

# Road to recovery

Our stories of hope...



**M**y role as Recovery Project Manager for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust (CPFT) has involved managing both the Peer Employment and Recovery College developments. Throughout this role, I have seen the value of incorporating recovery stories into mainstream mental health services. Being physically based in the recovery college has enabled me to hear recovery stories every day and to walk alongside so many gifted and talented people.

There can be nothing more humbling than hearing a person's recovery story. I have been truly inspired by the stories of hope, joy, creativity, and resilience and I am thankful to those people who I have had the pleasure to walk alongside for part of their journey.

This publication has been an incredible journey of co-production. It was really important that each story was meaningful for the individual so we have tried hard not to edit the story too much to lose any of this richness. However, we acknowledge that this may make some of the stories hard to read and may be quite an emotional roller-coaster. But what I hope you will find as a reader is that the stories show such enormous courage and strength.

Some of the people who have contributed were initially reluctant to do so, wondering how their scribbles would be received by the end reader, but now on completion have said that the process of compiling this has been a recovery tool in its self. All of the pictures and artwork in this publication are also photographed, painted or selected by the individual authors. They found this to be inspiring in itself and again this means the stories were brought to life. It is interesting to see how many of the authors used pictures of nature and scenery as positive and meaningful images.

What you will see throughout this publication is how people have used their inner strength and resilience and a variety of tools to enhance their own wellness. We hope that some of the things that people talk about resonate in some way with you, the reader, and you may get some tips for yourself or to share with others.

Thank you for taking the time to read this, I have been honoured to be a part of such an incredible project.

*Sharon*

**O**ne of my own stepping stones towards recovery was to do voluntary work, which led me to the recovery college. Working within a recovery environment where sharing and hearing others' experiences has been a transforming time. When once I would do all I could to hide my challenges I have now learned the value and benefit of sharing.

Being involved in creating this booklet has filled me with hope and confidence about challenging attitudes towards mental health. Within the recovery college and pages here are the most talented, brave, funny, and intelligent people I've met. I hope that through this booklet the words, images and experiences of those included find their way into the lives, homes, bags and bookshelves of all those who may benefit.

If, through sharing, we may give hope, comfort or a glimmer of light to one person, then the challenge of opening ourselves up will have been worth every moment.

Thank you to all of those who have contributed and a very big thank you to Sharon Gilfoyle for your passion and hard work to give others a voice.

*Mark*

# *Foreword*



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# Body and soul; hand in hand; walking my road to recovery

**R**ising early, celebrating mother nature by digging in my allotment or eating vegan food, taking office as president of a newly formed WI, celebrating the 1940s in lifestyle and dance, embracing love at every opportunity and ultimately being able to rest my head at night with a guilt-free conscience are a quick glimpse of the gifts that recovery has brought to my life.

When I arrived at the point in which it was painstakingly obvious that my years of struggle with addiction in its many guises (starting with food, then later moving to people, places, things and making its final damaging stop in drugs), the last thing that I expected to do was to be able to write a gratitude list like the words above.

My struggle with addiction began at a young age when I was convinced I was different from the norm. This was teamed with the fact that my recently

emigrated family, of British origin, found it hard to integrate with those around them in the farming communities of Canada where we often laid our hats. In that sense, our family was distinctively different from others, and small town folk are not usually the most accepting of anything that they are not 100% familiar with.

My natural tendency to feel ostracised only made matters worse as I began to be moved from school to school as my parents lived out their dreams of a travelling lifestyle. Unable to commit to social relationships, I became more and more withdrawn from others (despite on the surface seeming an 'outgoing and confident' pupil - words that were constant themes on my early report cards). I began fixating on food and eating in secret in an attempt to fill the mental void that was rapidly forming thanks to my inability to communicate with others around me.

My mother at the time, unsure how to treat what was diagnosed as an eating disorder, took me to our GP and was issued a strict eating plan to which I was to adhere. Time went on and as I grew up, this feeling of longing to belong took further hold of me. At the age of 18, I moved to London from which I had received a clarion call, compliments of the underground warehouse parties and raves in places like Hackney and Brixton. It was within the sweaty walls of said clubs that I found my 'loneliness fix'. Party drugs galore made me feel free and ultimately a part of something for which I was convinced I had always longed for.

From there onwards, I moved in the various music industry circles that attract the misfits of the world, and was even able to procure full-time employment working in the music 'biz' at a management company for a well-known addict in recovery. During my employment there, I managed to



get clean on my own (white-knuckling it the whole way), which resulted in my addiction popping up like a bad weed in other areas of my life in abusive relationships and getting down to an exercise regime that was seeing my body react in ways that I can only now see were just unkind. Following this short stint of physically being clean, drugs crept their way back into my life and I decided to pack my bags and move to Berlin - the party capital of Europe - which promised week-long parties and cooler-than-thou tribes of people, too. The addict in me saw this as an open invitation to ultimately find what I was still looking to quench the mental void of the necessity to belong. So off I went and that was where I hit an ultimate low. Unable to grasp reality and feeling as if I was watching a film of which I was the star, I was blessed with my rock-bottom experience in the dark and dirty clubs of Berlin, isolated by language barriers and a feeling of truly being unlike any of my peers.

Luckily enough for me, mother nature had better plans. On a whim, following a disastrous relationship break up, I flew back to London to meet with my former boss (who has been in recovery for nearly 30 years), to gain some insight into what options existed for me - a hopeless addict with little by way of self love/worth and a complete disconnection from all things the universe had on offer. Little did I know that this meeting would be one that would change the course of my life forever. It was the first day of what I would deem my new life when my boss recommended that I visit the rooms of a 12-step program for which he noted, I had always been a member, and therefore welcome.

I returned to Berlin, attended my first meeting and did whatever I could to



***“...what options existed for me - a hopeless addict with little by way of self love/worth and a complete disconnection from all things the universe had on offer”***

stay clean. The first days found me unable to escape the feeling that something was well and truly changing. Whilst I was still in the early days of counting my clean time by hours, I remember distinctively cleaning the mirror in my then flat share and catching a clear-headed glimpse of myself in the mirror. That for me was my first experience of the awakening of my soul. What I saw looking back at me was the spiritual

presence of a truly gentle soul who felt nothing but love for herself, those around her and Mother Nature in general.

After working closely with my sponsor (a person who has experience of the 12-step programme for which I belong), I learned that this was my first (of many), spiritual awakenings. From this point on, I attended as many meetings as possible, spoke out about my experience of self-doubt from years before (including all of those dark areas in my life that I truly believed were unique to me) the understanding and feeling of elation through hearing other people's experiences is what has kept me clean right to this very day, nearly four years later, as I sit writing this story.

I still have days where my old behaviours manifest themselves, but thankfully through the support of a loving sponsor, and my connection to my higher power (which in my case is mother nature), I am able to have the ability to harvest self-preservation and most of all the love to see me through my darker hours.

Recovery to me means the ability to self-reflect and learn how to live life on life's terms without resorting to my previous self-destructive ways as a means to harm myself mentally. Ultimately, though, what makes recovery and its definition so unique to me is the ability to allow love in my life for the very first time. It is through opening myself to this love that I am able to feel gratitude, love, happiness, appreciate times of sorrow for their importance (without dwelling on their potential darkness), and most of all, to respect and love *myself* - body and soul - as teamed together, both walk hand in hand on my road to recovery.

**by Joanne**



Sexually abused at the age of seven  
I took up judo and kicked some ass  
I'm a fighter!  
Years later, with children of my own.  
Three beautiful girls and living the  
dream.

Heaven!

At the age of thirty, on my own,  
young children, no husband,  
no best friend, no lover.

No longer living in heaven – fallen!

The signs are there, only I can see.  
Voices in my head, confusing me.  
I am Jesus, it all makes sense!  
Now I have to hide from the SAS!

My strengths are my scaffold  
Family my support  
Friends are the lifeboat  
And *every day is a good day*

*I believe*

# Angels

by Julie

# *Just a man*

If a man's hands sweat with fear  
And his heart pounds in social situations  
If he doesn't work because he cannot bear another day  
And cries like a child because the pain is too much  
If he pulls away from the things he needs  
And upon realising this falls to his knees  
If he has no home no money or phone  
And is growing older and falling behind  
Is he still a man?  
He is still a man  
He is still a man rebuilding his plan  
With time and patience he's a man who can  
The trouble and strife throughout his life is fuel to his fire  
And a balancing pole to aid life's high wire  
A man may break and a man may fall  
But there's always the chance to emerge standing tall  
I am a man who lost his plan  
I collapsed and fell and spent time in hell  
But I've found my wings and intend to fly  
And look back at trouble with a wave goodbye.

by Mark



**F**or most of my life I struggled to make sense of the darkness in my life...sometimes more successfully than others. I never understood what the meaning of it all was until I was fortunate to stumble across peer support.

Right up to the morning the training started, I didn't actually know if I was doing the right thing. However, as I ran across the car park to Sharon and asked her if it was okay to join the cohort, she smiled at me and said: "Of course you can!" That was the confirmation I needed that everything would be okay. The training was tough; it forced me to reopen some very dark caverns that had remained firmly shut for a very long time. We were in safe hands, though, with our amazing tutor and it all got so much more manageable.

This was the first time in my life I recognised that I would always be in recovery. I would always need to be mindful of my triggers and more importantly that I would always need to look after myself to preserve my own wellbeing. All those things were in my own hands; it was my choice.

