

Recovery and hope



CNWL recovery college
Hope - Control - Opportunity

Personal stories from students and
trainers at CNWL Recovery College.





If you would like to enrol onto a CNWL
Recovery College course or workshop, please get in touch

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Introduction

bb To be a person is to have a story to tell. qq

Isak Dinesen (alias Karen Blixsen 1885 - 1962)

To live in hope is essential to us all. In this collection, we celebrate the power of stories to touch and inspire us with hope.

Telling your story can be part of a healing process, inspire hope in people on a similar journey and offer practitioners a different view of their everyday work. These stories can be at the heart of changing practice, moving forward and learning together.

We are grateful to people using services, their supporters and members of staff for generously and bravely sharing their stories everyday in the Recovery College. Through talking about our experiences and sharing stories, we are able to understand and support each other and move forward positively. Working together, we want to help more people make sense and meaning out of life's great challenges.

This publication was originally printed in March 2013 to mark the first anniversary of the CNWL Recovery College and has been reprinted in May 2014.

bb A story told at the right moment in someone's life can shine a light sufficiently bright to illuminate the way ahead on the map of life. qq

The therapeutic use of stories (1997)

The CNWL Recovery College Team

The CNWL Recovery College offers adult education to deliver a responsive, peer-led education and training curriculum of recovery focused workshops and courses. We aim to promote opportunities for the recovery and inclusion of people with the experience of mental health challenges.

From the editor

Each person's story here is unique, filled with a set of circumstances and experiences.



All the stories share something that transmits beyond the details: each person has, like so many countless others, managed to climb the walls up from more despairing times into a hope-filled, satisfying life. The ascent hasn't been a quick, straightforward affair for anybody, but what we hope is that these real life stories convey the fact that recovery is possible, given access to the nurturing conditions of hope, control and opportunity. Each person's account has shown that mental health challenges and the experiences that surround them can create a newly formed sense of purpose and understanding.

Learning to take control of our own fate is another theme that these amazing stories share. It often takes time and perseverance, and it can certainly sometimes seem like everything is out of control. Being given the opportunity to pursue vocations, interests and causes that we personally value comes across in each story too.

The CNWL Recovery College offers an opportunity for students to take further control of their own and positively impact others' recovery. Some of the stories here have come from Peer Trainers working at the College, who instil hope through their inspirational stories and the valuable lessons they have learned. Other contributors have attended the College as students, each of whom bring their own lived expertise to the courses and here, in this collection of personal stories of hope.

It was an absolute privilege and pleasure to help put this booklet together. I thank everyone who contributed their amazing stories and took the time to talk to me about their deeply personal experiences. Most of the stories here have been written by the individuals themselves and lightly edited through further conversations, while some I put together through interviews and then edited in collaboration with the storyteller. I hope I have managed to keep the unique, inspiring voice of each individual, as each has something new to teach.

Fabio Zucchelli

Freelance writer and former Peer Employment Specialist at CNWL Recovery College

Control, keys and expertise

bb It may seem a small thing, but receiving a set of keys to the building where I was to volunteer was, I think, the dawning of a new beginning for me. I was treated as a member of the team and recognised for what I could contribute, not for my past as a drug user, nor for my present role as a service user. qq

I started using hard drugs when I was 17 and quickly became heavily addicted to them. I worked in the film industry and was very successful, which was in part due to me needing to earn good money to be able to afford the vast quantities of drugs I needed to function. I would manipulate the services I was calling on for help into giving me as large a Methadone prescription for as long as possible. That was all the help I wanted and did not think anything else was relevant. This gave me a feeling that I was 'getting away with it'.

About 15 years ago I had a breakdown; I lost my home, my family and my job, my career, and I was made bankrupt. I found myself on the streets for two years, before finally plucking up the courage to go into a hostel. During the two years on the street I had been in and out of hospital. This led me to believe that this was how it was going to be and that this was how the rest of my life would play out. I had lost everything but most of all I felt I had lost myself. I had lost my status as a productive member of the community and was seen as just another 'junkie on the streets', with everything that went with that identity.

However, I was very lucky and met someone in my hostel who was able to see me for who I was and not with all the 'baggage' usually associated with me and my problems. Things slowly started to get better for me as things in my life stabilized. I met my partner, was re-housed and my drug taking had all but stopped. However, I was still not coping well with everyday stresses and strains; receiving a bill or letter would throw me into a swirl of anxiety.

After gradually accepting that I needed help- I finally plucked up the courage to go and seek help from the substance misuse services offered in Westminster. I was immediately taken on and started seeing an occupational therapist, and actively started taking part in groups and other activities. I began to learn that there were more things in my control than I realised, the more I opened myself up to learning about the things that made me feel unwell and unable to cope, the more helpful things I could put into place for myself. I was steadily taking over the wheel to my recovery.



“Giving something back and trying to fight for a better future has given me so much to look forward to.”

After a couple of years I was told that I was coming to the end of group work and I was asked if I had thought about a work placement through the CNWL User Employment Programme. I balked at the very idea of going back to work. I truly felt terrified by all that it meant- not least with regard to my benefits which had taken years to finally sort out. I took the placement on the condition that it didn't mean I'd have to move into employment afterwards if I didn't want to.

That was agreed and I took up a position at Community Day Services in Paddington for half a day a week helping to run the gardening group. From the moment I stepped through the door I was seen as a contributing member of the team, given my own set of keys. The team valued and trusted me. It inspired me to want to do more.

I was given the chance to work in the drop-ins and absolutely loved it. The people were great, and it felt like the start of being part of a community, in which I was playing a helpful role. Being given the chance to help others, rather than just needing help myself, was really empowering. During my four month placement I had increased my days to two a week and when it came to an end I was able to continue as a volunteer with an 'honorary contract'.

This was great as it meant I could continue working in the community which I loved doing without it affecting my benefits.

As a result I was able to access training and started going on professional CNWL courses such as the PALS (Patient Advisory Liaison Service) training. I was then given the opportunity to do the peer support worker training. I have found that over the last two years I have been more and more involved in volunteering and ended up doing five days in some weeks. I was offered payment for a lot of what I was doing, but declined as it would have meant coming off benefits and that was too frightening for me.

I finally took plunge and when the CNWL Recovery College opened I applied for a post as a peer trainer and was successful. I have never felt so excited about my future. I feel I am in control of my destiny to a greater extent than I ever thought possible. I feel proud of what I have been through and that this is recognised as my expertise. At the College I have helped to produce courses and material like the Health and Wellbeing Plan. Giving something back and trying to fight for a better future has given me so much to look forward to.

How I survived 'treatment'

bb *My recovery journey has been long and labyrinthine. I have taken many wrong turns and made bad decisions. Yet glimmers of light along the way have helped me to survive my earlier experiences of psychiatric 'treatment' and move beyond, to the point where I can now say I have come out the other end and live a happy life.* **qq**

My psychiatric problems started while at school about 35 years ago. Leading on from this, I spent a period in hospital. It was a frightening and bewildering time for me. I felt completely lost and did not know what was happening to me or what the future might hold.

During this confusing time nurses often shouted at me and pushed me. I was not sure how to respond or behave as whatever I said or did seemed to be viewed as a symptom of illness or misbehaviour. I was interrogated by psychiatrists who eventually diagnosed me with schizophrenia.

As well as this diagnosis I was told I had a psychosexual disorder for which I was to be treated with behaviour modification techniques. This really upset me as I had felt fairly happy with being gay and had no idea it could be perceived as an illness. Now my sexuality started to frighten and confuse me as I was told by a consultant psychiatrist (and he should know, shouldn't he?) that it was an aspect of my mental illness. The resulting abuse, or should I say 'treatment', proved very damaging to my identity and self-esteem for many years to come.

At this time I met a nurse who proved, literally, to be my life-saver. She was an open lesbian feminist

who told me to trust my own feelings and to not necessarily believe everything the doctors were telling me. She was the first person who had shown me any kindness in all my time in hospital. She was a great inspiration. She told me that I would not always be in this state, although a lot of that would be up to me. With her support I started to learn about myself, and she talked with me about feminist ideas and explanations about the position of women in society. This wonderful woman gave me the strength to carry on, and not end my life as I had planned.

