



Hanging on to hope

Every morning my alarm clock wakes me up with Radio 4's Today Programme. It's the best way to get me out of bed as I'm a total news and politics junkie. As the famous BBC 'pips' mark the hour and the headlines are read out, I emerge from under the duvet. Still listening, I make some tea in my favourite Harry Potter Gryffindor mug, then scan through social media to see what stories are gathering momentum on Twitter.

Usually, that morning routine is a fairly relaxed affair as my brain eases

into the day. But during the past few months, staying on top of political news has felt like herding cats or catching rabbits. So much has been happening; there's always a dramatic new turn of events.

A few headlines this summer have made me question whether I'd fallen back to sleep and was simply having a bad dream. Surely Boris Johnson can't actually be our Foreign Secretary? Surely Donald Trump can't truly be in the running for US President? The world gets stranger and stranger.

VICKY BEECHING SPEAKS CANDIDLY ABOUT LIFE SINCE SHE CAME OUT AND HOW WE CAN SUPPORT EACH OTHER IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Most of us were already #Brexhausted weeks ago from so much change. It's felt like a rollercoaster ride. Yet the seismic shifts have kept on coming. We're adjusting to a new Prime Minister. We're still grieving the loss of MP Jo Cox. We're wondering what life outside the EU will mean for us. We're watching the Labour Party face vast challenges. Everything is in a state of flux.

As if these political shifts aren't enough to deal with, the significant rise in terror attacks also weighs heavily on us. Barely a week goes by without another horrific tragedy.

Two months have passed, but the fear and devastation of Orlando still hangs in the air. LGBT clubs and queer spaces no longer feel as safe as they used to. Pride marches are happening this summer, but with an extra serving of tension as we look over our shoulders for potential danger.

The recent murder of an elderly Priest at a church in Nice was another harrowing incident. Places of worship, despite their sacredness, are now targets too. Nowhere feels safe from this threat, so an underlying sense of uncertainty and fear has become our daily norm.

As people who identify as LGBTQ+, or as straight allies, we are 'queer family'. We're united by a powerful bond of solidarity. And we need each other - now, more than ever. So, what can we do to survive in this climate? How can we help each other in such tense and challenging times?

I believe one of the most powerful things we can do is this: To become more honest about our own struggles. To open up and admit the ways in which we're finding life tough.

Confiding in people feels like going out on a limb; it's precarious. But as long as they are safe and trustworthy, it can open up unprecedented depths of community.

Vulnerability is contagious - it has a domino effect. As we become transparent, others find the freedom and confidence to talk about their struggles too. Somehow, a sense of hope permeates us all in the process as we hear the powerful words "me too".

Chances are, many of us in the LGBTQ+ community are finding life

difficult. Research from The LGBT Foundation tells us that: "LGB people are two to three times more likely than heterosexual people to suffer from depression." Also, "LGB people are twice as likely as heterosexual people to have suicidal thoughts or to make suicide attempts".

In a Cambridge University study, twice as many lesbians identified as having mental health issues compared with their straight peers. The figures for bisexual women were even higher. These statistics show that for many of us flicking through the pages of DIVA, life may not be easy.

In August 2014, I came out as gay. I'm from a deeply traditional Christian background and had a full-time career in church music, based in the American Bible-Belt. So, coming out was a huge leap into the unknown.

After my announcement, I lost my career in Christian music. Many friends and former colleagues went silent and distanced themselves from me. Overnight, I felt shut out from the Evangelical faith community that I'd belonged to since childhood. On top of this, trolls plagued me, both online and offline, targeting me with homophobic vitriol.

During my first few months as an out gay woman, there were countless times when hope was knocked out of me. I often sobbed into the carpet, feeling like my life was now so unrecognizable - so unpredictable and unsettling - that I was forced into merely surviving.

Since then, things have thankfully become smoother. During the past two years, positive doors have opened. Now, I get to do meaningful work campaigning for LGBT-inclusive Christianity. I'm writing a book for HarperCollins, working in TV and radio, and contributing to publications like DIVA. A new life is gradually taking shape.

I've mainly publicized the positive aspects of my 'post-coming-out life' on social media. I want others to see that "it gets better" because it genuinely does; people can step into a meaningful, flourishing life when they leave the closet.

However, there's been one very challenging aspect of my 'post-coming-out life' life that I haven't spoken

about. And that is mental health.

This topic still feels like a taboo in society, and one I believe needs breaking. My desire for this societal change - and for a greater vulnerability in general - has recently led me to open up about the mental health challenges I've faced since coming out.

So, earlier this year at the Stonewall Workplace Conference, I spoke on this theme for the first time. I shared that the past two years have been positive and encouraging - yet, equally, they've been overshadowed by depression, anxiety, and symptoms of PTSD. I spoke about the therapy, anti-depressants, and medical support I've needed to get me through it.

Coming out was just the first step towards freedom. Following that, I needed to deal with the fall-out: the scars of a life lived in the closet, the rejection I faced from my religious community, and the loss of my former livelihood. The toll on my mental and physical health has been significant.

This summer, I've continued to share these aspects of my journey publicly through speaking and writing. I've also been more open about my physical health; discussing in more detail what it's like to live with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (also known as M.E.) and the ways this condition impacts my life.

I was nervous about all of these disclosures. I wondered if admitting these things about my mental and physical wellbeing would count against me professionally and socially. Did I really want these things on my public record?

To my relief, it's been quite the opposite: it's allowed others to be there for me in deeper ways. And it's given them freedom to tell me about the tougher aspects of their journeys.

Workwise, it's actually helped rather than hindered; I've been met with nothing but kindness. I've also been able to encourage corporate environments to improve their practices around mental health. Speaking up about these somewhat-taboo struggles feels like a risk, but it's the only way we can forge deeper community and create change.

So, in this time of political tension, global terror, and societal uncertainty, I believe we need to become more vulnerable with each other. And to do

so, even in stereotypically more difficult and reserved places, like at work. That's how we can fight fear and isolation, and create community and hope.

Perhaps it's as radical, and as simple, as the way we answer the question: "How are you doing?". Most of us are well-trained in pattering off the socially acceptable answer: "I'm fine" or "I'm good", when, honestly, often we're not.

By trusting safe people, and sharing what we're dealing with, it permits others to do the same. We reset the expectations in our communities, showing it's ok to struggle and that there's no shame attached. As a result, barriers will fall. The domino effect will kick in. Transparency will increase in our workplaces, homes, and friendship circles.

The writer M. Scott Peck once said: "There can be no community without vulnerability." He's absolutely right - vulnerability is hard, but it's worth it. Give it a go; together we can play a part in seeing taboos broken and culture transformed into a healthier and more honest place.

For me, the past two years have not been easy. There are wonderful days and there are challenging days. But I know, overall, I'm making progress towards a brighter, fuller life.

Opening up about mental health has been a really liberating decision; one that's enabled me to give, and receive, support in greater ways. If you're facing difficulties - whatever shape they may take - know that you're not alone. Many of us within the LGBTQ+ community are dealing with similar issues; we just need to break the taboos and talk.

Times of fear and uncertainty - whether in a global, political, or personal context - have a horrible way of shutting us down. But when we refuse to give up, and when we stand together and carry each other's burdens, we wield a powerful weapon: Hope.

Desmond Tutu once said: "Hope is being able to see that there is light, despite all of the darkness." May that hope light your way this month. What is ahead of you is infinitely better than all that lies behind you. So, hang onto hope and never let it go. **D**

PHOTO NICHOLAS DAWKES

Waking to recent radio headlines made me wonder if I was having a bad dream