

Working Life

Laura Sky: The people you're about to meet have each grown up with a parent who experienced mental health difficulties. Their relationships with their parents were at times difficult and have led to their own struggles. Out of those difficulties have come skills and learnings for life that will be helpful in any workplace.

This film is about living and working with mental health issues. Because work plays a vital role in all of our lives, we all need fair and respectful workplaces.

You're about to meet Doug Peter. Doug grew up in the 1950s. His father faced a series of mental health crises that were never spoken of. Although his father endured some of the harsh medical treatments that were typical of that time, he and his family received compassionate support from his employer.

Doug Peter: My father became quite ill when I was in my sort of mid-teens, 14, 15, and he was diagnosed as a manic depressive in those days. I think it's called bipolar now. And he was ill for at least two years. Being a teen, I really didn't know what was going on and nobody told me very much.

LS: And how did you experience his hospitalization?

DP: Well it was difficult. More than once people came and sort of in the middle of the night to, to take him away to an institution. My mother just couldn't cope with it. So one day my mother decided to take me to see him, uh, for a visit and I guess she hadn't called ahead to, to say that she was coming and bringing me because when we got there, uh, we saw my father being—coming out of, uh, uh, electric shock treatment, being held up by two of the orderlies and taken to his room and there was no visit. We couldn't—I mean, he was incapable of anything.

And that was quite a shock for, um, you know, someone my age. I'm sure it was a shock to my mother too. I'm, I'm not sure she'd ever seen him like that in other treatments.

But that kind of imagery just stuck with me for a long time, ever, I guess.

My friends would ask me where my dad was and my mother had instructed me to say, "Oh, well just tell them he's out of town on business," which was a total fabrication because he didn't travel on business in his job so

LS: Mm-hm.

DP: But that's what I had to tell people, and I felt a little uneasy doing that.

My dad was the secretary-treasurer of a major retailer here in Toronto and, um, they held his job open for—I'm not sure how long. For a while and till it got to the point that they needed somebody to do what he was doing and they hired somebody, uh, but, but the employer was very, very supportive, um, financially and personally. They called quite often to see how things were going. So they did keep track of my dad.

Then, as I said, when he became back where he could function, they took him back into the company and offered him a different kind of position.

LS: And was that a good thing for him?

DP: It was a good thing for him. He, he, he came back and as I said, he was quite a different man and they offered him a job in advertising, which he had never done before, and he liked it. He loved it. He would actually bring home work and show us what he was working on and the copy he was writing and that kind of thing so, uh, yeah but, uh, the employer was superb.

Male: Top down? Bottom up?

Female: I would, yeah, I'd go bottom up.

Male: Okay. Okay.

Female: How much should I pour?

Male: That looks like its good, right?

Female: Yeah. And then roll it back out.

Male: And roll it back out?

Peter Lebuis: My name is Peter Lebuis. I'm a child and youth counselor with the school board.

There was a really, really bad period when I was 6, uh, when my 13-year-old brother committed suicide and, um, I wasn't told that it was suicide. There was, you know, a whole big story made up and it was an "accident".

Interviewer: Were you getting help as a family during the time at home at the time of your brother's suicide?

PL: No. No, it was, um, it was so stigmatizing in 1971.

INT: Yeah.

PL: You know, to talk about—so, we talk about mental health, talk about suicide, and, uh, there was no support. My mom didn't get any support.

You know, in that moment of trauma, she thought she was doing the best to protect her other children, to not have us stigmatized as siblings of somebody who committed suicide, as well.

For me, growing up, it was dealing with depression. So, for my mother, it was a question of not knowing when she was in a good space, not in a good space. Was it, you know, mom was angry or mom was lying in bed? And I guess at some point I started to understand there was something going to happen and so those were the days that I would dread coming home for lunch or coming home after school.

It wasn't all bad, that's the thing. There were some really, really great moments growing up.

INT: What were some of the great moments growing up?

PL: Feeling loved.

INT: Mm-hm.

PL: Always feeling loved. That was a big, big thing for my mom. You know, French Canadians, it's the hug and the kiss and, and, uh, spending time together and the Sunday dinners and it—there's a lot of stuff that was really, really good about having the mom that I had.

Female: Peter, you're doing an excellent job.

PL: Thank you!

Female: What would you call this colour?

PL: Like, dark-ocean blue, maybe.

Male: I would call that sky blue.

Female: Yeah.

PL: That's not bad. Do I sign it?

PL: From my mom, the biggest thing that I learned was to not give up.

INT: Hm.

