

# Nature and nurture

The loss of a friend and a close relation led Fiona Coyne to re-evaluate her life. This in turn guided her to a new career and a thatched cottage in Meath, complete with two acres and stables

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**F**iona Coyne's delightful cottage is in the middle of the lush Co Meath countryside, surrounded by fields and farm animals – and she loves to bring nature right inside her bijou home too. Hence, it's full of images of flowers, birds and animals. But one in particular, the dragonfly, recurs in different rooms and she even has a subtle dragonfly tattoo. "I never thought I'd be the sort of person who has a tattoo but I've learned to be more open, to be non-judgmental."

It transpires the elegant flying insect is very dear to Fiona's heart. "What people don't know about the dragonfly is that they start out as bugs under the mud in the bed of the river and they have to push through all of that mud, and they then have to face the water and try and get out of that. When they finally get out of the water, they have to rest and then they turn into dragonflies and feel the sun.

"I've been that bug, I've been in the dark and I've pushed through only to realise 'Oh my goodness I've a body of water to get through',



only to realise 'I've gotten through the water, I'm now exhausted. Finally, here's the sun and here are my wings and I'm free.'"

Fiona is referring to the fact that while many good things happened in her life, including her family – she has two adult sons Rian and Eoin and a 19-year-old daughter,

Ava, who's studying art in Milan – she experienced a lot of grief, including the death by suicide of a close family member and the untimely death of her best friend. It's only in recent times that she has come to terms with these devastating events – thanks largely, she believes, to the therapy



Therapist Fiona Coyne with Pineview Lucy outside her charming 200-year-old thatched cottage in Co Meath, which is on two acres. Fiona uses Lucy in her equine-assisted therapy, a type of therapy that involves a client, a therapist and a horse. “The reason we work with horses is they are sentient beings – they sense our feelings and the work we do together helps the client learn about their feelings. This work is particularly good with neurodivergent clients”



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she finally received. And she got so much from her counselling that she decided to undergo training to become a therapist herself.

She's now a qualified counsellor, psychotherapist and – bringing her love of animals into her work – she's also trained as an equine-assisted learning facilitator. Fiona

believes that there's a profound connection between humans and horses, and horses can help neurodivergent people in particular.

She's thrilled to have qualified in this area as it satisfies the yearning she had as a child to work with animals. “When I was young, I

wanted to be a vet. I didn't realise that vets were there for the painful parts in an animal's life, when they are suffering.

“I don't think I could have handled that aspect of the work. As it happened, I couldn't become a vet as I discovered I was allergic to all animals. Anyway, vets have »

## My favourite room

» to be very intelligent and I wasn't at that level of the points system."

Originally from Dublin, and the eldest of five siblings, she gave up the idea of doing veterinary and studied marketing, and thoroughly enjoyed it. "During college I went on a J1 to New York and blagged my way into Saatchi and Saatchi, and had a ball."

She managed to stay at the advertising network 18 months, then when she came home she worked in various agencies. "You could be out on a shoot, you could be in a recording studio, in a room discussing strategy, or meeting creatives, it was very exciting," she says.

**After some years in marketing** she married and in 2000 she decided to stay at home, combining looking after her children with work in her husband's company. "What happened was, I had just gotten a promotion. I was due to go on a trip to Australia for the company but I had this little baby and he didn't sleep. There were very few creches, it was fulltime or nothing and I just couldn't leave him, so I gave up the job. I've never regretted it as I got to see all the milestones, the first steps, the first tooth, the first word. However, it was hard because I'd gone from a great career to being at home in a rural area, but we had the garden and the baking and friends."

Then her best friend dropped dead from a brain haemorrhage and she was devastated. "We were very close, she was a young woman and our children were the same ages. I was really shaken by it. Before that a family member had died by suicide. That person had suffered with their mental health for a long time and never got any help. People are so much better now at reaching out for help, or if they don't, other people will recognise the signs and will urge them to get that help. That wasn't the case. There was stigma and shame, it wasn't in an era of therapy."

At the time of the relation's death Fiona found it hard to talk about it, never knowing whether it was safe to bring up in



**Above:** Fiona in her sitting area with its extendable dining table and matching chairs. "I had the people from the St Vincent de Paul charity furniture shop in Navan collecting the last owner's furniture and I saw the table in their van. I wanted to buy it immediately but they insisted I go to the shop for it. It was worth it." She recently took up the harp and hired this one from Cairde na Cruite (friends of the harp). "I took it up a few months ago. I love the sound it makes"



**Right top:** The yellow chairs were left by the last owner of the house and the painting of roses is by Mark O'Neill

**Right:** The bathroom had no bath and Divinity Tile & Bathrooms rectified that. Beyond is Ava's bedroom



conversation, it was such a taboo subject. “The stigma of suicide results in complicated grief. I wasn’t able to talk about it, I was shut down.”

