



Steps to Recovery

Inspirational stories from people living with a mental illness





Introduction

The stories in this booklet have been shared to help others believe that despite difficult times there is hope and that recovery can occur.

This journey hasn't been a quick, straightforward affair for anyone, but we hope that these real stories convey that recovery is possible, given access to the nurturing conditions of hope, control and opportunity.

Learning to take control of our own fate is another theme that these amazing stories share. It often takes time and perseverance, and it can certainly sometimes seem like everything is out of control. Being given the opportunity to pursue interests, hobbies and causes that we personally value comes across in each story.

These stories came from individuals who initially agreed to co-produce "What is Recovery, and Social Inclusion." It has been an absolute privilege and pleasure to facilitate putting this booklet together.

I thank everyone who contributed their amazing stories and took the time to talk to me about their deeply personal experiences.

All the stories have been written by the individuals themselves and lightly edited. I wish to thank Michael Sheane for the editing and I hope we have managed to keep the unique, inspiring voice of each individual, as each has something new to teach. Each of the stories for me personally was very moving and it was inspirational to be allowed to part of people's lives.

Rosemary Hawthorne
Recovery Facilitator



A message of Hope

Absent due to depression. That's what was on the sick-note I handed into my employer on a regular basis. It could so easily have applied to me as well, for I was as absent from life as I was from work.

Struggle as I did, my employment finally came to an end and with it almost every social aspect of my life. Go away colleagues, go away friends, go away neighbours, loved ones and all.

Not that I didn't try. Again and again I tried, and again after that. Doing this, doing that, but nothing ever seemed to help. I talked to one, I talked to all, I talked to myself and I talked to the wall - but nothing ever helped.

Then in deepest despair, the wings of an Angel - one - two - three. The help that I needed, the comfort, the guidance, now look and see, I'm back to me!

Let's not think of years lost, but of the future to come, dreams yet to fulfil and prizes won. The future you see is now up to me, I'm no longer shackled - no longer a 'tomb'!

Read my story 'Peace at Last, but still ALIVE to tell the tale - thanks to my three Guardian Angels' at www.mentalhealthrecoverystories.net.



Life Beyond Depression

The birth of my first child should have been the happiest time of my life. I was newly married, enjoying life to the full with a fantastic and supportive husband and father.

I had a difficult labour, culminating in a pre-eclamptic fit which was very frightening for my husband who thought after getting a son he was going to lose his wife.

Three months after the birth, my health visitor noticed signs of post natal depression. I remember crying for no reason, criticising my every move, feeling guilty for everything and generally feeling bad that I couldn't cope with the demands of my new baby. I lost all confidence in myself and my self-esteem was rock bottom.

After discussion with my G.P, I was started on anti-depressants which were to help with my low mood and anxiety. I was also referred to a postnatal support nurse who came to visit me on a weekly basis and although I was very appreciative of the help and support given it didn't take away my feelings of guilt and hopelessness.

As my maternity leave came to an end I knew I wasn't ready to go back to work and after lengthy discussions with occupational health were I was employed as Nursing Auxiliary I made the decision to terminate my contract.

As time went by I began to dwell on my own childhood and the things I had locked away began to come to the fore. I don't know why my past wanted to come back, but it did and there was no stopping it. It shaped me as a person then and it was about to do it all over again.

Over the next few years I experienced a gradual improvement.

Following the delivery of my second child I was to experience a deeper depression and the diagnosis changed from postnatal to clinical. I became withdrawn, limiting my time with family and friends, I had no interest in myself or the motivation. My sleep was disturbed, I became paranoid that everyone was looking, talking and judging my ability as a person. I started to experience very frightening panic attacks with thoughts of suicide looming over me. Although I had these feelings, I would confess that the face I wore in private was very different to the one I wore in public. Those were dark days and under the surface a volcano was about to erupt I couldn't come to terms with the fact that my life seemed to be crumbling before my very eyes.

