



Paul Merton, 44, Comedian

In 1989 I had a 'manic episode' caused by a combination of overwork and anti-malaria pills. I just think it was a sort of manic excitement, really, because everything was happening and going really well. I felt alive, I felt alert, I was full of energy. It was the people around me who were getting worried because I was talking non-stop, working 24 hours a day and developing paranoia. I wasn't too bothered. I thought: I'm achieving everything.

One day I went to the corner shop and thought everyone was looking at me oddly, and the shopkeeper was reading things about me off my credit card. I remember coming out of the shop and running down the side road back to the flat and I had a filmic image of all the curtains twitching.

I ended up in the Maudsley for six weeks which was the best thing I could have done. I took the stabilising drug Largactyl and remember the precise moment when I

started to get better. It was a Saturday evening, a friend came to visit me and what I wanted was for somebody to hug me. But he, being a typical middle-class male, was keeping his distance. And his emotional detachment made me feel even more alone. When he went away, I felt so lonely, I howled, like animals cry. But that howl of pain was a sort of catharsis, and after that I recovered quite quickly.

When I left I knew I'd never go back. But still I would have liked to be given a badge or something to certify my sanity. Such is the taboo of mental illness, that I was reluctant for many years to talk about my stay in the Maudsley. What saddened me was that my visitors felt so uncomfortable. They thought the doors were going to slam shut behind them.

The Maudsley made me realise that what I do is only a job. It is a risk, you gamble and hope that people will find what you do funny, but if they don't, it isn't the end of the world.

Most of all people shouldn't feel ashamed for having a mental illness. We don't feel ashamed for having a broken leg, so why a mental illness?

FACT: In a recent survey, 47% of 16-24 year olds said they would be concerned for their safety if a hospital for people with mental health problems was built next door. (mind out for mental health campaign research, 2001)