

Talk to the Royal College of Psychiatrists (5th June 2015)

I am fortunate to have had some excellent mental health care especially in the past 3 years. But equally, I have come across stigma and discrimination whilst being treated by the health service. I will give you a brief rundown of my mental health history and at appropriate points, will give examples of what I consider to be both good and bad mental health care attitudes.

I was born and brought up in rural West Wales and have a twin sister and an older brother. From the outside we probably appeared to be a fairly 'normal' family, with my Mum being a primary school teacher and my father being a vicar and a university lecturer. However, I endured years of sexual abuse at the hands of my father until he died when I was 15. I survived those years by immersing myself in schoolwork. With hindsight, I can see that my chronic depression started when I was in my teenage years ... but it was not diagnosed until my early 20's. My family GP clearly did not think that children & adolescents could suffer from mental health challenges ... these days I know that this has much improved. Every few weeks as a teenager, I was sent for blood tests for glandular fever, anaemia & an underactive thyroid ... all to fit in with my symptoms of persistent apathy & tiredness, tearfulness & a lack of motivation. Each time they came back negative. If only my GP had thought to ask me how I was feeling. I had no concept of depression at this point ~ I just knew that I felt rubbish.

I opted to go to University in Cambridge to get as far away as possible from West Wales and all its associated memories. Naively I thought I could leave the past behind me I soon learnt that your memories go with you wherever you go. I came up to Cambridge to read Natural Sciences in 1985 but from the beginning, I struggled to keep up with the level of academic work expected of a Cambridge undergraduate ... there were times when I wondered what I was doing here. As I plodded through my 3rd year, I became more and more unhappy and more and more frightened of what

would happen to me after Uni had finished. I didn't feel I had the tools to survive out there in the real world. I was also frightened of failing my finals and knew this was a strong possibility as I had, by then, lost all motivation and enthusiasm for my course. I still wasn't aware that I was depressed ... I felt very lonely, desperate and frightened but never once did I think I was ill.

In January 1988 I took a large calculated overdose and went off to sleep for what I hoped would be forever. However, 3 days later I was discovered, unconscious, in my room by the college porters. I was in Addenbrookes for about 10 days & then went to the college sick bay for a couple of weeks whilst further tests were conducted for possible consequences of my overdose. The college sister had been a psychiatric ward sister earlier in her career ... but she came out with some awful comments to me as soon as I arrived in sick bay. E.g. "For goodness sake, go & find a corner of a field somewhere next time so you can kill yourself where no-one will find you". I had hoped for some understanding & compassion from her. I felt vulnerable & looked down upon for the remainder of my time in sick bay. Eventually, I was sent home back to Wales. I still had no diagnosis and was unaware that I was ill.

I returned to Uni that October to re-sit my final year and immediately saw my new GP, who didn't take long to suggest I may be depressed. She started me on some medication but I continued to spiral downwards until in January 1989, she succeeded in convincing me that how I was feeling was not something that I had to suffer ... and I was admitted to Adrian House, Fulbourn. Following a 7 month admission, I was discharged to supported housing.

I now had to learn to live with my mental health challenges - this was made so much easier after I met Liz, who became my partner, best friend and soul-mate for the next 20 years. From 1991 to early 2011 I managed to remain in full-time work ... there were ups & downs in my depression but in Liz, I had someone who supported me &

loved me as I was, 'warts & all'. There was meaning and purpose in my life for the first time ever. Sadly Liz was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2008 ... above all else she was adamant that she wanted to stay at home until the end. This is a promise I'm proud to say I was able to keep for her. On Sept 1st 2010, my life changed forever as Liz passed away quietly at home, with me by her side. My meaning and purpose in life was extinguished there and then.

After Liz's death, I managed to continue working but over the course of the next 15 months became very very depressed. My GP of 25 years was a constant source of support during these months, seeing me weekly most of the time. I had been out of secondary mental health care for many years but was referred back to psychiatrists twice during 2011. Both of these encounters left me feeling unheard and unacknowledged ... the 1st psychiatrist wanted to double the number of meds I was on. During my assessment with a 2nd psychiatrist I tried to explain that I desperately needed some talking therapy. Someone who would listen to all the 'noise' in my head. The psychiatrist bluntly told me that I was clearly looking for something that didn't exist. I felt stupid for having asked for help & also for wasting the psychiatrist's time.