So on recommendation of my G.P. I was voluntary admitted to my local psychiatric hospital and during that time I received counselling and psychotherapy treatment. I remember feeling a failure and very embarrassed at the thought of having to go there. What was everyone going to say about me? On admission I was given very little information on how my stay was going to help my recovery. I remember feeling all alone and afraid of some of the people around me, who were openly responding to voices in their heads. In the morning you were awoken to the deafening sounds of nurses shouting your name to come for your medication. I found this exercise humiliating and very degrading. I felt like a prisoner and missed my husband and children desperately. I stayed for 6 weeks before I was released to the comfort of my own home.



The years that followed were very much up and down and it took some time until I was able to get my life back on track. I joined various groups and these enabled me to broaden my horizons and look at myself in a different light. I had a great desire to help people in similar positions to my own and this led to voluntary work with Praxis and the decision to take on the course of Queens Cert in Counselling. During this course I discovered a new self-awareness and gained knowledge and skills, it increased my confidence and gave me hope for the future. A job opportunity arose with the N.H.S.C.T and with new found confidence I applied for the position of Support Worker in a community mental health team.

As I waited patiently I was delighted to be offered the job. I had a great satisfaction notifying the DHSS that I no longer needed benefits. Looking back this was a big undertaking and I am glad it paid off.

My new journey began in March 2003, I have since moved to another team within the trust and I am very passionate about the work that I do. I also am involved with Recovery Workshops and it makes me feel very proud to know how far I have come and that I can help other people in their recovery of depression. My clients today are the people who give me inner strength to keep going and make life worthwhile, although I have to be mindful of my own Mental Health.

I am not alone and like many people I have to work at keeping well; sometimes life doesn't make this an easy task. However I am thankful to my husband who has been my rock and inspiration. Throughout he believed in me when others didn't I have shared my story on numerous times in the hope that I can give people a more positive outlook on life and to realise that there is life beyond depression.



Catherine's Story

In March 1988, I experienced a complete and total 'identity crisis'.

I was admitted to hospital, where my 'breakdown' was treated with a range of medications – some of which had horrific side effects. I didn't find this or subsequent hospital admissions helpful – (I had several admissions between 1988 – 1999). No-one ever asked me my thoughts or feelings with regard to my crisis until now.

In August 1987, my youngest and only daughter turned one. I was breast feeding her at the time. As she was now on a wide range of solid foods, I decided that the time was now right to stop. I stopped breast feeding too suddenly which resulted in me developing an abscess which led to me experiencing a very high temperature, yet freezing cold feet. I felt physically and emotionally unwell. I started crying and couldn't stop. At the same time, I was increasingly becoming unhappy in my marriage and had become infatuated with a younger man who was a family friend, who equally felt the same way.

I sought help with the abscess from a health visitor but didn't seek any help with regard to my low mood and depression. I asked the family friend to stay away which he respected. As a married mother of three children I wanted my marriage to work. I loved being a mother and as such I felt strongly that the children had the right to be brought up by both their parents. I also hold marriage as an 'institution' in high esteem and respected it as such.

However I also experienced an overwhelming sense of loss at this time for the following reasons. I knew that my youngest was going to be my last child. The sense of 'loss' of what could have

been (i.e. my lost love). The moral shaking to my belief systems – in not only marriage but my own spiritual walk. I had more questions than answers and didn't know who to turn to at this time hence my 'identity crisis'.

In 1993, I sought marriage counselling with regard to my discontentment and after much deliberation and soul-searching I decided that separation was the best way forward for all concerned.

In 1998, with some encouragement from my then key worker – I decided to take up an educational course – Foundations in Humanities at BIFHE. This gave me a whole new lease of life. No-one knew me as a 'mental health' patient. I was simply accepted as a student and I loved every moment of it. I loved the companionship of my fellow students and I thrived in the educational setting. Education and learning were a big part of my own personal development and recovery. These were the keys that opened doors for me and gave me answers that I needed.

