



Scottish Recovery Network

The following story is an example of one person's experience of recovery. This story shows how being able to take risks, being in charge of ones own life and taking physical exercise has been important to recovery. It has been written based on the individuals interview for the SRN Narrative Research Project.

The Evolutionary Jigsaw

I have been in hospital 13 times. It took seven years before I got the correct diagnosis, seven years before I was at least given a chance. I've got bipolar disorder which can mean I am sometimes in hospital, but now the fact that I am ill holds no fears. For me, recovery is an ongoing process. What has made me more confident about the future is that I know I've got an illness, but I can do something about it.

Getting a diagnosis helped. It at least gave me the chance to say, "I agree with this diagnosis", and it gave me a starting point to work forward from. What held me back most of these years was inappropriate medication. It kept me trapped. Finding the right medication for myself was a huge step in my quest to live a productive life, although simply taking the medication wasn't enough. I had reached a level where I realised that I needed to do something to move on. It was as if a spark of life had finally broken through.

For me, being allowed to take risks and being in charge of keeping myself well has played a major part in my recovery journey. Many things, and many people, have helped me on the way. For example, my community psychiatric nurse (CPN) was supportive throughout and encouraged me to apply for benefits, which took away the pressure of having to find work while I wasn't really well enough.

In the early stages I didn't feel as if I could contact other people about my illness. The accepted way to behave seemed to be not to mention it to anybody and to pretend it just didn't exist. A big step towards getting in touch with people again was joining the Bipolar Fellowship and a local self-help group. Being able to see others live productive lives and sharing ways of coping with the condition has really made a difference. You begin to think, "Well I am just another human being, I might be able to do that, I can do that." Besides the help and encouragement that I've received through being in touch with these user groups new avenues of information have opened up to me. Before I was diagnosed, lack of information was part of the problem. In this regard the Internet has also been a big boost.

Exercise has become one of my main coping strategies: it's not just the exercise, it's the freedom of the outdoors as well. A big step in my recovery process was joining a hill walking club. Nobody knew that I'd been in hospital about a dozen times and I was just accepted as one of the other hill walkers. That experience helped me realise that perhaps other people don't have such happy lives, even though they don't have a mental illness or anything like that. It's not us and them; it's more that everybody has good and bad things in their life.

I am also seeking mental stimulation in a variety of ways - taking on something new certainly provides mental stimulation. For example, I play a major part in running the local self-help group and I am on the management board of a Scottish mental health organisation. But I have no plans to go into full time employment just now; I'm happy to be well, to be able to think and to be able to do what I want to do. There was a point last year when I was thinking about declaring to the Department of Work and Pensions that I wouldn't need benefits anymore, but I ended up in the hospital about two or three weeks later. Although the voluntary work I am doing right now is new and rewarding and I can see the impact it's having, I think I need to keep a lid on the amount of work that I'm doing. I feel every setback gives me tools to tackle what's thrown at me in the future. It's like pieces in a jigsaw that I can make use of the next time.

Over the years I've realised that support services can do too much as well as too little. I have learned to recognize when to stop my reliance on the support of professionals. If I hadn't taken risks to get well in the past, I might still be in a sort of low-level state. I might have had only one spell in hospital rather than a dozen, but I doubt I would be where I'm at today. Staying well might be an ongoing struggle, but I am committed to making it happen.

If you'd like to share your story of recovery then email info@scottishrecovery.net attaching your story. You may also want to attach a picture though this is optional. If you'd like to discuss this further then phone 0141 240 7790.