My journey of the last three years has been one of trust. Trust that I was on the right path and that everything would work just the way it should and I just needed to follow my intuition and my heart. The reason I mention this is

# My choices...

by Claudia

because I had never been one for "trusting" in the past, I had always taken the safe option and never trusted the unexpected. For the first time, I threw myself into something I believed in; there had been a reason for my darkness, it was allowing me to hold a torch of hope up for people who couldn't hold it up for themselves. In following my passion, I was rewarded with a full-time Peer Support Worker role – something that was not on the cards when I embarked on my journey. I remember feeling so fortunate in being able to use my experiences to help others, to give them hope and empower them to be all they could be.

As I gained more confidence in myself and my self-worth increased due to becoming a valued member of the teams I worked in, I got involved in as many projects as I could. I felt like a child in a sweet shop and my enthusiasm knew no bounds. However, this was to my detriment at times as I pushed myself to my limits and threatened my wellbeing. This, too, was a learning curve, as I was forced to step back and renegotiate

my own boundaries and find the balance for myself again.

My new strategy involves spending a week a year away in solitude walking with my dog...so far we have discovered The Peak District, Devon and West Wales. It fills both our needs and recharges our batteries again.

I have been fortunate to be involved in so many interesting things; Recovery College East from the very beginning, helping to co-design and co-facilitate the first Spirituality, Wellbeing and Recovery Course; speaking at events to promote peer support; delivering sessions to final year mental health students on recovery, to name but a few. My confidence has grown and grown and I have come to believe that I can have more, that I can do more and help in a different way.

In September 2012, I started my work-based pre-registration mental health nursing training with the Trust, of which I am immensely proud. First year is complete and I have loved every bit of my training so far. I have got to spend time on the wards as







well as in the community and I have seen some excellent recovery focussed practice but have also been alarmed at other things I have witnessed. This has made me even more determined to use the skills that I have gained through being a Peer Support Worker and take them with me into my future to improve the care that I can offer people at their most vulnerable and frightened times.

Just recently, I have been successful

in getting a Support Time and Recovery post, which is a promotion and another milestone on my career path. As these successes have materialised, I am conscious that I made a choice three years ago to follow my passion and that choice has rewarded me. The reward has been for my hard work and my determination to succeed and my ability to turn my negatives into positives. I have followed my heart and my intuition and I have never been

happier. In the future I want to be a Community Psychiatric Nurse who care co-ordinates people with empathy and is sensitive to their own individual needs, empowers people to be the best they want to be for themselves and provides a safe space when there are bumps in the road.

All of this is possible because I have had the experiences I've had in my life and come out the other side, stronger.

# A cup of tea and a bowl of stew...



A good night's sleep and a time to weep  
A long hot bath and a red hot curry  
All alleviate my daily worry

The crust of a fresh loaf skimmed in  
butter  
A mind erased from a room full of  
clutter

A bowl of home made stew  
Vinegar with everything  
A huge mug of builder's tea

A facial, a spa, reflex or Reiki  
A back massage with pre-warmed  
towels

My crystals, my angel cards, my positive  
quotes  
An abundance of 'Thank you cards' kept  
safe in my drawer

Mother nature in all its glory  
leaves, trees, flowers and air  
A slow flowing stream with pebbles on  
show  
The noise, the smell, the touch of rain

Close to the sea  
A land locked island  
Remoteness and calm  
Beautiful clouds that travel the sky

Creativity, DIY, art and the 'spirit'  
My hobbies, my interests, my home and  
my son  
My husband, my life, joy of things yet to  
come

Freshly washed sheets,  
Warm covers, warm toes,  
Woollen bed jackets and cosy PJs  
My work, my friends, my family  
My car, my music, my life  
A room full of books so evenly spread  
Still so much yet to be read

This is my wellness plan  
The things that keep me nurtured and  
well

Sharon

## The panic that attacks me

I wake with a start

My heart is pounding so loud that I think it will wake my family from their dreams  
My eyes are wide with fear; I search for the trigger but, alas, no trigger  
No spider, no lift, no confined space, no looming presentation calling from the dark  
Just my own bed, my safe space, my husband, just me

So why has the fear come to visit?

Why does it seek to control me, to invade my space, to haunt me?

I can't control it; it starts to visit me at work, in the car, in the shower  
The frequency increases until it consumes my whole life  
The fear of it appearing is as bad as the fear itself

I cry, I sob, I wail, I worry, I hide, I avoid, I lie  
I pretend my life is good  
But inside I feel I am going to die  
I lose time, self-belief, confidence, control  
I lose the ability to love others and to love myself

I change

I learn, I read, I write, I believe,  
I try, I fail, I fall, but I get up again  
Things start to improve  
Two steps forward, one step back  
But I am travelling

My journey has started

My life is good  
I now control the fear, I laugh, I sing, I dance, I love and I am loved  
I am proud, confident, honest and true  
The fear lost its power  
It became smaller, fainter, quieter  
The frequency diminished

It died

I have gained control

The fear occasionally comes back for a visit but now its on my terms  
I have the power and I can determine the outcome

I fought the fear and I won

by Sharon



**Living with  
my challenges**



I've lived with a variety of mental health challenges since the age of 12, a bewildering range of emotions that seemed to tumble through my life independently. It's been in the last decade or so that life feels more trustworthy and stable.

I've been most fortunate in that I have known people over years who can listen to me and reflect what they've heard me saying beneath my words. This is such an affirmation, so clarifying amidst mental swirling.

Medications are an important part of maintaining my wellness. It's taken time to find ones that work for me. With changes in my environment or circumstances in my life, I find alterations in my medication may be helpful. Some of the medications I have taken have had unhealthy side effects.

I'm thankful to have found medication that can help me to live more fully in the now, despite the potential long-term consequences.

In addition to medication supporting me in my wellness, so has learning about the mental health challenges with which I live. Information somehow validates my emotions. My challenges aren't who I am. I am me. I'm not my illness. To gain information about medication, challenges and strategies I've looked to books, mental health services, local organisations and websites. I'm excited knowing that there's much I can learn from to help myself. Bipolar UK is an amazing organisation, a wealth of factual and emotional information. A godsend.

Another way that I can take care of me is through self management. With awareness and practice I can offer support to myself in holding onto my well-being. For example, it's beneficial to me to be aware of the impact that my lifestyle, interests, etc, have on my challenges. It's helpful to consider what am I like when I'm well? What helps me to maintain wellness? When I'm beginning to feel unwell, what can I do to get back on track? For example, I find it helpful to have some structure in my life, to get enough sleep, to eat healthy food, to find time and motivation to be involved in interests, to think kindly about myself and to communicate with friends.

When I feel myself moving downhill, I need to check my list. I don't always know when un-wellness is wriggling back into my life. I've given permission to one person to gently let me know if this sort of behaviour is stirring. That way I can act on 'what I can do to keep me well' before it grows out of hand. If I continue to slide, then I can seek support more swiftly than I might have otherwise.

I believe that I live with my challenges rather than that I suffer with them. My emotional life can still prove confusing at times. Curiously, I'm generally thankful for the challenges (not in the midst of them though). I also think that due to these challenges, I live with a greater appreciation of life (beauty, nature, people, interests). I think that this is because I'm aware of what it's like to live without it.



**by Karen**



## Never judge a peer until you have walked a mile in their shoes

**A**fter graduating as a Peer Support Worker in 2010, I was offered a position on an acute ladies ward in Peterborough, which I accepted.

Initially it was a struggle for myself and the staff due to the fact that none of us really knew where I belonged as the role was new to us all. But very soon we settled down and got on with the job in hand. I received encouragement and subtle support from everyone and was made to feel very welcome and part of the team.

Fortunately, and yes I say fortunately (I will elaborate later), I became unwell with my psychological challenges just before Christmas 2011. I recognised that this was not a short-term depression but quickly becoming a major episode due to my reactions towards staff and peers on the ward. Part of my challenge when I am really unwell is the feeling of wanting to lash out at everyone around me for no rhyme or reason. I felt that if I did not remove myself rapidly I would lose control completely. I found my supervisor

and explained the situation to her and I was allowed to go home. I immediately contacted my GP who arranged an appointment the next morning.

My GP soon realised how bad I was and immediately contacted the crisis team who arranged a home visit the very same day. I had also not seen a psychiatrist since 2007 and it was arranged for one to see me at home. Well, the long and short of it all is I was taken care of by the crisis team at home and, by February 2012, I was back at work.

Had this happened to me prior to completing the peer worker training and completing a Whole Life Plan, I would have ended up out of work once again for anything up to a year or longer, back on full benefits and feeling as though life was not worth living.

The peer worker course and Whole Life Plan has made a huge difference to my life personally. I love my job dearly; it is fulfilling, gives me great pleasure being with people, and those endless cups of tea!

In my own life I have noticed my confidence escalating, I feel whole for the first time in my life; I notice the beauty of my surroundings every day; enjoy being on my own without feeling “alone” and very contented with life in general. The black tarry substance in the middle of my stomach has gone and generally speaking I am a very happy bunny who has plucked all the best carrots from the ground. The love, kindness and support I received - not just from those professionally involved with my recovery but my peer colleagues and friends - was absolutely fabulous. I am now able to keep myself safe, recognise when I am becoming unwell and put everything in place to help myself when the road becomes tough. I can recognise the triggers, I have changed my negative affirmations of myself to positive ones and get myself out of bed even on the days I don't feel I can. Wow! All that in all that in just under a year!

