

St.Helens Mind Befriending Service

A Tale of Two Rosemarys

Rosie's Story

I sit here on a sunny summers day and wonder where and how to begin. Some back ground first, maybe?

I have walked with the Black Dog of depression, the Dementors of fear for over 20 years. In that time I managed to work, and return to work from 5 hospitalisations, first as a tutor, then a senior manager and finally as chaplain, for nearly 20 years in a large, flourishing sixth form college. Episodes of severe depression and anxiety came and went, and in between I loved my job, felt I was making a difference both locally and nationally, and, being single with no siblings, made my work my life.

THE BLACK DOG OF DEPRESSION

But then, in my early 60's it became clear that I could no longer fulfil my role, despite a very caring and compassionate management team, and I took early retirement in 2015, becoming virtually a recluse, afraid to leave the house, to answer the phone, to engage socially. It was a very dark time, and I still wear the bracelet I bought with 'My story isn't over yet' as a reminder that however tempting it seemed, suicide wasn't an option. My faith as a Christian, and what I know about Buddhism supported this, but life seemed without purpose, fearful, painful.

Over those years, I obviously had many interventions from mental health teams, but had never encountered anything so holistic, welcoming, non-judgemental and supportive as St.Helens Mind apart from one private therapist who I still see.

I FOUND MYSELF REACHING OUT

My first encounter with St.Helens Mind was a few years ago. Dene and I swam at the same pool. She knew I had problems, and would talk about her work in craft groups and allotments,



Rosie and Rosemary

and mentioned the befriending service but it all seemed like a step too far, especially when I was still working. But retired, no structure or focus, faith and self esteem challenged by the illness, I found myself reaching out.

THE GENTLE YET CLEAR APPROACH

Groups were far too scary – I'm an introvert even when I am well – but the thought of a Befriender seemed a possibility. It took courage to make contact, fill in the forms, and especially to look at goals, but it was done, and first Esther and Graham came to see me and then Esther with Rosemary. And what struck me right from the start was the sheer humanity of the project, the gentle yet clear approach, and the acceptance that I was doing what I could, both emotionally and psychologically, something I had never experienced in the battlefields of CBT.

All three stressed that St.Helens Mind was opt in – there were no expectations of joining more than I felt comfortable with. And so began a long, difficult journey, with twists and turns, failures and little, and then bigger triumphs, matched step for step by my lovely friend Rosemary – and I am graced to call her my friend.

I sometimes think of the journey like a game of snakes and ladders: climbing ladders with real effort, gaining a different perspective then a big, usually anxious making, snake appears and at the worst times I return to go. But the times in the pit become shorter, and there is now purpose and meaning in life once more.

A HIGHLIGHT OF MY WEEK

The matching process was brilliant. We were roughly the same age. Both retired from an educational background, Rosemary with little ones and me with an older group. Over time we found shared interests in literature, poetry, cats and tadpoles. At first, Rosemary sat patiently in my house, listening as I shared my experiences – over and over again. Amazingly, she never doubted my ‘truth’ but listened with great care, empathy, and understanding. Those weekly meetings were a true lifeline, a highlight of my week. And I wonder at Rosemary’s patience and stamina.

I WAS A FLAKEY FRIEND

Eventually we ventured out to local coffee shops, or to the St.Helens Mind afternoon tea. We enrolled for a cookery course, not that Rosemary needed one! I managed 3 of the 4 sessions and couldn’t get out of bed for the fourth. I was a flaky friend, sometimes cancelling at the last minute. Rosemary never tried persuasion or reason, just accepting me where I was, but offering a phone call later, which ensured I got out of bed.

We shared our reading and writing, and I was so pleased for Rosemary when she got involved with the Reader, training with them and then using her gentle gifts with a group for St.Helens Mind.

She bonded with my little Lucy, my tabby cat, and I was fascinated by her frogs and tadpoles. I was really honoured when she spoke of her family to me, showing by example what it means to be a nurturing parent.

We gradually became more and more open with each other, discussing things such as the boundaries of the relationship. And from the start, Rosemary made it clear that she was my befriendee, not helper or carer. She never made me feel less than I am.