After further hospital admissions I felt that I had become stuck again in a cycle of illness, and that it was time to move on before it was too late. I needed to get away from those who felt I needed treatment which always seemed to be very punitive and not very helpful. I moved to Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp where there were thousands of women from all over the world.

At the camp I was welcomed, accepted, and soon became an active participant in non-violent direct action which I enjoyed immensely, partly due to the social aspect, partly because I was doing something useful and important – a new experience for me. I learned a lot

about myself during my years at Greenham Common Women's Peace Group because I was surrounded by inspirational women who were supportive when I did not feel well and helped me grow when I started to feel good again. I now felt strong in myself as a lesbian woman and, through reflection of my past, felt more in control of my mental health.

After the Greenham years, I went through a low time when all the excitement was over and I had to decide what to do with my life. I was ill equipped to work, possessing a non-existent CV, a terrible health record and minimal education, so I decided to volunteer in a community bookshop where I knew they sold books about the peace movement, anti-apartheid and feminism etc. - in other words, everything I was interested in. I was allocated a supervisor who immediately made me feel at home.

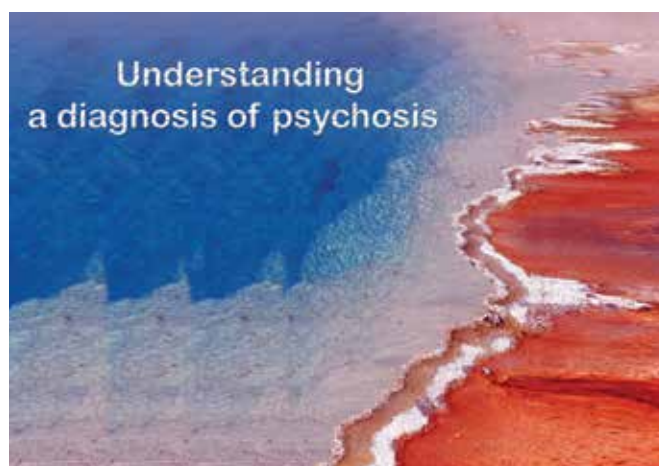
This was over 20 years ago and that supervisor is still my closest companion. I had never felt totally loved and accepted for who I was before, and I think it is because of this that I grew in self-esteem and confidence. It was this newly found confidence that allowed me at the age of 40 to embark on an Open University degree course which I completed a few years later. I felt extremely proud of myself after being told that studying was one of the many things I would never be able to do. Just by the by, I have done all those other things too!

Since moving to London and being treated by more progressive services, I have been re-diagnosed as having schizo-affective disorder. Although I don't find my diagnosis terribly relevant it has meant a different approach to me when I become distressed. I have had wonderful people who have worked with me to try to keep me well for longer periods and I have enjoyed many therapeutic treatments.

These interactions taught me to see that there are patterns to the ways that I experience mental health illness, and that by understanding these



patterns better, I can act upon them as warning signs quicker and prevent things from spinning out of control. So I go to bed early, eat regularly and importantly, talk to people whom I trust. All of these help to keep me grounded.

I am now in two paid jobs working as a Peer Support Worker (after training two years ago through the CNWL Recovery College) and a Recovery Trainer at the CNWL Recovery College. Co-designing the **'Understanding a diagnosis of psychosis'** course and co-running it with a great psychiatrist has given me a new way of seeing mental health services, and a far more empowering way to be part of it. I can honestly say I now find my present life fulfilling and stimulating.



I found this piece hard to write, partly because it covers so many years, and because, on looking back I have many different life stories depending on my mood or mode of self-reflection. In trying to understand myself as objectively as possible I realise the point is not to look for the 'real' thoughts and events that make up Kari but rather to sift as honestly as possible through the mass of often complex and even frightening aspects of my internal world and to come up with useful, satisfying patterns of my past – not a fixed mental picture of myself that has been labelled and relabelled by someone else. Taking responsibility for this process has been often painful but also incredibly empowering.

Under construction

 *Three things have kept me going: my kids, my faith and music. I remember when I was in hospital my sister brought me a dictaphone with recordings of my kids singing. It reminded me that I needed to keep going, and now I thank God that I did.* 

Growing up I always felt like the odd one out of the family. I liked reading and classical music, which always got turned off whenever I listened to it. Then when I became a mum I had times when I was so low that I'd get up to take my kids to school, go back to bed and only get up again to pick them up in the afternoon. I always felt I had to keep going for them, so I pretended to cope. I felt voiceless, never able to speak up, stashing all my difficult memories in the back of my mind so that I could keep looking after everyone else in my life. I went to university in 2005 but had to leave because I got so emotional, and then in 2008 I got laid off from my job as a duty manager at a gym.

In 2009 I had my first manic episode. Although it must have been building up, the intensive period only lasted a week. I stopped sleeping, thought the world was ending, I got obsessed with religion, and neglected my kids. I thought one of my kids was evil, but kept changing my mind about which one it was. I had never been like that; we'd always done things together as a group. I didn't recognise my thoughts or my kids. I remember the sheer terror like it was yesterday, and it led me to act in a bizarre way that got me taken to a police cell.

I was then transferred to hospital. It was frightening at first but gradually, with photos

of my kids on the wall to give me an incentive, and the guidance of the Bible, the place became less scary. I played music for the other patients; reggae, soul, hip-hop- whatever they were into. However when I left, I was homeless. My kids were with my sister and I had to stay at my mum's, which made me feel like I was 10 again. I didn't have as much access to my kids as I wanted. It felt like my world had fallen apart.

Then I started seeing a counsellor which was great. It helped to trace back to when I was depressed and work out the triggers and what was going on in my life at the time. My kids and I did family therapy which was good too. I got my kids back after two years when we got housed in temporary accommodation, and things were looking up again. I built a rapport with my care co-ordinator and my employment specialist from the CNWL User Employment Programme, who helped me get a work placement.

I was still having panic attacks, and I didn't go anywhere without my son. My recovery really got kick-started when I realised that I couldn't keep imposing on my kids; I had to do things for myself. So I enrolled in a course at a local college to be around people again, get my confidence up and get my brain working again. From there I went to a couple of courses at the CNWL

Recovery College. The **Telling Your Story course** gave me a different perspective on what I was feeling. I realised I still had some work to do, but was helped to see how to do it. Meeting other people who told their stories in different ways helped too. Meeting the trainers, and seeing the peer trainer do her thing, encouraged me to go after what I wanted to do: help people with mental health problems. So since finishing my placement I have now got a job as a personalisation peer support worker in Brent. I believe things happen for a reason. It might not have made sense at the time, but if I hadn't been on the other side of the experience before and ended up in hospital, I wouldn't be doing what I am now.

At the 'Telling Your Story' course I used poetry, which helped me to find my voice again. It has always been a dream of mine to redevelop property, and this is a poem I wrote about my own redevelopment:



UNDER CONSTRUCTION

New, freshly painted
Lovely decorated
Occupied
Happy times – smiling faces

Lived in used, wear and tear
Attic crammed full of untold memories,
good and bad
No longer in use,
Unlived in, abandoned

Broken into, space invaded
Overcrowded
Sitting tenants uninvited
Strange voices unrecognised
Cold- no love, no care
Destruction beginning

Leaks, holes and mould
Wires hanging - an accident waiting
to happen
Decay, cracking, crumbling
Everything falling apart
Overgrown, derelict, left

Spotted, unseen potential
Rebuilding, remodelled, rewired.
Walls knocked down, new spaces created
Loft conversion, big windows, light
bathing the surroundings

New, freshly painted
Lovely decorated
Occupied
Happy times – smiling faces

Defrosting in the sunshine

bb It was like giant dominoes falling, and I couldn't pick one up before the next fell. First I had a child, then four weeks later my mother died, and shortly thereafter problems with my employer came to a head. 2001 was the year where my life was turned upside down. qq

Until then I had used three tools to deal with my problems: alcohol, cannabis and nicotine. They made up the cement that shakily held me together. Right from university and into working life I had gone through periods of great depression, staying in bed for days on end, not answering the door or anyone's calls. I didn't realise until 2001 though, that I'd been having manic episodes for many years as well.