The peer worker course reaches across all barriers from psychiatric diagnosis: depression, bi-polar, substance misuse – you name it – it

has the ability to reach each and every one of us – all that we need is the tiniest seed of hope, and even that in our worst moments can be carried by someone who cares and believes in us, until we ourselves can take up the freedom of doing it for ourselves.

I recommend the peer worker course to anyone who wants to get involved with the same work I am doing. It not only helps the one person each of us would like to reach – it reaches within your very inner being and plucks out the very

unique and special person you are meant to be.

I am a Christian and first and foremost thank god for answering my prayers about helping me recover. Last, but not least ,my thanks to CPFT for bringing this course from America so peers, like myself, can benefit from the course.

(With thanks to Ellie for her kind permission to use this story. Sadly, Joy was taken from us far too soon - god bless you, Joy. We all miss you dearly.)

*by Joy: 1957 to 2013*



*“...I feel whole for the first time in my life”*





## My awakening, my journey to reconnecting, finding my purpose and becoming who I truly am

**W**hen I was 24 I had a massive brain haemorrhage. My parents and fiancé at the time were told I would probably not survive 24 hours. Somehow I survived and life was never the same again

When I returned home from the hospital my left side was paralysed and I had facial weakness. Barely able to walk or see, I looked emaciated and drawn. Although my hair had started to grow back over the craniotomy scar, it was still visible. My hair was only an inch long - all scraggly - but long at the back. I didn't recognise myself; it wasn't me.

During rehabilitation at the Oliver Zangwill centre, which I

was referred to eight years later, I had the opportunity to read my hospital notes and look at my brain scans. I cried a lot of healing tears within those walls, I can tell you!

The programme, staff and way it was delivered was thoughtful and beautifully designed. It felt like I'd come home. The whole process helped me to come to terms with feelings of loss, isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. It was wonderful to meet other people with acquired brain injury as the condition can make you feel very alone, and like you're the only one going through it.

The CFT (compassion focussed therapy) was, without doubt, the most beneficial form of

therapy I received. It helped me to stop seeing myself in such a critical way; blaming myself for the haemorrhage and for feeling so useless and incomplete after it. I developed an inner compassion where I thought more kindly about myself and focussed on the things that I could, and like doing, rather than beating myself up over the things that I find difficult.

I've suffered a lot of depression and anxiety since the haemorrhage which was a result of the side-effects from anti-convulsant medications I take to control my 'grand mal epilepsy'. The depression has been my darkest time.

Overcoming paralysis was easy compared to the lonely despair I felt back then. I couldn't bear to



be alone. I felt fearful and hopeless all the time, and there was no reprieve from it. It's like a grey, cold, misery had draped itself over everything. I went through years of having uncontrollable seizures - at work, in town, and on my own in my flat. In a constant state of anxiety, a sickening feeling of panic and an awful sense of unease, inside my head, dizzy, and light I would be screaming "no". Please, not again. It has always been painful as my body tightened and clenched with each muscle contracting.

That perpetual feeling of falling - terror would begin as I kept on falling. The trauma and fear is hard to explain. It's simply the worst feeling in the world -total loss of control. Lasting two to three minutes, I would lose consciousness and take 30 minutes to come round, not knowing where, what, or how I had got there. I suffered two seizures a day most days; it was a living hell. Thankfully I am now taking a medication that is controlling them. I am now living a much less anxious life. I feel calmer and freer after 10 years of uncertainty and the nightmare of side-effects. I have been through two patches of severe depression; one of them was two years ago when bullying at work, combined with seizures and depression, drove me to a breakdown. I attempted suicide.

It took me a long time to rebuild myself physically, emotionally and spiritually.

My entire life I'd been searching, trying to find the latest vitamin or herb to ease the side-effects. Then I found Dr Gaier. I was diagnosed with gut dysbiosis, which results in the gut self-fermenting and producing its own alcohol, poisoning the bloodstream and brain. If you haven't had any alcohol then usually a blood test would show 0. Mine showed the levels of alcohol were so high I was three quarters of the way to the drink-driving limit. He started me on treatment and an eating



plan. I now feel the best I've felt in years! I have fewer problems with insomnia. I can easily get out of bed again. I have more energy, and rarely feel down. I am not tempted to binge-eat and have less period pain. Part of the problem with the condition is that the bacteria in the gut sends off chemicals that mimic female hormones causing menstrual pain and feelings of permanent PMT. Something no one wants! I remember feeling so angry and frustrated, yet sensitive and wanting to cry a lot. I would feel incredibly fatigued, not able to concentrate and found it hard to organise my thoughts. Excitingly, all this is improving day by day; the fog is clearing!

I now have a part-time position as an ambassador working with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust (CPFT) which I enjoy being a part of. It is wonderful to be able to speak from a service user's perspective and that it's seen as a useful insight. I also occasionally contribute to involvement in mental health research and am about to start tutoring at Recovery College



East, which I am nervous about but feel passion and excitement for! I love the co-productive ethos of the college. It is something I never dreamed I would be able to do! I am also going to work with psychology students at Anglia Ruskin University in the future to help them gain insight into the way brain injury impacts on life and subsequent mental health challenges.

Through my experiences, I've learnt an important lesson: that it's ok to recognise and ask for what I need and require. This equips me to support others as it's not possible to support anyone properly if we are unwell ourselves. It's taken me a long time to truly accept that.

I still have difficult days when it's hard to cope, but I have strategies to get me through these times. I now live a truer more expanded life with richness, meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment.

This is my new beginning, seeing things from a fresher perspective and feeling everything more deeply. Often I feel like I'm glowing, and the feeling vibrates with life and energy! I would never have got to this point if I hadn't had these experiences. And although they were awful and took me to the depths of despair and physical pain, I wouldn't change them due to the emotional intelligence and insight that I now have. I've found a new purpose in life where I hope to encourage others and guide them on their journey of recovery and true self-discovery!

I would just like to say that any of us can have a meaningful life. I didn't believe this two years ago when my very being felt like it was swamped in darkness but, with a bit of luck, the right support and determination we can all achieve whatever we set our hopes, hearts and desires on.

*by Nat*

The world was a dark place  
Troubles too hard to face  
On the way down  
No smiles just frown  
Am I losing it, am I alright?  
No energy or strength to fight  
Alone, confused and getting worse  
This feels like a curse  
This is it, no return  
I am waiting for the turn  
Instead, getting worse, no recover  
Down, down, lower and lower  
This is it, this is the end  
No, I am not on the mend  
Just be calm and it'll all be over soon  
The deed is done  
No longer shall I wake or see the moon

Sleep now; let G-D decide what is best  
Sleep now and rest  
Shocked and awoken  
G-D has spoken  
Now I want to live; now I need medical  
attention  
I can't speak, nothing to mention  
I have been admitted and no longer feel  
a danger  
I meet new friends not strangers  
At times life is too hard to face  
Take things easy, no need to race

Am I losing my mind  
I am so lucky that I have met someone kind  
Someone to love, trust, hold and smile  
I never thought I would meet someone for a  
long while  
So special and loves me right  
Like an angel come down in flight  
I never thought I could trust or love again  
But I have now and am starting to feel sane  
One door closes and another opens  
True love of which I am certain  
Loved again and no more sorrow  
I now look forward to tomorrow

By TJH



I have been on my recovery journey now for the past few years.

Before, my life was very chaotic. I had no clear path, no security and no hope for my future - just pure darkness. I come from a broken family home, but always had a close relationship with my grandparents, mum, dad and brothers but this was never enough for me. I was always searching for something, something else, something better. From a very young age I engaged in alcohol and drugs, as well as having a volatile relationship. I fell pregnant with my beautiful son and moved hundreds of miles away from my family and friends. I thought my life was complete. Things were good for a while. I loved being a mum and looking after my home. After a year I realised the relationship I was in wasn't good; things were happening that shouldn't have been, but what was I to know I was so young?

I moved back to my dad's thinking I would get my life sorted because I had my family and friends near me, but things deteriorated pretty quickly. The next few years were clouded by drugs, alcohol, men and physical illness. Those years were full of pain, hurt and rejection, but still I could cope through my new friends' alcohol and drugs. Eventually I got so poorly my son had to live with his dad whilst I pulled myself together. I did pull myself together; I found a new job, a new home and stopped all my treatment through mental health services because I was OK again.

It wasn't long before life started falling to pieces again. I lost custody of my son, but did have contact. I managed to keep my home and job but I

was out of control, always suppressing my hurt and pain. I kept going with my brave smile. Katy was always happy - the life and soul of parties. The next few years were pretty much the same. I got married, had the perfect wedding, a job I enjoyed, and my home.

However, my marriage broke down and we went our separate ways. Again, friends' drugs and alcohol comforted me and I was in and out of relationships, causing everyone hurt and pain. Throughout this I kept my

strong relationship with my son. I was knocked down so many times through lost custody battles but managed to get up again for him.

In 2008 I found a job within a custody environment that I thought I would try. I made lots of new friends and started to enjoy life again. I threw myself into work and loved it. I started a relationship after a year of being there; life was good. In 2010 there were some traumatic events at work. At the time I was OK until I started having panic attacks throughout my shifts so was signed off work. I went to America for two weeks - my dream holiday. Whilst there, I entered this great big black hole. I had been there three days and didn't get out of bed. I didn't eat, I was crying continually for hours. I felt like I had been kept hostage. I had nowhere to go and couldn't get out. Inside I was screaming.