PL: Right? And I think that that's—she may have been lying in bed sometimes or getting angry or fighting with my father but it was always better after, right? And there was always that moment and I, and I think that, uh, what really stayed with me was that idea that you should never give up.

INT: Hm.

PL: That things are bad right now but that things will get better.

INT: Did your mom, during the time you were growing-up, was she part of the workforce at all?

PL: She was. She worked, um, on and off, seasonally and then she got a full-time job as a receptionist.

INT: And do you have any idea how, if any of the difficulties you were experiencing at home played out at her workplace?

PL: You know, I think the other thing I learned from my mom is how to be very functional. While feeling, um, depressed.

INT: Okay.

PL: So I think that my mother, like, like, I learned to do, was able to go to work and be around other people and be funny and laugh and nobody would have a clue and, um, she'd be there for everybody else. And then would come home and, and that's when it would just sort of all give away.

INT: Mm-hm.

PL: So, uh, I think that, uh, yeah, I think that's how she managed.

But I don't recall my mother ever not wanting to go into work. I think that the work was probably one of the best things for her.

INT: Mm-hm.

PL: To be able to, to go out and just socialize and be around people.

Watching my mother, um, go to work and have everybody at think she was so wonderful and so happy all the time, and so productive and such a good worker, I think that that's how I learned, "Well, that's what you do in life." So if you're miserable inside and you're sad, you don't talk about it. You just go out and you put on a brave front and then you come home and go to bed.

I think March of this year, there just seemed to be this weight, and there was all these, these changes, so I, I graduated university, I had a, a friend who, uh, attempted suicide, I all of these things sort of compounded and just kept on building up and then when I went to work I just felt like I was just absorbing all of this, this, this stuff that the kids were going through. And, uh, you know, people around me were just—"It's depression, it's—go back and see your doctor" and I would sit there in tears and saying, "But I'm not depressed. It's not depression. I love my job" and like, you know, it was just—it was too much.

My, my union had a wonderful union day and there was a, a speaker there and he was talking specifically about burn-out and it was as though he was talking directly to me. And I realized, "Oh my gosh, that I'm completely burnt out. I have nothing left to give."

I've been really fortunate that I've had some really, really good administrators that I've worked with that have, um, been supportive and, um, have known enough about me to, to sort of see when I needed a break.

It was just understood. "You need this time. The doctor says you need the time. No problem." I was more concerned about the students: Who was going to be there? So, um, from that respect, I think that that's—that's what I would like from any employer. I wish everybody had that opportunity: to have somebody at the top say, "Look after yourself."

I think it's important to know that it's okay. It's okay to feel depressed. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be angry but you have to acknowledge that that's what it is and once you could acknowledge it, you can start to work at repairing it. And now I know how to acknowledge when I'm not doing well. Uh, when something's been particularly difficult, I know to go and talk to a supervisor about it.

LS: Some people would be afraid that their supervisor would think badly of them or it would be a mark against them. What do we need managerial people, supervisors, to understand about, in this case, burn-out?

PL: I think they need to learn that the problem isn't the employee. The problem is the problem, the employee is the employee. And until you can acknowledge that there's a problem and start to fix the problem, um, it's, it's, it's, it's pointless. So, by understanding that the two are separate and by enabling someone to work on the problem, you will get a more productive worker. Because you don't see it, because you can't really see mental illness, and we tend to be a society that just wants to be at arm's length of everybody, uh, we just don't—we don't even acknowledge it, and, and I think that's the message that people have to get is that it's out there, it exists, and

it's okay. It's not this horrible, horrible thing. Um, it doesn't mean that you can't be a parent; it doesn't mean that you can't work somewhere; it doesn't mean that you can't go on to university; it doesn't mean that you can't—it, it doesn't mean that you're limited. You know. I, I think that we're limited by our, by our minds more than anything else and if, if people think that it's something that has to be hidden, something that you can't talk about, I think that that's much worse.

[PL sings song]

Female: Red's supposed to be my colour. Ooh, I like it.

Male: Ooh. That is nice.

Male: Yeah, you're right, that's very fuchsia.

Tallie Garey: My name is Tallie Rochelle Alexis Sky Low Garey and I love colour. I'm about to graduate from art school and I'm a freelance fashion photographer. I really love the work but it's a hard way to make a living.

I didn't know until I was 16 that my mom was dealing with any mental health difficulties so as a child, I just understood that my mom was really, really happy and fun sometimes and could get really sad, or really angry, really easy other times.

Sometimes I couldn't explain why she was in a bad mood and I would just think, "I must have done something to bother her. Maybe I didn't do the dishes right. Maybe I didn't fold the laundry the right way."