On a good day that year, the most I could muster was to get up and sit at the edge of my bed, and fill up ashtray after ashtray. I gave up smoking when I learned I was pregnant, but actually this only escalated my condition further as one of my crutches was taken away. I was given antidepressants but they did nothing other than cripple me further. I had such strong tremors I couldn't even hold a cup of tea and I became violent for the first time in my life, even smashing up my flat a few times. It became so overwhelming that when my son was six months old I ended up emptying a box of medication down my throat. I called my care co-ordinator to tell her what I had done, and when she and my husband arrived I was slumped at the bottom of the stairs. I had left my son on my bed, but they couldn't find him. Luckily he was happily gurgling on the floor by the bed, but it made me realise something was not right at all, and I needed to take action myself to make a change.

This was when I first came across bipolar disorder. I looked up 'depression' online and happened upon bipolar quite by accident. I was totally gobsmacked. Things started to fall into place like a jigsaw puzzle. The more I read, the more it made sense to me. It was such a huge relief to read that other people had the same kind of experiences. I found a great workbook by Mary Ellen Copeland and worked my way through it. I started to see how so many of my dangerous behaviours in the past had been influenced by mania. Over the next six months, after much too-ing and fro-ing, my diagnosis was finally changed to bipolar disorder and it helped immensely as I finally had something to hang my clothes on, a framework I could work with. I tried new medications, and although they still gave me problems at least I no longer suffer from those violent rages.

I really poured myself into work- it became my life. I worked as an arts officer for a company that toured African and Caribbean artists and musicians. I loved the work, and I'd end up working for days at a time without sleep or food. What I didn't realise at the time, was that this was only helping to fuel the mania. With the addition of a new member of the team, things started to go downhill at work. It was a small team, and it had always felt like a family to me, but gradually a poisonous atmosphere started to seep in. In

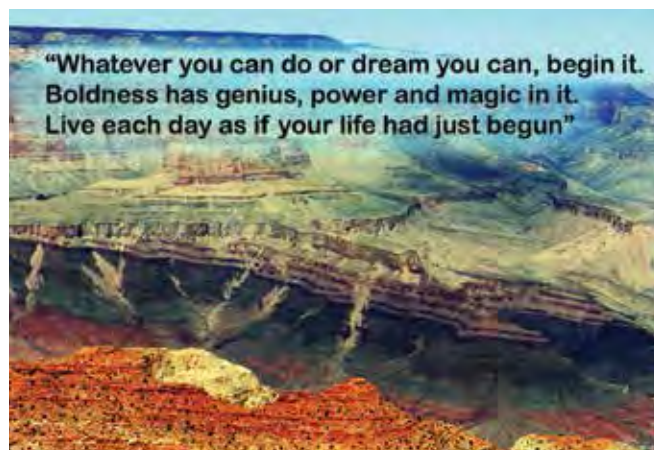
2006 I was wrongfully sacked, and the wheels really started to fall off. It felt like everything had stopped- so I gave up. I took such a large overdose that it was touch and go as to whether I lived or not.

I was told I should stay in a mental health hospital to be safer, and I didn't trust myself at home, so I agreed to go. At first I just looked around for ways to kill myself and didn't talk to anyone at all, but gradually things changed for the better. One thing that changed me was the sun. I remember one February morning sitting in a patch of sunlight. It sounds strange but hitherto whenever the sun had shone on me it was as if there was a shadow cast over it. But now it felt hot on my skin, I could actually feel it. From then on I just chased the sun round the ward, desperate for its warm glow. I felt human again- like I had defrosted.

There was one patient who kept speaking to me, despite my lack of response. Eventually I started talking to him, and he proved an inspiration to me. He was due to leave soon after nearly a year on the ward, and I realised the progress he had made. It amazed me how he could remain such a nice man despite everything he'd been through. I thought to myself 'If he can do it then so can I'. I started to eat more (as not eating had always been a problem for me), I talked more to others on the ward and saw my son and husband in the family room. I also knew I needed to get out to attend to the employment tribunal I had set in motion in response to my wrongful dismissal.

When I left things were still pretty dark, but one thing that kept me going was attending a women's recovery programme at an African and Caribbean mental health resource day centre just around the corner from me. The programme pulled us all apart but then put us back together, stronger. This was also the first time I heard the word 'recovery'.

By this time my former company had gone out of business, so there was no money to compensate me if I won my claim, but I went ahead anyway - I wanted closure. The case was found fully in my



favour. When I left the building where the four-day tribunal had taken place, it felt like a huge boulder had rolled off my back. I felt validated, and like a new person, in control. Taking control had started with working through Mary Ellen Copeland's workbook, then with the recovery programme and it was reinforced by getting through the tribunal with my head held high. I had lived through the three gruelling years the tribunal took from start to finish, and could now close the door. It was the start of my life for real.

I did some mental health training through Mind, and since then I can't begin to tell you how much I have done! I have trained on so many courses and run training for various organisations, and have loved it all. For a while I still looked for work in the arts, but I realised that this wasn't what I wanted any more. I wasn't the same person I had been. I do a lot of sessional training work now, through a great contact at the Mind Service User Network in Kensington and Chelsea, and also as an associate peer recovery trainer for the CNWL Recovery College.

I really think my experiences are valuable to other people using services - in fact, I just couldn't imagine doing anything else now!

I wouldn't be where I am today without the support of inspirational people. The patient on the ward who showed me it could be done, my family reminding me to take one day at a time and all the great staff and other service users at various places; they were all there at the right time to keep me going and show me the way.

From existing to living

It wasn't until quite a few months after leaving the therapeutic community in 2006 that I started to realise how much I had learnt about myself from my time there, and how I could change things for the better.

I worked as a children's nanny until 1991, then after getting married I had three children of my own in less than two and a half years. After each child I experienced postnatal depression, but it wasn't until my doctor told me after my third baby arrived that I realised it. I had never experienced depression before, and didn't really know what it was. I had family therapy, medication and inpatient care. Four years later I had my fourth child and things got really tough.

Between 1998, when my son was born, and 2002, I saw a psychologist. Things seemed only to get worse though and in 2002 my psychiatrist, who I had been seeing for about eight years, ended his own life. I hit rock bottom and I wasn't sure where things were going with my life, until I saw a locum psychiatrist who offered me the chance to go to a therapeutic community. I felt that my only choice was to accept, so I left my husband and children and moved into the therapeutic community, where I stayed for a year. My husband was a rock and my social worker was great too. They both supported me throughout my stay. I came home at weekends to be with my family.

It was whilst I was in the therapeutic community having in-depth therapy that I began to see some of the things that had been causing trouble in my life. I realised I had a need for

friendships that I was missing out on and had long-standing jealousy issues. I had already been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and after reading more about the diagnosis and having the time to think about things, I agreed with the diagnosis.

When I left in 2006 I thought things could only get better. However, four months after leaving I had my first manic episode. I ended up detained under the Mental Health Act and diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder. That was the start of my psychotic journey. I now see that this came about because I went from being active all day every day in the therapeutic community and having regular therapy to having neither in the blink of an eye. It was like I had been dropped.

However, after several weeks in hospital I decided to attend a three day training course on getting involved in the Approved Social Worker (ASW) course (now Approved Mental Health Professional, AMHP). I then started telling my story to the students and getting paid for doing so. This boosted my confidence and I stopped staying in bed every day. I also began studying for a Health and Social Care degree in 2006, which I hope to finish this year. I attended an IT course with my local Mind organisation from 2008 to 2010. This gave me the routine in my life that I needed.

“It was whilst I was in the therapeutic community having in-depth therapy that I began to see some of the things that had been causing trouble in my life.”

In 2009 I became a mental health first aid (MHFA) instructor and an expert patients programme (EPP) tutor and I regularly deliver these courses. I passed all my assessments on my IT course with Mind and got the support to apply for a job as a health trainer, which I started part-time in January 2010. I realised that work was something that had been missing from my life and I thoroughly enjoy it. Although I had worked as a nanny, this was the first time that I was working for an organisation with HR departments, payslips and all the other things that make you feel like you're in a serious job. It was actually really exciting.