On the fourth day, I flew home and didn't look back. I hate aeroplanes and I hate travelling alone, but I had this strength inside me that got me on that plane. I went straight to my mum's and laid on her sofa for days. I cried, I screamed, I refused to eat and drink, I didn't wash or change, I wanted to go to sleep and not wake up. I didn't know why,

I didn't realise what had been going on. All I knew was I was not going to continue with my life. The next

few months were extremely challenging for me, my family, partner and my friends. I attempted to take my life. I hurt myself, drank myself into many comas, life was just one big mess. I couldn't see a way out, I was determined I couldn't be here. I needed to go to sleep and not wake up. Nothing anyone gave me or did for me was good enough.

After a few months I was receiving services and given a care co-ordinator. My life took a positive turn. Katy was

there; she was getting control back, she was climbing the ladder of recovery. A Peer Support Worker walked into the room, hugged me and told me she understood and I knew she did. She had that hope for me and my recovery journey began. It was very testing at times and wasn't perfect and I still have bumps in the road, but with my experiences I know what to do and how to face them.

Within a month I was on the Peer Employment Programme and had the most amazing time of my life and met some amazing people who are very special to me. I feel part of a big family and finally I did find what I was searching for. I use my experiences for peers who can't see the light; who are like I was and need someone to hold that hope. I am now that person. Recovery is possible; you can do it. I did and so can you.

I was asked to create a collage of all the things that keep me well, so I thought about who I need in my life, what I need to do, and the things I enjoy. I cut up photos and pictures and stuck them all on a sheet of paper. I stepped back and looked at this and the feeling of warmth inside is something I can't describe. All these years I have felt so lonely and not known I have had these people in my life, but now I have put them together on a piece of paper. I look at that often and smile because I know I have a lot of good things in my life.

Recovery is possible, you can do it. I did and so can you.

## Finding hope, light and my road to recovery



by Katy

Telling my story is not an easy thing for me, I've found that writing down my experiences and challenges can bring up memories that recovery has allowed me to leave behind.

Recently, though, I've found that through creativity I can express myself and my experiences in a way that supports and moves me forward on my recovery journey. I clawed my way back to a different positive emotional landscape and continue to hold on to my dreams.

by **Kate**



Kate's artwork right and below show how she has moved on from her "dark place" to somewhere full of hope...

### My dark times...



My recovery...





## *Yatra - prelude and fugue*

by Ella Yinsky

*The spring begins to flow,  
Early, prematurely,  
In...NOT IN AM.  
Radiant beauty,  
In mother's arms,  
Left hip disease,  
At four and a half,  
Plunges me into,  
A year of mother absence,  
In an isolating orthopaedic hospital,  
Coming out, a second sister,  
Push her over in playpen, told off quite correctly,  
But no sympathy for displacement,  
Only physical touch from mother,  
Bathing my knee,  
When spiked by a sharp coil, end of wire,  
And sliding my Thomas splint,  
Caliper, on and off,  
To keep load bearing weight,  
Off damaged hip.*

(To protect individuals' identity, all names have been changed)

**D**ad made me sad. Bach's organ music evoked in me beautiful, life-affirming and emotionally intense energy. Teased in the playground for being "just like a girl" and a big sissy, secondary school stripped me of my dignity.

Internal oppression from society, mum and dad and the church gave me a terror of the gay side of my bisexuality. I fancied a young man in Forres, Scotland, but felt too unsure to proceed further. Dad prevented me doing art for O-Level, regarding it as a useless girly subject.

Unsuitable paid employment made me mentally ill. Mental hospital at age 17 in 1969 including being sectioned and subjected to ECT. Yet I needed a different kind of ECT – ***Extra Cuddling Therapy!***

ECT shocks, as did injections thrust painfully into my bare backside. I retreated into an inner fantasy and sci-fi world of elves, demons, monsters, Dr. Who, Star Trek and Dan Dare. I met Kirsty Kristenylen in October 1977 in group psychotherapy. Over 31 years, through ups and downs and ebbs and flows, we inspired, supported and cuddled each other. A dear life companion until Alzheimer's disease forced her into care and a nursing home.

In the late 1980s I studied literature, philosophy and religion for five years in the north-east. I felt very lonely. I met a woman who, like me, was hungry for affection and we became passionately involved. Gina Jenkins of York was a total lover. But Kirsty had emotional depth and kind acceptance. Gina dropped me like a stone when my mental illness became more evident.

Whilst studying for a year in Sheffield I was in a household with two gay men. Jim was in the next room to me and we could have had full gay

expression except that I was in fearful denial. I knew I was transgendered, but I could not cope with my inner oppression blocking proper acknowledgement of this.

Psychologically I tend to conceal my feelings, especially the tender ones, often creating a front of objectivity and uninvolvement. Outwardly I may seem clear, convincing and even clever, yet inwardly I often feel isolated, confused and plagued by severe feelings of meaninglessness.

**“***The challenge in any particular recovery process is to understand ourselves and the world and others better, to be more aware of our inner conflicts and how to govern them, especially learning what our needs are and how to channel them carefully and with full awareness, avoiding impulsive risky activities which may add to our adverse experiences. Meeting our needs, especially those we find difficult to talk about and relationship education needs to be part of the process.***”**

Meditation via Christian icons or Buddhist images helps. The challenge for me is to go beyond my inner world into action and to go beyond isolation to community. Yet I am not very good at this. Not being in a true domestic community means that solitude plays on my vulnerabilities and tends to bring me down.

Time passes, the flow of life goes on. At Bangor, Gwynedd, North Wales, I began a process of acknowledging my transgendered self. January 1998 I knew I was Ella and in 1999 Ella became my sole legal forename and I became Ms, acknowledging my female gender identity within a male body.

Depression drove me back to Cambridge in a very life-disruptive way. My safe haven in those days was a lovely home created by my most central relationship, Kirsty. Almost 22 years older than me, she had a youthful, exuberant, extravert attitude to life despite very serious mental health problems. From October 1977 we had more than 31 years of emotional engagement with each other, spending much time together until Alzheimer's began its bit-by-bit demolition of her mind and care and nursing home institutionalisation. On 9 September 2009 she went into care. Dad died on 28 November and his funeral was on 7 December. Mum died on 30 November 2012 aged 89, her funeral was on 12 December.

Kirsty's exodus from her lovely old home brought an end to our mutual consolation of cuddling and caressing.

Now once again I am plunged into mutually contradictory and self-cancelling conflicting thought patterns. I am a creative, thoughtful, questioning individual who just happens to have problems, somewhere around the schizoid and schizotypal end of the schizophrenic spectrum. These processes can be intensely self-isolating. Yet there are significant steps on the journey including Patrick Holford's book "Optimal Nutrition for the Mind" and Tyrosine which is amino acids taken between meals. This stops me ringing 111 in severe despair. I see a senior medical herbalist in Norwich. Buddhist retreats calm my mind and increase sensitive, compassionate awareness.

I am gaining an understanding of many factors that contribute to my life difficulties. I am dropping denial and seeking support to create a better quality of life despite the difficulties. A cautious hope is unfolding.

***by Ella Yinsky***



## My story

Mental illness runs in the family, mum became very ill.  
I had to look after my brother and go to work still.

Just got married, should be best years of my life, but just lie in bed, tossing and turning, not the best wife.

Things spiral, in and out of hospital for years, now my hopes are fears.

Suicide attempts – why do I always feel so tense, people around me, dark thoughts surrounding me.

As well as this came cancer – what a double edged sword, but I came through it fighting thank the lord.

Came off all my meds, went sky high, put on injections, but felt zombie-fied.

After 10 years, became empowered.  
Got off injections.  
Had a loving supportive partner with good reaction.

And now moved to Peterborough, a fresh start.  
Looking forward to the future with all my heart.

**by Katherine**



Hi, I'm Michelle. I suffer with anxiety, panic attacks and mild depression.

My first panic attack started October 2012. I believe my stressful life and childhood is partly to blame. I didn't have the best start in life. Aged five, I was put into care because my father was violent to me, my brother, sister and mum. My mum had to be hospitalised with severe post-natal depression after the birth of my youngest brother. After a year or so, we were reunited with my mum and brother and we started to live a normal happy childhood, until my mum took my dad back when I was 10.

This time my dad was only abusive to my mum, but I remember we all used to walk on eggshells about the house, living in fear. Finally, my dad was removed from the house and our life started to get back to normal - until mum met her new partner, who was a drug addict and alcoholic, and she started to use drugs and drink herself.

When I was 13, I started going out drinking and smoking cannabis with older friends. I did that on and off until I was 15. I stopped going to school and slept in the day. I remember feeling low, sad, and angry at times. I just

wanted a normal childhood family.

At times, after arguments with my family, I would cry and try to harm myself with a razor or put something around my neck. I wouldn't have gone through with it; I just think it was a cry for help. It was around that time I must have started being depressed and angry.

At 16, I met a boy who I liked. I was a lot happier and started going to college. I stopped drinking and stopped socialising with the wrong group of friends. But after two years we split up. I left college and started working and met my current partner. I was happy and loved up. I quickly got pregnant, moved out of my mum's house and I got my own flat. I went on to have a beautiful son. He is my world and with help of my partner and son and motherhood they have changed me as a person. Now aged 24, I am in good spirits. I enjoy mindfulness, relaxation and have found exercise which helps me on my road to recovery. I also try to make time for me and I am hoping to continue to live my life to the full. I am now feeling very hopeful about the future.

