UCL Remarkable Stories

Season 2 Episode 3 - Cynthia and depression

Transcript

**Gia Lulic**

We are UCL. And these are our remarkable stories. I'm Gia Lulic and I work in the UCL organisational development team. In each episode, I will be in conversations with the UCL guest as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences and life lessons. Today we'll be speaking to UCL alumni Cynthia Ko about her struggle with depression and how she has coped through her studies and where she is today.

Please note, if you are currently managing depression or other mental health conditions that this episode will delve into recaps of experiences some listeners may find distressing.

So, I was wondering whether when you first started University at UCL, do you feel that the pressure and expectations of being a student sort of made the depression worse, or how did that have an impact?

**Cynthia**

I wouldn't say that it was UCL per se, that added pressure to me, because by the time that I joined UCL that was about one and a half years ago. And that was my second post graduate programme that I was following at UCL. And before that, I already finished my bachelor's degree back in the Netherlands. And obviously, I've been going through a lot of ups and downs there as well. But I would say that what made it tough for me to be at UCL was the fact that I was in a new town myself. I mean, I've been to London before, obviously, but I've never lived there on my own. I didn't have a lot of friends. And also, the course that I was following wasn't really something that I studied before. So yeah, I, I studied behavioural science at UCL. But before that, I actually did a degree in Industrial Design engineering. So, I was much more of a designer or an engineer then, sociologist or psychologist. And that's what made it tough. For me, that was one thing. The second thing was that I was an international student that managed to go into UCL because I secure to scholarships, and that in itself already added pressure to myself, because if I didn't pass my courses, basically, I would have to give back the money to those who funded me. And, like I said, already, it was the loneliness, it was dealing with myself, in a small bedroom apartment, it was just yeah, I think anyone in my situation would feel a little bit more lonely and sad if they were to travel to another country and didn't know a lot of people. But for me, I think it was even more impactful because I had previous experiences failing in education, well, just that one experience, really when I studied psychology for three months, and I felt like being at UCL was my time to make all that right. Because during my engineering and design degree, I didn't really manage to have a student life. I focused a lot of my energy on studying because I didn't feel like I was as smart as my peers. And at UCL because there were so many student societies, I felt like this was my time to really find myself to find the people that match my values to do something to develop myself beyond just academics. So I wanted to do well in academics because of my scholarships, obviously. But also I wanted to do well in my personal development, because basically, during my teenage years and my undergrad degree, I felt socially deprived, in a way because of my depression.

**Gia Lulic**

I think one of the reasons why your story is so significant, Cynthia, is that a lot of the struggles that you talk about would be very relevant to our international students who have scholarships as well and are feeling that added pressure on top of being in a new city on top of being lonely. So what would you say was your lowest point as a student and what was the kind of trigger that made you reach out for help or made you take want to take a step in the right direction to get on the road to recovery or managing the depression?

**Cynthia**

So I would definitely say that my lowest point in life was during my gap year that I already talked about, but during UCL in particular, I think it was the third term where I was severely depressed and had a lot of anxiety attacks. Because third term is all about deadlines and studying for your exams and you don't really have a lot of lectures anymore. So I struggled a lot to simply get out of bed. Every time the thought of just going to the library or the Student Centre even though I even though I would meet up with Some pears to work in assignments together the thought of going to the library, paralyse me so much that I would have a very intense heartbeat or was lying in bed for half an hour and sometimes I would end up crying and hyperventilating. So that definitely was a very tough time. And I kind of expected that to happen because I've had these depressive episodes and anxiety attacks, even before I went to UCL. So when I first came to UCL at the beginning of the term, so in term one, I already looked for the students, psychologists at UCL and I had six sessions with the psychologists there, which was okay, but obviously, in six sessions, you can't fix what's been happening for 15 years already. And after that, I think during term one, and two, I was mostly just busy being busy, that was my only solution, being proactive, surrounding myself with people and making myself feel worthy of being alive by doing things that I believed in, such as joining the UCL climate action society, or being a sustainability ambassador. And all of that really got me through, alongside some dance classes at the UCL dance society. But then in term three, a lot of that fell away. And I didn't have lectures to go to anymore, so. And then I also had the stress of doing my assignments, while I couldn't concentrate anymore, I lost the ability to plan during term one and two, I was planning so much back to back, my whole Google Calendar didn't have any gap in it, because I couldn't stand the thought of being alone in the bedroom. And then suddenly, during term three, I couldn't even get out of bed. And thankfully, the course that I attended the behaviour change course, was a very small course. So, the teachers were really close to us, my course coordinator and another teacher of mine, they were aware of my circumstances. And I got to meet up with them once a week just to check in and say how I was doing not that they were helping me with my assignments. But it really helped me to have a reason to get out of bed for and knowing that I had this support system from my teachers, but also my classmates. And so yeah, does that answer your question?