MY LIFE BEGAN TO UNFOLD AGAIN

Gradually horizons expanded. We joined the cinema group and the choir, neither of which I would have attended alone. We went to plays, bookfoldings, films, even a simple walk through St Helens which had seemed impossible. And gradually my life began to unfold again, with the occasional snake to trip me up. I have reconnected with friends, argued with God (and Rosemary never doubted how important faith was to me, nor how hard a struggle it could be.).

RAISING AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

I can get out and about far more though still with some avoidance. I hope to be of use to St.Helens Mind and through Mind have got involved in Healthwatch. My prayer was always, please heal me, but whether or not, let these 20 years be of use to others. I am beginning to see the seeds of this, both locally and with the Archdiocese of Liverpool, in their work raising awareness of mental health issues.

STRUCTURE, SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Without Rosemary, any progress would have been much harder and slower. The Befriending scheme gives you a friend, a structure, support and encouragement. I have benefitted from it far more than from any Mental Health services. I’m not there yet, wherever there is, and anxiety can still paralyze me.

Like an addict, I think I may always be in recovery rather than recovered. And I am very lucky to have access to a great therapist and therapy group, and the finance that makes this possible. But without my befriendee I would be in a much darker place, with far less potential.

“And the greatest gift of all – I have found a life time friend, and for that I am truly grateful.”

Rosemary's Story

It's over two years ago now that I was introduced to Rosie. That is the name she likes to be known by and it wasn't until we'd been friends for ages that it somehow cropped up in conversation that her full name was actually Rosemary, same as mine. We've learnt all sorts of things about each other since becoming friends through the St. Helens Mind Befriending Service!

The Rosie I met at the beginning was in a very different place to where she is now. I remember thinking, when she first opened the door to myself and Esther on that introductory visit to her in her home, that here was a lady who was struggling against overwhelming odds – she opened the door to us with a smile but so much of her body language revealed anxiety and exhaustion; she couldn't stand up straight and looked as though she wanted to sink through the floor.

The courage needed for welcoming us in was immense, but Rosie is nothing if not brave and determined.

THE IMPORTANT THING WAS TO 'JUST BE THERE'

Initially, I was concerned that I wouldn't have the experience needed to help someone suffering so badly with anxiety and depression so I was very honest with Rosie about this and explained that, if I said anything clumsy or insensitive, just to put me straight. Rosie's reply was to acknowledge that it wasn't easy to be friends with someone who is depressed and that the important thing was to "just be there". That was no problem! Rosie has always been a warm, generous person even when at a very low ebb.

She also shared great insights into her condition, particularly through the imagery of "the black dog" and the wolves: "the good wolf and the bad wolf". Much of this came through the poetry she was writing at the time which she did me the very great honour of allowing me to read.

WE HAD COFFEE AND TALKED

To begin with, Rosie and I sat in her sitting room, had a coffee and talked; partly about how she was feeling and partly about "ordinary" things like what we were

watching on the telly. I chattered on about what I'd been doing and Rosie listened willingly to my in-depth accounts of the "Couch to 5K" running programme, a big challenge for me at that time!

Gradually, we reached a point where, at Rosie's suggestion, we went out for coffee, explored new places and tried a couple of activities such as a cookery course and the "Tea Parties" organised by St.Helens Mind. These social situations involving other people were not easy for Rosie and, inevitably, she didn't always feel able to cope with them but she persevered and was always concerned to be a positive member of the group.

Now we have joined a choir, "Sound of Mind", another St. Helens "mind" initiative. Rosie is musical, I am not! But it has been good for me to take this leap out of my comfort zone.

And alongside this, Rosie was telling me of the progress she was making on her own; walking through the town centre, for example, which she had been nervous about for a long time and arranging things with friends. I felt enormously privileged that Rosie trusted me enough to share these successes with me, knowing I would appreciate the courage involved.

There must have been a huge amount of change happening within Rosie that I wasn't really aware of though because, suddenly, there she was volunteering with Healthwatch St. Helens, volunteering with St. Helens Mind and feeling confident enough to leave the Befriending Service.

The lady who could barely stand upright now looks the world squarely in the eye, enjoys a bit of banter and feels she is far more in control of things. She is no longer "depressed Rosie" but "Rosie who experiences depression" so that, although those shadows will always be a part of who Rosie is and may still darken her world at times, she is no longer defined by them.

I don't think this is the end of our story though. Although Rosie and I are no longer Befriender and Befriendee, I hope we will be friends for many years to come.

How to get in touch with St.Helens Mind

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