**by Michelle**

***“He is my world”***



**T**he stigma about mental illness had a big impact on my childhood. It was so bad back then that my family moved house repeatedly as my parent was not able to face people after each breakdown. When in my early 30s a good friend asked me to tell him about my family background, I made the shocking realisation that this was something no-one had asked me and that I had not ever really spoken of. I suspect it is not unusual, though, for those of us who are not from the dominant culture to be that quiet / invisible.

I trained in social and community work and was being interviewed for a social work job in Cambridge a year or so after a spell in psychiatric hospital. I had not decided whether to tell or not but found myself spilling the beans anyway. I was asked how this would affect my work – and said I thought I would have greater empathy and understanding. It was encouraging that I was given the job – not bad for the early 1980s. Soon afterwards, though, in the duty office, derogatory comments about people with mental health issues sent me rapidly back into the closet.

In some places I was able to be open about my experiences. I started to practice a form of peer listening and led a support group for people who had been through the mental health system. In 1992, when working as a neighbourhood community development officer, I organised a three-day training course for key people who lived and worked in the area, raising awareness and challenging stigma about mental health and illness. I did this on top of a lot of fear, though, got burnt out and narrowly avoided hospitalisation. Instead, I went to stay with a member of my support group and we organised a rota of safe people to be with me 24/7 for a week or so until I was able to return to my home and young family and, a few weeks later, to work.

In 1995 I answered an advertisement for a co-manager of a homeless women's project which stated that people with experience of using mental health services were particularly encouraged to apply. This was a really positive organisation run

by women for women and it was a joy to be part of. I was free to share bits of my story, when appropriate, and could see that this strengthened my relationships and could lend real hope to women who were struggling.

I loved the creative work we were able to do together, and the highlight for me was a millennium project called *"Living the Fragments"*. This involved conducting an archaeological dig in the grounds of Fulbourn Hospital – imagining the stories of women who had lived in the iron age house we found evidence of, and who had lived there in all the centuries between. A hundred women were involved in the art project which culminated in a

medication. In 2007 we had a successful workshop on *"Coping with Coming Off"* where I was a member of a panel speaking about our experience of taking and coming off psychiatric drugs. This led to further community work to address some of the issues and eventually to a three-year NHS-funded project to promote more shared decision-making in this area. It is clear that some people have found the opportunity for openness and discussion about this important topic to be helpful.

When I heard that CPFT, the local mental health trust, planned to train and employ a large number of people who had been through the mental

## *My story about telling my story*

*by Sheena*



theatre piece, drawing together ancient and present time stories of our lives as women in that particular place.

On reading the report of a survey Mind did about what people found helpful when trying to come off psychiatric drugs, I decided that it was important to have a dialogue about this locally as I felt it was a neglected area. As well as my own experiences of taking these drugs I had seen the challenges that many women experienced and the powerlessness they felt in relation to psychiatric

health system to work as peer support workers, I was very excited and wanted to part of this initiative. I signed up for the month-long, intensive training course taught by Terrence, a trainer from Recovery Innovations in the United States. After the first week we spent a whole day sharing our stories. It was incredibly moving and truly inspiring to hear about the journey that each person had made to reach this point in their recovery. The 10 minutes we each shared played a large part in the sense of solidarity, closeness, acceptance and pride that carried us through the rest of the course and beyond into peer employment.

I was fortunate, after that, to be employed as a peer educator, and to experience these wonderful story-telling days with each new cohort of peer work students. Every course ends with a graduation ceremony, during which each student tells a little of their personal story, and this never fails to reach the audience on a very emotional level. It can be a

real “light bulb moment” for those people who did not really get what is meant by recovery in mental health before.

At Recovery College East I love co-tutoring on the “*Telling My Story*” course. It is a treat and a privilege to be alongside people as they look afresh at their lives and begin to reframe things. Telling our stories, however and wherever we choose to do so, can be very empowering for us. Hearing each others’ stories can inspire us, give us hope and help us feel connected.

Those of us who have experienced significant mental health challenges have had difficult experiences to deal with prior to our use of services. Hopefully, our contact with mental health services will have been helpful, but there are associated challenges to overcome such as stigma and the side effects of treatments. I see everyone who has shared their story with me as a true hero, committed to moving forward and rebuilding a meaningful life, despite many challenges. I have found the following affirmation very helpful as it cuts through all the negative messages we can so easily

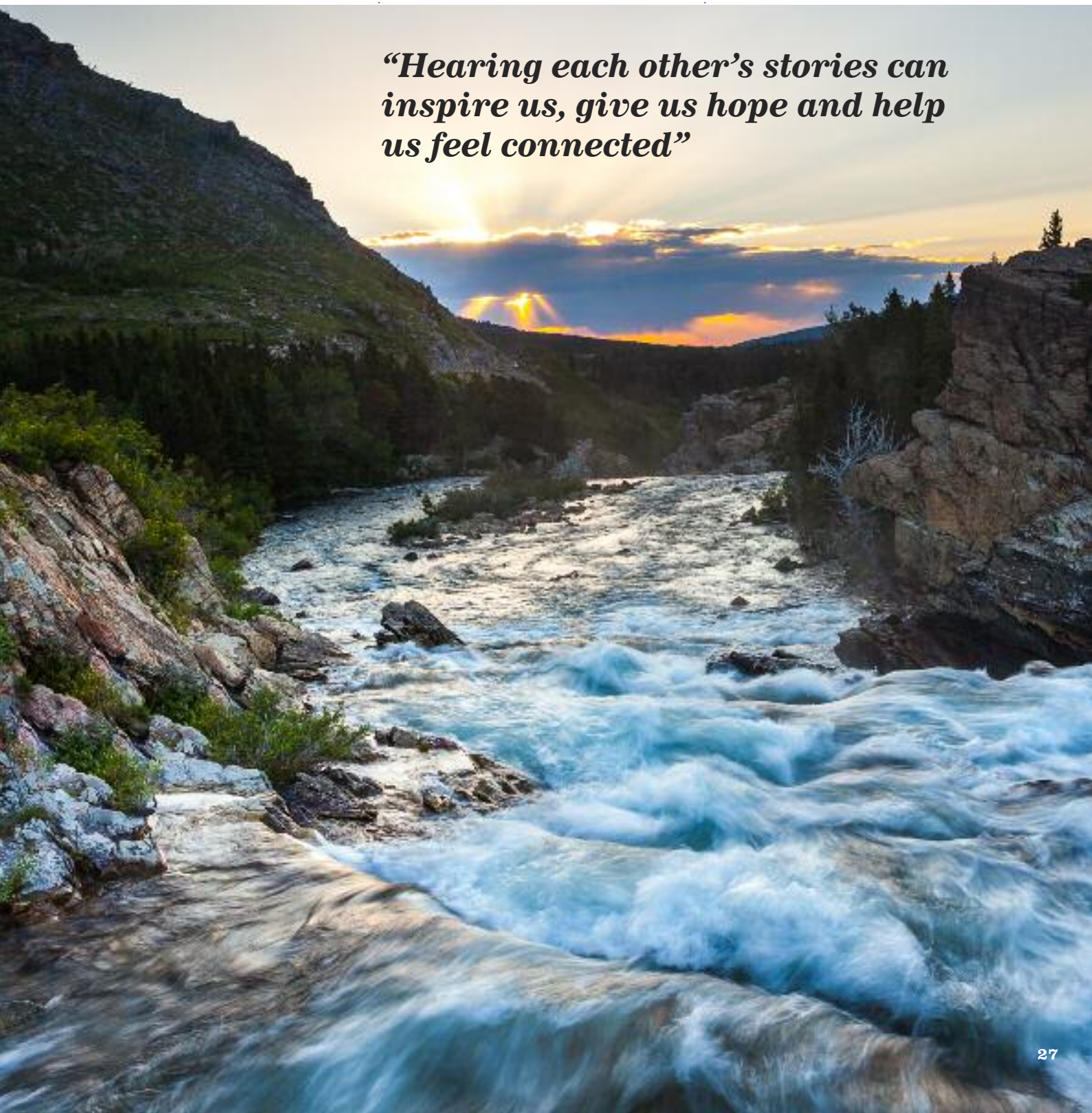
internalise about ourselves:

I promise to take complete pride in myself and all other mental health system survivors

I can choose the perspective on my past experiences which gives me the most satisfaction

I can take complete charge of my mind and fulfil my wildest dreams

I am the perfect person to lead all people towards liberation.



***“Hearing each other’s stories can inspire us, give us hope and help us feel connected”***



## The final piece in my recovery puzzle by Zoe

**R**ecovery. A concept I had never entertained at 14 years old, when I was thrust into a world I neither cared for, nor understood; the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) system. Appointments, assessments, evaluations, weights, charts, and so it goes on. But, no: “Not thin enough yet, my dear, you’d better try harder”. Or at least that’s what I heard, and that’s exactly what I did. How dare she humiliate me in this manner; how dare she stifle my efforts to attain the unattainable; perfection. I very quickly became consumed by the voice (not literal) in my head, shouting, screaming, pushing, punishing me, forcing me to be better every, single day. My body ached to be held, to be told everything would be okay, but that voice never came and my body grew weaker. I was soon a mere shadow of my former self. Looking back, I couldn’t have picked me out of a line up - I was disappearing.

