



## There's something about relationships....



*'I'm planning my wedding'* are words I never thought would cross my lips. Yet it's true, I really am planning my wedding! As I start to write I'm not sure what parts of my journey I will share and where this blog will end but it's primarily about relationships - all different sorts! I should point out from the start that I've had mental health challenges since my late teens and I'm now 52 and have recently

become engaged to be married for the first time.

During my early twenties I developed body dysmorphic disorder, and this led me to live a solitary and secluded life. The body shame that came with my condition stopped me from forming new relationships with people and I was so wrapped up in checking, treating, and camouflaging my skin that I had little time for anything else. The whole of my twenties disappeared to the disorder and eventually a long-awaited voluntary hospital admission came about, and I was at last given some treatment.

A big part of my recovery was not just the therapy I received but meeting other people on the ward. Looking back now, I realise it was the first peer support group I was part of. The group formed naturally, and we supported each other in our personal goals. Meeting other people with similar difficulties to my own meant I felt less lonely in my struggles. We shared a unique understanding of the mental distress we were experiencing, and I was able to connect in way I had never done before. Our group was so important to us that we all kept in touch after discharge despite living many miles apart from each other.

It was during my admission that I also became romantically involved with another patient which was a relationship that was to last 10 years. This relationship helped me to challenge my body image problems and initially improved my self-esteem. It was the end of this relationship that precipitated the onset of psychosis for me.

My battle with psychosis started late in comparison to some and although I'd had a history of body dysmorphic disorder and depression the onset of psychosis in my late thirties completely floored me. It caused me to lose relationships with friends, family members and colleagues.

I was alone and deluded and the belief that I was to be tortured and murdered pervaded my mind. I was eventually sectioned and taken to hospital. Here a very different relationship with people unfolded.

As I was driven to the hospital, I remember the person escorting me happily chatting to someone on her mobile phone. This was in stark contrast to the fear I was feeling as I



stared out of the car window. The driver angrily asked me '*what have you been doing Justine?*' and the hostility in his voice just made me stay silent.

Once on the ward, I don't recall anyone talking to me, but I do remember being shouted at for being non-compliant and being talked about as if I wasn't there. This strange environment only strengthened my delusions, and I took to hiding in my room as the messages I was receiving continued to taunt me.

It is fair to say my delusions kept me away from both staff and patients, but I can't help wondering what it would have been like if someone had attempted to gently connect with the frightened person I was.

I had never felt so scared and lonely and yet the only human interaction I had was when someone did things to me like take my blood pressure or give me medication. It seemed I had ceased to be a person.

Thankfully, I have also experienced kindness while being driven to hospital and while on a ward, during a later admission. On that occasion I was spoken to and given choices. I'll never forget a doctor saying to me '*you are safe here*'. Those kind words meant so much.

When thinking about relationships that have been helpful on my recovery journey, I find they all have things in common - I've always been shown compassion, felt listened to and been treated with respect. The one thing that stands out to me as being the most damaging to a relationship is when a person is not honest with you. A trusting relationship cannot be built on deceit whether that be personal or professional.

I can now truly say I'm not the bad person my illness and the 'system' would have me believe. I am a daughter, sister, aunty, friend, fiancée, and peer support worker.

My diagnosis does not define me but has helped me to get the right support and is a part of me.

I may not have trod the conventional path my parents had wanted for me, or the path I had indeed wanted for myself. However, it is because of the healing power of all the good relationships I've had with staff, my peers, colleagues, family members and friends that I no longer feel ashamed of who I am.

I believe it is because of these relationships that I have found a love I never thought possible, and I can't end this blog without sharing with you that it is because of my fiancé's love that I'm able to write it.

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