I came off benefits when I started work, and this was a difficult time financially but once it was all sorted out I was better off in many ways. Stepping into the working world really enhanced my recovery.

In 2012 I completed the Peer Support Worker course and got a job working in the CNWL Recovery College which I really enjoy too. I was already working three days a week as a

Health Trainer and I now work the other two days either at the CNWL Recovery College or delivering MHFA or EPP meaning, I usually work full-time. As well as keeping me very busy, I love working at the College because I can see confidence building in the students, when they see me and think 'If you can do it then so can I'. And I don't have to hide anything as a peer trainer, I can be myself.

My life is great now that I am working and my family are a great support to me. I have not had an episode of depression or mania since July 2009. However, I am still on medication and I have family therapy but things have moved on so much that I can truly say that I am living life rather than just existing. That to me is the meaning of recovery.

“Stepping into the working world really enhanced my recovery.”

Collaborating as a family for recovery

Working on our relationship was not an easy process for my daughter and I, but in the end I could see all too vividly that what I thought was helping was just colluding with the illness and keeping Henrietta unwell.

My story begins in 1994 when Vanessa my youngest daughter developed anorexia. This was an illness that I had never heard of and knew nothing about, but instinctively I felt that there was something not quite right.

What followed were a few months of trying to get Vanessa to eat while watching her lose more and more weight until eventually her ability to function was impaired. By that I mean she lacked any energy and her capacity to think coherently was affected. Eventually a decision was made to admit her to an inpatient clinic.

I can still remember to this day the chilling sensation I felt as the door of the clinic closed behind me and I was told that I could not see Vanessa for several weeks and we could only communicate by telephone once a week. I thought that this was what seeing someone in prison must feel like.

Vanessa was discharged from her clinic after four months and went on to have intensive outpatient therapy for three years, and from there she was able to pick up the threads of her life again.

In 1996 Henrietta my eldest daughter developed bulimia/binge eating. Unlike Vanessa she suffered from huge bouts of depression and

would hole up in her room for days with the curtains closed, constantly telling me she would commit suicide.

I had very different relationships with my two daughters. Vanessa was very independent and was determined to stand on her own two feet. Henrietta was the complete opposite and very needy.

This characteristic of Henrietta's resulted in her always wanting me to be available to listen for hours to her problems, whether it was on the telephone or around our kitchen table. She always wanted me to come up with the answers for making her better and in her own words "fix her". Just as I would think I had solved everything for her and taken away the tangible pain, she would come back for more lengthy conversations or with requests for money as she had literally eaten through all that she had.

Henrietta struggled terribly with her bulimia and her continuing thoughts of suicide, created by her deep feelings of depression, was very sad and worrying to watch. One day instead of talking about suicide she decided to act, and took ninety laxatives in one go. Luckily she survived the experience. As a parent I was devastated, with endless questions going around in my head as to how and why it had come to this when I had

spent so much time trying to help her. After this episode and seeing it as a cry for help, Henrietta was admitted to an inpatient clinic.

It was at this clinic where the story of recovery for both of us begins. You may think 'why for both of us?' What I had to learn was that Henrietta and I had become co-dependent and by constantly meeting her demands and trying to 'help her' through the endless conversations we had, I was actually not helping and she was in fact becoming more ill. My behaviour was taking all responsibility for her own recovery away from her and not letting her see the consequences of her actions. I was sheltering her from making the mistakes that teach us how to cope with life.

While Henrietta was undergoing her programme of recovery for her eating disorder I was doing mine for co-dependency at the same clinic as her. I will always be so grateful for being offered this chance to understand the hallmarks of healthy and unhealthy caring for someone who is very distressed. Henrietta and I had to set boundaries around our relationship so that I didn't go into over-helping mode. By doing this, slowly but surely Henrietta and I both got into our own recovery.

The outcome of both our programmes has brought recovery not only for Henrietta and myself, but for us as a family unit. We are so much stronger for the experience, principally because we have healthier relationships based around healthy caring. For all of us this has been a painful and challenging journey but our lives have been changed for the better. It sometimes seemed like a bereavement- like I have lost the children I knew. I didn't get back the two daughters I had but I wouldn't have wanted that as our family is much happier now. Yes we have all had to make changes but I had to realise that what I was doing wasn't working, and as they say, 'If nothing changes then nothing changes'!

One of the other things that helped our recovery was when we all started to work as a team. In Vanessa's case that was with her, me and her psychotherapist and in Henrietta's case it was with her, me and the clinic. My view is that the more collaborative you can be the better the chances are for good recovery outcomes.



Nothing prepares you for a loved one developing an eating disorder and certainly nothing prepared me for two out of my three children developing one. I was exhausted, I blamed myself, I was consumed by guilt and thought that it must be something I had done as a parent that had brought all this on. It also impacts on the whole family.

My two daughters are both in good recovery now. They have friends, good jobs, homes of their own and Henrietta is getting married in July. All these things a few years ago looked like an impossibility but it is always good to remember that recovery is an option.

This is where the CNWL Recovery College plays such a positive role. For me, it has provided a place of opportunity and hope, while also teaching the skills that will help both the people using services and their carers on their recovery journey.



Learning to learn my way to a life I like

bb I'll start by talking about some of the worst experiences I had. I lay on the floor in my parent's house. I couldn't get up. It was as if I'd been pinned to the carpet by a large rock. "I can't move," I said. And it was true. qq

Sometimes I walked from one room to another as if I was wearing concrete boots.



I don't know of a medical explanation for that. My explanation is that my body had listened to the metaphor that it was 'a struggle for me to get anywhere in life' and made it literally true. Not only was it a struggle for me to keep a job, finish anything I started, or form relationships – now it was going to be a struggle for me to walk into the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

At different times, I lost all emotional connection to my family – I was 'void', and they were less than strangers. At other times, when I walked into a room; at a gathering, in a job, at the dole office, I felt that I was 'less than' anyone else there, that I was frayed at the edges and missing a great chunk of something vital at my core.

I felt very stuck. For several years, I'd been in and out of jobs that I didn't like. Whether working or not, I frequently felt tired and drained, and couldn't find the time or energy to do the things that I might enjoy – like making music. I was waiting to magically feel better, and then perhaps I could live the life I wanted to live. I waited for quite a long time.

I lived inside that box labelled "I'm depressed/ I have depression/ I'm a depressive" for a long time. Some doctors had said it to me, and now I said it to myself: this was it for me; depression was a feature of my DNA.

But in another part of me, a silent flame of hope glimmered on. Often obscured and forgotten, from time-to-time I felt its heat again. Sometimes I'd spent the whole night alone, talking myself into knots, but when the morning came there would be a powerful flash of anger. And a voice from deep in my belly: "No more. No more."

I think the most important thing in learning how to live a more fulfilling life was admitting to myself how bad things were, that no one out there could do it for me, and getting myself interested in my own recovery. It was time to grow out of the box.

I had one or two friends who didn't give up on me, even though I wasn't much fun. They saw something in me to value, when perhaps I didn't. A good friend once said to me 'I'm hearing a lot of problems, and not any solutions'. It was very hard to hear, but it hit home because I knew it was a challenge from a true friend, and one that required action.

And then there were the people who seemed to get a kick out of telling me that I "didn't look

comfortable in my own skin” (which, of course, made me feel even less comfortable). So I learned to steer clear of people like that, because there is a big difference between constructive, caring feedback, and putting someone down or telling them what’s ‘wrong’ with them.

Whenever I had the energy and the inclination to do it, I read self help books. By trying things out, I discovered some things that didn’t really help me, some that helped a little and a few that helped a lot.

I learned meditation, and found that for me, becoming aware again of the sensations of my body (and just noticing, without judging if they were good or bad) was the most rewarding part. It was like coming home.

I began asking questions as I went to bed at night, and these would be answered in my dreams. I saw that there was a bigger part of my being that wanted me to be well, and would support me, if I nurtured a relationship with it. It opened up things I was confused about, and showed me where the next step was in a way that my day-to-day thinking wasn’t able to at the time.

