

Mental Health PACE Setter Award

Patient, Claire, shares her experience



Hello everyone, my name is Claire. I am a service user, peer mentor and 'passionate' mental health campaigner for CWSX Mind. I have been asked by Katie Glover and her team at CWSX Mind to come and speak with you today as part of the Mental Health PACE Setter Award for the primary care. I'd like to thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules - it's very much appreciated. I'll get straight to the point...

Mental Health is complex and complicated. It has taken me over 20 years of trial and error approaches in managing it to get to where I am today. It's through trying various coping strategies that I have reached a simple yet profound conclusion...listening and clear communication is crucial if we are to understand ourselves and others better. In a technology saturated world, we have forgotten the art of communication. What you are doing right now is listening, and for that I thank you.

You are here today because you have recognised the importance of mental health- and by being here you are part of the growing 'movement of change'. In order to challenge the stigma, we as a society need to challenge the myths that surround MH: You see: 'We only fear what we don't understand.'

Within each one of us lies the capacity for care, compassion and consideration. We are here today in the hope of generating that move towards a greater understanding of mental health - 'we' as individuals can be a collective force for good; not only support each other but towards those who are considered the more vulnerable members of society who need our help.

Obviously, I have no understanding about the dynamics of running a busy GP practice; I'm here as someone offering a service user point of view who has 'lived' experience of mental health. I hope that the suggestions that I offer today are helpful. I am fully aware of the financial, as well as time constraints that are placed upon the healthcare sector in general. My colleagues and I are conscious of this

when thinking of ways to bring mental health to the forefront of our minds in the working environment (in this case GP surgery) that require minimal time and cost to the practice.

My experience of primary care has been pretty good as far as GP support goes. I was extremely lucky that once I was discharged from the CMHT that I had continuity of care from my GP - who saw me on a regular basis depending on how I was coping. As I grew stronger the frequency of my visits were staggered until they eventually tapered off to an 'as and when' basis. What I remember of that time is feeling vulnerable because the support of the CMHT (which had been my safety blanket for so long) was removed. I need not have worried because my GP had a firm grasp of what my needs were and took great care of me. In my experience, doctors like her don't come around that often. What made a difference is that she listened to 'me' and treated me with compassion, explaining things using simple terminology that I could understand.

For someone with mental health issues it is important to feel as if you have control over your recovery - she allowed me this and more giving me the courage to lead the way in my recovery journey. Another aspect of patient care is continuity. Of course, there are going to be instances where an appointment with your designated GP can't be offered for whatever reason; but I can honestly say that most of the time when I needed to see my GP, I did, seeing a familiar face is reassuring and comforting to someone with a mental health diagnosis.

**Suggestion* If when a GP is leaving, as mine did, there is notice given to the patient? I called for an appointment to find out that my GP had left, I had no warning, and this left me feeling abandoned because I had built up a professional rapport with her. This understandably impacted my mental health for a time. It was a while before I found another GP with whom I felt comfortable. I appreciate that doctors see many patients and that it's not always possible to tell every patient if they are leaving but (I don't know if this is implanted already within your practice) to circulate a newsletter via email to mentally vulnerable patients (as well as having hard copies within the surgery), is achievable? Or, send a text – like the ones we have when we have book our appointments?*

I've been a patient at my surgery for 20 plus years, and over that time I have noticed that the physical surroundings haven't varied much. The picture of the breastfeeding mother has been there for as long as I can remember. Over the years not only has the general literature remained the same – it mainly promotes physical health and I have never seen any information promoting MH. **Suggestion* Is to make better use of space, perhaps a prominent feature wall that's updated regularly either with information on mental health, physical health or both - where staff can be included and have input into the content. This doesn't have to be costly, the only requirement is use of the imagination. Perhaps use colour and visuals to draw attention, including up-to-date information and statistics as well as crucial signposting information.*

Useful strategies for MH

I came across a useful article the other day whilst surfing the internet. It was written by Ellen Scott (Lifestyle Editor) for Metro.co.uk (<http://metro.co.uk/2017/07/19/how-bosses-can-make-their-workplace-more-mental-health-friendly-6790918/>), the article was called: *How Bosses can make their Workplace more Mental Health Friendly* and has experience of working in a MH friendly environment.

As I said previously, I have absolutely no idea about the running of a GP practice, and what is about to be suggested may be implemented already - if so, great! 'Even the most positive, supportive workplace can bring in new initiatives and ideas to make people feel happier and healthier', says Scott. Here are some of the suggestions she gives:

- **Accept that time off for mental health is just as valid as time for physical health related reasons.**
- **If an employee is asking for time off, set up a meeting.**
- **Don't feel awkward about offering help.**
- **Establish ways to give feedback.**
- **Look at changes in your staff.**
- **Openly talk about mental health.**
- **Look at the working culture.**

- **Be flexible.**
- **Encourage a culture of respect for mental health.**

It's wonderful to see royalty and celebrities coming forward to show their support for those who experience mental health by having open and honest dialogues about their own mental health struggles. We as a society are slowly coming together to challenge the stigma of mental health. But there is still more work to do.

You see, mental health is so much more than you see on the outside. Just because someone looks okay, doesn't mean they are. Mental health doesn't discriminate either, it comes in many guises - it's a silent battle nobody notices.

If we are to take anything from today, let us consider that the smallest change can have a big impact. It's the simplest things that can make such a difference; especially to someone with mental health. And these things don't necessarily have to cost money, maybe just a little imagination and time to implement – a shift in thinking is all that is required. So let's work together to make this happen. Let's start today.