



Image taken from Soulful Baker © Lisa Linder and Julie Jones

# MENTAL HEALTH *and Making Cakes*

So often we hear from readers who have come to baking and sugarcraft at difficult times in their lives and have found it relaxing, distracting and even therapeutic. We spoke to Stephen Buckley, Head of Information at mental health charity Mind, to find out more about mental health issues and the role creative pursuits can play in managing them.

'We all have mental health, just as we have physical health, and how we feel fluctuates over time. While most of us are familiar with ways of looking after our physical health, it's easy to neglect our mental wellbeing. Feeling stressed, anxious or having down days is a perfectly normal part of human nature, and usually these feelings will pass without having any major impact on your life, but if the feelings don't go away after a couple of weeks, or get worse, it could be a sign that you're experiencing a mental health problem.'

'Successful treatment for a mental health problem varies from person to person and

while medication can be effective for some, it is not the solution for everyone. Some people find alternatives such as talking therapies, arts therapy, exercise or a combination of treatments work best. Self-care techniques and general lifestyle changes can help manage the symptoms of many mental health problems, and may also help to prevent some problems from developing or getting worse.'

'Baking can be a great way to make time for yourself, away from the pressures of day-to-day life, and boost mental wellbeing. Creating something that tastes great can give a sense of reward and increased self-esteem but, even if things don't quite turn out as you'd hoped, the

processes involved can be therapeutic. Baking a cake for a loved one or for a special occasion can give you a huge sense of pride and enjoyment and can help turn negative thoughts or feelings into something positive. For some people, taking time to concentrate on following a recipe for example, rather than on your own thoughts and feelings, can be a relaxing experience.'

'Baking can bring people together by sharing recipes or enjoying the finished product over a cup of tea. It can be a great way to find time to really talk with a friend or loved one and an opportunity to work through the feelings or problems you may be facing.'

So can baking really be a helpful tool for coping with depression, anxiety and other mental health issues? We spoke to three cake makers with first-hand experience to find out.



I spent last Christmas 2015 on my own as I couldn't face the pressure of going to someone else's house. I was also incredibly anxious that my husband would be missing out if he didn't go, so he went to his parents and I spent the day alone. I was so worked up about the idea of me ruining his Christmas but, in hindsight, it was a classic example of how isolating mental health can be and how we can get so caught up in trying not to have it negatively impact others that we end up punishing ourselves.

I created my own business after my breakdown. I couldn't leave my house and I made my mum a cake. It was the first time I didn't have a panic attack in ages and I began to realise my love of baking. I had no idea I could make cakes! Cake decorating is therapeutic for me as I find I lose myself in it. When I am focusing on working with that piece of sugarpaste it uses all my attention, this helps to quieten the anxious part of my mind that is usually swarming with thoughts and feelings. I find that the ultra-vigilant part of my anxiety becomes a superpower as I am able to focus on the tiny details on a cake. The act of producing something also gives me purpose, which helps me to battle the self-doubt that my depression brings.

Liz Fox runs BuBakes and shares her experiences with baking and mental health on her blog.



In 2011 I was having a rough time. I had left my job to take care of my father who was suffering with severe mental health issues after the death of my mother. I have always turned to art in times of stress. That Christmas, cake pops were all the rage but, as you may know, they are tricky to master. I was googling one night and found a cake pop class at Cakes 4 Fun. After that I started taking every class I could find and reading every blog and Facebook page dedicated to cake.

I had been following Depressed Cake Shop's creator Emma (a.k.a. Miss Cakehead) on social media and I read about the project. The mission is very straightforward; we promote the idea that the act of sharing a piece of cake creates connection. We also aim to promote self-care through the power of creativity. In doing so we open up about subjects that are often taboo, promote awareness of mental health issues, and raise funds for non-profits who are working every day in the mental health space.

Emma's original concept of bakes with a grey exterior and a colourful interior was so simple and visual that it became the perfect metaphor for what depression feels like – it casts a grey pallor over an otherwise beautiful life. Having spent time with my father I could see that was his exact experience. He had a wonderful family and a life full of blessings, but he could not see that. It broke my



heart and made me want to do something to help other families and individuals who were having the same experience.

Depressed Cake Shop pop ups have received an amazing response – the project has literally changed people's lives. Most recently, a woman who has been suffering with depression for years worked with her daughter to create a Depressed Cake Shop for their Bat Mitzvah project. The experience was so gratifying that she left her job to work with her synagogue on a series of projects to create more conversation around mental health issues in her community. In Scotland, a woman named Freda Douglas, who lost her daughter to suicide, regularly pops-up shops to raise money for a foundation in her honour.

