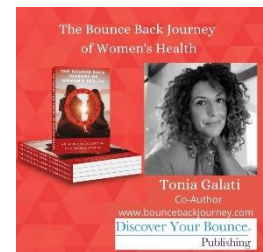


Tonia Galati, The Bounce Back Journey of Women's Health.



You are more powerful than your fears

Looking back, I think I have always struggled with self-confidence and imposter syndrome, so it was only logical that my feelings of not belonging or being good enough would accumulate and manifest into something much later in my adult life. As a female the pressure to conform to what society expects of us and the increased pressure from social media, portraying the lives and aesthetics of others through a perfect filter, has impacted me immensely over the years. I know lots of great females in my personal and professional networks who feel the same.

Growing up in a small, prominently white, town in Lincolnshire, my sisters and I were known as 'the brown girls'. We faced frequent bullying from our peers and let's face it, teenage girls can be very cruel. Attending an all-girls high school from the age of 12 definitely made me scrutinise myself at length – my academic abilities, feeling pressurised to 'fit in' and constantly being upset about my looks and how I didn't look like everyone else. This led me to spend the remainder of my high school years trying to blend into the background and avoid any opportunity to draw attention to myself.

However, after high school ended things started to look up for me. I went to university, where I envisioned myself completing my degree and later moving overseas. I really enjoyed my time there, despite the feeling of not fitting in still being very present in my mind. I made some lifelong friends and (thankfully) managed to graduate! Still, to this day it remains a complete mystery to me as to how I did, as I never really engaged with my degree as much as I should have.

When I got my degree results through the post I cried for a good hour; mainly in disbelief, but also because the realisation had hit me that I would now have to actually make some decisions about my future. I never had a plan in place for what I wanted to do career-wise and to be honest, I had always just gone with the flow and fallen into things. Eventually, 21-year-old me decided that I would pack up and move to London and make my millions. I did move to London, although I'm still waiting on the millions! Still not knowing what I wanted to do, I took the first job that was offered to me – an interior designer - where I could utilise my degree, because back then it was expected of you.

I did that for a couple of years but was bored out of my mind, so I moved into an office environment and went to work for a professional body. Whilst I enjoyed the environment and my colleagues were great, I found the same old routine soul-destroying and ultimately felt unfulfilled with my work. I wanted to do something meaningful.

Then one day, by chance, I saw an opportunity advertised at a local university, working with students from difficult backgrounds to help them enter employment. It was at that moment that I realised that *that* was what I wanted to do. I wanted to work with students who had no sense of career direction, who felt like they weren't good enough and like they didn't belong. Without a doubt, I sweated through that interview as the feeling of imposter syndrome took over, but I got the job and have never looked back!

However, over the years, I have always put pressure on myself to deliver high standards, so naturally, I often focused on what others might think of me and avoided situations where I could embarrass myself. This has often dictated my decisions and to an extent the direction I have taken in my career.

When I was offered my first job in Higher Education I tried to negotiate taking out any elements of public speaking and presenting out of the job description. Of course, I was unsuccessful and after a long conversation with my sister, realised that putting myself out there publicly was something I would *have to do* if I had any chance of progressing in my career.

Really this was a blessing in disguise, as my anxieties eventually led me into a career that I love, enabling me to help others and, in particular, work with students and graduates who face challenges and barriers in their lives and employment. Much of my work has been focused on helping others build their own confidence and be the best they can be – ironic really.

Ultimately, my determination to make a difference in the lives of others is what did and still does drive me. I was so passionate and I got things done, soon making a name for myself in the industry. I challenged the thinking of others and helped make a difference to so many in a relatively short space of time.

The conversations I have had with students over the years about what they can achieve and the feeling I get when they are offered the job, or when they realise that they alone are their own limitation, is indescribable. It warms my heart and I feel as though I am doing a hobby I love every single day.

Yet the pressure of wanting to do everything perfectly and the guilt of not wanting to let anyone down, including my team, family, friends and students, resulted in me taking on more than I could manage; working 14 hour days and struggling to sleep. I could feel myself losing control and spent a lot of unhealthy amounts of time in the gym, as that was the only thing I felt I could control.

I often used to find myself upset and exhausted from putting on a front and pretending that everything was okay. This, coupled with the constant ruminating at bedtime, resulted in me having regular ‘bags for life’ under my eyes. I felt completely lost and as though I had no control over anything. This culminated with a serious bout of anxiety, stress and clinical depression in the autumn of 2014. All of the emotions that I was internalising had started to eat away at me and came flooding out. All the plates I was trying to juggle suddenly came crashing down all around me – and they didn’t just break, they smashed into lots of pieces.

My world falling around me really made me reflect on life and the things that were making me so sick. I decided I just wanted peace. I didn’t want to feel confined to doing things in a certain way, or not being able to work in an environment that was flexible to how and when I wanted to work, when I felt that I could.

Sometimes you wake up and you just don’t feel like facing the world. Being employed, whilst many bosses are understanding of mental health, it is very difficult to say, ‘I don’t feel like it today, I’m not coming in.’ So, after a considerable amount of time working within Higher Education, I decided to take voluntary redundancy and set up my own consultancy business. I ripped the support blanket out from underneath myself and I went it alone. But honestly, it is the best decision I have ever made. Never have I felt so relaxed, fulfilled and in control of my work-life balance, doing what I love.

I was never particularly academic, in fact I found learning at school and university quite difficult. All of my achievements post-study have been due to my passion, commitment and hard work. This is often something that I fail to recognise myself, particularly when I receive a request to speak at an event or I am described as a specialist in my field – because why would anyone be interested in what I have to say, right?

The feeling of being labelled a ‘fraud’ will probably never leave me, but I have learnt to use my network and if I am not okay, I say it rather than letting things build up. I now have coping mechanisms in place and I know my triggers, which I either try to avoid or manage. I would be lying if I said that I don’t get knocked down or have difficult days still, but it is all about getting back up. Yes, it is really flipping hard; walking in a downpour is never easy, but the rain and the storm pass and then the sun comes out and things get better.

I have learnt to trust my support network – my sisters, parents and my friends (I have such amazing friends) who have been instrumental in lifting me up and who are there to support me and cheer me on from the sidelines – my very own cheerleading team. I have learnt to push myself out of my comfort zone, to go with the flow, to not worry if I don’t have a plan or if I can’t control something and above all - I take risks. Whenever I doubt myself, I focus on how far I have come, everything I have faced, the battles I have won and the fears I have overcome.

My advice? Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Spend time with people who lift you up and avoid those who bring you down. Above all, stop wondering if you are good enough and ignore that voice in your head. Do not listen to anyone who says you can’t – particularly if that person is you. Believing in yourself is what gives you the confidence to be authentic and vulnerable; from your vulnerabilities come your strengths.

Yes, my story is filled with some broken pieces, but it also features a major comeback and so can yours.