

# ‘THE ONLY WAY I COULD SEE BEAUTY WAS THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY’

Many are searching for ways to improve their wellbeing in the light of the pandemic. Three photographers tell David Clark how image-making helps them navigate life and mental health

**The number of people experiencing mental health issues** has been increasing in recent years, with the global pandemic triggering a full-blown mental health crisis. Factors including job insecurity, fear of infection, isolation and bereavement have led to increased demand for treatment of such conditions as depression and anxiety.

In April 2021 the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that 2.2 million adults and nearly 400,000 children in the UK sought help for mental health problems during the pandemic, adding that the situation “will likely get a lot worse before it gets better”. Although a return to normal life is now under way, it’s likely that many will continue to struggle with the legacy of Covid.

Landscape photographer and RPS member Paul Sanders believes engaging in photography can bring significant benefits to mental health. “I’m absolutely passionate about the power that photography has to help people overcome anxiety, and to positively adjust their outlook on life,” he says.

Sanders joins fellow photographers Robert Darch and Melissa Spitz to reveal how they each use image-making to document and explore mental health issues – as well as overcome them.



‘Edenbridge, Kent, 2021’ by Paul Sanders



## Paul Sanders

### BIO

Sanders began his photographic career in 1984, working in fashion and advertising, then later moved into newspaper photography. In 2004 he became the picture editor on the *Times*, leaving seven years later to focus on landscape work. He now runs photographic workshops and retreats with an emphasis on mindfulness, through his company, Still.

“My depression started to kick in around 2010 and began with insomnia and heightened anxiety. There was quite a lot of pressure in my job as the *Times* picture editor and coupled with that my marriage was breaking down, so I took the decision to leave and become a landscape photographer.

“At first this left me even more depressed because the images I was taking had nothing to do with me. In all my years as a photographer, I was always commissioned and shooting what other

people wanted, so I never knew what sort of photographs I wanted to do.

“Around 2013 I changed my therapist and she got me to talk about how I was feeling through my photographs. She asked me why I liked shooting with long exposures and I said, ‘I’m anxious, I can’t breathe, my head is filled with voices and noises, but when I sit next to the camera while it’s exposing, I can almost see everything slowing down and it makes me feel calm.’ Later, when I looked back at

the pictures, I’d remember the calm and be able to breathe. She really helped me see that.

“I found photography was becoming like a meditation, it was a time of slowing down and contemplation. When you’re in a state of depression nothing seems beautiful, but I needed to see beauty in things and the only way I could see that was through photography.

“I realised what I had to do was not look for validation through social media or exhibitions or print sales,

### “Photography was becoming like a meditation – a time of contemplation”



Above from left ‘Birling Gap, East Sussex, 2021’, ‘Stromness, Orkney, 2020’, by Paul Sanders



‘Cuckmere Haven, 2021’ by Paul Sanders

but just photograph what I enjoyed looking at. Now, I don’t mind if 100 people or no people like my images. I do them purely for myself and they reflect how I feel in a particular moment.

“I shoot black and white because I enjoy the simplicity. I use the same workflow and keep things

as straightforward as I can because as soon as I get lost in the kit, I lose the connection with the subject. I can see beauty in a fence post, or in the way shadows are formed on a wall. I enjoy the flaws in the world and don’t strive for a perfect picture.

“I’m grateful for the things that are presented to me. I don’t view photography as a competition – it’s a contemplation. It’s like a continuous therapy through photographs.

“It makes me appreciate life so much more.”

[discoverstill.com](http://discoverstill.com)



## Robert Darch

### BIO

Darch graduated with a BA in Documentary Photography from the University of South Wales at Newport in 2004. He holds a Master's in Photography and The Book (2015) and an MFA Photographic Arts (2016), both from Plymouth University, where he is now an associate lecturer in photography. He has published two books of his work, *The Moor* (2018) and *Vale* (2020).

"Between the first and second year of my degree I fell ill with a transient ischemic attack, which is essentially a minor stroke. Then, during my second year, I had glandular fever and felt really unwell for a long time. I took a year out from my studies to get better and during that year was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome.

