

If you asked me to tell you what I got for Christmas last year; I wouldn't have a clue, not without being prompted and a little mental effort. Having said that; I can remember the day I was first sectioned fairly clearly, and that was nearly 20 years ago. I was completely naked; talking to a light bulb; truly believing that I would be beamed up too heaven at any moment. In my psychotic and confused state I believed the light bulb was connected to heaven (God is light etc). My father, my sister, my sister's husband and his friend all witnessed this breakdown. I was told later that I had been acting weird for weeks and was getting progressively worse. I had lost a lot of weight very rapidly; I had gone from eleven stone to seven and a half stone in a number of weeks. I was not sleeping; I was not eating and I would continually go missing; my family had difficulty keeping tabs on me. They did not understand what was happening and did not know what to do. All they knew was; I had lost the plot and had gone mad, and they were absolutely right; I could not have been any madder; even if I tried.

My life as I knew it had shattered and I had become a mess, life became too painful and too complicated and I eventually cracked. Normally; I was able to deal with life's problems and carry on, just like anyone else. But life did what it does sometimes, and threw in a number of major problems on top of the everyday crap the average person has to endure. I had been struggling to keep it together for a few years. I watched; as bit by bit my life fell apart and there was nothing I could do about it, it just happened. It was not just me going through a bad time; I saw my family and friends struggle to make ends meet, trying to get through each day on very little income. Watching them struggle exacerbated my situation. I tried to access help through the usual channels; I went to my GP hoping to get help and find some answers. It was a waste of time. My GP was a middle class woman who had no idea what it was like to live on a rundown inner city council estate with no hope of a better future. I took the anti-depressants she gave me but I was not convinced they would do me any good and they didn't. Up to that point I had been using alcohol to help alleviate the stress I was feeling; but alcohol was no longer enough. I turned to drugs and quickly found myself using heroin. I did not mess about; I went straight to using heroin intravenously on my second go. It was like stepping into a cool shower on a hot summer's day; the relief was immense; it immediately took away all the stress and pain that life was throwing at me, but it exacted its price and that price was addiction, a miserable and dark existence. Once in; there is no easy way out. Eventually; I lost everything, my family, my friends, my home (I wound up living on the streets), my job and I ended up talking to a light bulb as a result of trying to cold turkey. I decided to give myself one last shot at life. I moved to Nottingham in 2002. I rented a gloomy bedsit in the city centre and began the process of putting myself back together.

I needed to take stock of my situation and I attempted to piece together all that had happened. I needed to understand how my family friends and work colleagues could simply discard me like a used rag. I spent many nights hating them for

abandoning me especially when I needed them most. I wanted to hurt them back; I wanted them to know what it feels like when the people you have loved, trusted and helped; turn their backs on you and tell you to go away. I was very ill and had no one to turn to. I was completely alone. Before I could move on I needed to understand why my family and friends behaved the way they did. I could not carry this hate and hurt inside me if I was to stand any chance of being happy. I needed to think, I needed to understand. I eventually found some answers. I met and worked with other service users and I realise I was not alone. Other people had experienced the same hurt and rejection as me and it had a name, "Stigma". To understand the reaction of my family and friends; I had to face some home truths. I had to be honest with myself. I realised that prior to becoming ill; I too had had a bad opinion of people with mental health problems; I too had made jokes about the "mad people" and I too was frightened of them. I too believed the stories in the press and I too did not understand people with mental health problems. I use to think that "those people" were born like that and that they should be kept away from society and locked up in asylums. I did not know that mental ill health could happen to anyone at any time. I did not know that the average human being could crack up under the stress of everyday life. I thought people were made like that, I thought some people were born "mad". In understanding my own ignorant attitude to mental ill health, I was able to understand the attitude of my family and friends and that helped me greatly. I was able to at last forgive them. I understood that they too were acting out of ignorance and I believe it was innocent ignorance. They did not know any better. They believed what they were told and they believed what they had read. I could now move on and begin the healing process proper.

I came to realise the NHS was limited in what it could do for me. It could only get me to a point of "fragile stability". I realised that if I was going to get well, I had to become the architect of my own recovery. Don't get me wrong, I could not do it alone, I needed the NHS, I needed my new friends and I also needed the help and insight of fellow service users. But I had to take control; I had to decide what worked for me and what did not work for me. I soon realised that strategies that worked for me may not work for other people and vice versa.

In planning my recovery path, I had to look at the obstacles. The biggest of which was stigma; not only the way society viewed me but also the way I viewed myself. Was I damaged goods? Would I ever participate in society again? Would society give me the chance? I came to the conclusion that I would be the one to decide the answers to these questions. I knew I had changed and even if I say so myself; I had changed for the better. All the pain, rejection, introspection and self analysis had helped me to understand myself. In turn; that helped me to understand others, I was able to see more clearly. I decided I was not going to try and be the person I was before, that person was gone; he no longer existed and besides; part of the problem in attempting to recover in the past; was; that my family and friends kept trying to fit me into a box. They would often say; "You're not the same person". "Yes" I would

think "You're dead right, you try having your mind completely shattered and come out the other end as the same person, not a chance". So I decided to develop myself as I felt, I decided to get rid of the old rules and feel my way rather than think it. It was not easy because I have always found it difficult to trust my own feelings, but I suppose that is understandable given that I did not really know myself in the first place.

In 2003 I began volunteering with a service user advocacy group. I could only do a couple of hours a week to begin with because both my mental and physical stamina were very low and of course the medication was very powerful. Gradually I built up my stamina, before long I was able to do a full day's work. I was very frustrated however, because I wanted to get back into life immediately; I did not want to wait around, I did not feel like being patient, but I had no choice; I had to go at the right pace. When I tried to go faster I would crash and end up unable to do anything.

The following year (2004) I was offered 2 jobs within a week of each other. One was on a part time basis with NIMHE East Midlands and the other was a full time post working on involvement with Nottinghamshire healthcare NHS Trust. The experiences that qualified me for the job were the experiences I believed would prohibit me from ever working again; namely, mental health problems, drug abuse and homelessness. I was given the chance to use all I had learned in the most difficult times of my life to help others. I was unsure as to whether I could hack a full time job; but a little voice inside said "Go on you have got to take a risk every now and then". I decided to take the risk and accepted the fulltime post. It was difficult at first because of my poor stamina levels. I was completely knackered at the end of each day; and by the time the weekend came around; all I wanted to do was sleep. I had a few ups and downs, I suffered a few relapses having to take time off sick, but gradually I got the hang of it. Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust has been exemplary in the support they have given me and I would like to thank them for supporting me in my second shot at life.

I am currently working as a Development Worker looking at employment opportunities for people who have experienced mental health difficulties and "STIGMA!!!" There are 2 service users in our team. Our role is to help the organization employ and support people with experience of mental health difficulties. The greater the number of service users who get involved in trying to change the system; then the sooner it will happen. It is happening now, I have seen major changes occur and I have only been campaigning for 6 years.

I believe that a major contributing factor to my recovery (and it still continues to be) is working with other service users in helping to change the system. I have learned that the system has limitations and that the real experts are the people who live with the trauma of mental health problems day in day out. I think that when we as service users try to make a difference that helps us to understand ourselves and also we

meet other service users along the way; who offer support, advice, experience and wisdom.

We can get better; it is not easy and requires some effort especially as there are so many obstacles for us to overcome; the biggest being “Stigma” which includes out dated ways of thinking. We can get better, believe me.

Liam O’Neill