For example as part of the English module I was introduced to the poetry of John Hewitt, which I loved. This led to me applying for and getting a bursary place in the John Hewitt summer scheme. This opened a whole new world to me – I met a wide range of interesting characters who were not pigeon holed by normal traditional values. This led to an acceptance of my own belief systems that were not necessary stereotypical.

At around this time (1998) I was also invited to join a small group of mental health professionals and carers. I learned a lot about group dynamics from

this experience. I learned how to compromise – fit in; present ideas to one or two members and let them flow with it. At least it was a starting point – the mental health service user voice was on-board.

In 2001, due to sectarian death threats towards one of my children I felt I had no choice but to move into another trust area. This led me to become involved with a service user led working group, which offered several doors of opportunity for me i.e. training such as ASSIST and The Competent Helper course; peer advocate training. I also availed of the opportunity to be a member of the Bamford Service User Reference group. This was a steep learning curve for me. I really appreciated and experienced the value of peer support especially among the Experts by Experience (EBE'S) – Bamford Service User Reference group. I firmly believe that this kind of support is the way forward.

I have had to overcome the mind-sets and attitudes of others, and disbelief in myself as an individual. I have come to understand that I cannot take on the burden of responsibility for the empowerment of mental health services users (EBE'S) on my own. I am not an 'island unto myself'.

I have learned a lot about myself and what I call recovery. I must be central in my own recovery journey. That I find self-care extremely hard. Identifying my needs and how best they can be met. That my recovery cannot happen in isolation. My recovery becomes 'our recovery'.



Frankie's Story

I am 28 years old and I would like to share with you my journey to recovery from mental illness.

For the past 11 years I have suffered from serious episodes of depression and anxiety. I was a serial self-harmer and, at times, tried to take my own life. I can now safely say that I am in recovery and have hope for a better future. Don't get me wrong, I still have difficult and challenging days, but using the skills I have been taught, I now manage those bad days and for the first time in my adult life I am excited about my future.

I was first admitted to a psychiatric hospital at the age of 17. I had become increasingly depressed after "fighting" a long-term and debilitating physical condition. I had spent long periods of my adolescent years in and out of hospital for treatment, missed long periods of time from school, and at 18 was struggling with my transition from children's services to adult services. I was admitted to the psychiatric hospital as I had become a "danger to myself". After a few weeks of talking therapies and medication, I was discharged and supported in my community.

I went on to finish my A-levels and then progressed onto college for two years. During this time, my mental health was very unstable. I was too scared to admit that I was struggling for fear of being admitted to hospital again.

I finished college and applied to University where I began my social work degree. University brought with it many stresses and challenges. At times I found it difficult to cope and slipped back into my old ways of self-harm and abuse of prescription medication. I didn't know how to deal with my fears and anxieties in a positive way so used negative measures instead. My negative coping strategies always seemed so safe to me and it is only now that I realise that instead of them making me feel better, they were making me much worse and I was just in a constant vicious circle.

After a couple of years hiding how I was really feeling from professionals, family and friends, I could no longer keep up my façade of everything being "fine". I had another severe depressive episode and had to take a year out of university.

The support I received from my CPN and psychiatrist increased, and with their help and the love and support from my friends and family I was able to return to my final year of studies.

During my final year of university, I continued to struggle with the demands of the course and my increasing fluctuating moods. I became very aggressive, couldn't eat or sleep and once again began self-harming and abusing prescription medication. My psychiatrist and CPN thought I would benefit from attending a psychiatric day hospital and it was there that my journey to recovery really began.

At the beginning of my time at hospital I really resented everybody - from the staff who were trying to help me and my friends and family because I was convinced they just wanted rid of me for a few hours every day. At times I even resented the other patients! It took me a couple of months before I began to engage with the service properly. I attended groups to help me understand my depression and anxiety and learned skills to control and manage my condition. I also began to take better care of myself physically. I started exercising and following a healthy eating regime and to date have lost just over 6 stone in weight.

