



Telling stories  
Touching lives



# Mental illness to mental wellness... how I got there in the end!

By Debs Carter

Touch Network is a not-for-profit organisation that celebrates real life stories of everyday people who are overcoming things in their life.

Our big idea is to get people talking – really talking. We are working to see real life stories of overcoming being chatted about in everyday situations, we want this to become the norm and for successes in overcoming to be celebrated.



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My Dad was an alcoholic, whenever he was drunk, which was most of the time, he was aggressive, abusive and violent towards the whole family. None of us children knew how to deal with it, so would generally ignore it. There were times when plates would be thrown across the room in Mum's direction and we'd all continue to eat our dinner as if nothing was happening.

My Mum is a survivor, she did her absolute best to support the family but found it very difficult. My brothers, sisters and I were neglected at times, with not enough food, not having clean clothes and not washing or bathing often enough.

I took on responsibility as a young girl. I'd make food for my family, keep the house clean, make the beds, make the packed lunches for school and wake Mum up every morning to try to encourage her to go to work.

As a child and teenager I was sexually abused. I coped with this by blocking it out of my mind and I only realised much later that this had happened.

I found school a real sanctuary, as I did well

academically and my teachers were generally fond of me and although they knew things weren't quite right at home, they didn't know the full extent, so they simply tried to support and encourage me as much as they could.

I became very ill as a teenager and had unusual physical symptoms that turned out to be caused by emotional stress. At one stage I was unable to walk and had to use a wheelchair for 3 months. I was hospitalised a number of times while doctors tried to investigate the mystery illness until eventually it was diagnosed as psychosomatic.

Around this time, I was able to tell a doctor about my experiences at home, including the abuse. He suggested I move into foster care which I did. For various reasons it didn't work out and eventually the Local Authority agreed for me to move into a bedsit at age 16. Living in a bedsit was not the best place for me and I remember others in the accommodation having wild parties and being scared to leave my room.

I hated myself deeply. I didn't believe I was worth anything, I thought I was the most disgusting person in the world and believed I deserved to

die. I felt I was a phony. I convinced myself that although a 'nice' person on the surface this was my fake façade and deep down I was horrible, unkind and nasty.

I was able to get people on side, I was popular as a teenager and my friends were very kind to me, but I couldn't accept this kindness deep down. No matter how many times people told me I was a lovely, talented and beautiful person, I couldn't accept this message and was in turmoil.

I began to break down and self-harm. I'd been out with friends for Sunday lunch and returned to my flat. I'd no other arrangements until the next morning and I felt alone and frightened of being in my own mind. I felt a big heavy, black and dark feeling in my chest and felt like I might explode with feelings of sadness but I felt I had no one to help me and felt I was the only one to blame. I walked around my flat crying and punching myself and telling myself how much I deserved to die. I smashed a plate in anger and then picked up the china and started scratching into my arm the word 'hate'. It seemed to help initially and I calmed down for a while.

The breakdown continued the next day, and the day after that and the day after that. I felt like killing myself. I considered how I'd take my own life and made plans for this. A few days later I took my first overdose.

I survived the overdose, but was admitted to an acute adult psychiatric ward. At this time I was 17 years old. I felt vulnerable amongst the other adults, male and female, on the ward. It seemed that no one really knew what to do to help and very little treatment was offered to me apart from a weekly counselling session. I began to feel a tiny bit better and was discharged from hospital for the new college term when I was to take my second year of A-levels.

I struggled while at college. My college tutor was supportive where he could be but didn't want me to become dependent on him. I was very aware of this and although desperately needed and wanted someone to be a father to me, I knew that my tutor would never be this.

I could just about manage when I was at college, but when it came to the summer holidays, I broke down again. I took another overdose. I was alone

in my flat. Once again, I found myself in the adult acute psychiatric ward.

At this stage I was severely depressed and determined to do damage to myself. The doctors sought to protect me by putting me on 1-1 observations which meant I had a nurse by my side every second of the day. This arrangement continued for a year. I wasn't even allowed to go to the loo by myself, or sleep in a room alone. There was someone with me every second of the day. This made me angry.

I was eventually transferred to a therapeutic community in London. A therapeutic community is a hospital where patients take control for the running of the community, including cooking, cleaning and therapeutic interventions, but there's always support from nurses, psychotherapists and doctors.

Being in the therapeutic community was the first time that I was able to openly share my story in a safe space. I was in with other young women, who'd faced similar childhood experiences and who all wanted to self-harm. It was like a mirror in front of my face. I became friends with the other

young women and over the year each began to tell their story of childhood difficulties.

It took a long time to tell my story, and I had a number of self-harming attempts prior to opening up. I was frightened and ashamed of what had happened in my life. I still felt I was disgusting and that I deserved to die. As my friends in the community began to open up about their stories, I faced conflicting feelings within myself. I could see that my friends were genuinely nice people and that their childhood experiences weren't their fault, I could see the pain and trauma they faced when they recounted their experiences, and cried often with them about their story. I was fighting against the realisation that if they had similar experiences that they could talk about, and it was obvious that they weren't disgusting, then surely it must be similar for me.

