Twon't let Tourette's hold me back

Ruth Ojadi was distraught when she developed tics in her teens, but she's come to accept them

alking along the street,
I can feel myself about
to shout out a word so
obscene that people
are guaranteed to stare.
But no matter what I do to stop myself

But no matter what I do to stop myself, it tumbles out of my mouth anyway.

I was 16 when the right corner of my mouth started to drop and my eye began to involuntarily twitch. Within a month it felt as though the entire left side of my head was being pulled backwards, causing me to make odd facial movements.

Worried, my mum took me to the doctor. The GP assured me it was just anxiety and exam stress, but it only got worse.

Soon I was making grunting noises, flapping my arms and shouting swear words as I walked along the street. I remember being terrified. At night, I'd lie awake worrying it was all in my head and willing my body to do what I wanted.

As the years passed, I developed ways to hide the tics. If I felt myself about to grunt, I'd look down and pretend I was coughing. If my arm jerked, I'd move it up to look as though I was running my fingers through my hair. But the sounds got louder and the movements more exaggerated.

I could yell out anything – from 'bomb' as I walked through an airport to 'cankles'

as I passed a stranger. It was mortifying and I began to dread going out. I stopped seeing my friends and grew more and more self-conscious. Still, my GP assured me it would go away.

It was only aged 23 that I got a second opinion. After an hour-long consultation, I was told I had Tourette's. While part of me felt relieved to know what was wrong, I remember being heartbroken – there was no cure, I'd have to live like this forever.

I was prescribed medication to help suppress the tics, but they left me exhausted. I also put on 5st, taking me from 11st and a size

10-12 to 16st and a size 16-18.

I grew more depressed by the day and for the next year, instead of living, I simply existed.

Then, in 2010, I got up one day and realised I had two options – I could spend my life as a recluse or I could accept who I was.

It wasn't easy but, after speaking with my doctor, I stopped my medication and began cognitive behavioural therapy – which helps retrain your negative thought process into a positive one. It's made me realise that when people look at me in the street, it's because I've startled them, not because they think I'm a bad person.

I've lost the weight I gained, got a job working as a group support officer for the

charity Tourettes Action and I've even taken up yoga. The teachers and my classmates know me so well that they hardly notice when I shout 'hurry up' or I swear loudly – often they tell me it's what they were thinking anyway!

Most of the time I try not to put myself in situations where my tics might 'misbehave' but if a few slip out, I try not to worry. I spent years apologising but I refuse to do that any more. Tourette's can be embarrassing, but it's a part of me, and realising that has given me my life back.

THE FACTS

- * Tourette's syndrome (TS) is a complex neurological condition characterised by a combination of involuntary motor and vocal tics.
- * There's no known cause, but TS can run in families and boys are more likely to be affected than girls.
- * A common myth is that all people with TS swear uncontrollably, but only 10% have a swearing tic.
- * For info and support, visit tourettesaction.org.uk or call 0300 777 8427.



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