded by Natasha and Ruth Rogers in 2006, campaigning on body-image issues, regardless of shape, size, race, age, or gender] by a funding organisation, but they said they specifically fund body-image projects for women, so we would have had to become female-focused only. We refused that money. I wanted to focus on male body image and gym culture, and things like that too.

"For years, those with mental health issues were locked up, silenced, hidden away"

Social media has had a massive impact on how young people think, behave and identify. But it's a big leap to say that it's therefore responsible for all mental health problems. If you're passively scrolling and comparing yourself to others, then it will be negative, but if you're using it to connect with like-minded people, then it can enhance your wellbeing. I'm frustrated that it's being made out to be solely negative by people who have a vested interest in painting it that way.

Writing my book was my attempt to get my message outside of schools and into the public consciousness too. I feel like the challenges in schools are mainly funding and resource based, rather than attitude. The teachers I talk to are usually the ones who are passionate about PSHE [Personal, Social, Health and Economic education], but just don't have the time or the resources to give those children what they need. When you exist in that sort of silo, you get a false sense of how okay people are with mental illness. I'll then say something on the news, and people will tell me that I should be in an asylum. So I thought, maybe I need to try to reach those people, instead of preaching to the choir.

For years, those with mental health issues were locked up, silenced, hidden away, in the way that people of certain sexualities or races were. Then when they get a voice for one minute – in the grand scale of things, we've been talking about it for just a minute – people say it isn't a problem anymore. It's just another tactic for silencing. We've been waiting to hear from these people, let them speak. ♦



as told to terrijane dow, portrait by jonathan donovan



Natasha Devon MBE is a writer, speaker and campaigner. She tours the UK, delivering talks as well as conducting research on mental health, body image, gender and social equality. *A Beginner's Guide to Being Mental: An A-Z* was published in May 2018. Follow her on Twitter @NatashaDevon, or pop to natashadevon.com for more information on her current projects