Then the most remarkable thing happened, I was to meet a woman who was instrumental in my recovery, and to whom I owe a great deal. It was as though she picked me up, dusted me down, and said the words I had longed to hear, “everything will be okay”. And I believed her. There was a truth in her eyes and a spring in her step - what’s not to believe? We embarked upon a

rocky yet beautiful journey out of the darkness and back in to the world and, my goodness, isn’t it remarkable? Freedom, success (not determined by scales or clothing sizes), family, friends, a career, and the most beautiful of all, the baby I was told I would never have. Our beautiful baby boy, the light of our lives and, well, a miracle. Love was something I had convinced myself I neither deserved nor wanted, but when somebody walks into your life and somehow makes you believe again - I just couldn’t help it. The final piece in my recovery puzzle, a family of my own; a man I adore and a baby I would give my life for. Complete.

So, I guess what I’m really saying is, that for me, recovery is about taking a leap of faith. Trusting where you perhaps otherwise would be afraid, believing in yourself where you might usually be filled with doubt, and loving unconditionally, because it does exist and you do deserve it. So, close your eyes, take a deep breath and dive right in - there’s a life out there waiting for you, you just have to hold the hope and trust your heart.

Recovery is life. We are all recovering from something.

These are some of the memories and activities that lift my spirits when hope seems far away and recovery appears remote. Some of them are reminders of what I have done and some are aspirations for the future. They are a rock in a sea of uncertainty.

*by Chris*



A vast field of sunflowers stretches to the horizon under a dramatic sunset sky. The sun is low on the left, casting a golden glow over the scene. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a clear blue at the top, with wispy clouds catching the low light. The sunflowers in the foreground are in sharp focus, showing their bright yellow petals and dark brown centers. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

*“I’ve stopped running  
and face up to my fears”*

**T**his is my story. I feel it's not about my *recovery* as such but more about *discovery*. I haven't recovered from my illness but have discovered along the way how to manage and am able to get on with life.

It felt like a neverending rollercoaster ride from hell that lasted for many years. I would plunge into a deep depression for months at a time. I was in this deep black hole. I felt numb, scared. I would, on occasions, feel frantic; think irrationally for no apparent reason. Why was this happening to me? What had I done wrong? Why was god punishing me? I hated myself, my life and life itself. All at the tender age of 23.

I lost my job, my partner and friends along the way due to being mentally ill. I also had to sell my house. I never thought this dark cloud would ever lift. I would start feeling better due to medication. Trying to get my life back to working order, then maybe four to six months later I would relapse. I would plummet into an even deeper depression for longer each time. I never thought I would be normal again. I always felt anxious - why won't this pain go away? Always on benefits, always having to rely on other people. This had become the norm for me now. I could hardly remember my old self.

After time, the relapses started to become shorter. I wasn't feeling so deeply depressed, although I still thought I was a failure and had no confidence or self esteem. At least it was a start. I now had a goal to aim for, to come off medication; the sleeping tablets also had awful side effects. I gradually came off medication with the support from my GP.

I tried working for agencies but failed each time. Eventually I aimed for voluntary work. I had to tread carefully, not to try to run before I could walk or else I could end up relapsing again. Take every stage bit by bit, step by step.

I worked at a local company which was very supportive and understanding. At first I was terrified and my anxiety levels were through the roof. On many occasions I didn't want to go, I would feel sick, thinking what excuse I could make. It would be easier for me if I stayed at home. I discovered that when I didn't go in I would be even harder on myself, thinking I was a failure.

I worked very hard, pushing myself, as I was determined to give it my best shot. I just hated the feeling of being so anxious. But the want of being what society calls *normal* again was so great. I started off with very simple things; washing up the cups, opening the post and shredding. Just getting in to a daily routine was extremely tiring. I was so used to staying in bed until lunchtime and not doing much else throughout the day. I would come home and go straight to bed for an hour; I was mentally drained. This was one of the coping strategies I learned along the way. Slowly things got a little easier and I began to get into a routine.

As time went by I was gradually given harder tasks to carry out and suffered the occasional set back. I realised too many changes were harder than before this journey began. This time, though, I didn't go into a deep depression with

what felt like four walls caving in on me. I accepted it instead of fighting it, which helped me move on more quickly. I also had a great deal of support along the way from my partner.

When I was more comfortable with the voluntary work, I learned as much as I could about the illness, which gave me more understanding about myself. I also discovered that there was a family history of mental illness.

My voluntary placement expired, but I still needed to build up my confidence and self esteem. I didn't feel I had much to offer as a person. It was time to tackle what caused my anxieties - I was so tired of running away all of the time.

By chance another voluntary placement arose within the same company, but working with more people in a busier office. I had a great deal of support and encouragement from the manager and the whole team. They made me feel at ease with myself and I discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of by suffering from mental health problems.

Through gradually facing my fears, my confidence and self-esteem began to grow. I could see the progress. I also built up my skills by attending different training courses, and took on new challenges, even when I knew my anxiety levels would rise. This helped me a great deal.

Now in paid employment as a peer worker and off benefits, I am helping other people with mental health problems. I'm quite fond of myself now!

I am on this journey of learning. I still get anxious from time to time and suffer from bouts of depression, but have accepted this. I have stopped running and now face up to my fears. Although it's been the hardest thing to do in my life, it's worth it, believe me.

There is always hope. I used to want to be the person I once was before I became unwell, before the illness took hold. Now looking back, I'm a better person than I ever was.

***There is  
always  
hope...***

***by Angie***



# Building My

**D**ue to being bullied throughout childhood for being overweight and struggles with what I now realise was dyslexia, I've suffered from depression and anxiety and as it later transpired, the gradual onset of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME)/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) since my teenage years - that's more than 25 years now!

I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in my early teens and later Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and so ensued 20 years of researching and trying various antidepressants and alternative treatments. Some helped my mood but none helped the other symptoms and the antidepressants made my constant battle with weight 10 times worse. Eventually, six years ago, I was diagnosed with ME/CFS!

ME/CFS is basically the label given to a bunch of symptoms that affect every system in the body. Symptoms that the doctors can't find any other reason for and can't find a cause for. They told me there is no cure (what I realise now is what they actually meant was they didn't know what the cure was, that is not the same thing at all). They said I might get over it or I might have it for the rest of my life.

For a short while, I lost my driving force and my saviour, my hope! But then it resurfaced and spurred me on to find answers for myself. And so, as I always do, I cried frequently and in

between, I set about searching for a solution via the internet. A big turning point for me was finding a private clinic run by people who had been ill with the condition but had made vibrant recoveries. They described having ME/CFS as an overloaded boat that's sinking - to recover, you need to unload your 'boat'! This idea makes sense since so many things in our lives affect our wellbeing and if too many of them are out of balance, our bodies break down.

In preparing to write this, I read through old stuff I had to write in forms to help doctors diagnose me and it saddened me so much to think of all the pain, sadness and loss of my life I've felt over the years. I used to feel so angry that life seemed so much harder for me than others, that I put so much effort in and got so little in return.

My physical and mental health issues made me feel isolated, inadequate and broken but over the years, I have got to know many people and have noticed that even those who seem to have it all, don't! They too have their issues, whether they choose to deal with them or not. Just because you have officially been given a label/diagnosis does not mean you are broken. It also does not mean you are necessarily any more mentally ill than the next guy, it just means you were honest enough with yourself to confront your issues, you were proactive enough to look for a solution and you were resourceful enough to ask for help. So be proud of yourself, comrade, you did well.

Throughout this healing journey of mine, I have learned many things that have aided my

gradual progress and towards a life a little bit more marvellous. I'd like to share some of them with you in the hope that it will inspire you towards building your own happy healthy place. **I have learned** that there is no magic pill. I wasted lots of energy chasing one solution after another, hoping that was the one that was going to make me well but I realise now, it doesn't work like that. Since finding the clinic (its definition and teachings strengthening my hope and giving me direction) I've come to understand that the solution is multi-faceted and holistic and these past six years have been a steep learning curve in finding the pieces to my personal puzzle. Here's a breakdown of just this year and some stuff I've learned:

**I learned** once I eventually committed to doing gentle yoga daily, it actually did help my energy increase.

**I learned** by testing myself alongside other gardeners by volunteering with a gardening team that gardening isn't a realistic career for me to keep thinking I can return to full-time when I'm well (I've run my own part time garden maintenance business for the past nine years). Finding a less strenuous and more reliable job makes more sense with my current capabilities, my eventual old age and the need to work in to retirement due to lack of savings and pensions.

**I learned** on an art retreat about online art communities and e-courses that opened up a whole new world to me.

**I learned** when I volunteered with a local charity that running



# Happy Healthy Place

workshops in art and craft wasn't the uplifting activity I thought it would be. That, for me, it needed to also be positively focused towards recovery.

*I learned* on a two-day job-seeker course that I can still feel slow, stupid, vulnerable and inadequate if I'm not in the right environment, simply because the tutor talked while we were reading and writing. With brain-

*“Just because you have officially been given a label/diagnosis does not mean you are broken. It just means you were honest enough to confront your issues and you were resourceful enough to ask for help.”*

fog on top of dyslexia, I found this difficult and stressful.

*I learned* on a confidence course the feeling of empowerment because I found myself contributing to every discussion and was naturally good at active listening. This is simply because I find people interesting and I felt people liked and respected me, that if I'm in the right environment, I've got good interpersonal skills and I enjoy talking to people and being open, friendly and honest. This was a revelation for me and I've continued to notice further evidence of these skills on all the following courses, too.