**Gia Lulic**

Yeah, that's perfect. And just to dwell a little bit deeper into that, I just wondered over the course of, you know, dealing with depression, and also having those therapy sessions, did you come up with a coping mechanism for yourself that you kind of refer back to now, and that might be really helpful to some of our students that might be going through it. For example, if you can recall that day when you couldn't quite get out of bed, what was the story you told yourself that eventually made you do what you needed to do and sort of take the next step? for that day or for that week, or?

**Cynthia**

To be honest, there wasn't really a story that I told myself, because at that point, and at several points in my life, I felt so hopeless, that I questioned whether I should even be alive. Not that I was thinking of taking my life, per se, but I was just questioning why I was born in the first place. So, when you're lying in bed, or paralysed and having, having these anxiety attacks, you don't really think about a bigger story, you think about surviving. And that's what I did. My whole year in London, I was surviving by what I would call a little bit of hyper organised version of myself, by planning a lot of back to back meetings, whether they are social events, or joining society stuff just to make myself feel useful, just so I wouldn't be alone in my bedroom. A lot of people praise me for that, actually, they would always see me and say, Whoa, Cynthia, you're so busy, and you're doing so many things, and you're doing so many awesome things. How do you do all of that? How do you manage all of that, when they didn't realise that that was my coping mechanism of dealing with my depression and anxiety. As long as I was, as long as I was busy, as long as as long as I had this adrenaline, of doing something useful. I could keep on surviving. I basically numb all of my lonely thoughts and all my emotions. But every time of course, when I went to bed, when I went back to bed, and I was all alone, again, with my own thought, I have insomnia, I couldn't sleep and all the emotions could just we just come flooding back. So I wouldn't recommend this strategy at all to students. Because there's a Of course, from the outside, it looks great because I seem like a high achieving person, despite my struggles. But actually, it was a very unhealthy way of coping with my struggles, I was basically fleeing from my struggles. And I'm actually still working on how to moderate that. So at the moment, while we're doing this podcast, I am back in London again. And this is my eighth day of self isolation. And, honestly, a lot of people in my position, travelling abroad, again, being in a new home environment, and having to stay in your bedroom for 14 days, just because you came from a country that would upset a lot of people, it would make a lot of people feel sad or lonely. But because I know myself, so well, I prepare myself very well for that. So I know which moments, I feel lonely, I was very strategic about my move to London here. And that's definitely something that I learned from one and a half years ago, when I attended UCL, I just made sure that every day for those 14 days of self isolation, I would have a video call or another phone call with one of my friends or parents or my siblings. And I also know that eating dinner on my own was one of my toughest periods during the day when I was studying at UCL, because you're so busy going to lectures all day or doing society stuff, and then suddenly, you're just there sitting in your bedroom, eating on your own watching Netflix. And that was just really depressing to me. Because I knew that this time, when it came to London, I ordered this hello-fresh subscription, which basically is a box of ingredients that you get every week, so that I make sure that I will cook for myself, because I have ingredients there, I still get my meditation moments whilst cooking, but I don't have to have the stress of thinking about what to cook. And I'm forced to cook, because otherwise my ingredients go bad. So those are just a few strategies that are put in place. And in general, back when I was studying at UCL, and I was lying in bed and was really having difficulties coming out of bed. And right now as well, while also working from home, I just make sure that during the moments that I am feeling, okay, I kind of fool myself with some of the behavioural tricks that I learned during my studies actually, like putting my jogging clothes out there on my chair the night before, so that when I wake up, I see my gym clothes there and I'm more inclined to dress up. Or just doing very small things like putting reminders of of, of the love that I've received all throughout my life, putting all the pictures up, the first thing that I did, when I came back to London, eight days ago, was put all my pictures up, even though I was just here for one hour when I first arrived. So it's all about knowing where your pitfalls are, knowing the moments where you feel most lonely and knowing who your support network is. I think that's the advice I would give to people who are struggling with loneliness and depression or anxiety during this tough period of time. Although anxiety is a little bit different. That's basically a lot of breathing exercises, sleep medication during nights. And yeah, having someone that you feel safe with.

