

# A Personal Account of Recovery

by Lisa Solheim

## Recovery

I sit here and try to write, try to think and make sense of my life, of what I've been through, and know if I told all that no-one would believe me. After all, it seems that my life in some ways parallels the dramas that we see in the soaps on TV.

Hope and Recovery to me are ambivalent words, words that mean to me something different tomorrow than they did today. I would love to say that I believe in these words and sentiments, yet life has taught me that you have to be careful what you believe. How cruel is it to have hope about a future less painful and difficult, about Recovery and maintaining wellness, but also to know that tomorrow all hope may be extinguished, and hope itself becomes painful.

I guess I don't want to really discuss my distant past in detail here, but suffice to say that my upbringing was troubled, and those troubles leave me scarred to this day. I was brought up not knowing about emotions, the only 'feelings' I could identify with were feeling hungry, or tired or suchlike, which I now know are not feelings at all!

I first remember experiencing what I now know is depression in my teens. It was never recognised, and left me on my own with emotions I could not understand or explain. Being emotionally illiterate, and unable to express these feelings in a safe way my emotion became physical, I began to self-harm by punching a granite wall in my room. You can guess that I didn't damage the granite! It was the only way I knew that I could channel the emotion I was experiencing in a safe way.

I left home when my parents split up, at first living in a grotty bedsit, unemployed after doing disastrously badly at my A Levels.

The housing I was in, and living on benefits brought about the return of the depression. It was hard, but I somehow got through it. I managed to get myself a part time job working in a hospital which I really enjoyed, and from there was accepted to train as a mental health nurse.

Being still pretty much emotionally illiterate this was a steep learning curve. I found it demanding but probably amongst the most rewarding things I've done. Unfortunately the depression was triggered again, and this time things went completely haywire.

I had some time off sick before trying to return to work, which went disastrously wrong. No one was at fault, but within a few days I had overdosed and was in hospital. This led to a lengthy psychiatric stay of three months, mainly out of the county because I was staff.

It was really difficult being on the other side of the office door; I knew what was likely to be happening within. I knew that the staff now saw me as being different. I knew that the view would be shared by the other service users and that I would be treated with suspicion. Nobody, let alone me, knew where I fitted into the 'them and us', of staff and patient. That was eight years ago, and life is still a struggle. I have had several admissions, but none for a while as it has now been judged that hospitalisation doesn't help me.

My time as a service user began in hospital, in the community it has brought me into contact with lots of staff. Some have been stars, and others sometimes much less than helpful. I'd like to thank those who have accompanied me along the journey, people who may not have realised that they have helped.

My diagnosis has changed from depression to borderline personality disorder. I really struggled with this due to the stigma that this diagnosis carries, and I still get horribly depressed. One of the best things that came of the new diagnosis was that I had a chance to work with a nurse specialist, and I know that without their support I would not be here today to write this.

I wish I could say, "I'm cured!!" But I realise that a cure is not quite possible! I have changed since I first became unwell, some things for the better, some things I still struggle fiercely with, including life itself. But I have also managed to achieve things with the support of people round me.

I have just gained a qualification in mental health service improvement leadership, and have set up a peer support group for people with personality disorder. At some point, in a safe and supported way, I would like to return to work in the field of mental health.

I guess that brings me back to where we began, and that word 'hope'. I do not know what the rest of life holds for me, or how long my life will be. My grasp on it becomes fragile at times. I know myself well enough to realise that life is good at throwing the unexpected at me and sometimes I cope better than others.

Maintaining any kind of wellness is very difficult, and I owe much to the people who have been there for me, members of the family, my friends, staff, people who have shared some part of my journey with me. Without their love, help, support and validation things could have been vastly different. And last but not least do I owe thanks to the cats, dogs and horses that have provided relief and unconditional love therapy along the way.