I registered for ‘self-improvement’ courses (some of which I attended for free), and met and learned skills from others who were also looking for keys to a better life – a calmer, kinder and happier life.

I also read about mythology and how people have always needed to make their own sense of the world, and where they belong in it. There was something about the conclusions of one of these books that I recognised, that I’d always known. Life wasn’t supposed to be painful, whatever the traumas and difficulties of the past. I discovered that the meaning of life is life itself. There isn’t really a question that needs answering. I felt like I was coming out from under a wicked spell which had shrouded me for half of my life.

I began to savour ordinary things. Real magic was being revealed to me.

I sat down and had a good think about the kind of experiences I would value each day. If I was going to go back to work, it needed to be work which fit in some way with my values and abilities. So I worked as a volunteer for Mind in Camden, and then took paid work as a recovery trainer at the Recovery College in South West London and St George’s NHS Trust. Last year I also joined the Recovery College at CNWL. And funnily enough, these days I also seem to have more time and energy to do other things I enjoy (like making music).

I keep learning. I’ve come to see how any of us can only ever take the next step from where we are, and so helping people to find their next step is more useful than laying out an entire road map. Each person’s map is going to look different in any case.

I learned lots of other valuable things from all this. I’ll mention three.

Firstly, recovery is possible even when it seems impossible. If you believe it is, and you use whatever resources and energy you have – then more than likely it will happen, in one way or another. And some changes can happen more quickly than you might expect.

Secondly, I discovered that where once the past seemed very real and troubled my mind all of the time, that it is only a story which has no life in itself. People can head off in a new direction, and leave behind what needs to be left behind.

Thirdly, I learned a lot about compassion and allowing people to be who they are.

I once believed that nothing good could come out of that depression. But now, I’m grateful for all the experiences I’ve had and the love for myself and other people that has grown in its place.



Climbing the ladder out of hell

bb *After managing to stay out of hospital for three years, I had a relapse last year. It was scary, but after a short admission of three months I feel I am doing so much better. If I really look at the progress I have made over the years to stop feeling guilty, sad or angry about the past, or panicking about the future, then I can see that after each admission I have gained a bit more strength and climbed further up the ladder of recovery.* **qq**

I was first admitted to an eating disorders unit in 1996, a few weeks after moving to London. The words 'anorexia nervosa' had already been attached to me when I was 16. Along with anorexia, my diagnosis now also includes severe anxiety, depression and a personality disorder. Over the next 15 years I came close to death many times, and found myself trapped in a cycle of trying to struggle with severe anxiety and depression on my own. I tried to use food (or lack of it) and self-harm in order to control and silence the sadness, guilt and anger I felt inside, developed from trauma, difficult family dynamics and a family history of mental health problems. I'd reach crisis point, and get admitted to an eating disorders unit or psychiatric hospital where I would be forced to gain weight to a healthy level. Sometimes this took over a year, and because the issues underlying the eating disorder and behaviours I was using to cope had not been dealt with, it wouldn't be long before I would end up in hospital again.

Things have been so bad at times that I have seen no way out and suicide has seemed the only option. Thankfully I was not successful, although at the time I was not able to see a way out of my despair. I felt like a failure: this was just another thing that I was useless at, confirming that I was

a waste of space. A long history of anorexia has meant that I have a lot of physical complications caused by years of starvation and malnourishment. Besides the fact that I cannot have children (something I am still trying to process as I would have loved a family), I have severe osteoporosis which means that my bones are so fragile that a fall or even too much walking can give me fractures. Luckily I am now on a yearly treatment which has been a 'miracle cure' for me and has limited my fractures to just two a year.

Over the fifteen years that I was really struggling, I did manage to gain a degree in psychology, masters in health psychology, an advanced diploma in therapeutic counselling, and a qualification in play therapy. Yet for all my qualifications, and previous periods of employment, in the last 10 years I have not worked at all. I have suffered from a crippling lack of confidence and self-esteem and did not feel capable of coping with life in the way that other people could. I felt (and sometimes still feel) that there is something fundamentally wrong with me.

Despite this, I did manage to fall in love and get married to a wonderful man. Unfortunately our relationship did not survive my illness. He thought his love would be enough to save me, and I thought that my love for him would be enough

to make me want to get better. Neither was true and what could have in an alternate universe been a very happy marriage broke down under the weight of our combined sense of guilt. I had to learn that I deserved something more than the inner hell and torment I was trapped in. I had to WANT to get better.

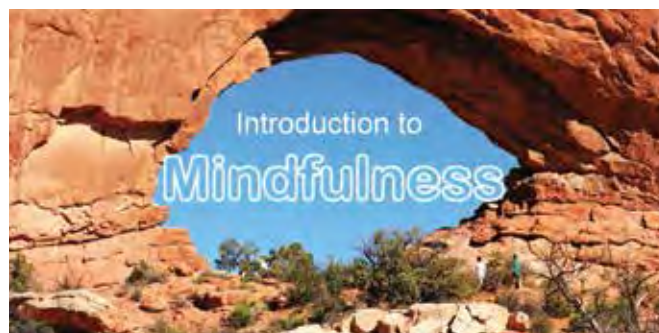
Although there have been times where I have felt hopeless and like I have fallen back down to the bottom.

“I have learnt that the best thing for me to do is to stop, take a few deep breaths, and start again.”

Just taking life moment by moment and not putting so much pressure on myself (although patience, particularly with myself, is still a virtue I am working on mastering).

I now feel that after a lot of hard work (and more still to come), I am making strides towards finding a way to live with a mental health condition. What has helped? A combination of lots and lots of things over the years, including trial and error until finding the medications that work best for me, but most of all learning that I am a fighter who does not give up. In those moments that I have lost hope that I will ever get better, I have also been lucky to find knowledgeable and compassionate professionals who have been able to hold that hope for me while I have regained strength and determination.

I have a fantastic therapist now who is strong enough to not crack or get upset if I share things with her, or go into crisis, and respects me enough to be open and honest and not say things for the sake of it or to make me feel better. Getting out of the house at least once a day is imperative for me, as I can very quickly spiral downwards on a bad day if I am not firm with myself and at least attempt to not hide indoors and beat myself up. Having a structure and keeping busy helps, although I do have to be wary not to exhaust myself. Trying to get enough sleep and a healthy and balanced diet so that my weight remains stable is also important, as are



cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness and breathing techniques.

Support of family and friends I can trust has also been so important. And after attending a lot of courses at the CNWL Recovery College, I have felt empowered with knowledge about my condition, become more in control of my emotions, and have picked up quite a few skills to help me along way. The opportunity to share my experiences and interact with people who have similar life stories, feelings and struggles has probably been the most beneficial thing (and peer trainers are such an inspiration, reminding me that I am not just someone with a mental health condition and that there is a life beyond depression/ anxiety/ services). Mindfulness techniques in particular have taught me that instead of fighting off feeling anything, I need to slow things down and give myself a break and a bit of TLC sometimes.

Last of all, one of the most helpful things for me has been yoga - not only on a physical level (making me stronger, fitter and teaching me to respect my body), but also mental (calming me, giving me energy and helping me sleep), and a spiritual level (figuring out who I am and starting to learn to be more compassionate with myself). I have gained so much from it that I am now training to be a yoga teacher so that I can share those skills with others. I am also volunteering at a local library and a yoga centre as a stepping stone towards gaining employment in the future, taking it slowly and gaining confidence and stamina. Of course I still have bad days, and I can't say that I will never struggle to the point of having to go back into hospital for a period, but know that even when things feel like they won't, they do get better: there is always hope as long as I don't give up.

How to take off a coat

I have owned and worn a coat of stigma for most of my life. It was made to measure. Nowadays though, whenever I feel its weight upon my shoulders, I take it off and hang it on the nearest hook. It has become outworn, unnecessary and for the first time in my life, I feel confident enough to say that my own business with it is finished.

My journey has spanned the ruthlessness of Rhodesia, sectioning and isolation, the cold streets of London and much more. With the help of a wonderful team of specialists, my own acceptance of my condition, and the correct regime of medication, I now have the confidence to stand up again and be counted.

“My life is so much more stable, and sometimes even great.”