**Gia Lulic**

It sounds like structure is something that's kind of helped you to get from where you were from that day when you couldn't get out of bed to where you are now.

**Cynthia**

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, that's what I that's why I was saying, the way I cope is by being a very hyper organised version of myself, which is incidentally also something that people admire in me. But sometimes, you know, it's you can only be hyper organised for so long, you can only be busy for so long until your body and your mind is depleted. So I tend to go into these periods of time, where for two weeks, I plan a lot of things back to back and I'm so busy, and I feel these adrenaline shots of being useful of creating a social impact. And then I get so exhausted from that, that for one week straight, I feel like I can't do anything at all, I can't even read a newspaper article, I can't even get out of bed. I'm just so exhausted. And during that period of time, I feel very useless in life. And I don't know what to do. And then I plan a lot of things back to back again for next two weeks. And then the cycle kind of continues. And that's really something that I'm still working on to get the balance right between being busy but also in touch with your emotions through meditation or creative techniques or diary writing or just talking with the people that are close to you.

**Gia Lulic**

You mentioned that it's not a healthy way to cope but it is, in a way a coping mechanism. And I'm sure that there's plenty of other people who are doing the exact same thing. What would you say to someone if they came to you and you know, or you recognised a peer that was doing the exact same thing that you were doing, you know, overworking, keeping themselves super busy so that they don't really have to be alone with themselves? What would kind of be a piece of advice that you would give to someone else based on your experience?

**Cynthia**

That's a really interesting but difficult question. Because, because I, yeah, due to my own depression, since I've struggled with this immense sadness since the age of 11, and then got all these anxiety attacks since the age of 19, or something during my gap year, I am highly attuned to people's emotions, I also kind of educated myself on different kinds of mental health issues by reading about mental health and such. So, I can kind of sense when someone is sad, or very stressed out and does worry me, because that's something I saw when I was studying at UCL as well, mostly amongst the undergraduate international students, I would see them working in a library till three am I would see them being a vice president and the president of three different societies. And I know that that's what's needed to survive in this current world, you need to have this amazing CV, especially in the UK, you need to have this you need to have a high, you need to have the credentials, you need to have the high grades. So in a way, it didn't feel like my place to judge people for that, for striving for that, because that's needed for survival, that's needed to get a job these days, look at how many people are currently struggling to get a job. And I'm not saying it's because they are not doing their best. It's just because the competition is too high. Society is expecting too much from us. So in those moments, when I saw someone replying to my message on a query I had about the UCL climate action society, for example, in the middle of night, at 3am and being busy with all these things. I didn't want to ask, are you okay? How come you're still awake? But at the same time, what could I really offer them, I didn't know what to do. So it's really difficult to give advice to one person, I feel like it's much more of a structural issue where we have to recognise that there is so much value in ourselves as a human being, without all these credentials, and this amazing CV, and it's really about finding a coping mechanism that values your self worth. That's not tied to external factors in that sense. So it's about celebrating the small wins, even though the world may not see them. It's about knowing that you can be proud of yourself when you attended this panel discussion about humanitarian issues, for example. And at the same time, you can also be proud of yourself, when you manage to get out of bed to shower to cook for yourself. I think it's about as cheesy as it sounds, counting your blessings as well. And I definitely am not saying that. Because it's a solution per se. Because I know that a lot of people undergo trauma that's been going on for years, myself included, I've gone through a lot of trauma in my life, I've lost. I've lost a lot of friends that couldn't deal with my trauma, because it was too much because they just didn't have the tools to handle my emotions. And I didn't have the tools to handle my emotions. But that is something I slowly learned through experience through therapy, because they are the professionals. After all, they can see the thinking patterns that keep repeating throughout my life that made me stuck in life for so long. And it's just a process that you have to be patient with. I think that's all I can say, really, you have to be patient with yourself. You have to keep trying. And you have to allow yourself to fall and rise up again. Because that's really just a part of being a life of growing as a human being.

