

CASE STUDY

“I’d been ill for a long time, but I ducked and dived to keep away from hospital”

I was in and out of contact, visiting outpatients then leaving and coming back home again. I’d been ill since 16 years old... arguably longer... and this was my third admission.

It was September last year and things weren’t going too well. My friend took me to outpatients to have a chat. I had about three or four outpatients sessions and was referred to inpatients. Then I had an emergency admission in November.

“I thought others were just making a fuss”

I knew things weren’t completely hunky-dory, but it seemed to be going OK. My plan was to talk to them, say I was fine and just come home again. I was definitely ready to fight my corner. I was going to say ‘thanks, I really appreciate the offer, but I’ll be going home’. In the end, I agreed to voluntary admission... though I still thought I’d just put on a bit of weight to keep people happy and then leave.

I hadn’t been discharged after one month there, then three months. Each time I’d tell them I was fine, but it got to a point where they told me I’d have to be sectioned if I didn’t make headway, so I realised I had to do something.

“I understood why everyone else was in a hospital, but not me”

For the first couple of months, I just wondered ‘why am I here?’ I’d been holding down a good job in the City before, travelling into London every day for work. I felt lucky in comparison to the others – I’d had a really good life; there were just a couple of underlying things that sparked all of this off. I also didn’t feel I had the characteristics of someone I’d associate with an eating disorder. I understood why everyone else was in hospital – and wondered why they had so much self-hatred – but I couldn’t see this kind of thing in me.

It felt to me that the staff on the unit were just there to make my life a misery... why can’t they give me a break, you know? I resented the fact they had control over me. I was being treated like a five year old. I was like a fly in a glass jar buzzing around.

It was quite a while before I realised I needed to put something into the programme myself. Before, I was so anti it all and I remember one of the nurses saying to me 'you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. I could see that had been happening.

“The staff work damn hard to get people out of the traps they are in”

As soon as I changed my approach, I saw that staff members would give me the support back ten times over. They gave me lots of support and kindness.

Actually, the combination of people there is really helpful. It's like different staff members cover off different things, and you come into contact with them for different reasons. There's someone there to chat to between 2 and 4am in the morning if you really need it. There were strict rules and it wasn't an easy ride, but I could see a different side of them.

“It took time to build up trust”

It was a good while before I started to talk about things that weren't just all rosy. I'd chat to anyone about the X-Factor or my gap year – it wasn't as if I didn't like talking to people – but I never spoke about anything deeper.

One nurse did prod and prod, and I started talk about one or two things from under the exterior. I really trusted and respected this particular person, and some difficult things started to come out... like the can was opened and the worms were coming out. That was when I felt others started to understand where I was coming from.

I was also speaking to a psychologist on a regular basis, which was really useful. I hadn't really spoken to someone regularly like that before.

“We were all going through our own journeys”

Talking was starting to help, but I wasn't as cheerful. I was emotional and upset and couldn't see why. I was always busy before, so I never had free time like I did in the hospital. I had nothing, and that was hard to cope with. I felt homeless, with nothing to give me self worth.

Art was suggested as part of the occupational therapy programme. At first I thought the idea was patronising... why are they trying to make this more horrendous for me? Then I started to enjoy it. I got really involved and wanted to go to the sessions. It kept me grounded and away from the compulsion to exercise. It filled the time and

gave me a purpose, and I also started to feel more like a person than an illness in other peoples' eyes.

“The friends I made there got me through”

I think I just wanted to make others better at first. I'd always put others before me... the shoulder to cry on or the entertainer. But, I started focusing on myself and it got to the point when I was extremely vulnerable there.

It was horrendous opening up actually. It was really painful because I was speaking about things I never wanted to address – I'd shoved these things in the deepest closet, right at the back. It's draining going through your own experiences, but at the time it was difficult to show anything but that side of me. If I hadn't gone through it, my problems would have remained. I built up a good relationship with others there and still meet up with them today.

“I have a different philosophy now”

Since leaving, I've been doing voluntary work... which I love. I have a boyfriend, I'm doing an art A-Level this year, and I've also applied to university.

I had a lot of time to reflect on what I want from life and have changed my priorities a lot. I had a very rigid career path before, but it was mostly about the money I could earn. I was doing well on paper, but life's too short for all of that. I wasn't passionate about it, and now I've found something I really want to do.

I'll always be me: someone who's passionate and energetic; someone who's not happy just doing a nine-to-five job and hanging around at home. But, I'm more laid back. I don't need such a structure or plan. I'm still focused, but it's channelled in a different direction.

“Without admission, I'd still be running down that same road”

I didn't always agree with the people there – I'd probably have thrown cake and custard in their face if I could – but it had to happen. I could have been in an awful situation now and may even have dropped down dead. The service gave me the courage to pull myself out. It was the catalyst to take stock, draw a line under the past and start over.

I can now see it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. It really tore me apart, but they didn't leave me in a mess and pulled me back together. I needed that group of people and I was really lucky I went through it all with so much help. Amazing.