There is a lot of very good and convincing research around creative pursuits as a means to manage mental health issues. For me personally, the artistry and focus that baking and decorating require help quiet my mind, especially during times of high stress. And there is the added benefit of sharing my creations with friends and family which takes the pursuit from solitary to social.

Valerie Van Galder runs the website and social media for Depressed Cake Shop and will answer any questions you may have about popping up a shop if you email [info@depressedcakeshop.com](mailto:info@depressedcakeshop.com).







Images © Lisa Linder and Julie Jones

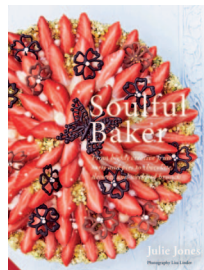
When my mum's dementia worsened she was no longer comfortable with being taken out to cafes and such like so we would stay at home. She was very anxious and would repeat herself continually and, in general, be very agitated. It would be a long afternoon if hours were spent just trying to reassure her, with the same question answered countless times. Patience would naturally be tested and it could be exasperating, especially with three children also needing your attention.

It was an impulsive decision to bake a cake one afternoon – a simple idea which went on to save those last few months we had together from being stressful ones. I have such fond memories of those afternoons when we were connecting again but, most importantly, I was helping her to feel relaxed. As soon as we would start to bake her symptoms would ease, her anxiety practically vanishing for those few hours. I can't explain why this happened, perhaps it was being given the belief that she could still help and do something, perhaps it was memories that she had playing out within her mind or perhaps it was a fondness of me re-teaching her what she had taught me all those years ago. She could never explain how she was feeling, she could never tell me what she was doing, but her body would naturally let her sift the flour or roll the pastry. Seeing her be even just a fraction of that person she once was was very touching and I would eagerly await the next baking day.

Baking with my mum when she was ill brought great relief and a feeling of deep connection between us, even though she no longer knew me. Again during those months of grieving, when I baked, I could really tune in to how I was feeling. By doing so I felt that I could deal with all of the sadness, using those emotions and channelling them positively into being creative.

There are so many positives to be gained through baking. Personally, I find baking for others most rewarding. The process and the care you give to what you are baking is, in essence, sharing a little bit of your love. In return the recipient's heart will undoubtedly be warmed upon receiving and eating your lovingly baked treat. The baking process is also a relaxing and enjoyable one. Using the time to forget everything else and focus on making something for yourself and others to enjoy will be beneficial. To de-stress and have that time to be mindful and be creative is essential in such a fast-paced modern environment.

Julie Jones began baking with her mother who was suffering from dementia. She has since written a book called *Soulful Baker* documenting her experience and sharing her recipes.



## MORE ABOUT MIND

'Mind provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We do this through our network of around 140 local Minds who provide services specific to local needs, supporting over 390,000 people each year. We also support over 16 million people through our award-winning information services which includes extensive online advice and guides on all aspects of mental health.'

'Mind campaigns to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding of mental health problems. Mind runs a free Infoline and legal line which provide confidential advice to around 65,000 enquiries each year. Aside from this we pioneer new forms of online support, including our online peer support community Elefriends.'

'Many people wait too long before seeing their GP, discounting their mental health as part of everyday life. It's important to seek help as soon as possible if your feelings are interfering with your ability to do the things you normally would. We know mental health can be a difficult thing to talk about, especially with a GP or practice nurse, someone you might hardly know. We've put together a new guide with some tips on how to prepare for your appointment and make the most of the short time you get with them. Find out more at [mind.org.uk/findthewords](http://mind.org.uk/findthewords).'

**Stephen Buckley,**  
Head of Information at Mind

## MORE ABOUT OUR BAKERS

Read more about Liz's experiences with mental illness at [bubakes.co.uk/blog](http://bubakes.co.uk/blog).

Visit [depressedcakeshop.com](http://depressedcakeshop.com) and sign up for the newsletter. Go to the 'Get Involved' page to find the tools you'll need to host your own pop up. You can also email [info@depressedcakeshop.com](mailto:info@depressedcakeshop.com) for more information.

Turn to page 74 to read a review of Soulful Baker and find out how you can win a copy. You can also follow Julie on Instagram [@julie\\_jonesuk](https://www.instagram.com/julie_jonesuk).

Thank you to everyone in this feature for sharing their experiences. If you have any questions or comments, please do get in touch by emailing [enquiries@cakesandsugarcraft.com](mailto:enquiries@cakesandsugarcraft.com). We'd love to hear from you.