**Gia Lulic**

And it sounds like from everything that you just said that it sounds like you're still working it out for yourself, but there is a level of acceptance in the way you're describing things. How important do you think acceptance of your condition and acceptance in general of the circumstances in your life? How important do you think that is to being on the road to managing you know, again, life in general as well as you know, a mental health condition?

**Cynthia**

Yeah, good question. I would say that it's extremely important to have this acceptance. But it's also the hardest thing to have this acceptance because even though I'm dealing with it right now, even though I feel like I'm at a place where I belong at the moment, I'm living in London, I'm, I'm working on a job that's very valuable to me that I love. And I also do volunteering work on the side, I have a great support system, you know, when you look at all those things from the outside, you would think, oh, Cynthia is doing great. But I wouldn't feel like this was something to be proud of, if I didn't accept that my struggles have also led me to this to this destination. Because for a long time, I felt like I, as a person, am a very nice person, I'm kind, I'm empathetic, I'm, I would say that my values have really brought me far in life. And then I'm working hard on creating a social impact. And those are all things that I'm really proud of, as of myself as a person. But I would always, always say, I'm nice as a person, but not when I'm depressed. So it was almost as if I saw myself as two persons depressed Cynthia, and normally functioning Cynthia, when actually, those kind of complemented each other. Like I said, even though it was a coping mechanism that I worked so hard to make my dreams come true. Yeah, that's really what brought me to being the person that I am today. And if you don't accept that depression is a part of you, you will never really believe the people that believe in you. So I had a lot of people that love me. Even during my secondary school years, when I was bullied, or my university years, when I lost a lot of people that couldn't handle my emotions, there were a set of people that always stuck with me, which I'm really grateful for. But they would always tell me that I'm so amazing, and that they love me so much. But I just simply didn't believe them. Because every time they complimented me for something, I would say, yeah, that's nice. But I'm still depressed, and I'm so negative, and I'm so I'm such a pessimist. And those are just my own voices. Obviously, some of my old friends also told me these things, and they're currently not my friends anymore. But I realised that I was being a bad friend to myself as well, because I didn't accept that I was depressed. And now I can easily say that I've been in therapy for six years already. And that I'm still depressed. I'm on antidepressants right now. And since the summer, it's been a lot better in terms of regulating my emotions, I just realised it was something chemical. But it was also something psychological, from my childhood traumas and everything else I experienced during my teenage years. It's not something that you can just make disappear through a magic wand in one year. Because it's been here with me for over a decade. But I recognise that everyone is struggling, especially during the pandemic, right now, a lot of people know what it's like to be alone with your thoughts, to feel hopeless about life, because covid robbed a lot of people of their future. So I think a lot of things have been put in perspective for me during lockdown during the pandemic, where I was finding things to do for myself, that didn't relate to people outside of my house. So I was stuck inside my house, I was drawing, I was crocheting, I was doing a lot of creative things, or still doing a lot of social impact stuff. But mostly because, well, of course, I still was addicted, addicted to this adrenaline shot of creating a social impact. But most importantly, it connected me with people that have the same values as me, whether that's in terms of sustainability, or humanitarian issues. What I found is that when you connect with these people, they are usually also very open minded about mental health issues. And if you surround yourself with people that are accepting, I think it also makes you Kinder towards yourself. And that's how I came to where I am right now where I'm slowly starting to accept myself but at the same time, whenever I hit a day where I'm unproductive, I still hold grudges against myself. And that's just something I'm working on.