Ever since I was a child, I realised there was something different about me. I remember the comments: “That boy is touched”, “The little bastard should be in a home.” Nice. I suppose this is where my self-image came from; in a sense I have been trained to be mentally ill from a very young age. I had very few friends, and was regarded as an oddball in my community. I had, though, learnt how to manipulate situations and gain trust in order to benefit myself.

Rhodesia was a tough nation with scant acceptance of personality disorders or attention deficit maladies amongst children, from which I was afflicted. The rod became my constant companion throughout my informative years. As my father had died before I was born, my over-burdened mother took on the role of both parents, meaning that whilst being a loving mother, she also reinforced the overly aggressive discipline I became accustomed to.

Despite hating school, I excelled in English. I attribute my love for writing to my formative years under the tuition of my wonderful English teacher. In many ways, he was one of the few adults who showed faith in my ability, without expecting me to commit a lewd act on him in return for his confidence.

This was not the norm; the unspeakable abuse I suffered from age nine was not constant but certainly enough to open up a wound in me, a wound of fear, anger and hatred that has led to relationship breakdowns, hospitalisation and criminal charges throughout my life. As young as 12, I started drinking to cope. It was easy for a shrewd little child like me to come by it in a poor, alcohol-ravaged community.

As a vulnerable 13 year old, I was targeted by a paedophile ring. Soon I was a well groomed thing. My self-hatred deepened. At 14, I was suddenly considered too old and cast aside to fend for myself. I turned to drugs and alcohol, and I was barely 15 years old when I first attempted suicide.

At 16, I was sent to a young offender's institution. I escaped the 'joint' but was soon caught. I accepted my fate and tried to get on with it. My mother was forced to hand over guardianship of me to the warden of the institution, an Anglican priest, and I was beaten and abused into submission. My faith in God did not flourish.

I started an apprenticeship while still serving my order and I soon excelled. After barely three years though I spiralled into depression, reuniting with my old friends, drugs and alcohol, and my reputation worsened. I survived by sheer determination and lots of underhanded dealing. With our country undergoing a revolution I somehow had the foresight to realise that, after one very serious brush with the law it was prudent to run, so I fled to South Africa.

I lied my way through the immigration process, easily manipulating people who didn't know me. I found a willing partner and with her help managed to get employment and I started to live a respectable life. Once again I soon rose through the ranks and was well liked and respected until the depression and mania returned. Every six months or so, I would end up in a police cell or mental ward for my own safety, and I was diagnosed with manic depression. I ignored what this might mean, preferring always to run rather than face my demons. And yet somehow I would always pick myself up and start again.

We relocated to the USA where my partner's family lived. Through my well-honed manipulation skills, I managed to land a fantastic position, set up a home, and become a member (albeit an illegal one) of American society. This lasted for less than three years before I once again spiralled out of control, filled with paranoia, mania and depression. I fled leaving behind a broken relationship, debts and the reputation of a very disturbed young man.

I drifted around Africa for a year, alone and afraid, taking odd jobs. Self-hatred and fear grew in me. Then in 1995 I met my future wife, who was in many ways the first person to accept me for who I was. We moved to London in 1999, where again I managed an air of respectability for a short time before plunging into deep depression, heavy drinking and erratic behaviour. In 2003 I packed in my job, which was the last straw for my wife, who left me. This spurred me on to reinvent myself, and I

“The Recovery and Social Inclusion course felt amazing for me. Attending the College has helped me to keep up the momentum of my recovery, to keep going forward.”

became a highly successful salesman but by the end of 2005 I was washed up. I refused help and felt that essentially my life had come to an end.

Penniless and very ill, I ended up taking to the bitterly cold streets. The steps of Westminster cathedral became my bed and I lived on handouts from local charities. Early in 2006 I could no longer bear life on the streets and finally asked for help at the local day centre where I would go for breakfast and a shower when needed. The Westminster Outreach Team gave me night shelter, and life became a little easier. Soon I was given a bed in a hostel where I stayed for many months. Here I was given help to manage my debts, as well as receiving treatment after being diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Over the next two years I ended up sectioned and confined to a local mental facility on two more occasions. Once again I went through the motions and did my best to survive; by this time I was convinced that my life was completely worthless. But again I stayed alive.

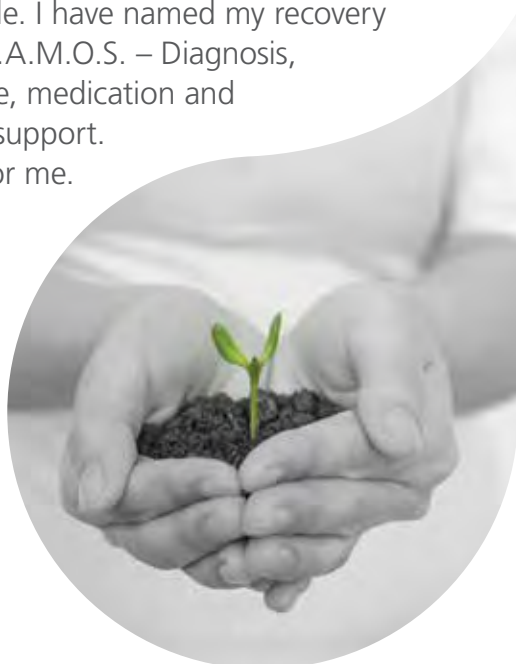
I was rehoused in mid-2008 and somehow I managed to maintain my accommodation, restructure my debts and on the surface manage well. However, in 2009 I was hospitalised again; it felt like nothing had changed. Fortunately though, the psychiatrist handling my case took a personal interest in me and after a few months of treatment and therapy he decided to change my diagnosis and treatment regime. I was reclassified as suffering from post-traumatic stress and borderline personality disorder. I had

become comfortable with my bipolar diagnosis and did not like this change at all... for with it came hard work if I wanted to survive.

One of the major changes to my regime was that I had to attend occupational therapy . I rebelled, but somehow forced myself into showing up. Thank God I did. My occupational therapist turned out to be my saviour. She was so good that I began to trust her from an early stage in my treatment. Something clicked; for the first time in my life, I felt that someone understood me. I felt able to open up, to dig deep inside; I felt for the first time ever that I was making progress. My acceptance of my illness had begun.

I was put on what I can only describe as a wonder drug, a mood stabiliser that has helped me to cope ever since. After a year under her supervision my occupational therapist transferred me to the Waterview Centre in West London, where I would continue therapy. I made the leap but without the crutch of my wonderful occupational therapist I fell down once more.

Despite further troubles, culminating in having to be saved by a policeman from jumping off Vauxhall Bridge, I returned to Waterview and tried therapy again. Through hard work, I started to recover. I finished the course of therapy and my life has changed for the better, becoming more stable. I have named my recovery strategy D.A.M.O.S. – Diagnosis, acceptance, medication and on-going support. It works for me.



I was worried when I left Waterview that I would be left to my own devices. Fortunately I was directed to the CNWL Recovery College, where I have now taken six courses. I chose each one because they address something specific in my life, like **understanding self-harm and depression**.



The Recovery and Social Inclusion course felt amazing for me, as someone who has for many years lived on the margins of society. Attending the College has helped me to keep up the momentum of my recovery, to keep going forward. I have used the Health and Wellbeing Plan that I came across at the College too, and it's helped me a hell of a lot.

For the past 18 months I have been a volunteer with the Big Issue street team, helping with basic needs and trying to promote good mental health among the vendors. My supervisors know of some of my past troubles, and they support me wholeheartedly in my recovery. I am by no means cured, but I have been taught how to manage my illness and more than that, I have been taught to raise my hand when in trouble and ask for help. It seems to be working.

Bringing castles in the air down to the ground

bb After years of being a 'patient', I now have another place in mental health services: as a peer support worker in the very hospital where I had been detained, and as a recovery trainer at the CNWL Recovery College. For the College, I was asked to co-design a course using the knowledge I had acquired through my personal experiences as well as my doctorate. I went from seeing myself as a burden to a genuine asset, with expertise to contribute. qq

When I was 16 I took an overdose after becoming very depressed and was detained in an adult psychiatric hospital. I remember feeling very frightened about what was happening to me and around me, but I was even more terrified about the possibility that I would be in that hospital for years just like my grandmother. My memories of my grandmother bitterly talking about the 'treatment' she experienced during 30 years of incarceration, appeared as a terrifying vision of my future. I remember thinking 'I have to get out of here, I have to tell the psychiatrist a story that will get me out.'