I resisted the realisation for a long time and couldn't accept that I was the same as others and continued to self-harm. By this time my self-harm was more dangerous. I'd insert metal objects into my tummy as a way to get rid of a feeling inside me that was related to the psychological impact of sexual abuse. I'd insert deeper and deeper until



one time the metal object went too deep. I was admitted to a general hospital for emergency surgery. This was better than facing up to the feelings associated with sexual abuse. The more I self-harmed, the more I could distract myself from the pain.

After the admission to hospital for surgery I made a decision to try and change my life whilst living at the therapeutic community. I tried harder to trust the therapists, doctors and my peers at the hospital and desperately tried to get involved in community life. I managed to curb my self-harming behaviour and tried desperately to talk about my story.

Only being able to stay at the community for 1 year, I decided I was going to take control of my life and go to University. The therapeutic community agreed to this plan and I eventually moved to Southampton to complete a degree in Sociology and Social Policy.

When I arrived at University I was scared, and determined not to share my story with any other students but to begin a new life. I knew I'd need

help from professionals so took myself to the doctors surgery at the University and met one of the GP's who agreed to see me regularly as well as arrange a therapist.

Although a good start to University, it became harder. My depression worsened again throughout my first year and I began self-harming again. Without telling my friends, I disappeared from my university course and was admitted to the local psychiatric hospital.

I remained in hospital for a year, once again on 1-1 nursing observation. During this time I was given medication, electro-convulsive therapy and psychological treatment, none of which seemed to help. I was desperate, I'd seen a glimmer of hope from my first year at university, a glimmer that things might get better and life might be worth living, but I'd returned to the dark place of depression once again.

I was extremely lucky to be given another years treatment at the therapeutic community, and this time I was determined to work hard from the beginning, and I did.

I challenged myself to talk more, to be more descriptive about the abuse and to be supported and encouraged by my peers. I did all I could to let go of my mantra of being disgusting and things began to change. I changed my mindset, I began to see good in myself. I learnt to trust, to be a good friend and I learnt to laugh and have fun. I loved the other patients at the therapeutic community, and lifelong friendships developed. Through my friends sharing their story, I started to talk in a group setting about the abuse I'd faced and the trauma of my hospital experiences.

I was getting better.

I returned to university having taken 2 years out and was much more settled. I had good friends who cared for me and was doing well academically. This was until the cycle began again. I noticed I was getting depressed and was terrified of losing the life I'd managed to create for myself.

I talked to my GP about this who looked me in the eyes and said that I could go down the road of hospitals, depression, self-harm etc. again or, I could decide I was okay and the same as

everyone else, I could decide that I wasn't disgusting, that the pain and trauma I'd faced wasn't my fault and that I deserved a life as much as everyone else. I could decide I was no better or worse than others.

I found this extremely challenging and was angry. How dare he say this, how dare he tell me I just needed to decide. Nevertheless, I couldn't get it out of my head. I went home that night and thought about it. I decided to change my mantra, I made a commitment that I wouldn't call myself disgusting anymore. I wouldn't hate myself anymore, I would accept that I was the same as every other human being, with good and bad bits.

Believing I was okay was the beginning of change for me. I saw life through a different lens, I no longer interpreted life with a lens of me being the worst person in the world, instead I believed I was worth something and had a voice.

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Looking back I feel sad about what I went through but feel glad in some ways, mainly because I feel it's made me who I am today.

If I could go back and give advice to myself, it would be to drop the 'I'm disgusting' mantra and choose to accept 'I'm okay' and that I'm no different to others, there's good and bad in me. I believe that if I'd accepted this sooner a lot of the pain wouldn't have happened.

Although I've had two short periods of illness in the last 8 years, these times were very different as the behavioural issues associated with my illness (self-harm, anger etc.) weren't there, instead I was depressed, suicidal and cried all the time – but nothing particularly dramatic happened. I was more in control of my illness, I knew how and when to ask for help, so prior to acting on self-harm, I'd go and find a nurse to talk to, instead of letting myself act out emotions, I'd make sure I was in a place where there were other people around so I wasn't alone.

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I got together with Phil (my husband) 8 years ago and this was hugely significant. When I first told him about my story, he responded in an amazing way, he said 'it's not ideal' but assured me it didn't change anything and he still loved me in the same

way. I now have a best friend who I can tell everything to and he still loves me just as I am. Being intimate with Phil has a healing effect on me making the issues of sexual abuse much less of a big deal. We now have a little girl Emily, who is beautiful and loved.

I have set up Touch Network as a social enterprise with a clear vision of telling stories and touching lives, who knows where this will take me...



From my difficult childhood, through to my years of depression and treatment, I've come through it. I want to share my story so that others may gain inspiration and hope from my struggles and triumphs.



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