Other times, she would get really upset at very small things that I would do and then I would get grounded and it would just seem over the top.

My mom, she liked to infuse colour everywhere in our life. Two to three times a year I would wake up in the house and everything in the house would be a new colour. She went from brown walls to lavender and purple walls and all of a sudden there was a zebra couch in the living room.

I have to get it for here. There's too much white showing.

I guess it kept things fun and alive, and even if we didn't, you know, have enough money to get new furniture or new toys, we could at least be in an environment that made us feel good.

LS: What do you think? Does this colour describe Tallie?

PL: I think so. It's very, it's very bright. It's energetic.

Male: Vibrant.

Female: It is.

LS: Yeah.

TG: I like them beside each other so much, with that tiny bit of white

Female: Yeah.

Male: Yeah.

LS: Your mom could work some of the time and not others?

TG: There were times when she had full-time jobs and then when she was getting her high school credits, she could only work part time, and when she was going to nursing school, she could barely work because it was a, it was a huge pressure.

I think my younger brother was about a year or two old and I basically raised him the whole time she was in school. Um, I took him to the babysitter's, picked him up when I was done school from the babysitter's and would feed him dinner and that whole thing.

LS: Was that a burden?

TG: In some ways it was a burden but it taught me how to take care of and how to nurture people. And I think that's a really important lesson. And also in some ways, raising myself and my mom. So I learned how to take care of myself and I learned how to take care of others. That's probably one of the best lessons that I think I've learned.

INT: Now, I know that recently your mom, knowing that you were graduating and her imagining that you would be entering into the world of work, she wrote you a letter with some thoughts about it, some things she wanted to tell you from her own experiences. Is that something you might be willing to read to us?

TG: Yeah.

INT: This would be a good time to do it.

TG: Yeah.

“As you make your way into the world and as you embark into the wo—work world, there are some tidbits of knowledge that I've learned and want to pass on to you. Don't follow the yellow brick road. Don't stay on the straight and narrow. You are not meant for this path. You can't fit on that path. A square peg cannot fit into a round hole. Your edges go off in different directions. Don't be afraid of the edges. Pick your own learning.

From my own, from my own work experience I have learned these things. We need to eliminate stigma. We should be able to talk about our bad days when we are at work. When I'm having a bad day, I need to reach out and talk to people about it. You should be able to express yourself at work. You should not be defined by those hard days. I don't see my illness as a hindrance. There have been a lot of bad things but there are also a lot of beautiful things.

Tallie, you are forever blossoming.”

INT: What stands out for you when you read that?

TG: Well, 'forever blossoming' I think stands out as definitely a, a way that my mom sees me, um, which makes me feel really wonderful inside. Um, and the importance of being able to get the care that you need and to be able to, to be able to reach out to people when you need to, I think that's really important and

INT: Hm.

TG: And I—it makes me sad to think that my mom has to go to work and have bad days where she's feeling really horrible and she can't talk to anybody about it.

INT: These lessons that you've learned, how do you think those lessons are going to help you as you begin the next step of your life, which will include supporting yourself?

TG: Being able to rely on myself is probably one of the biggest ones that I'm seeing for myself is a great lesson because I'm at a point where I'm about to be freelancing and all I have is to rely on myself.

I'm, I'm really desperate. The make-up artist didn't even show up and I—like, I counted you in as one of the five people that I had.

Ohhh, it's a very stressful thing organizing shoots. You have to depend on a lot of people and

Female: Not a lot are reliable.

TG: Yeah. Not a lot of people are reliable.

Even though I'm in photography, I've had a few part-time jobs.

LS: What are the values and the assets that you bring to the workplace?

TG: I have a desire to help people with whatever they need so I feel that I will always come to a, a job from an angle of how can I help? How can I be most useful? Even just working in retail, but in all aspects of my work, I really pay attention to detail. Being resourceful, being able to work with what I'm given in a creative way and to multitask on many creative levels.

It's pretty close to the same colour. Can you

Another aspect I think about wanting to help people is being empathetic, compassionate

LS: Mm-hm.

TG: Um, being able to really listen to what your employer or employee needs, um, and what will be very supportive to help them do the best at their job.

INT: Making this film today, knowing that it will go to employers, employees, other families, what does that mean to you to be part of this?

TG: It means a lot to me. Having, I guess, my own mental health difficulties and having experienced being in the workplace and dealing with my own problems [01:21:50]

and, and knowing what my mom has dealt with, I really want to be able to help other people.