*I learned* during an art mural project I did with a national charity that I have a great eye for colour, form and texture and that I work well as part of a team and I'm full of ideas.

*I learned* through the process of participating in a local college business course and simultaneously in an online soul-based business e-course, I finally managed to organise my masses of ideas, understand where my passions lie and get a better idea of how to work towards them.

I then participated in five courses at Recovery College East and have further clarified what to focus my energies on. That is:

- Finding part time work in mental health where I can empower others in their recoveries and support my own.
- Creating artwork that will evoke happy healthy emotions in people to license to manufacturers of greeting cards, homeware, etc. Creating an online embodiment of my happy healthy place in the form of my website: [www.ahappyhealthyplace.wordpress.com](http://www.ahappyhealthyplace.wordpress.com) which I am building to create and share a library of resources that help my recovery and to provide an uplifting community space, where people can come to be inspired, be comforted, be energised, be appreciated and basically cultivate positive groovy feelings that they can take with them in to their everyday lives.

None of those things were *the* answer for me, but accumulatively they have nudged me towards my goals,


increased my confidence in my abilities, helped me identify a potential career that I feel passionate about and helped me feel positive about my future. And to end, my hopes and dreams in the form of a positive affirmation.

Every one of us in this wonderful world are vibrantly healthy, full of glorious energy, are financially secure and have happy and healthy relationships with ourselves, friends, families and colleagues, free to live our best possible lives.

My personal dream is to spend my time empowering others to create lives they find as happy and healthy as I find mine, within my local and online communities, creating artwork that I lucratively licence to manufacturers, walking in nature, canoeing and spending quality time with my loved ones and with myself.

To live in a place that is gently warm and sunny all year round in our own wooden shaker style house with a veranda, that looks out over a bay of sand, has a garden where we grow our own food and is surrounded by nearby hills and mountains where we go for early morning hikes, take photos, make drawings and watch the sun sparkle on the sea, feeling at one with the earth... calm, contented and peaceful.





“I have stopped trying to rewrite my past as I have no control over the things I cannot change. I live whenever I can in the present moment”

# Why not me?

by TP

Who am I today? Charlotte or Scarlet? When I was unwell I would ask myself the question and often make a choice of which of my two escape artist characters I could be. Charlotte was the better side of me and Scarlet was the mischievous one who had no fear. It was a dangerous game and one I played increasingly as a way of running from my life. I was never who I really was. Always one removed from my true self; a woman whose daughter had died. I learned from my parents that 'no one listens to a cry baby' I followed their example and I disguised my grief under an impenetrable mask.

Life moved on and change came with it. My first born needed his mum and I went on to give birth to my second daughter but, despite our attempts at becoming a family, I had an unsettling fear that a chain of unstoppable events had begun. D.I.V.O.R.C.E came first - inevitable, really, when communication fails to connect through a wall of grief, blame and resentment. I celebrate the fact that there is still love in our original family; we just express it differently now. I like to think of my family (and I include my friends in this) as a splendid, blended mix of wonderful people.

I embraced single parenthood and slipped on another mask. I was determined to be the best mum, best friend, best employee, best daughter and best sister I could be. Looking back I realise that the main person missing from that list was me.

I was able to manage all aspects of my life and work was my anchor. From the age of five I worked alongside my parents, brother and sister to turn our world of nothing into a world of something. Working together was our family time and through that we grew stronger, although the unbalanced nature of 'all work and no play' took its toll and I floundered through my teenage years and into early adulthood.

Love was always present in our family; I just didn't realise it until later in my life. One of my biggest discoveries on my recovery journey is learning to celebrate the different ways people express love towards me. It was hard to stop judging people for not loving me in the way I wanted to be loved, but it has allowed me to see the beauty of the unconditional love that comes my way.

A few years after my divorce I was the victim of a vicious sexual violent crime in


which I was left for dead. A blur of police interviews followed and afterwards as I lay in the darkness I struggled to see any hope. When my daughter had died I remember the sensation of forgetting how to breathe, as if someone had to remind me to do it. This feeling had returned. I was lost. The masks I had layered over me slipped away so fast that the speed with which I became unwell was unforgiving. I have later realised that part of the reason I became so unwell was because over the years I had given out all my energy to others, forgetting to save some for myself. When I needed me...me wasn't there.

Scarlet joined me on this part of the journey and we ran hard and fast away from everything. Scarlet had no fear; she wasn't a mother, a friend, a daughter or a sister. Everything and everyone was shut out. When I stopped running I retreated behind closed doors, not communicating with anyone. Inevitably, in just a few weeks, I was admitted to hospital. In this short space of time I was unable to care for my children, I lost my home, my extended family and my job. However, it was in this darkest moment that I met the most amazing people. People whose courage, determination and strength inspired me to believe that anything is possible. Being around people who believe in you, when you are no longer able to believe in yourself is the greatest gift. When I was unable to hold the hope for myself they held it for me. I will never forget that my peers provided the small spark of light amongst the darkness.

My admission into hospital was the start of my recovery journey, and I continue to build a life for myself and my children. I cherish all the people in my life, my family, my best friends and all the people I work with. Having these people in my life keeps me well.

I used to ask myself 'why me? Now I ask 'why not me?' I have stopped trying to rewrite my past as I have no control over the things I cannot change. I live whenever I can in the present moment and occasionally, as its still early days, I take a peek at my future. I celebrate that my journey so far has given me new strengths – courage, determination, forgiveness, resilience and empathy and I continue to learn how to love and be loved unconditionally.

My journey continues.

A stack of several cardboard boxes of various sizes. The top box is the largest and has text printed on its side. A white tag with the word 'LABELS' written vertically on it is attached to the top right corner of this box. Below it, another box is visible with more text. In the foreground, there are several smaller boxes, some with white tape on their flaps. The background is plain white.

Price me up and put me in a box  
Seal the box tight  
Suffocate me  
Smash the box open  
Let me be free  
The only label I need is me  
Do not fix me I am not broken  
Who makes society's 'rules'?  
Who decides what is socially appropriate?  
Don't tell me off for being me  
Understand me and accept me for who I am

**LABELS**

If you want me to understand you tell  
me who you are  
If I look sad ask me am I okay?  
I may just be bored, I might be happy,  
I might be confused, I may be upset  
You will never know unless I laugh or cry

**BY MANDY**

# My story of hope



**M**y story started with the horses – lovely but frightening animals. I grew up on a farm in the middle of the sea of crops. I galloped free with the winds and often saw no-one. It was a dream but it's a lifestyle at a cost. I have mild cerebral palsy and wear hearing aids, but its impact became significant in this able-bodied world I grew up in. I somehow lost my school friends through various reasons. People crumbled away from me and stopped communicating. I was alone and void of my peers. I simply didn't learn to say "hi" as they were all trained to be nice to me. Despite having a twin sister, I missed most of the parties, friendship groups and rapport with the teachers.

I focused on my studies – they were only thing there was, alongside the horses and the farm. Horses began to scare me. The environment became important – hence I chose to do conservation studies at a diversified agricultural college that also specialised in horses and animals, landscape design and gardening – my mother always created beautiful gardens with my father who also does the hard landscaping. And we had a goat and a dog, plus chickens, cats and fish. Sounds like a perfect college to go to, right? How wrong I was. Well, I did want to study at a proper university at first but my parents heavily suggested this college. I agreed as it reflected my values and lifestyle. Surely I would find people there?

Things were ok, but I still couldn't settle within a good group – then things got confusing and worse for me.

Then I had some challenges at college which had a huge impact on my life.

Amongst this horrible turbulence, I had lost the farm – my identity eroded away.

I left college and was called back after I started my new job because I failed my dissertation work. I got myself into trouble as I would not stop e-mailing someone important to me for my scientific work at my job about my past because I was scared of being misunderstood, discriminated or thought of badly.

I took an overdose. My life felt out of control, misunderstood and really unfair – I wasn't that disabled, I had good and professional intentions and did believe that science would be a way forward with projects and networking! What on earth? Why can't I handle the social games? Is it my disabilities that don't get noticed in my family life but hugely noticed outside in the real world? People gasp when I swear. People patronise me. People don't realise about my high expectations. I had strange beliefs involving care and professionalism and my beliefs didn't work out. These beliefs comforted me during my childhood years then became real. I kept trying to commit suicide. A young person's life doesn't work for me, one way or another – friends, driving, sex, romance, career opportunities and so forth were not happening or being denied to me by others. I got kicked out of my job. I walked to town in the middle of the night in my PJs and socks. I was struggling and wanting to feel the night

I was suspended then re-deployed.

I needed people to listen, hospital experiences and talking treatments. They were given, and I took a lot from them, and I kept journeying through and learning. Another relapse meant another helpful visit from the psychiatrist or psychologist. I started writing to my therapist to explain, make them understand, clarify myself, write about me, confirm my hopes, protect myself from my dark thoughts, to self-develop and learn. One day one person mentioned that I have little right to communicate. So another relapse. My GP became the next recipient – he had said it was ok, and I am still writing to him. I can't stop, I write everyday - sometimes to defend myself, add in new learnings and to demonstrate that I am doing well. It is my "personal medicine" – buying the stamps is like buying cigarettes - but it is healthier as I am dealing with the past and those men.

My family had been becoming more supportive. I saw a Richmond Fellowship support worker for most of a year and had been participating in Recovery College East courses. I am relearning to drive. I still manage to hold on to work – they are being brilliant, like my GP. Because I can work and write around it all. I still send letters and a few e-mails about everything, including the past, and read about writing therapy. It is all like a treasure hunt where you find gems of learning and have more faith in yourself and others.

