

Psychology Department

My Journey In Clinical Psychology

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There is something strange about reaching the end of a long journey. It would be all too easy in a way to skip on to the next thing without making much time at all to pause, breathe, take note of where you're standing, and look back at how far you have come. I have very recently completed my doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Queen's University, Belfast and in the next few weeks will begin my new role as Dr Holly McSpadden, working therapeutically with looked after and adopted children, young people, and those that care for them. It's a dream I have passionately and painstakingly pursued since around the time I picked my GCSEs. I'll be honest, it doesn't feel real quite yet!

The journey to become a Clinical Psychologist is competitive and can take years of dogged commitment and hard work. So much so, that during the first week of my undergraduate Psychology degree in 2013, those of us with such aspirations were advised to invest in a 'plan B' career, advice I decided to throw out the window. After achieving first-class honours in my degree in 2016, I developed my therapeutic skills and confidence whilst on a graduate mental health placement in Sri Lanka, before returning home to support adults with learning disabilities within residential and community services.

Following this, I spent an incredible year working with children and families within the Paediatric Psychology service at the Royal Belfast Hospital

for Sick Children. Within each role I gained invaluable experience, grew ever more passionate about working alongside and helping people in distress, and took a step closer toward 'readiness' for clinical training. In 2019, I was ecstatic to secure my place on the doctorate and joined fifteen other women in attempting to juggle the demands of research and academic study, alongside five clinical placements within psychological services across the country, with the challenges of a global pandemic and surviving our mid-twenties thrown in for good measure. It has been both an incredibly demanding and endlessly rewarding experience.

I'll admit that it's an achievement that I'm very proud of. However, as I think back over the last ten years, what strikes me most are the dozens of people God placed beside me at just the right moment to support and champion me at times when it would have been much easier to give up and walk (or run) away. It's a moving and humbling realisation. Believe it or not, my first such experience was at Banbridge Academy. Whilst I was academically successful at school, I faced tremendous challenges with anxiety and panic attacks. I remember asking myself during my A-levels, "If I can't manage this, how on earth will I ever be able to manage a degree, a doctorate, or life as a therapist?!" Understandably, what seventeen-year-old me hadn't yet learned is that emotional resilience isn't about getting rid of difficult feelings, but

rather in learning how to bring some compassion to them and to do the hard thing anyway.

I am so grateful that my A level psychology teacher, Mrs Duke, already knew this. On the day of my Psychology exam, I was so overcome by spiralling panic that I arrived at her door unable to breathe or speak. She was calm and kind and proceeded to spend what must have been an hour walking me up and down the hill at the Academy before delivering me quietly to the door of my exam, and then walking away. I remember it vividly. She told me afterwards that she wanted me to know that I was bigger than my fear and could walk into the room on my own. It was a powerful lesson in courage that has carried me through every exam, interview, and moment of emotional burnout ever since: "Just walk into the room Holly."

To the teachers who may read this, I hope there is something here that encourages you of the tremendous impact you can have on your pupils long after they have left the corridors of the Academy. Your kindness and encouragement will be remembered even when your classes are forgotten. And to any pupils reading this who are struggling, stop and rest if you need to, reach out for as much help as you can, but please don't give up. You are so much bigger than your worst feelings and you have no idea what incredible feats you might achieve in ten years' time.