I have also gained so much confidence and know that I am capable of achieving anything I put my mind to. I want to use my personal experiences to benefit other people and am about to begin peer advocacy training. I also feel ready to look for employment. Having a mental illness does not define who I am or dictate my life anymore. My bad days are rare now but when I do have one, I no longer stay in bed hiding from the world. I get up, do some exercise, contact a friend or family member and try to do something productive with my day. I can proudly say that I no longer self-harm and will always take the positive coping strategy rather than my previous negative strategies.

I am very hopeful about what my future will bring.

Eileen's Story

Before I became unwell I was a very busy mum, working full time managing a school meals canteen as Cook in Charge and being a mum of three, all at secondary school.

Home life was also hectic, I was always on the go used to sleeping very little and not eating sensibly looking back now it was clear I couldn't continue living at this faster than fast pace.

2005 was the beginning of a whole new me; someone I didn't know. Life began to slow down, I found myself crying for no reason. I was unable to laugh, have fun and it even got to the stage where I was unable to get of bed. I was deemed unfit for work. I felt that I was beyond curing, if a doctor has said I am never going to work again what hope have I of becoming better again.

Things became so bad that I was admitted to Holywell hospital in January 2006, I was here for a total of four and half months. For me this was the end. Why me? What did I do to deserve this? My mood got lower and lower until I reached rock bottom, I felt I couldn't live this life anymore and I attempted suicide, the first of many attempts. At the time I felt like a failure, my head was in such turmoil, I was unable to get myself out of this dark, dark hole it seemed as if there was no light at the end of the tunnel. I was fed up putting on a mask and trying to pretend all was well when actually things couldn't have gotten any worse.

My confidence was in bits. I got to the stage that I wouldn't leave the house. I couldn't even drive my car for two years as I kept taking panic attacks. I stopped going to my place of worship or any public place for that matter for I felt people were staring at me and calling me the local nutter. I was no longer able to take my children to their classes or to any of their interests. I felt I couldn't continue my role as a mother, that I had let them down and I was a bad mother and they would be better off without me. It's unbelievable how insecure I had become, I even told my husband of 20years that I was of no use to him and he would be better off getting someone who would not put him through what I was.

Thankfully my family held on to the hope that one day I would come back to my old self.

I attended a Day centre where I was encouraged to go for walks and I got to meet people who were going through the same as me. Through time I began to see that there was "HOPE" for me to recover. I completed several courses in mental health which helped me understand what was happening to me. I was found my confidence again so I started taking "CONTROL" of my life. With the help from counselling and my family and friends I was finding the meaning of life, only at a new pace and I was doing what was best for me to get better.

The various training courses I did opened up "OPPORTUNITIES" for me to become a volunteer, this led on to me setting up Client Consultation Groups. These groups were set up so as others who have problems the same as me were given a voice in how mental health services would develop and this also "EMPOWERED" me to represent service users at trust level and regional level. I have had a major part in writing papers which will help improve services. I have also trained to deliver training to staff and so far I have delivered six sessions which is very rewarding being able to let staff get a better understanding of what it is like to suffer from depression and anxiety.

Part of my journey was completing a W.R.A.P. course this is a plan to be able to see when things are starting to go wrong again and what I can do to prevent a crisis happening. While attending this course we were asked to write what our main goal in life was. I wrote "A JOB" at the time this seemed impossible because of all I had been through, but I never let go of my dream.

My journey has been a real rollercoaster with a lot of ups and downs, but thankfully I am well enough now, I haven't been in hospital since 2011 and have been able to cut down on the tablets with the help of the community mental health team.

I am proud to say that my family and I are all happy and I have been looking for work within mental health and I can only wait and see where this new journey takes me. I am keeping my fingers crossed. I am much stronger now and my illness has made me change my lifestyle and my outlook on life.



Aaron's Story

Dark Days

I'm a king without a throne,
A knight without a country.
Who would give me a piece of bread and a glass
of water for my thirst and hunger.
A fool for a day, only a fool would be king for a
day, I'm not that fool!

~

In a dream, strange things were flying all around in
the night sky, where the golden eagles fly.
Should you cry or should you die.
Does anyone know why?
These are dark days if the angels come clean or if
they are to be seen.
These are strange days indeed.
There are UFO's flying over New York and I don't
have a clue, so why go out and have a look when
the howling wolfs of time and doom come
crawling around.