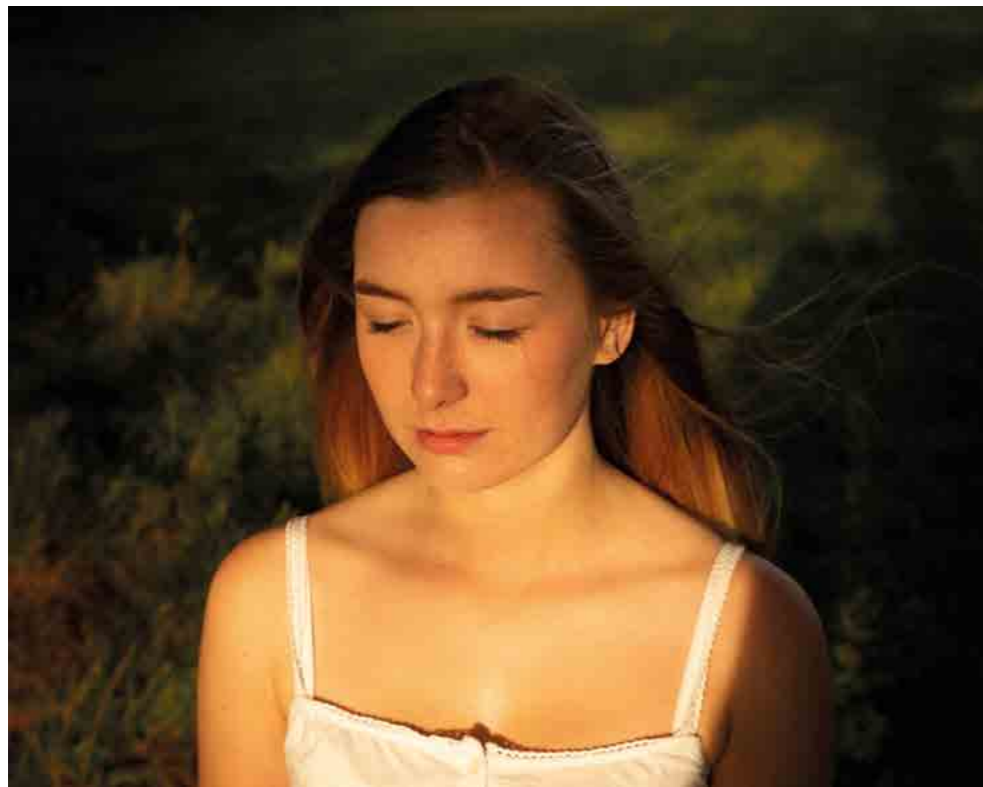
"My symptoms included brain fog and a feeling of weakness. At my worst I couldn't leave the house

very often, and any mental processing was difficult. I continued making photographs but I changed how I was working – I focused much more on details in small spaces, and pictures relating to my internal life.

"After finishing my degree I continued living at home with my parents until they retired to Devon in 2006, after which I lived independently in Worcester. As a result of being at home for so long my world became small and



From the series *Vale*, 2020, by Robert Darch



From the series *Vale*, 2020, by Robert Darch

**"My symptoms included brain fog and a feeling of weakness. At my worst I couldn't leave the house very often, and mental processing was difficult"**

insular. I had issues with anxiety and especially with re-integrating into the world. Things like getting a train or bus were difficult. Towards the end of living alone I'd also got quite paranoid and I realised it wasn't a healthy situation to be in.

"Two years later I moved in with my parents in Devon and slowly got better. Eventually, ten years after I first became ill, I felt well again, and able to lead a normal life and work as a photographer. By the time I started my Master's in 2013 I had spent a long time

developing and thinking about my photography, and everything came together in my practice.

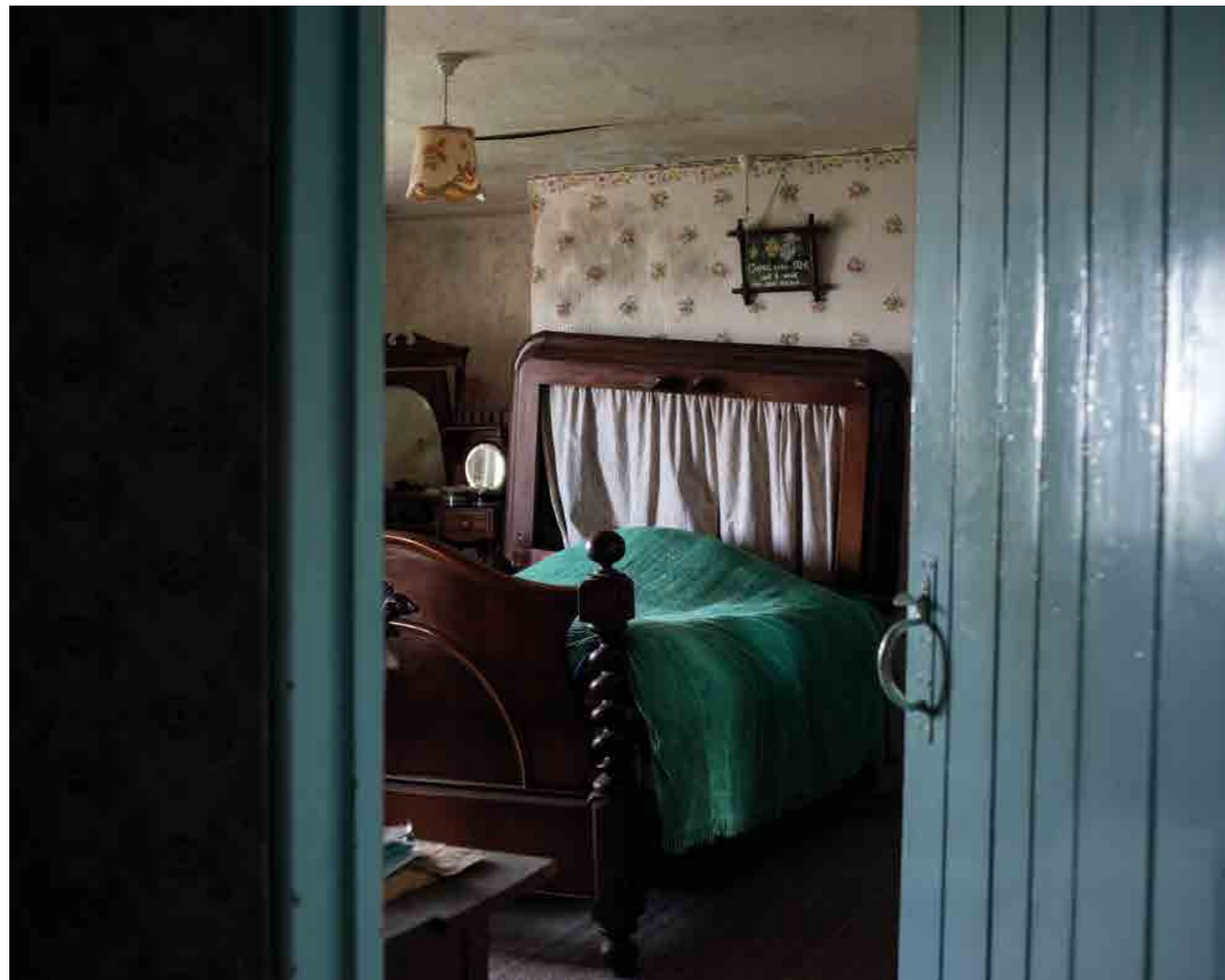
"My most recent book, *Vale*, is my main project which links to mental wellbeing and reflects on my ten-year period of illness.