So I told the psychiatrist that my suicide attempt was just a mistake, that I felt fine now. I got out and vowed never to end up in the mental health system again. And I didn't for many years, although I knew that things were not right with me. I often felt really low, filled with thoughts that I was the most useless, worthless person imaginable, and struggled with lots of things like paranoia that I believed other people did not experience. I spent years feeling ashamed and trying to hide my personal struggles, while trying to develop an identity and a life that felt ok. Hiding my problems seemed like the only

way of avoiding my grandmother's fate.

I studied psychology in the hope that I would come to understand and change what was wrong with me. Then in August 2007, on what should have been a wonderful day as I handed in my doctorate in psychology, I felt I could no longer cope. I had been struggling alone to 'stay afloat' for too long. I did not want to die but I just could not continue to endure the way I was feeling. I needed someone to reach out to me and help me out.

I wanted to be rescued. So I went to Westminster Bridge and jumped into the Thames. I was rescued but I felt even worse. I was so ashamed about not coping, and felt humiliated by my own behaviour. At the time I didn't really understand why I was doing it and so the pattern continued. I ended up jumping into the Thames again and being rescued again, and admitted to hospital and discharged again. This pattern continued - each time I jumped in I was rescued (which I am now very grateful for!) but each time I lost a bit more. I lost my job, my partner, any sense of personal responsibility and my identity. I now thought of myself as 'just a psychiatric patient'.

Eventually I lost all hope that things would ever get better. I was sectioned for many months and remember thinking this was it: I would end up just like my grandmother. But thankfully I didn't lose my children, although I came close. At this point I did not know how I was going to continue to live, but I knew what my suicide would do to my boys. So I continued to battle on and things have really changed.

What has been important in my own recovery is first going through a process of accepting that I had a mental health condition and what a difficult struggle that was. The stigma, which I think I internalised from memories of my grandmother regularly being taken from our home and called a 'nutter', made it harder to do so.

Feelings of fear, loss, shame and anger raged in me. I got caught up in futile battles about diagnostic labels. I didn't want a diagnosis, I wanted a successful life and at that point I believed that the two did not and could not go together. It wasn't until I started the process of accepting a diagnosis, that I began to discover ways to recover.



I started reading more about personality related difficulties, not just the psychiatric and psychological information, but also personal accounts of others with similar difficulties and what had worked for them. I was able to use NHS mental health services

like the Waterview Centre in west London, and found a great deal of help in groups, as well as art therapy. In the groups I became able to really hear feedback from others. People assured me that I wasn't the terrible person I thought I was. They also helped me to realise that my sense of

identity would change depending on what was happening at the time.

I came to see how my emotions frequently controlled me and there was not enough thought going on between my feelings and my actions. I would act on impulse. Talking and listening to others really helped me to see, for the first time, the grey area between the black and white thoughts that had always dominated my mind. I began to recognise and work on my perceptions, which were often distorted. I'd build castles in the air and move in!

Finding out about other people's struggles in overcoming difficult life experiences helped me regain a glimmer of hope. Hope was essential. I learned to notice these glints of light and then tried to hold onto them and prevent them from being extinguished. Having contact with people who were hope-inspiring and communicated this really helped. I still remember how amazed I felt when someone said they believed that one day I would return to work. At the time I had given up hope that this was possible.

I am now working and will be forever grateful to those individuals in mental health services who were able to help and played an important part in my recovery. How lucky I have been that it's no longer commonplace to lock 'them' up for 30 years, and that mental health services continue to develop and change with the aim of making recovery a reality.

I still get exhausted from time to time, and know that if I don't really look after my mental health it can go downhill very quickly. Producing my own **health and wellbeing plan** has been great for helping to nip any blips in the bud. It has also reminded me just how important it is that I take control of my recovery. I still sometimes get support from others, but the difference is, now it's me recognising early on that I need it, and it's me asking for it, on my terms.

Life, take two

bb *In a way I'm afraid my story is pretty boring... Ok, so I'm not really selling it am I- but please keep reading because although I don't have any remarkable tales to tell, I have travelled a pretty amazing internal journey. I'm 27 but sometimes I have to look in the mirror to remind myself I'm not ancient. Conversely I also feel fresh for the first time, ready to create the life I want to lead.* **qq**

I have travelled from firmly believing that I was set for a life defined by depression, taking powerful medication and giving up on all my aspirations, to a point now where the present influences my future more than the past. It did, though, take a commitment to understand the past, to move away from it, and the self-destructive patterns it had created. And this took a bit of time, a skip full of grit and determination, the support of people who retained hope in me, and the incentive of a future with a wonderful woman.

I think I experienced depression pretty much as early as the developing brain is capable of experiencing it. As a child I was always told I didn't smile enough and that I was too serious. I gradually developed the belief that there was something fundamentally flawed about my character that caused depression. Although I did ok at school, I made some friends and was generally successful at the things I really enjoyed like sport, most of this was done under a cloud of great fear and the underlying conviction that I was stupid, inferior, worthless and alien. My family always supported me in the ways they knew how, but I was missing a massive chunk of what makes a person feel comfortable in their own skin.

I went to uni and had the time of my life, at one point genuinely believing I had 'grown out' of depression. It was only a smokescreen though,

and upon graduating at 21, I fell into a hole so deep it took me two years to hit the bottom. After an aborted attempt to live with friends and work, I retreated to my parents' home in rural Somerset. I admitted defeat to the outside world and decided to hole up for good. As a result I ended up being held hostage by my own mind. I soon developed Stockholm Syndrome: no matter how badly my mind treated me, I grew increasingly attached to the shame-filled self-critical thoughts, and became crippled by the feelings and avoidant behaviour that followed so automatically. Yet I was still desperate to feel better. In fact I was trying, by ruminating my way out of it.

For years I barely saw anyone. I fantasised about death and saw no way out. My brother and a handful of incredible friends did travel to see me every now and then though, and I think this actually kept me from suicide. The fact that they stuck around despite my company being boring at best, reminded me that there was something worth living for. I also saw a great occupational therapist who helped to apply some much needed structure to my life. I was just about being held from the brink, but still nothing was moving forward.

I had tried different types of talking therapies and continued to do so, but it didn't seem to be helping. I was desperate to feel better and re-

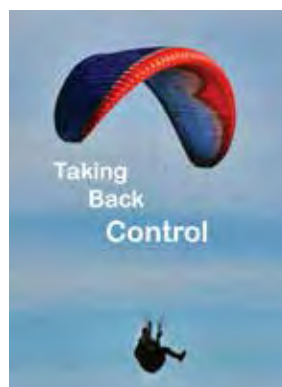
enter the real world, so I fell into the next trap: believing medicine was the answer. I had been taking antidepressants continuously since I was 14, and as the despair grew, the more medication seemed like a solution. Unfortunately, most people around me agreed- especially the ones dishing it out.

Before you could say 'over-zealous polypharmacy' I had gone from taking one antidepressant to becoming a one-man drug trial. Under the care of an eminent psychiatrist, at one point I was taking a cocktail comprised of a rarely prescribed antidepressant (owing to its heavy side effects), a major tranquiliser, a mood stabiliser and a sedative. If fired from a dart gun, I'm pretty sure that combination could ground a rhino.

The drugs did have an impact. I felt less anguish but with it less everything. I lost the ability to feel joy, sadness, excitement... you name it, I didn't feel it. I put on weight, slept all day and developed a firmly set 'out of office' facial expression. Though the psychic pain had diminished, I felt emptier than a lidless plastic bottle floating in a vacuum.

At 24, two major turning points took place. First, I decided I had grown too tall for my parents' thatched cottage and the isolation that surrounded it (both literally and figuratively), so I moved to a nearby town. I had been working in the town as a support worker in a mental health hospital for nearly a year, after gradually building things up from voluntary work. This exposed me to the real world once more; I was paying rent, seeing friends a little more regularly and generally trying to live like an independent adult. My parents greatly supported me in doing so.

