

Earlier this year, I was psychotic for around 12 hours.

I mean that literally, and as a criminal barrister, I've read enough psychiatric reports to know that I was correctly diagnosed. It all happened over one weekend. On the Saturday things were still fairly normal. For example, I took a call on my mobile and discussed the next steps in a case, while walking around a shop with my family. But by Sunday night I was being taken to A&E by ambulance, strapped to the trolley to keep me safe.

I am not the sort of person people would have expected this of. My friends were astonished. Opponents, judges, clients, they too would be amazed if they knew. I'd prosecuted a 4 handed trial shortly before, and I am confident that if I told anyone involved in that case what happened within days of its conclusion they would find it hard to credit.

In fact, it is pretty rare for a psychotic episode to come and go suddenly, so it's not surprising few of us know it can happen, but this is mental health awareness week. So I'm telling the story to raise awareness, not just of the fact that many of us have suffered from mental ill health, but also of the many forms it can take.

This is what happened. In the two years before, my life was in normal mode, but there were a few additional stress factors. Normal mode for me is full-time work in an unpredictable, demanding job, alongside my husband who is also a criminal barrister, and we have three children, one still young enough to need her backside checked for proper wiping.

The additional stress factors -

On a personal level, my father has become frail, and has been in and out of hospital. He is the world's worst patient. My mother is the world's worse nurse. It's trying for everyone. Meanwhile my teen has been suffering with low mood, to the extent where she has been tearful and "like a ghost" in class. We're also embroiled in seemingly endless litigation with the freeholder of our building. Then there's the builders....

But also there's the post-Brexit world, which we are all dealing with in our different ways. For me anyway, it has felt personally challenging. I've felt like the onus was on me – on all of us – to do all we can to improve the parlous state of our democracy. But at the same time politics has become so polarised, so hate-fuelled. That's one of the manifestations of all the political cards being thrown up in the air. It's toxic.

And then there's mobile phones. Most of us now seem to be locked in a love-hate relationship with our phones and devices. Social media is a big part of that. But even without that layer, our phones are just so demanding, so attention-grabbing, so damned interesting. I've become unable to just rest and watch the world go by, even for a few moments, unless I've left my phone somewhere well and truly out of reach.

This heady mix had led to what I now recognise was chronic and constant lack of sleep. Too short nights, followed by a steady drip of caffeine. As a wise friend pointed out to me, staying up and being effective late at night produces a kind of high. When I was young I was always up last at a party. In middle age I'd started having my own, really lame little

party with my phone, late at night. I was either on it in the hour or so before falling asleep, or back on it when I woke up in the night.

Things had got to quite a pitch on the weekend it all blew up, and the final straw was a totally sleepless night on Saturday. Sunday was weird all day, but Sunday night was wild. I use that word advisedly. Being psychotic is a thrill, so long as nothing spoils the party. At times I thought I was soon to be on top of the world. Trump was about to die. I was going to be instrumental in sorting our own Government out. I was going to receive justified credit for sorting out the NHS funding crisis. I mean wild, huh?

But things began to break the spell. At one point I suddenly registered my husband's desolate, exhausted face, when I'd thought he was part of the magic – him and me dancing on top of the world.

Then later I found myself in a secure part of A&E, which at the time I couldn't understand as anything other than a strange Orwellian prison. I was in a windowless, white room, with one lime green wall and one mauve plastic seat. The door was closed and it had no handle. There was a thin clear strip in the door and I could see men in black uniforms outside. I thought one of them was a rapist.

He had restrained me earlier, using what seemed to be his full weight and strength. I don't blame him. That's his job – he was a security guard. But when I think now of the many, many patients who have actually experienced rape or sexual assault, as I fortunately have not, it must be even more terrifying when they are being restrained by big, burly psychiatric nurses or security guards.

When I finally saw a woman in plain clothes, probably a totally over-stretched doctor, and was able to get her attention, I was unable to explain to her that I was terrified. I couldn't even explain that it would be a little better if I had something to lie down on (this being two nights on from the few hours of sleep I'd had on Friday).

I wish I could find a way to track down the unknown security guard, who was kind enough to try to understand me, and put himself in my shoes. He took the trouble to show me that the handle-less door was not and could not be locked. He even managed to get a little mat and blankets together for me, and curiously enough, as it turned out, that was all I needed. I will be forever thankful to him.

Once I fell asleep, my mind started curing itself.

I've been told that the drug I was given was too slow-acting to have produced the immediate effect that sleep did. By Monday afternoon I was no longer psychotic. I'd been asleep on and off through the day, and my brain had what it needed to bring me back to sanity.

I took time off work of course. And it's been hard to adjust to the speed with which the psychosis came and went. The psychological damage has been far more profound and long lasting. I've been comforted by the medical advice that there is no reason to think the

psychosis will come back, and certainly no reason to think it was the onset of an enduring illness. But it will have a profound effect on my life forever.

The recipe for better health that I am currently following is actually pretty simple: no caffeine at all, my phone is plugged in downstairs at night, and I put it out of the room whenever it's bothering me. I've removed social media apps from it, and I visit twitter and facebook around once a week or less, from my laptop, at a time I consciously choose.

It took quite a while for my sleep to regulate, but I now have 7 or 8 hours every night. I still feel like I'm catching up.

So far so good.

We can all suffer with mental ill health at times. For many of us, it need not be enduring. With the right support we can get back to health.

I've written this anonymously because there is stigma attached to mental ill health, and because I don't want to be forever that barrister who had psychosis. But actually I am willing to talk about it pretty freely, and I've written this because the movement to talk about mental ill health more freely can only be a good thing. If anyone wants to talk to me about anything I've raised here, get in touch with [Aaron Dolan] at the CBA and he'll pass your details on to me.