"It also strongly relates to people feeling trapped and locked down and isolated by Covid during the last year. In a way it's a projection of those lost summers in my early 20s, obviously heightened and romanticised. The people in the images are kind of

stand-ins for me and how my life could have been.

"I think one of the reasons I got ill was that I was a perfectionist. I was completely driven and I felt like my body just gave in. But if I hadn't got ill, I wouldn't be making the work I am now. The experience of long-term illness changed me and as a result I'm much more relaxed. I have a level of ambition, but it's not the same as when I was 21. I'm just doing this work for me because I enjoy it."

robertdarch.com



From the series *Vale*, 2020, by Robert Darch



'Mom's mask, pt 1, 2011' from the series *You Have Nothing to Worry About* by Melissa Spitz



## Melissa Spitz

### BIO

**Spitz, born in 1988, is originally from St Louis, Missouri, and now lives in New York City. She was named Instagram Photographer of 2017 by Time magazine and received Magnum's Inge Morath Award in 2018. Her best-known work, *You Have Nothing to Worry About*, is a long-term documentary series on her mother, Debbie, who suffers from mental illness.**

"My mom was first hospitalised when I was seven years old. My dad was away on business and she was telling me there were people in our house that wanted to kill us. After two days of her phoning the police she was taken away for psychiatric treatment and I was left with my neighbours, feeling anxious

and confused. From then on, this kind of chaotic and traumatic situation became normal life for me.

"I formally started photographing mom when I was in college. My professor had said I wasn't making work that was up to par for the class and I felt angry and wanted to prove him wrong. I drove two hours

back to my home and photographed our house, the pills, the garbage, then my mom came in, saw the camera and started going into theatrics.

"Later my professor looked at the photos and saw my mom and said, 'Is she mean?' I was so floored this had even come across in the photos because she was happy in



'Praying, 2013' from the series *You Have Nothing to Worry About* by Melissa Spitz

most of them. It really turned into catharsis at that point – it became a way for me to talk about something I had been so embarrassed by and had felt so much shame about for so long.

"For the first couple of years of photographing her she was so out of it in most of our sessions that I don't think she always realised what we were doing. Then one time she looked at a photo and said, 'How can you make me look like this?' We got into a big fight about it, but later she said, 'Will you please keep taking pictures?'"

They scared me but they've helped me see I'm not living my life correctly.'

"That was when the collaboration really started. We would create photos that illustrated events that had already happened – for example, she would say, 'I want to act out this panic attack I remember having.'

"Occasionally I will get a comment online saying what I'm doing is exploitative and cruel. I used to get very defensive about it, but now I think, OK, believe that if you want to, but I can guarantee that my mom

loves the attention and it makes her feel important.

"The process of photographing my mom has helped me see her in a new light, where I can understand and respect her more than I thought I could. With the photos she can see how genuine my love is for her, and that despite all that's happened, I've still made her the centre of my life. That's validated her and validated our relationship and I believe the work has truly saved her life."

[melissaspitz.com](http://melissaspitz.com)



'Pool day, 2015' from the series *You Have Nothing to Worry About* by Melissa Spitz

**"It turned into catharsis at that point – it became a way for me to talk about something I had been so embarrassed by"**



'All of mom's prescriptions, 2014' from the series *You Have Nothing to Worry About* by Melissa Spitz