Maybe my mom couldn't work every single day a regular 9 to 5 job but she could still, with the energy that she had, she could work sometimes. But sometimes doesn't always pay the rent and sometimes doesn't always feed your children. So knowing or having support available when you can still do some work but you can't fully participate, I think that's really important and people who are there to not just support the parent or just support the child but to support the family as a whole.

Female: Ooh. Nice. Coral.

A.J.: Am I doing this right?

Female: Yeah. Just shove it.

A.J.: It's like a gavel.

A.J.: My name is A.J. and I'm a journalism student at Humber College. Growing up as a child, to me my mom was normal. She wasn't necessarily like other parents that I was going—you know, of kids I was going to school with but growing up at my household, it's what I was accustomed to and that's all I really thought of. "That's, that's my mom. This is, you know, her," and that's just about it. It was after I got older, I think, when I went into Children's Aid, when I was 9 years old, that's when I had overheard people talking in meetings that she had mental health difficulties. When I was, like, 14 or 15, they started calling it an 'intellectual disability'.

Okay. Are we ready?

Male: Are you there or in the corner?

A.J.: I'm here and I'm sold.

Male: Oh, okay.

Female: Oh, that's nice.

Male: Oh.

INT: Do you think that you and your family were treated differently by CAS because of that label?

A.J.: Yeah. Because I, I believe that when they gave her a label, they automatically thought she was incompetent. When she was diagnosed with that, they thought, "How can an intellectually disabled mother be capable of caring for her child?" It just—I almost—like, the vision I have in my head is her picture and then a red X over it, because that's what it felt like. It felt like she was crossed out, she was cancelled out. It was almost like they were trying to cancel her parenting role out of my life.

INT: We now know you were in 16 placements.

A.J.: Mm-hm.

INT: How did you finally get home?

A.J.: I started running away a lot. After rebelling and refusing to go back to the group homes, I tried to prove to them that even though I'm rebelling, "Look, I can make it work. I can make it work." And it didn't work on the first time but the second time it did work. And people are still amazed when they even see me today, asking "How are things with my mom?" and it's not an easy life to live but I'm making it work because it's my choice and I'm determined to make it work. And I realize that I love my mom.

INT: What do you think the CAS didn't know about your mom and you that might have helped them?

A.J.: I believe that they thought our determination was just words. I don't believe they realized the commitment we had to each other and our commitment to making it work.

And what we did at first was we sort of had a—we started counting, I've been successful at home for one day, then one week, then one month, then three months, then six months. And I think after staying at home for about two years, my mom and I stopped counting.

PL: Is this the colour—is this what you thought it would look like, A.J.?

A.J.: Kind of.

PL: Because it looks really, really cool. It's very bright, very bubbly, just like you.

LS: What do you think of the colour A.J.?

A.J.: I like it. Like, I think it kind of speaks to me. Well, it's a sa—like, for some reason, it reminds me of a salmon and I consider myself like a salmon. Think I've

PL: Sorry, I won't laugh. I'll wait for your explanation.

A.J.: No. But I mean, I think growing up in CAS, I swam around from place to place.

Female: Ooh!

A.J.: And so, yeah, like, the first thing that speaks to me is, like, a salmon, a very pink salmon.

INT: What kind of things did you learn from having had those particular struggles in your life?

A.J.: I knew my mom loved me but I didn't know to what degree.

INT: Hm.

A.J.: So I learned that she loved me. Um, I learned—but she always believed in me. I did anything in my power to get out of school and she kept telling them, “He'll go back when he, he's ready. He'll go back when he's ready.”

And they said, “But he has to stay in school.”

And she says, “I know my son. Give him time. He may not want to go to school today, he may not want to go to school tomorrow, he may not even want to go next week or next month, but he's a smart kid and when he's determined to go back, he will be. And sure enough, I ended up in college and she said, “See.” And I'll be graduating a year from now. She was right.

I was shocked that, you know, I was one of a hundred students admitted to the journalism program, out of 1,200 applicants. And the first two years were so rough. There was a lot of the times where I was in the dean's office wanting to pull the plug and it's like, “I can't do this anymore” but he knew about me, he knew about my prior determination and said, “You're going to be leaving this college with a diploma. I don't know how it's going to happen but one way or another, take my word for it, it's going to happen.”

PL: Well, I—after hearing his explanation, I—and knowing your story, completely right. A salmon always swimming against stream.

A.J.: Swimming against stream, which is so difficult. No matter how tired I got, I still feel I like I had a mission to accomplish: to move back home with my mom and have a relationship with her. You know, I beat the odds and it happened.

