

On the 1st of April, nine novice comedians took to the stage to take part in the first White Collar Comedy Night, raising funds for the Jersey Employment Trust. One of those was Matt Du Heaume, who eight years ago had a complete mental breakdown – and here he was standing up in front of 240 people making them laugh about the very illness that had caused it.

“I would worry about keeping others safe, especially my wife. I would sneak downstairs at night while she was asleep and check the doors and windows were locked, 10, 12, 15 times, because, and I'm sure you agree this is reasonable, I did not want “the murderers” to get in.

Who these murderers were I have no idea, but my brain thankfully answered that question when one night I thought... wait... what if I'm the murderer?

Turns out I have a form of OCD called Harm OCD which means I often get intrusive thoughts about being violent towards other people, especially loved ones. I couldn't be in the kitchen at the same time as my wife as I would often get thoughts about grabbing a knife and stabbing her...”

When he signed up to do some stand-up comedy as a charity challenge, Matt Du Heaume wasn't planning on talking about his mental health. The process involved eight weeks of mentoring, including from professional comedian Nathan Cassidy, who encouraged participants to draw on personal experience.

‘I do magic as a hobby and I have played music, but I have never been on stage alone and just talked and expected everyone to pay attention before. So it was a matter of, can I get up there with just a microphone and be comfortable?’ Matt said. ‘I had gone into the process trying to write jokes, worrying about what would make other people laugh, but nothing I had felt right. With encouragement from Nathan, I decided to dig deep and just tell my story. Once that happened, I felt like everything started to fall into place.’

That story involved opening up about his diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder. ‘I had a full-on breakdown eight years ago,’ he said. ‘I wasn't originally going to use it as material. I didn't want to go down the route of stereotypical jokes about lining things up or excessive hand-washing. I have Harm OCD [a sub-type of obsessive-compulsive disorder] so talking about harming people can be quite dark.

‘I asked my wife, Anna, what she thought and she reminded me of things I had done and said, and it went from there. I did find a lot of humour in it in the end.’ Matt said he had always been quite a cautious and nervous person, with perhaps some OCD tendencies – but ‘only what people might consider quirks’. It was when his first child was born that things changed. ‘That sense of responsibility ramped up when we had our daughter in 2014, and I became over-anxious about everything.

‘In 2017 I started having panic attacks for apparently no reason. Nasty thoughts were taking over, things like I was going to get ill, or I was going to make the kids ill, I was going to hurt someone else or hurt myself. I started to get really depressed.



‘One time, Anna was away, and I was at home alone with my daughter. I asked Anna to ring me every morning to make sure I hadn’t died. Not because of me, but because I feared something would happen to my daughter if I did. Looking back now it seems crazy that I even thought that way.

‘Breaking point came when I started having thoughts about smothering my daughter, who was three at the time. I went downstairs to my wife and said “I need a hug” and I just burst into tears. My biggest fear was telling her about the violent thoughts I was having, how she would react. But there was no judgment on her part, she knew exactly what I needed at that moment, and took me to see a doctor.’

Matt was signed off work for more than a year while he sought help through Jersey Talking Therapies as well as getting the right medication.

‘I was at the point where I was frightened to leave the house. I couldn’t drive because I thought I’d run someone over. I feared walking past people in the street in case I pushed them into the road. These thoughts were constant and terrifying. So I became isolated, which didn’t help with the depression. After a while I forced myself every day to go outside for at least a walk, sometimes have a coffee or visit town, and that did start to help.

‘Those harmful thoughts – I knew I wasn’t going to act on them – but I would be asking what they meant, why I was having them. Turns out they don’t mean anything, they are just there, it’s just your imagination. You try to find meaning when there isn’t any, which makes you obsess over them. This is something I had to learn. Now I can treat those thoughts as trivial, so they don’t bother me in the same way.

‘Therapy led to a whole new way of seeing everything, which needed time to adjust to,’ Matt said.

‘I have had to accept that I have a disability, whether I like it or not. And I have to accept that it’s always going to be there. A bit like an alcoholic, you are always in recovery. But there’s no shame in it. I seem healthy – but I am healthy because of the medications I take.’

He is back at work as an accountant, but with flexible part-time hours so that he can do school runs and keep the work-life balance.

Matt wishes he had known about the Jersey Employment Trust at the time. ‘I think it could have been of benefit to me and my employer. It was a struggle for them and for me. I could have done with the support to make them understand that I do have a disability, even if it doesn’t look like I do.’

Comedy proved to be therapeutic, he said, writing about something that had been so bleak, to revisit it and laugh about it.

‘At the time, of course, it wasn’t very funny. I was in such a dark place. But it was great to be able to find humour in it. I am always happy to talk about what I went through because I know that’s what helps other people. If you know you’re not alone, it doesn’t seem so scary.

‘The White-Collar Comedy has been very therapeutic, it’s like coming full circle. Eight years ago I was too scared to leave the house and here I was standing up in front of 240 people and making them laugh about it. It almost feels like if I can do this, I have beaten it. And the fact that it was for a charity that supports people who have a disability or long-term health condition, made it even better.

‘Dave Crossland [one of the coaches/mentors in the process] had said don’t underestimate how life-changing the experience could be – and he was right. I feel like I have achieved something more than making people laugh, I feel like I have raised some awareness as well.

‘We all got such a buzz on the night. All of us have said we would be mentors for next year’s participants. I’d recommend anyone to give it a go.’

Matt added: 'I still get intrusive thoughts, especially if I'm tired or stressed, but nowhere near the intensity I used to, and I can deal with them now. I think, oh, I haven't had that one before and I can tell Anna – and we can laugh about it.'

I leave you with one final story which shows the dynamic of our relationship since I had my diagnosis.

My wife and I are cooking together in the kitchen and I have a knife cutting something up, when suddenly, for the first time in a while, a thought flashes through my mind that I could stab her. So, I just tell her: "I just had an intrusive thought about stabbing you."

And her response was: "Well, at least I know you still love me."

And they say romance is dead.

*Since his comedy debut, Matt has become a JET Ambassador. You can still sponsor him at tinyurl.com/MattComedy

Photo by JT Livingston Photography