However, when her friend died she went to therapy and found it life-changing. Not only that, she found she wanted to learn counselling skills to help others.

“I don’t know what it is about me, I could be having a cup of coffee or at a bus stop and someone will start telling me their life story,” she says, adding that she was spurred on by the fact that her counsellor said: “You could be good at this.”

She studied for five years and now holds a BSc in integrative counselling and psychotherapy from the Institute of Integrated Counselling and Psychotherapy in Tallaght. She also overcame her allergies and is a qualified equine-assisted learning facilitator. In her studies, she found herself learning about autistic and neurodivergent people, and has gone on to work with many diverse clients. “I’m passionate about neurodivergence, possibly because my brother Eamonn was autistic. He was a lovely man, he died two years ago in his 40s. He got a diagnosis of cancer and was dead within weeks. We were all with him at the end, which was beautiful. It was an honour to carry his coffin. It was hard but I put on my high heels and I did it. That was a gift Eamonn gave me.

“I’ve learned so much, both professionally and from Eamonn. No two neurodivergent people are the same but it’s a neurotypical world – 80 to 90pc of people are neurotypical – and we mustn’t shut out people with neurodivergence, we must cherish them and help them blossom.”

As well as grief and trauma, she likes to help people with their everyday challenges and usually suggests seven sessions, though she’s happy to do one or two. “I’m a results-oriented person so I’ll be like “This is a professional service and it’s costing you money. What do you want from it? ‘Will you be able to tackle that passive aggressive boss/get some sleep/handle social situations better?’

Sometimes all people want is to be fully listened to.” Around the same time as she started to study psychotherapy, Fiona separated from her husband and started to look for a new home, ideally with some land and outbuildings with a view to working on her therapy practice from home.

It took time and cost her thousands in rent and there were several disappointments – the shelf over the fireplace in her living room is lined with little houses which friends had given her to celebrate when she found homes she liked, only to lose them to higher bidders. “I had my heart set on three, and went sale agreed on two before they fell through.”

However, she finally found the ideal home. It’s a 200-year-old cottage on two acres. It was once part of the Lynch’s castle estate and was lived in by the farm manager. It came with stables for her horse and old barns which she hopes to eventually convert into extra therapy rooms. It’s quite tiny with two bedrooms, a compact sitting/dining room, a second sitting room which doubles as a therapy room, a small kitchen and a bathroom. It was owned by a man from the North whom she found a delight to deal with.

**Fiona took out the existing bathroom as it contained a shower but no bath. “A typical man’s bathroom. I have to have a bath. I tried so many bathroom suppliers who said it was too small to do anything with but I found Divinity Bathrooms and they did exactly what I wanted. As a child, I lived near the sea in Donaghmede so I’ve gone for seaside colours.”**

The other thing the house lacked was storage. As Fiona points out, people didn’t need storage in the old days as they only had two outfits – one for work and one for Sunday – but she hopes to increase that in the future. In the meantime, she finds odd spaces – the tumble dryer is under the stairs.

The bathroom took all her budget so she’s keeping the other rooms as they were for the moment, brightening them with her own pieces. Although bringing



**The cottage kitchen is compact but bright and functional. Fiona’s budget didn’t extend to new units so she painted some of them in a shocking pink, added pastel blue appliances and pretty pieces of pottery**



*What do you want from therapy? Will you be able to tackle that passive aggressive boss/get sleep/handle social situations?*

her furniture in was a challenge as the doorways are so small. However, the rooms are full of charm with old beams and tiny single-glaze sash windows that are so deep it’s possible to use the window ledges as seating, and there are wonderful views in the bedrooms, not to mention great light. “Ava’s bedroom window is a little bit like Newgrange in that the sun will come round and will come between the barns. It will light up her top window and go all the way across the back wall at a certain time of the day.”

She’s ‘girlied up’ the house with pink panelling in the living room and pink touches in the kitchen.

The thing that won her over, however, is the thatch. “I had a vision board for a house in a country setting, yet close to a main road for clients to get here. There were stables on it and a horse. But I never envisioned the thatch. Kudos to the universe for coming up with that. That’s the cherry on top.” ●

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