

## **My personal account. By Rachel.**

My name is Rachel. I am 58 years old and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2007, but was diagnosed with a variety of other mental health conditions prior to this. I moved to Newcastle in February 2014 after living in several cities looking for somewhere that felt like 'home' following a very bitter divorce in 2007. My youngest son was at university here and suggested I might like Newcastle. I thought I would never survive the cold winters and would be off again before long. But it did feel like home and still does. I doubt I will ever return down south where our family home was.

I am very cautious with other people. I have learned through experience that so called friends can quickly stop being friends when you are someone with mood swings or even just when they find out you have a mental health diagnosis. This meant that during my first year here the only people I knew were my son and his friends and that was fine by me . However, I kept seeing info about a local women's organisation on a community notice board and eventually phoned them and arranged an appointment to visit the centre.

I had a meeting with one of the staff to discuss what I would like to gain from the centre and how they could best help. The lady I met suggested she put my name down for a one year closed support group. The group was aimed at women who felt alone or socially isolated. The latter applied to me. The group would have a maximum of 12 women plus the course facilitator and would meet once a week. The end goal was that the women would continue to meet away from the centre once the course finished.

I started this course in September 2015. My mental health wasn't good and some weeks I could barely remember my own name never mind anyone else's, but each week we were asked how our week had been. During this time nobody else was supposed to speak. We could each share whatever emotions we were feeling. It was a safe place to be able to do this. Sometimes somebody might be really happy, sad, very angry or whatever they felt about their life.

After this part of the session, each week we would talk further. It could be a general discussion, specific subject or art type therapies. Sometimes a guest would be invited. Some of these were two ladies that could organise exercise class access for anyone who was hesitant about attending exercise classes. Some other ladies also came in to tell us about what they were doing - digitally recording Newcastle residents about something important to their lives. This

could be anything. A childhood memory. A hobby. Something they treasured etc. A few of us signed up to take part in this. The sessions took six weeks and were fun. The stories were shown to the public via a red phone box positioned in various parts of the city. The course facilitator also told us about various multi organisation events for mental health awareness. She also told us about the service user opportunities to get involved with the social worker degree programme.

In general I found the support group difficult. I was over-medicated so like a total dope. I missed some weeks because I didn't want to leave the flat or just couldn't. Also there were a couple of quite forceful women in the group who tried to make the sessions about them only. The course facilitator was very good at stepping in to stop this.

Gradually the women attending the group dropped down from 12 to 7 and towards the end of the course we arranged to meet away from the centre but with the course facilitator and a social work placement student with us. We went to a park one week and went shopping another week. At Christmas and Easter we took food in for the group to share.

When the course was coming to the end we had to decide how we wanted it to continue. We had the option to use a free room at the local fire station but we opted for less formal gatherings. We had a trip to the beach as well as a shopping trip and lunches out together. Seven dwindled to five of us and then there were four as one went back to live in the south and is engaged to her ex husband - so her happy ever after. But she does return to see family and friends.

The remaining few of us meet up regularly and I am proud to call them my friends. We know so much about each other that we cannot share with other people. Our lives aren't easy but we try to laugh in the face of adversity and long may it last. It is the first time I have been able to be open and honest with friends without being judged.

But this women's organisation offers so much more. A programme of weekly events that is ongoing. Drop in sessions available to any women registered with the centre. Also specific courses women can put their names down for. Such as managing anxiety or mindfulness that last for a set number of sessions. And counselling sessions.

Two of us from the support group attend Sunday lunch there every other Sunday. The menu is decided by the group for the next lunch so we have all sorts of different food. They are great at catering for dietary requirements also. It costs £2 so it is great value.

In April 2016 - whilst the course was running - I had a major bipolar crisis and my psychiatrist wanted me admitted. I was adamant that I did not want to be admitted so she worked with me to find a way forward. A CPN phoned me each day and I had to keep appointments with my psychiatrist 2 or 3 times a week. And my meds were reviewed. This episode reinforced that I should stay in Newcastle for the sake of my mental health due to having a great psychiatrist for the first time in my life. I also love the city and the people. But I also realised that to do this two things would need to change

1. I loved the area I lived in but hated my flat. I knew where I wanted to live and started to look for the right house. I moved in May 2017
2. I needed to lose weight. I discussed this with the support group and said I knew I was overweight as a result of my meds. They all agreed that psychiatric drugs cause weight gain but when I told them I wanted to have bariatric surgery I think the reaction was generally one of shock. However, I was starting to feel stronger in my views and approached my GP. His reaction was it would never happen as I had a psychiatric diagnosis, but I fought my cause and was approved. I had surgery in February last year and have gone from being 15st 8lb to 8st 10lb. It has been an amazing journey.

So, in conclusion, thanks to this women's organisation I have lovely friends, have become involved with the social work student program, and have found the courage to follow what I knew needed to happen to improve my life.

I am so glad that I decided to move here five years ago.