**Gia Lulic**

Again, I love your story, because to varying degrees, what you're saying relates to everybody, obviously, people with mental health issues, everything that you talk about is going to be heightened to another level, but I think a lot of the things you talk about are relevant for everybody and I wonder, is there a particular person or group that you can remember that's been of particular significance in helping you to kind of get more joy in your life or get more perspective or get some focus? Is there a particular person or thing that's kind of being really, really instrumental. And that stands out in helping you to kind of gain focus.

**Cynthia**

At the moment, I would say that I'm in such a different place compared to when I was studying at UCL one half years ago. And I think that was partly because of the pandemic. So during the pandemic, me and my family really grew close together, because we're stuck in the same house, and it couldn't really go out a lot. And I also didn't have the pressure of having to do well academically because I was done with university. And by the time, I could basically enjoy life inside my house, because I couldn't go outside during the pandemic. And it's really opened up this opportunity to talk more with my mother and my dad, understand their experience of life, understand how they are struggling with having to stay inside so much. Also, understanding how my little sister's coping who's four years younger than me. And I think the reason that I mentioned my family is because for a long time, especially during my teenage years, I felt like my family was the core issue of my depression, because I grew up in very unique circumstances where my parents didn't go to university, they had a little shop, and was going to school, I had to help them out with the shop. And as a Chinese household, we also don't talk about emotions that much. So it's very stereotypical right now. But that's what it felt like to me, when I was a teenager. And a long time, I was really angry, actually, with my family for putting me through such a tough time, even though now I realise it's just something that couldn't be helped. It's what happens when you're an immigrant in another country. So in a way, growing closer with my family during the pandemic gave me a lot of closure about the past, recognising that, yes, life was tough during my childhood, because of our circumstances, but things do get better. So, one thing that really got me through my depression, and be speaking so casually, about my depression right now is definitely my family. My second group would be my university peers at during my undergraduate degree in engineering. Back in the Netherlands, I met a group of nine people that are really just my type of people, they are creative geniuses, they don't mind me being quiet, sometimes they don't mind me being awfully hyper active sometimes. And we just really clicked and a few of them are amongst which is my best friend, she's just very empathetic, always listening to me always trying to learn more about mental health and learning about how to communicate with me. So like I said, already before, surrounding yourself with people that are empathetic is so important. And it really brought me to the journey that I am at right now. And then the other thing is basically a lot of social impact groups that I'm a part of. And I keep emphasising this because it's such an important part of my life, to feel like I'm doing something for the environment. I'm doing something for diversity and inequality in my life, and having these people around me learning about different cultures. So at the moment, I am part of this group called slow fashion movement, which is a global movement, about sustainable fashion. And we we've been meeting people from India to Puerto Rico to Australia, and then grew close to these women that were 10 years older than me or from a very different culture and all online and simply because we care about the same things, surrounding yourself with loving people. people that love the same things as you, people who think the same things are important as you even though it kind of makes you stuck in this echo chamber of thinking that everybody in your life is environmentally friendly or caring about social impact. It does really give you this meaning in life, and that's something I really missed. In Throughout my whole life actually. Being a second generation immigrants in the Netherlands, I felt like I didn't fit in with the general Dutch population. being someone who doesn't necessarily subscribe to any religion. I felt out of place because I didn't have a Sunday church to go to. I didn't have this community to go to every week. So, at the moment, my community is really the social impact community. It's there where I find people that relate to me that are open minded or empathetic, and that are willing to grow willing to learn.

