



Scottish Recovery Network

The following story is one person's experience of recovery from mental ill health; it shows how a local mental health association aided in recovery by helping this individual access Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, personal development courses, a CPN, and a Social Worker. The story is based on the individual's interview for the SRN's Narrative Research Project.

## **Tracky Bottoms and Trainers versus Make-up and Heels**

About two years ago I realised that I really could recover. I find that quite an amazing fact, because over the years no one has actually said, "You can recover." I thought once you had mental health problems you were just going to be stuck with it. I hid it for many years. Looking back now I don't know how I managed, widowed once – my husband committed suicide when we were both very young – and two divorces. Depression, agoraphobia, and later two overdoses; I just tried to keep it well hidden and closed up. One of my sons in particular was quite distressed that if his friends knew, it would stigmatise him. To be honest, I was also terrified that social services could come in and take the children away. Especially when I was hearing voices and things were moving about the rooms. I was frightened in case they would come and step in, although I know I was never so bad that I didn't look after my sons.

I should have asked for help a lot earlier. There were times when I thought, "I am too tired, and I can't keep going on." Something always sprung back up telling me, "You are a fighter, keep trying." My body and my mind were saying no and this wee thought would come from somewhere, "Keep trying, keep trying." I've had depression all my life but I seemed to get to a stage where I thought, "This can't keep going on." For many years I tried to cope on my own and I realised I was getting worse and worse. I realised that I had to admit to myself how far I was going down, and that I was past the point where I could help myself. You've got to make that decision to ask for the help, and I found that quite hard at the beginning.

After my divorce I had moved to a different district and didn't really know where to go for help. I remember picking up the phone book one day - at the time I couldn't read or write, I was so stressed out - and I thought, "I don't even know what I am looking for, what am I looking for?" If I was an alcoholic I could find AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), if my car broke down I could find RAC, but where do you go for mental health? In the end I decided to go to my GP practice thinking that they would be able to at least point me in the direction to find help. All I was told was, "Sorry we can't help you", but I didn't give up and was finally put in contact with our local mental health association.

I have been quite lucky. The organisation really pushed me towards helping myself. They put me through cognitive behavioural therapy for a good year and a half, I had a community psychiatric nurse (CPN) in place and a social worker, and then I did an anger management

course. Their approach was just amazingly different from what I had experienced up to then. They weren't saying, "Well what do you think you need?" because I just didn't know. They were putting things in front of me and saying, "We think this could be beneficial, what do you think" and that made a big difference. They gave me a bit of choice. Realising that there are choices out there was a big step forward. Realising there are different things apart from just a psychiatrist which, don't get me wrong, I found very helpful over the years for various things, but I felt I'd got to a stage where I needed something a bit more than that. I needed coping skills, life skills, because over the years I had just hidden in the house and it wasn't working. So I had to learn how to speak to people again. I needed skills for getting through life basically, ordinary everyday things. Even going to Tesco could be an ordeal at times.

I have learned to talk myself through situations that are difficult for me. My psychiatrist and my CPN have been extremely helpful in this regard. In bad times I found myself going back to their voices. I could actually hear my CPN saying, "You are ok, just stop that thought now". It took me a couple of days to work up to being able to go to the anger management course. Being on that course with other people really helped me turn things around, to look at the other side of the coin and see that the other person could be the same as me. The anger management course helped me to stop beating myself up when I didn't achieve what I thought I should have achieved. My muscles used to seize up and I would get lumps and I was constantly tense because I wasn't reaching or wasn't achieving the goal that I thought I should have achieved. Realising that my mental health could affect my physical health was a big step.

A number of people offered me extremely valuable support on the way to recovery. My social worker was just fantastic, very understanding. He supported me in such a way that I could start to believe and trust in myself again. I also joined a support counselling group for about a good year and a half. What I liked about it was that after twelve weeks we personally would revise ourselves and see how far we had come; if we had only come a little bit that was OK, and if we had taken a step back that was also OK. Sometimes some of us made big leaps and we were quite supportive of each other.

I found talking to people again quite difficult. It took me a long time just to go to our local drop-in centre. For years I had been isolated because nobody seemed to understand what I was talking about, so I didn't speak about it. I thought, "Well I am in a wee shell here" and then I realised that there is help out there and it is all over. I have two good friends that now know when I am sliding downwards. That keeps me on the balance, knowing that I'm not so isolated. I realise now and accept that I also need a lot of time on my own. Whereas before I thought, "If I am on my own, I am scared of sliding, or what if something happens to me?" I stayed in two bad marriages thinking it's better to be with someone, just in case. Over the last year I have realised and accepted that for me personally I need a lot of time on my own.

From then onward I gradually joined various groups and am now an advocate and representative for service users. I am even giving talks and managing meetings. I have been on a few training courses and hope to continue particularly with the suicide prevention work. Starting to do voluntary work has made me feel valued again as a person. I can't physically work anymore and I used to beat myself up about that, but then I discovered that I have got a brain and that I can use it. That really makes a difference to put back in, from a service user point of view, what it is like on the other side 'cause it's not nice. Sometimes you see the professionals and you think, "Oh, well they've learnt it all from a book", but people like myself have learned it through hard experience. You can't have one without the other; it's like talking therapies for me are no good without my medication, I need both. Trying to help people understand that what might suit one person might not suit another.

I still take it day by day and week by week. I've got a big black diary and I put down whatever I've got on that week and my world is that week. I actually moved on from day to day, I am

now going from week to week, which is a big step for me. I could not see me going over that hurdle for a long time. There are still bad days, but it's about accepting that it's gonna be a tracky bottom trainer day and accepting that you are gonna have your down days. If you can't accept yourself as you are how can you expect anybody else to? My advice is to surround yourself with people who are positive, who understand, and not necessarily just in regard to mental health. People, who, if you are down, don't nag at you, don't push you, but let you go at your own pace. It's a learning curve, but I am still here, I am still kicking, I am still alive.

If you'd like to share your story of recovery then email [info@scottishrecovery.net](mailto: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.