LS: And she beat the odds.

A.J.: I'm actually a damn good painter.

Female: Yeah, this is definitely good.

Female: You know what else?

A.J.: Forget journalism, I'm going into painting, man.

INT: Can I ask a little bit about you've had your own experiences recently on a job where you experienced a bit of depression?

A.J.: I finally pulled my employer aside and just said, "Listen, I'm going to be honest with you. My mom's undergoing some health difficulties but I'm also feeling depressed myself. School has overwhelmed me. I'm—I, I, just need some, some time away." Um, even if it meant only working a few hours a week. And that actually turned into me getting written up and putting—being put on internal probation. And when I had said to the manager, "Am I not allowed to be depressed?"

They had said, "If you're depressed, come back when you're not. Call in sick every day until you're, you're not depressed anymore."

They told me to put a smile on my face and become enthusiastic and I had just explained, like, when you're feeling like this, putting a smile on your face or faking a smile, it actually makes you feel worse, and I feel like I'm good at my job. They acknowledge there was no record of customer complaints and I thought, "You know, if they catch me with a frown on my face even once, I'm going to lose my job." I don't like feeling like this but I—the fact of the matter is that I do and I need to be accommodated. My professors have accommodated me. There was days at school

where I was crying for no reason and my professor sent me home and I said, "Please, I want to stay."

And they said, "No."

But they didn't do it from a, "you're a bad person" point of view; they did it for my own well being. They tried to talk things out with me and my employer wasn't like that. They looked down on me and did it from a perspective of I'm a bad person, that it was wrong to be feeling this way.

And what I think employers need to come to the realization is that mental illness is everywhere. Their own employees that they may not even know might have it. And I think they need to be encouraging so employees are upfront. So they—I shouldn't have to call in and lie and say, "I'm sick" or "I've been vomiting all night. I can't come into work." I think they need to create a safe environment where I should be able to be upfront with my employer and say, "Here's the deal. I suffer from depression. Most of my days are good but the odd day, not so much."

Yeah, if I were to give one word it would be acceptance but also honesty.

I will be starting an internship, um, on a national news program that I'm very excited about and though they don't know much about me, they kind of still know my story and they welcome me with open arms. And definitely I'm going to be putting all my energy, over the next month, you know, just building it up, um, doing this internship at a lifetime that I've hoped for many months and years, and, hopefully, impressing them enough that I'll be able to get a job and put my other worries aside and go to a more accepting place. I'm so determined to show people: Look what I can do.

LS: So, what do you like about each other? What do you like about being together as a group?

A.J.: I feel like I can be myself. Um, I mean, the, the details that I've shared in the group over the past little while, I mean, I think a couple other people know but it's just nice to do it in such a large group of people, not necessarily one on one.

TG: It's easier to go through something when you know that you've got the support of other people who also what you've gone through.

Female: Yeah.

Female: I was thinking, one thing that really came strongly in this group is realization that people are so much more than their problems or the problems that they're facing in life.

TG: Well what stood out for me, as a group, unifying us, is that we were all here to make a difference.

LS: How could things have been different for you if you had been able to talk about this openly?

DP: Oh, I think it would have been an enormous help to talk the way these young people talk to each other. Just having someone to share the experience with, whatever the—whatever that is, I think would be very, very valuable.

A.J.: You guys look like farmers.

INT: If you could give a message back to that teenage boy

DP: Mm-hm.

INT: what would it be? Send a message back.

DP: Ask questions.

INT: Ask questions?

DP: Mm-hm. What's going on? Why is my dad sick? Tell me. What can I do? How can I support you? And talk with your peers if you can. Talk with some professional people who can assist you in understanding the nature of the illness. But talk.

Female: The richness in the group is so many different ways of living in families where someone is experiencing difficulties, and so many different learnings that came out of it, but together, it's sort of like unity in diversity. Like, there are some things in common and some things very different.

Female: Some things, yeah.

Female: And we found the threads.

Female: Yeah.

PL: It—we've created a—and you helped create a safe environment, I think, with Ruth and everybody. I think it really is a safe place that we can talk and know that we'll be supported and not be judged. It's really, really cool.

TG: Mm-hm.

A.J.: I enjoy coming to these meetings.

Female: Yeah.

Female: Yeah.

TG: There's also a playful dynamic with us.

Female: Yeah, there is a playful dynamic. Yeah.

LS: What is it that you have in common?

A.J.: Besides the obvious?

LS: And the obvious is?

PL: Good looks? [laughter]

A.J.: That too.

Female: Talent. Talent.

PL: Talent. Good looks.