**Gia Lulic**

There's a real theme coming across about, again, acceptance, belonging, but also purpose. That's, you know, if you watch any motivational content on YouTube, those are sort of the three themes that are always coming up, especially for people who are struggling with mental health or anything in life really, that, you know, those three things are what work best to help. I wonder, Cynthia what do you, at this very moment, what are you looking forward to most,

**Cynthia**

What came to my mind first was to simply continue living the way that I'm living right now, trying to find this balance. And I'm in particular, not saying that I am looking forward to being completely healed, because I realised that I've been enjoying the journey So far. There were tough times. But at the end of it, I always came out stronger because of it. as cliche as it sounds, I'm expanding myself so much in different ways. I'm learning new hobbies, because my coping mechanism is to be busy. And I'm really learning who is there for me in my life at the moment, and who isn't, and also, at the same time, accepting that those who aren't in my life at the moment, aren't necessarily not in my life, because I'm difficult to deal with, even though for sure, I know, you have to have the certain capability, you have to have the tools to, to communicate with someone who's depressed. But I just accept that that's, that's a problem with their toolkit as well. I mean, it's something that I have to work on, I have to learn regulating myself more, I have to keep myself busy, I shouldn't be as dependent on people. But at the same time, I can be dependent on people who have this mind space to do it. Although I have a lot of respecting your mental health, your own mental health, it's about recognising other people's mental health as well. And knowing that you're in this together, and that you have to find your way together. So, I just hope that I keep developing myself, I always say, I don't want to find myself, because that means that at one point in life, I'm just that person, and I enjoy growth, I enjoy changing. So, I'm really looking forward to seeing where life will bring me and it would be really nice to if these antidepressants started working properly. And I wouldn't feel up and down all the time. But I'm working on that. So let's hope for the best.

**Gia Lulic**

You mentioned that when you were at UCL, there was a few kind of groups or communities that helped you. Do you remember what those were?

**Cynthia**

Yes. So, the first group is definitely the VA for change communities. So my cohort was just a group of 30 people or something, and they were all from different backgrounds, different ages, but we just connected so well, maybe because the behavioural change course was just in its second year. But then so the teachers were fairly involved, they could really rely on my teachers. The second group that I could rely on was the UCL climate action society. I met amazing people there that were as hard working as me that even work even harder than me, but we, we recognise each other struggle. We knew that if we wanted to make a change in a world, this is what we had to put in. And we knew that things could get tough sometimes. But we knew that it was worth it. We wouldn't have verbalise this, per se, but it's just this general feeling that you get. So that was the second group that really made me feel like I belong at UCL. And then the third group would be the UCL dance society. Because dance is such an important part of my life, I wouldn't say I'm a professional dancer, but it's one of those things that you just have to do, you have to keep exercising to release those endorphins. And I generally don't like a lot of sports, but dance is just so expressive to me, when I'm dancing, I feel like I can finally let go of those emotions that I'm always holding in without bursting out in tears or writing a whole essay to someone on WhatsApp. And at the same time, it's good for my body because my body gets to experience this high as well. And it was a very, very low key way of getting to know new people without having the pressure of wanting to be best friends with them immediately because dance is what connects you. So yeah, I would say that just finding these communities that have the same interests, as me, made me feel like I belonged, like, I have a purpose. And, yeah, that's what mostly got me through my UCL year.

**Gia Lulic**

I feel like there's so many things that you've pointed out that there's like a real theme of like self-discovery. So I wonder, when you think about depression in general, do you feel like that having this condition has clarified your purpose in life? Or has kind of assisted you in some way on your journey?