By December 2011, I reached my lowest point and life was a daily struggle. I became intensely suicidal and was put in the care of the Crisis Resolution team, who on their 1st visit said that they could only work with me if I 'promised not to do anything silly'. I hated that phrase ... it made me feel like a child who was being told off by a parent. I would have preferred had the Crisis Team asked about my suicidality directly rather than using this comment. They worked with me for about 6 weeks before passing me over to a CPN with the Intake & Treatment team.

This CPN came out with some of the most unhelpful, discriminatory comments I've heard within the mental health service. For example ... I was going through some of

my history with her when I happened to mention that on discharge from Fulbourn hospital, I lived in a group home for a year & that it had been a very positive experience for me. Her response was 'Goodness, you lived in a group home? Well, you've certainly done very well for yourself haven't you? Patients who live in group homes don't ever really come to very much'. This comment is one that I still recall very vividly & I can remember feeling very ashamed in that appointment for having needed to live in a group home for that time. I wished I had never mentioned the home as it clearly made the CPN think that I was much less capable than she'd originally thought.

Towards the end of my time with this CPN, I asked if she would refer me to a clinical trial that I had read about, for individuals with chronic treatment-resistant depression. I thought it was important for individuals such as myself to take part in mental health research which might help others in the future. My CPN refused to refer me saying 'you need to stop looking behind you & start looking forwards to your future'. This comment made me think that she had not listened to me or heard my reasons for wanting to be referred onto the trial. Yet again, my self confidence was hit hard & I was left wishing I'd not opened my mouth. Thankfully, my GP referred me to the trial & amazingly I was accepted onto the experimental arm.

In October 2012, things began to change and as I look back today, I can now see that this is when I took my first tentative steps towards my journey of recovery. The trial provided intensive, holistic therapy for a period of 12 months. It turns out that this intensive treatment was exactly what I needed and during my year on the trial, I met and worked with 3 amazing people. I was seen weekly by a psychologist who helped me work through some of the deeper difficulties I faced following on from my abusive childhood. A CPN met me weekly at home and helped me confront my hoarding challenges head-on ... I was ashamed of this hidden part of my life but she gave me the strength and techniques to start de-cluttering my flat. This process is still on-

going. And I met Dr Ramana ... a psychiatrist like no other that I'd met before. She spent 3 hours with me, taking down my history, in our 1st consultation! She listened and gave me space to say whatever I needed to say. And throughout the trial, she never made any decision regarding my treatment without first giving me plenty of information regarding my options and then coming to a joint decision with me about the best way forward. Shared decision making at its best.

Towards the end of the trial, my psychologist guided me towards Recovery College East, thinking it was a place I could go to to further my recovery. I followed a number of courses at the Recovery College in 2013/14 before starting the application process for the PSW training course in Summer 2014. Initially I was in 2 minds as to whether I was doing the right thing or not by enrolling onto the PSW course, Although I felt I was at the start of my journey towards recovery & I knew I wanted to help others with their recovery, I wasn't sure I would be well enough to complete a 14 week course. My confidence had taken several knocks in the previous few years by practitioners in the mental health service making me feel that most of what I thought was irrelevant & most of what I said was not worth listening to. Thank goodness for my experience with the clinical trial team.

I was thrilled when I learnt I had been given a place on the PSW course. Several months on & I can proudly say that I have completed & graduated from the course in January 2015. Since then, I have been working in a voluntary capacity at the Recovery College... helping with peer supporting students, assisting with teaching, writing a course on De-cluttering and also helping out with some admin. I now feel I am sufficiently far down my journey of recovery to contemplate at least some part-time work & in fact, had an interview for a PSW role within Recovery College East 2 weeks ago. I found out the following day that I got one of the positions within the college and started working in an official capacity there, for 2 days per week, as of this week.