

# Learning to love Christmas

A mother who suffered from depression – but whose life has now been transformed due to attending Recovery meetings – tells Margaret Hawkins about her journey.



*Maura (65) has been in Recovery for 16 years. She is originally from Roscommon, but now lives in Dublin. At the age of 17, she joined a convent, but mental health problems occurred soon after. She tells us what happened:*

**“** I was in hospital for two months, but was okay for years after that, but post-natal depression meant that I was hospitalised after my third and fourth children.

It was a local priest who told me about Recovery meetings. I have grown and got myself together so much as a person since I started attending them.

I've confidence in myself now. I always thought I wasn't as good as other people, but Recovery teaches me that all I have to be is average – I don't have to be super duper. I only have to make an effort, and I can endorse (praise) myself for that effort, not for the results I get.

I used to dread Christmas – all the shopping and the presents and the idea of cooking and having to organise everything – but I don't anymore. In Recovery, I've learned not to anticipate and dread. We are

told to live in the moment, to break the day up into 'part-acts' and to take one task at a time.

We learn that when we make a decision it steadies us. If we are in dread of something it unsettles us, so we try not to anticipate.

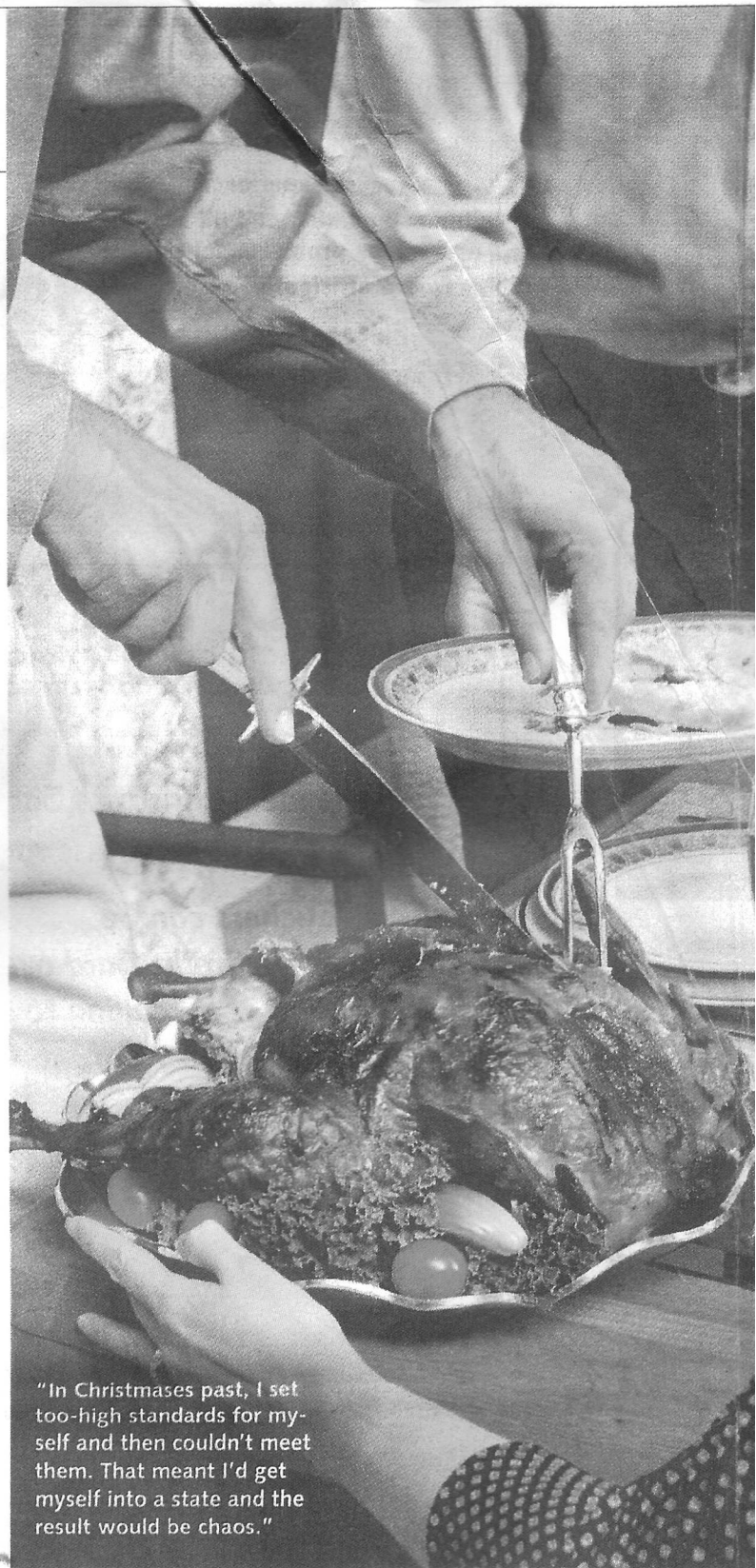
In Christmases past, I set too-high standards for myself and then couldn't meet them. That meant I'd get myself into a state and the result would be chaos. I lowered my standards for Christmas and asked myself what the average Irish mother does.

