



JIM'S STORY

Like many people, 56-year-old Jim's suffering is rooted in comparing himself unfavourably with others, but surviving cancer in his 30s made him appreciate just how lucky he really is.

I started experiencing depression in my teens. Not smart enough. Not good-looking enough. Not popular enough. Not funny enough. Not rich enough. Just not good enough.

It seems obvious reading through this list now that my feelings were the result of comparing myself unfavourably with people around me. I didn't know that at the time. I thought these things were objective facts.

Today, those feelings sometimes still feel like my default settings. But I have found a way of thinking about them differently.

When we're born we think we're the centre of the world. Of course, we do. The world didn't exist before us. However, as you grow up you become increasingly aware of other people and learn, as a fact, that the world doesn't revolve around you. The problem is that facts don't, of themselves, change feelings. Only we can change our feelings and only if we recognise them as such.

Billions of humans have lived before us. There are billions more out there alive today. Imagine all those people, then and now. And then rate them in terms of luck. Don't be deceived by costume dramas or travel writing. To have been born in western Europe in the late twentieth century is the best time and place to have ever been born.

So, if I'm honest, I have already won the lottery of life. Having cancer in my 30s helped me to understand all this in a real way: at any time anywhere before the 1990s, the cancer would have killed me. In the vast majority of countries today it still would.

We are encouraged - by society, by capitalism, by human nature, by whatever - to see life as a race. Our language is all about winners and losers. Sometimes people like me are described as 'beating' cancer. It's bullshit. I didn't beat anything. I just got lucky.

In other words, it's only possible for me to feel inferior because I've been so incredibly lucky. It's not surprising that there were people at university who were smarter or funnier than me. It's not surprising that in a city the size of London, there are people who are better-looking or richer than me.

You could say I should just stop comparing myself with others but that's easier said than done. Comparing comes naturally. It's part of the human condition. Social media would never have caught on if it wasn't.

This is not to imply that the very luckiest among us - film stars, celebs, sports stars, rich people, intellectuals - shouldn't get depressed. On the contrary, it may be part of an explanation of why they do. Nor am I saying it applies to everyone. Not all mental health challenges come from our instinct to compare, especially not the more serious ones. But, in my experience, around the mild and moderate end of depression and anxiety, it's often a factor. Even if we take time to admit it.

When I was very young, four or five, I was attacked by a mad dog. I was bitten on the shoulder (which shows how small I was) and needed to go to hospital. I'm still nervous today when I see a dog off its lead. I know the risk is tiny but my body feels something else. My reaction annoys me at times - perhaps it reminds me of vulnerability - but I don't blame myself for it.

The causes of other anxieties can be less obvious. That's one reason why talking about how we feel helps. Through talking you can identify the mad dog that triggers the feelings and, while you might not be able to control them, at least you'll understand that they're not your fault. The sense of failure that I have mostly stems from very human feelings of jealousy. I try to recognise the feelings as such, call them by the right name, and recognise that they're not facts.

Life is a lottery won rather than a race lost. Easy to say; harder to do. But, for me, if you can see it like that, it helps. The fact is, however I sometimes feel, I was born lucky. Maybe you were too?

Jim Pollard is a writer. His latest health book is Mens Health (Haynes; 2020)



TOP TIPS:

- **Getting it into perspective and not taking yourself too seriously.**
- **Using the five ways to wellbeing (connect with others, get active, notice what's around you, learn things and give/volunteer) as a tool-kit to choose something new from.**
- **Ringing the changes because there's no magic wand.**