The adult I may have become

Sarah Swainston

I sometimes wonder how my life might have been if I had not become mentally ill. At seventeen I was a head girl at school, doing well in my A-level course and on target for entry to medical school. From eighteen to twenty I was a medical student, doing reasonably well and enjoying life. At the age of twenty-one, I suddenly and unexpectedly crashed into a depression that lasted several months and required ECT even to begin to lift it. At twenty-two I returned to medical school better, but a different person. Once you have looked inside the relationships you missed — and I thought, ‘what about me?’ I’ve got a family, a career and a husband. But, I wondered — how would I have been different if I had never been ill?

The loss of the adult they could have become?

When someone loses a leg we understand the loss; when a couple has a disabled child, we recognise that they need time to grieve for the other child they never had. When working with an adolescent with a chronic illness we try and help them come to terms with the fact that they may never have a future. But when working with a young person with mental illness, do you ever think of it in terms of the loss of the adult they could have become?

I don’t. I never look back on my life before I became mentally ill. When someone loses a leg, we understand the loss; when a couple has a disabled child, we recognise that they need time to grieve. But when working with an adolescent with a chronic illness we try and help them come to terms with the fact that they may never have a future. But when working with a young person with mental illness, do you ever think of it in terms of the loss of the adult they could have become?

The adult I may have become
Sarah Swainston
Access the most recent version at DOI: 10.1192/bjp.192.1.24