~

Sometimes I sit up late at night wonder where did
it all go wrong on such a bright moon lit night.
One minute I was well and the next minute it all
went to hell.
Who can you tell about such a bad spell? it's clear
to me now it's all gone to hell.
No one can put up with my strange ways, so I drive
late at night on the dark country roads in search of
my lost heart and soul.
The darkness and aloneness that comes over me,
it's more than I can bear.
Dark voices in my mind say what's the point of
going on, end it now and we will look after you.
Such dark thoughts that cloud my mind, must I live
in such a world of fear, sadness and darkness to
the end of time.

~

I've travelled the cosmos in my mind's eye; heaven
knows how I fly on such a dark windless night.
Death has no meaning for me as I've travelled a
million light years to be here.

I've seen the dawn of man, I've walked through
this war torn land and I once stopped at a village
so many years ago, a place they call Bethlehem so
many years ago.

~

There, a holy man gave me some water, then he
looked at me and I looked at him and we could
see, we were so different in a strange way.
So you see there is nothing new to say about thee.
So there is no more mystical tales to tell about
thee for the sands of time in the hour glass are
almost gone out, that I have no doubt.
When the sands are gone so shall I on such a
moon lit night.

~

For some strange reason I find myself walking on
death's lonely dark highway.
Maybe I'm feeling a little insane, maybe life has
too much pain or maybe I want to be sane for one
last time.
A wish that's almost dead for I know the evil that's
in men's hearts.
Can a bad seed be planted and a good plant
grow?

~

Who owns the birds in the sky or the trees
standing by and who owns the mountain streams
that run by or the earth we live on.
The answer is that when we are all dead and gone
and forgotten in the midst of time.
The earth will still be here and so will the mountain
streams, can we all be so blind that we cannot see
that we are killing ourselves to live.
We are being told how to dress and how to live
from what we see on tv and the press, we are
told what to read and what to eat from tv and the
press, so we are being controlled in so many ways
we cannot express and this they call freedom.
So I say to all you comrades be loyal to none and
be free from our sick messed up society.



Anthony's Story

I was 19 when I first discovered that I had a mental illness.

I had severe mania and psychosis, leading to a long stay in a mental hospital. Coming less than a year after the death of my brother it was a very difficult thing to come to terms with. I was very depressed for a year or so after my first manic episodes as I had to drop out of university and spend a lot of time at home doing very little. I restarted university and was hopeful that I could get over my illness but I didn't like taking my medication. I had several further manic episodes, meaning that I had to drop off my course another 2 times and eventually had to come to terms with the fact that I was not going to get my degree and do the things I aspired to do. After 2007 with no university course to focus on I was again depressed and directionless. I was still reluctant to take medication for any length of time and suffered a relapse of my mental illness almost every year. This put a strain on my most important relationships and the way I drifted without anything to focus on undermined my social confidence and I became more reclusive and found it difficult to relate to other people.

After yet another relapse in 2011 I went onto a course of drugs that I stuck with for a good length of time. As I started to feel better in 2012 I was persuaded to try something different from the past and instead of isolating myself, reading many books and going on long solitary walks, I voluntarily signed into a rehabilitation unit of the local mental hospital. As my mental health was better than it normally was when I entered hospital I was able to see the institution and staff in a more positive light and realise that their main aim was to help patients feel better and be able to do more.

Looking back I would say that the difference between my recent experiences and earlier ones was that latterly I was more willing to trust people, whereas before I had a very independent mind-set, feeling that I didn't need other people and did not want to accept help. So earlier in my illness I felt like I was being badgered against my will and complained a lot and saw things negatively, whereas once I started to believe that other people

could help me feel better and had good intentions I started to perceive my situation in a more positive and hopeful way. I began to look at opportunities for the future rather than concentrating on regrets and resentments. We often see self-reliance as a good thing with mental illness it is hard to accept sometimes that we cannot fix things ourselves and that there is nothing wrong in needing and accepting the help of others. Since I began in a rehab unit in 2012 getting structure back into my day with regular activities and getting used to the idea of socialising on a day to day basis without nerves and embarrassment I feel like I have moved to a healthier psychological state.