**Cynthia**

Well, sometimes I'm not sure if it's the condition that caused me to be so introspective, or my personality in general. And that's I think, sometimes, because a lot of my depressive traits can also easily be personality traits. And sometimes I find it hard to distinguish between what's really me, and what's the depression talking. But in general, I would say, being introspective, and going through therapy, always being attuned to what you're thinking and what you're saying, and how you react to people that really give you this resilience and the capacity to analyse yourself and to be very aware of yourself. So I think that really put me on this journey of self discovery. But just because I'm depressed doesn't mean that I'm the only one that can develop this, I think you should think about mental health as a spectrum. You could have poor mental health, or you could have good mental health, whether you're depressed or not. And I think a lot of people right now are experienced this, for mental health during pandemic, even though they might not have been diagnosed with depression. I think in general, just this introspective nature and learning these tools, from therapists to write down my thoughts to really deconstruct them, that has really helped me to define what's important to me in life, not just in terms of actions, but also the people and the things that I want out of life.

**Gia Lulic**

Yeah, it sounds like you know, irrespective of your condition, it sounds like you've there's a real clarity around knowing yourself and what you want out of life and what kind of people you'd like to surround yourself with. And that I feel like that's of real value to someone who's is young as yourself to have so much clarity around that, because a lot of people spend their life, you know, they get to the age of 60/70. And they're still not quite sure if the people around them are right for them, they still feel like they don't quite belong. So in that way, I feel like as someone who's also suffered from anxiety, I feel like being in that pressure cooker of having something consistently be like a dark cloud following you around. It kind of helps you to quicker decipher between what is in alignment with your personality and what's not, even though it's a real struggle, I felt like for me, at least there was a real, it kind of sped some things up for me. And I think everything that you've said today, there was so many helpful things in there. And I think just from your own experience, even talking to someone who's struggling with this, now, they could gain so much from what you've gone through, and everything that you have to offer, the kind of mini solutions and quick wins that you have to offer them could really help them. So in that sense, I feel like there's a lot of positive that, you know, can be gained from your experience, not just for yourself, but also those around you who are listening to you and who are you know, learning that even though you're not, you're not perfect. And life's not perfect that you have found ways to cope with this situation also found things about yourself that you are excited about, and that you are feeling positive about.

**Cynthia**

Yeah, that's such an accurate way of describing it, especially when you talk about this dark cloud following you. When you're struggling so much because of different reasons in your life of your life. You spent so much time trying to get out of get out of that dark cloud, to run away from it. And so I've become very solution based throughout my life. I know that I'm not perfect. And I also don't mean to say that once you have this clarity of will be well in life, because you never know what happens in life. When I graduated in May, for my master's degree, I thought I was going to work in London, which is something that happened but I thought I would be working as a designer, which is what I initially studied. I thought I would design some systems that would improve sustainability in the UK or something. And then I ended up becoming a qualitative researcher at the diversity inclusion and equality research agency, which is something I never really thought of at all in my life. Life. But it really matched with my values. At the same time, it matched with my lived experiences of being a second generation immigrants in the Netherlands, of being a person of colour in different countries. And life has a really funny way of unfolding yourself at unfolding itself in front of you. So even though you can plan all the small wins, you can plan your day to day, I wouldn't get too stuck on planning what you want to achieve in let's say, two years, or 10 years, because it's so much more important to plan how you want to feel instead, and how you get there. And through what tools that's also an adventure that brings joy to life, I think.

**Gia**

That’s such a powerful message and I completely agree and thank you so much for being so candid and I think everything you said is going to help a lot of people , a lot of students at UCL, just to see the situation in a more balanced way and also its always helpful to know that there is other people that are sort of sharing a similar struggle to yourself so thank you so much for for sharing and being so open, so finally I want to pose to you the question we ask all the guests on remarkable stories podcast; what would Cynthia today have told a younger Cynthia, perhaps, you know, at the beginning or realising you had depression or at the beginning of your adult journey?

**Cynthia**

Hmm that’s tough, so I think I would direct the message to my 11 year old self even though I was not diagnosed with depression yet back then but certainly that was when it all started. I would tell her, the people that come into your life right now, they may be right or they may be wrong for you but there is something to learn from it and I know that the time ahead will feel very dark and lonely, but at the same time, whilst navigating this darkness, know that an amazing person will come out of it. And I hope you can stay alive to experience that person and experience becoming that person, most importantly.