

# More to life than mental illness

I first became unwell when I was 12 years old. I am 28 now. I have had numerous episodes of depression and when I entered adulthood I started having episodes of elevated mood as well and at one stage I experienced hallucinations and delusions. I was eventually diagnosed with Bipolar although that diagnosis changed numerous times over a decade. Over that decade I was treated and supported in different ways according to whichever diagnosis was being worked with at the time. I was treated more favorably with some diagnoses than with others and ironically, my symptoms hadn't changed and nor had I, but regardless of that, I was treated differently each time my label (diagnosis) switched.

I was hospitalised in 2007, when I was 21 years old. Thanks to my mum, I didn't become homeless but many people do after periods of being an inpatient. I didn't have much in the way of support, aside from my mum and GP, when I left hospital as I had decided to disengage with the mental health team. I felt a bit failed by them. My GP told my mum and I about Mind and suggested we went along. The idea didn't appeal to me very much but it felt like our last hope and so we went.

We met with one of the staff and he seemed to understand me like nobody had before. I started accessing the resource centre quite regularly after that. I didn't know what to expect when I first went to Mind – my only experience of mental health establishments came from being an inpatient and films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

I met loads of people and they all seemed, well, normal. I don't know if perhaps I expected to see people rocking and dribbling but that certainly wasn't what I saw. There were people from all walks of life, women, men, young people, old people, music fanatics, gardeners, business people, parents, people who'd worked or were working in all sorts of places... event management, the NHS, the civil service... these people were no different to people outside of Mind but they shared something in common, which was experience of mental health problems. It taught me that I wasn't alone and that mental health problems didn't discriminate against anyone at all... that anyone could be affected at any point in their life. It wasn't unusual and it wasn't the end of the world either.

Another thing I didn't expect was there to be happy conversation, jokes, support, understanding and empathy among peers. I thought it might be really miserable and depressing there but it wasn't at all. I made friends who understood me for once. I didn't stop feeling ill though. I still believed things would never change for me and that I was resigned to a life of turmoil and chaos, just now with people who understood that I could share it with.

I started helping out around the centre and was invited to some training Mind provided in Mental Health Awareness and Stigma. I enjoyed the training, I enjoyed meeting new people and making wonderful friends and most of all I felt like my life had some purpose now. I wasn't stuck alone at home without a job, afraid to tell family and friends how I felt in case they judged me. I had somewhere that people helped me to feel better.

If I expressed an interest in something, people would encourage me to try it out. If I felt sad or unhappy about something, staff and members would talk to me about it and help me put things in perspective. They would help me to find ways to improve things in my life. Not just in relation to my symptoms... but in my home life, in financial matters, in my friendships and relationships, in my aspirations for education or employment or in any other area.

At Mind my diagnosis was irrelevant. It didn't matter whether I had depression, borderline personality disorder, bipolar, anxiety or nothing at all. At Mind I was a person and what was wrong with me mattered less than who I was and what I could become. I was supported to understand myself better, to figure out what I wanted from life and how to go about achieving it. I was supported to volunteer and to attend college. I was even supported to re-engage with the mental health team. They taught me about my rights and how to get the most out of support from any place I could access it. I learned about benefits when I was too unwell to work; I learned about other organisations that could help me along the way; I learned about support in so many areas ranging from housing, education, employment, health, leisure... the advice and information I was given was so helpful.

Before I found Mind, I felt like I was really alone and misunderstood and that my life would always be that way. I couldn't hold down a job no matter how hard I tried and eventually gave up even trying as it was too difficult. It was not an overnight process but gradually, and step by step, Mind staff and all of the members helped me to realise that I did have power in my life to improve things. I was given the right support, the right information and the space to figure it all out for myself so I could move forward. I volunteered and started helping other people, then I studied for a while and eventually I started working full time. I felt stronger. Sometimes I still felt unwell but I had things in my life that were important to me. I had things that mattered and things I wanted to be well for and it made it so much easier to recover from relapses. Relapses happened less often as well.

What I learned from everyone at Mind played a huge role in my recovery and I saw it play a huge role in many other people's lives. I realised that recovery didn't mean being cured. It meant being stronger, more resilient and above all it meant feeling like I had a purpose and was fulfilled. For some people recovery was just having places to go or people to see. For others it was volunteering or learning and for some it was staying in or returning to employment. It didn't matter what people's aspirations were, what mattered was that they were supported to achieve them.

Above all finding Mind taught me that there is more to life than having a mental illness. It taught me that with the right information and support, I had the power to improve my life no matter what my diagnosis was.