I was referred on from the rehab unit to AMH new horizons where I have undertaken computer and employability skills courses. I have been captaining a local sports team for 2 seasons and I've enjoyed this as well as becoming more confident. I have returned to studying with the Open University which provides enough flexibility to make me feel confident I can achieve my educational goals without the stress I experienced before due to ill health. My growing trust in psychiatric doctors and other mental health staff has helped me commit to staying on my course of medication and this has given me the stability and freedom from mania or psychosis so that I have been able to make progress in my life and restore self-esteem and an optimistic outlook.

Having a mental illness can feel like something that ruins your life when you are feeling at your lowest but accepting help and looking to the future rather than the past can mean that in time it becomes more of a minor inconvenience that can be worked around. For me, a steady course of medication and the method of taking small steps in becoming more active and social helped get me to a position where I could get back a sense of optimism about the future. For anyone suffering from a similar condition I would say that just because you feel awful at a given time does not mean you won't feel happy and hopeful at a later stage.



From Darkness to Light

I was diagnosed with depression when I was 8 years old.

My grandfather had died. When I was 11 I had a breakdown and was seen by a psychiatrist. My grandmother had died. I don't remember much of these times other than crying a lot. Over the next years I had many episodes of depression and anxiety usually related to death and loss. I was afraid of death; I kept all my thoughts and fears inside and didn't tell anyone.

I got married and had a son. Life was good.

2009 started off a good year for me. My son and his fiancé announced the date for their wedding, it was to be September of that year. I was so excited, telling all my friends about the wedding. I bought my outfit complete with handbag and shoes. It wasn't long until reality hit me. I began to think I was going to lose my son forever, even though he was only moving to another county. My depression got worse as the months went past. The only comfort I got was by staying in bed, although I didn't sleep day or night despite medication. Everything was complete darkness. I couldn't see any light.

Thoughts of suicide were now in my mind and although I loved my husband and son dearly I could see no other way to escape from what I could only describe as torture. I managed somehow to perk up a little and be at the wedding although I don't remember much of the day. The day after I went even deeper into depression. I became psychotic; these episodes would last 2-3 days at a time, where I would just sit there and stare. I couldn't do anything for myself. My husband would have to wash me, dress me and even feed me. Worse than that, I didn't know who I was, who he was or who my son was. This was a very difficult time for them. The crisis team were called and I was seen by a Psychiatrist.

Soon after that I was admitted to Holywell. This was a very frightening time for me as I thought they wouldn't be able to help me out and I would be kept there. I did settle, the staff were lovely, and although they had to observe me all the time they were very kind and always reassuring. I think this was the first time in my entire life I knew someone who could help me and I decided that with their help and with the appropriate treatment I would get better. I had been imprisoned long enough, had enough dark days of depression and fear and wanted to get better. I did improve and was allowed home.

I realised there was life after depression but I had to take responsibility. Life would be different, I would still face many challenges, but I would know where I could find help and I wouldn't be afraid to speak out. Life for me has changed, I now have my own depression support group, I volunteer for Aware Defeat Depression and now am involved as a volunteer in the Northern Trust.

I have just completed a WRAP Recovery Programme which enables me to facilitate WRAP groups. My passion is to reach out to those with mental illness and I will never be ashamed to tell my story. The person I am now is because of the experiences I have come through. There should be no stigma, depression is an illness which can affect anyone at any time, despite who you are and there is nothing to be ashamed of. I tell my story to bring HOPE in the midst of darkness. I came from darkness to light – so can anyone.

The Flowers in May

The flowers in May are growing old and grey,
so why are the knights of old so foretold!

On life's great market place there's a book seller
on the way out on the right.

So why does he always want to start a fight
on such a bright moonlit night.

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