Then came possibly the best decision I have ever made. I started to realise just how many of the constraints holding me back from moving on were down to medication rather than the depression. My psychiatrist urged me otherwise; that I was merely 'misattributing symptoms'. Something shifted in me, as I actually knew this was nonsense. Perhaps if he was wrong about this, he might be wrong about me having 'chronic depression', 'health anxiety', 'trichotillomania' (my personal favourite- look it up if you're interested)



and every other psychiatric label going. I began to realise I was actually the biggest expert on me- no-one else. I started to see, too, that the most helpful people in my life were those asking me questions rather than just giving answers.


I decided to reduce the various medications, until after nearly six months I was finally drugfree. A couple of months later I fell headfirst into depression. I suddenly remembered how hellishly painful it was. My future collapsed around me and I resigned myself to suicide. Still, somehow I kept going and eventually emerged from the darkness, and despite the temptation I held steadfastly to a drug-free policy. Knowing that the real me had lived through this episode felt like the dawning of the real thing.

Since then I have continued to grow in nearly every way desirable. I moved to London where I now have a much more fulfilling life. Through understanding and practising mindfulness I have reached heights of insight and control unimaginable to the 22-year-old me. Last year I experienced something of a meltdown brought about by stress, but again I lived through it, and am all the stronger for it. Two years ago I met the girl of my dreams and I could now see a real, bright future with her. I had something amazing to work towards, and this I believe gave me the incentive required to prioritise my mental wellbeing, which, I should add, still needs constant work.

Meeting with a psychologist around this time who truly understood me gave me much-needed guidance to structure my progress, including the development of a greater sense of compassion towards myself. Coming to see the real meaning of recovery when working for CNWL on the periphery of the CNWL Recovery College, enabled me to learn from the inspiring experiences of others and be part of something wider and more important than myself.

A life worth Living

Walking the tightrope.

I was always afraid and felt that I was walking on a tightrope and that, unlike other people, I could lose my footing and fall onto the rocks below. I must tread very carefully or I could suffer something so terrifying that I would not survive. 

As depression came and went during my twenties, I felt that I was getting closer to falling onto the rocks. The highs came and went too, and they provided a kind of soaring excitement and relief from the constant dread; they were milder than the depression but I'd upset people by doing out of character and bizarre things.

In the face of this deterioration, my life decisions were going from bad to worse. I became dependent on a man who did not love me. I was repeatedly referred to secondary mental health services who assessed me too quickly and concluded that it wasn't serious - moderate depression and some dependency issues. Unfortunately they were wrong.

Falling off the edge of the earth and staying there

My father died and I descended vertically into a white noise of terror. I landed on a ward which matched my terror. After a six month admission, I was discharged as it was thought my episode was a one off aberration. I didn't agree but didn't say. I was in despair because I thought that what had happened had been there all the time and I knew it was there, and was still there. I hurtled out of the depression, into a high and into rage.

I had had enough and headed for the off license. I did not want to feel anymore and I drank and drank... I thought I had found the solution in alcohol. I could not enter this chapter of my life alone, as had always been my pattern, and found a suitable partner. I met him in a dubious pub in the middle of the day when he was breaking up a fight. Discovering that he also started fights, mainly with me, was disturbingly not a problem as I was beyond caring about myself.

I didn't last long in this extreme and angry rough and tumble, and landed on the ward again for another lengthy spell. This time there was no mistaking the seriousness of my situation, and I met a consultant and her team who did everything they could to save my life. My problems were advanced and complex and it was a difficult job. I couldn't recover even in a limited way from this episode, and was stuck, for four years, in a kind of life-threatening end game of suicide and suicidal drinking, domestic violence and chaos, dosed up with enough lithium to floor a horse.

I was a hopeless case in that I was without hope. My mum, and the people working with me were holding hope for me. Eventually a man called Keith at the dual diagnosis unit, who I will

never forget, persuaded me to go to a Twelve Step Fellowship about my drinking. This had been suggested before, but not so cleverly, and Keith had been working on me painstakingly. I had a conscience and there were a few people who loved me, so I went to my first meeting as I thought I owed it to them to give it a try.

Recovery – finding love, acceptance and building a life

When mental health professionals told me I could recover, I did not believe them because I saw no evidence that it was possible, not in my life anyway... I was completely taken aback by the Twelve Step Fellowship. There were people there who had been as ill as I was but they were well and at first I thought they were lying about their past. After three months, these people convinced me to attempt to live life without alcohol. They also convinced me that I had to get rid of the boyfriend because with him around I needed to drink. I gave in, still without believing them, because I had nothing to lose. They talked about recovery but I didn't know what they meant.

I slowly learnt what they meant. In the first year I surfaced gradually and in the second I flourished. After a while I met a man but I did not need him, I wanted him, which was different. We had a child, it was amazing.

I suffered a setback and went high. This time I caught it early and I could work out what had gone wrong. I had to address deep rooted self-neglect issues and I started to completely commit to practice mindfulness meditation and engage in psychotherapy.

I realised that I needed to apply a similar recovery approach to my bipolar condition that I had to alcoholism- similar, but not the same. I learned more about this distinction after attending recovery training at CNWL, when I



realised I had been misapplying certain elements of recovery from the addiction model to my bipolar. This had been proving unhelpful. I saw 'relapse' as something to be avoided at all costs which meant I developed unreasonable expectations of myself not to have any episodes of depression or mania, when actually, unlike with alcoholism, it's part and parcel of the fluctuating condition. If I do become unwell, I know what to do now, and although I'll have a rough time for a while I'll get better again. The CNWL Recovery College has shown me a broader conception of recovery outside of addiction.

I don't feel scared like I did because I have learnt to love myself. Even if I fall off my perch I've spent a great deal of time knitting a safety net which I know will catch me. I have discovered that love is the answer to fear, but not romantic love, a deeper spiritual love. I also realize that some of my difficulties are permanent and that I need permanent support. But so what? With this support I have a life worth living.

The CNWL Recovery College offers courses and workshops on story sharing and story gathering “Telling your Story” and “Gathering Recovery Stories”. Please see our prospectus for dates.

Our story is as long as our life and we will have many different versions over the years. Experiencing mental health difficulties can be a huge and complex challenge from which we can only begin to recover when we start to make sense of what has happened. During the course we use journaling as an everyday way of paying attention to our thoughts, feelings and memories. Through weekly exercises we gradually and gently explore experiences, memories and feelings, building towards a story that can be shared if you wish. We also look at other people’s published recovery stories for inspiration.

Telling your story

This course offers the chance to share experiences with others who may have faced similar challenges. It is a chance to acknowledge what has happened, for your resilience to be witnessed, to celebrate your survival and to have a space to dream about the future.

Gathering Recovery Stories

The course aims to offer a supportive group experience but we are not offering any particular interpretation or advice, just the interest and respect of fellow human beings. The aim is rediscovery through self-expression; you choose what to share and how you wish to portray your story.

If you would like to enrol onto a CNWL Recovery College course or workshop, please get in touch

Phone: **020 3214 5686**

Email: **recoverycollege.cnwl@nhs.net**

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We would like say thank you to all the contributors for their courage and sharing their empowering stories.

Photographs by Debbie Lane-Stott

**This document is also available in other languages,
large print, Braille, audio format and Easy Read upon request.
Email: recoverycollege.cnwl@nhs.net**

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এই ডকুমেন্ট অন্য ভাষায়, বড় প্রিন্ট আকারে, ব্রেল এবং অডিও টেপ আকারেও অনুরোধ পাওয়া যায়

این مدرک همچنین بنا به درخواست به زبانهای دیگر، در چاپ درشت و در فرمت صوتی موجود است.

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Dokument ten jest na życzenie udostępniany także w innych wersjach językowych, w dużym druku, w alfabecie Braille'a lub w formacie audio.

Mediante solicitação, este documento encontra-se também disponível noutras línguas, num formato de impressão maior, em Braille e em áudio.

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