

Cosplay: an escape from anxiety

You'd think that a convention centre heaving with strangers would be a nightmare for anyone suffering from an anxiety disorder. But some people have found a way to manage their illness and immerse themselves in the spirit of convention life: cosplay.

A portmanteau of 'costume' and 'role play', cosplay is the act of dressing up and becoming a character from film, television, literature or gaming, usually for pop culture events like conventions.

Mental health charity [Mind](#) suggests that people suffering from anxiety may benefit from 'shifting focus' away from their illness. Often the act of creating a costume can be incredibly therapeutic, and temporarily becoming someone else can be a great form of escapism.

23-year-old Ruth Hodgson from Scotland has suffered from extreme anxiety and depression for many years. "I've had psychiatrists on and off since I was about 10, and my mental illness still affects me on a daily basis. It can be crippling, sometimes I find it difficult to even leave my flat."



Ruth (left) and friends cosplaying characters from an anime called *Free* (Photo credit: Ruth)

Ruth attended her first convention in 2009, cosplaying as a character from the anime series *Hetalia*. "I went with a friend who ended up convincing me to go on stage. That was one of the most nerve-wracking situations I've ever been in, but it actually helped me a lot. Once you've conquered that, you feel like you can conquer anything."

For Ruth, costume creation is an integral part of the cosplaying process, and she makes each costume herself. “If the depression hits me really hard I’m unable to do anything and it can take forever to finish. But once I get going, the act of making a costume can really help. When I get in the zone it actually becomes very relaxing.”

Crafting is a well-known mode of therapy for people suffering from a variety of mental illnesses, and by taking control of her own projects and working on them alone Ruth is able to find a brief respite from her anxiety.

But even surrounded by hundreds of strangers, cosplay can help people distance themselves from their mental illnesses. “Whilst you’re in costume you get to pretend that you’re not yourself,” Ruth says. “You’re there to have fun and meet people, and don’t have to worry about ‘real life’ problems. It’s definitely a form of escapism.”

In fact Ruth now takes comfort in the hustle and bustle of a convention environment, as it’s reassuring to know that, on the whole, each member of the crowd is not so different from herself. “Conventions feel almost like a second home now, because everyone’s so understanding. They’ll generally do anything to help people who are having a hard time, and being in that supportive environment definitely helps with my anxiety and depression.”

Ruth is not alone. The promise of escapism draws many people with mental illnesses into the world of cosplay, which makes this unique community an incredibly accepting and rewarding place to be.

PHOTO GALLERY:



Max Bone, 17, UK – cosplaying Yang from RWBY: I suffer from depression, social anxiety and PTSD. Cosplay helps me to deal with my mental illnesses because it's a form of escape. I am able to be a different person and forget myself for a little while. (Photo credit: Max)



Kathryn Chinetti, 17, USA – cosplaying Anna from Frozen: I suffer from anxiety and depression. Cosplay has always made me feel safe. I don't get as anxious, and I can pretend to be someone else while still being myself. (Picture credit: Kathryn)



Ashleigh Baxter, 23, USA – cosplaying Loki from The Avengers: "I have Bipolar Disorder, OCD, BPD and some anxiety disorders, and I personally think cosplaying really helps. It's still challenging knowing I'm going somewhere that people that are going to approach me, but it's helped me to be more social." (Photo Credit: Alan Tijerina Photography)



Seb Wake, 28, UK – cosplaying Bobby Baratheon from Game of Thrones: I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome with severe anxiety and hypersensitivity. Going to conventions is hard work, but cosplay makes me feel galvanised, like I'm channelling some of the energy and bravery of the character I am cosplaying. (Photo credit: Seb)