*By Lizzie*

# Miracles do happen

by Donna

**I**t's hard to look back and remember that it happened. The memories, the pain, the trauma, the darkness. It was all real.

As a child my first devastating life event was the divorce of my parents after their 18-year marriage. I was only 11 and remember my mum sat at the end of my bed crying night after night. I really did not understand as one morning we were bundled in a car, all our clothes and belongings were stuffed in the shed ready to leave. After a long car journey we arrived at a homeless safe house for lone parents.

My life as a child would never be the same.

My life became very chaotic. I was a very mixed up little girl. My behaviour took a turn for the worse when one day my dad took my little brother from his school. I was daddy's girl; my brother was my mum's favourite. At the time I just could not understand why he did not take me. I felt like the most unloved little girl. I guess I was very vulnerable at that time. Life carried on and I just got more and more angry at the world.

One day I ran away and something terrible happened to me. Apparently it was my fault!

Life became even more unbearable. I refused to go to school. I kept running away. I got myself in vulnerable situations. This continued for years

until one day I went to court and was placed on a care order. I spent time in children's homes and foster care, but I still ran away. I had no sense of self worth and deep through the core of me was this: "I am bad, unlovable, and not wanted kind of feeling". Eventually I was deemed as a risk to myself and was placed in a secure unit for a number of years. Once I was allowed to leave, life continued its journey of one disaster to the next.

I was on a rollercoaster and I could not get off.

During this chaotic time I had a baby girl. I was very young. A baby I thought I gave a better life to through adoption, away from the dangers and abuse that I had come to know. Who was to know what the future would bring? At the time it was a dark, lonely place. I never forgot, and it exaggerated the negative self beliefs I had developed.

I experienced even more feelings of hate towards myself. I went on trying



to manage all these mixed-up feelings. My need to be in control led to many years of changing addictions, from drugs, food, abusive relationships. I ended up in difficult situations, gloomy places. I have seen worlds that some people could not even conceive. Life carried on and little did I know my life was about to change direction as I tried to take control and change what was my world.

I went to college and then university and found someone who believed in me. This changed my life around. I graduated; I threw my cap, surely that was not the path that was written for me? I got married, I got the great job that I'd dreamed off and we moved far away. The years passed by, everything seemed perfect but I knew I would never hear the patter of tiny feet or hold my baby in my arms. It all sounds rosy at this point, but when I look back at the five-stone me in the picture, I look like a stick and the shadows of the bruises I was trying to hide. Life was a mess and I needed to get out of the relationship. We were no good for each other. However, we did love each other, but inside I feared my death would be soon. I hit rock bottom.

My whole life as it was disintegrated before my eyes. I lost everything - my husband, my home, my job. I tried to take my life. I arrived at the doors of the mental health service. I was diagnosed and told the problem was me, I will never change. I felt doomed. I was still adamant to get some help and work through the childhood trauma that I had experienced.

I engaged in some therapeutic work and tried really hard, deep in my heart, to face all the demons. I took tiny steps. I went to Mind for support and made some friends. In the early days my support worker listened and helped me get out and about. One day I was offered an opportunity to attend some training. I decided to go along. I sat in the class and listened hard. It was about mental health recovery and a self-management plan called Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP).

It had been developed by Mary Ellen Copeland and other people who had also been told that they would never get better. I was totally inspired as I



worked through the stages and developed my plans.

Soon enough my life started to improve. I was becoming more in tune with myself. I learned that we are all the experts of ourselves and the answers are within me.

The more in tune I became the more control I started to have over my distress, my thoughts, feelings and ultimately my behaviour. The choices and decisions I made became more conscious and thought out. I went on to blossom in a way. I gained further training. I have over the years facilitated groups, given talks, delivered workshops and talks at conferences. I went on to be self-employed and involved in some fantastic peer support pilot projects. I have met some inspirational leaders along the way.

I have been humbled to see, watch, and observe others who also could not see the way, grow, change and believe. People can and do change their lives and worlds. I will be forever grateful for the skills and insight that applying it has given to me.

One Christmas eve, I was stood on my front doorstep and saw a shooting star. I wished for one thing - my own family.

A few weeks later I had a really strange dream about my little brother. I woke and went on the internet to

search for him. There were no results. Then I came across a message - someone was looking for me. It was less than a few hours and I talked to my daughter, my baby girl, who was 16 years old. The following years were a whirlwind, and emotional rollercoaster. The feelings are beyond words. Not only did I become a mum, nine months later I became a nana to a lovely little boy. My motto now is be careful what you wish for. I could have never imagined the person I have become today.

It's been a hard - almost 10 years now. The situation became really difficult in the early days and just after his first birthday my grandson was placed in local authority care. I continued to visit him and eventually applied to the court to be his special guardian. After a year of assessments, supervised contacts and many court cases, he came to live with me. I was totally open about all my past history and my mental health. In my heart I never thought social services would give me a baby. I fought for him and won.

Life now is a gift for me. I am a full-time mummy to my grandson and I get to watch my baby girl (who's not so little) turn into a beautiful young woman. I am also lucky enough to have found a highly rewarding job where I can support my peers who have also lost faith and hope in the future. I feel valued and supported by my peers and colleagues. I have developed a great support network of people who support me through the darker days and share the happier moments. I use my WRAP to work through what ever life throws at me. Despite having bumps in the road, I know I can get back up and keep going.

I look forward to the future with hope in my heart.



**“Life now is a gift for me”**

"It feels such a privilege to have been involved in this collection"

"Oh my word. This is amazing! I totally love it. Such a wonderful project, Sharon. The stories are amazing and inspiring! Can't wait to see it in full print"

Let the strength and optimism of the words that lay pressed within these pages be as healing and as inspirational to you dear reader as they have been to us who have shared them.

"I can't believe how incredible this publication looks - you have turned our stories into something that is unrecognisable from our first few scribbles. Thank you so much"

The power of the recovery stories has been incredible, it has taught me a valuable lesson in that my professional training is equally as important as a person's lived experience. Thank you

Sharing such amazing stories of hope and courage can inspire others to believe that taking that first small step on the path of self-discovery is possible for them. It is an honour to be given a glimpse into their incredible journeys.



# Recovery College East

Telling our stories can be a powerful experience that provides an opportunity to see the courage and strength within us. At Recovery College East we have a range of courses that are designed to give students the opportunity to have their unique voice heard.

Recovery College East is a collaborative, educational learning environment for people who receive services from Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust and partner organisations, their supporters, staff and students.

The college follows an adult education model and aims to deliver a responsive, peer-led education and training curriculum of recovery focused workshops and courses. Whether you want to develop new skills or move towards an understanding of mental health challenges, you will find the college is a relaxed, friendly place to learn with lots of support on hand if you need it.

All the courses have been designed to provide opportunities for discussion, promote independent learning and offer an

environment that is open and accessible. Courses are co-produced and co-delivered, involving at least one person with lived experience of mental health challenges. The college values expertise gained from lived experience equally with that derived from professional training.

Recovery College East aims to bring people together to realise and inspire individual and collective potential and enhance the development of recovery-orientated services within CPFT and elsewhere. The college conveys messages of hope, empowerment, possibility and aspirations. It recognises strengths and successes rather than highlighting deficits or problems. It celebrates the diversity of everyone. Courses vary in length from one-off workshops to those that run for a number of weeks.

They are offered at a variety of venues across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The college celebrates the lived experience of everyone and recognises that we all have the ability to change and grow. Everyone who enrolls is seen as a student, regardless of their previous experience or other identities.

## **Recovery College East**

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[www.cpft.nhs.uk/recoverycollege.htm](http://www.cpft.nhs.uk/recoverycollege.htm)



## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service**

If you have any concerns or feedback about any of CPFT's services, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on freephone 0800 376 0775 or e-mail [pals@cpft.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@cpft.nhs.uk)

## **Volunteering opportunities with Recovery College East**

If you would like to know more about the volunteering opportunities available at the college, please telephone the college co-ordinator on 01223 884431 or alternatively you can e-mail: [recoverycollegeeast@cpft.nhs.uk](mailto:recoverycollegeeast@cpft.nhs.uk)



“*The challenge in any particular recovery process is to understand ourselves and the world and others better, to be more aware of our inner conflicts and how to govern them, especially learning what our needs are and how to channel them carefully and with full awareness, avoiding impulsive risky activities which may add to our adverse experiences.*

*Meeting our needs, especially those we find difficult to talk about, and relationship education needs to be part of the process.*”



***Do you feel inspired after reading the stories?  
Maybe you want to start writing your story here?***



***This beautiful publication was designed by Andrea Bateman.  
Thank you for your ability to interpret our stories in such an  
inspiring and creative way.***

If you have any concerns about any of CPFT's services, or would like more information please contact: Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on freephone 0800 376 0775 or e-mail [pals@cpft.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@cpft.nhs.uk)

#### **Out-of-hours service for CPFT mental health service users**

Please call **NHS 111** for health advice and support.

If you require this information in another format such as braille, large print or another language, please let us know.

**HQ** Elizabeth House, Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge CB21 5EF.  
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[www.cpft.nhs.uk](http://www.cpft.nhs.uk)

***“If, through sharing, we may give hope, comfort or a glimmer of light to one person, then the challenge of opening ourselves up will have been worth every moment”***