I also made my mental health at Christmas my top priority. That's one of the slogans that you live by.

There are a lot of slogans that we use as tools – like 'decide, plan and act'. If you are depressed, indecision can be a big thing, and this slogan helps you to get things done.

Another one is 'command your muscles to move'. When you're depressed, you tend to just want to sit there, and things like washing up are a big deal. With the Recovery method, you command your feet to move to the sink and your hands to move when you get there, without thinking about your feelings.

As soon as you start doing the washing-up, or whatever the task is,



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you endorse yourself (praise yourself) for doing it. You are no longer blaming yourself for what you're not doing; you are praising yourself for what you are doing, and you feel better.

In Recovery, we use the word 'spotting' a lot. This means identifying a disturbing feeling, sensation, thought or impulse then applying the right Recovery tools [to cope with it or get over it].

Another key slogan is 'be willing to bear discomfort in order to gain

comfort'. If I make the decision to have the will to bear the discomfort of doing a task – say, washing the dishes – I will gain the comfort [of having the kitchen tidier] and feel good about myself.

I have learned that there is no mental illness that isn't curable. I live a very healthy life now, I have good friends, love playing music and I still work part time.

Dr Lowe helped people who had been hospitalised for years. You could bring what he said down to



## RECOVERY LEADER

*Hugh McCann of Dundalk is the leader of the Newry Recovery group. He worked in sales until being made redundant in 2009.*

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About 15 years ago, I began suffering from depression. I put it down to bullying. My self-esteem was getting lower and my bad days were outnumbering my good ones. I went to my GP at that point, and he put me on anti-depressants.

I knew, though, that medication wasn't the total answer, and when I heard about Recovery one day at mass in 2005, I decided to give it a go. I've been going ever since, and it has changed my life.

It took me a while to get a handle on what was involved initially, but as the weeks went by I made progress. You have to give it time. We are so used to going to doctors, thinking we'll get a quick fix, but there is no quick fix to this.

One of the things you worry about if you're depressed is what other people think of you. You could get yourself all worked up because someone you know didn't say hello to you on the street, for example.

You'd be thinking: 'My God, have I offended her?' But she may not even have seen you or was preoccupied with something else entirely. Anyway, no one can ever know what another person is thinking.

The Recovery method trains you in 'spotting': looking at what you're thinking. If an incident like this happened, I would 'spot' that the person who didn't speak was 'outside environment' and I have no control over that.

I would then remind myself that I only have control of my inner environment and that I can control how I react, and I don't start worrying about why the person didn't speak. The spotting techniques are about training your mind to think differently.

At meetings, we read a chapter of one of Dr Lowe's books, then we introduce ourselves by first names only. Then one person at a time would comment on the reading and what it meant to them.

After that, we have the 'example phase'. That's where each person gets the chance to give an example of where they got worked up about something during the week.

They would talk about the symptoms they experienced – anger, frustration and so on – the spotting they went through (their thinking at that time), then they speak about how they used their Recovery tools to cope.

They also speak about how they used to react. That shows them how much they've improved. We all learn from each other's examples.

Meetings are run in this four-step way and are very disciplined. Endorsement (praise) is one of the biggest aspects of them. A lot of people who are depressed would only see what they've done wrong; they don't realise what they've done right.

Recovery has made a huge difference to my life. I do things now that I wouldn't have done five years ago, and I am more open about things. I don't try to hide the fact that I suffer from depression anymore.

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'give yourself secure thoughts' and 'command your muscles to move'. Everything stems from those two slogans.

People are terrified of mental illness, but if they knew that mental illness is only self-criticism and self-doubt, they wouldn't be as frightened of it. I can't thank Recovery enough for the help I've had. The only way I can give something in return is to help others find help too. **CL**

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