How volunteering helps my mental health

– A blog by Champion Hazel

I have always had a difficult time with employment, I can see how and why the stability, routine and sense of purpose it provides can be really helpful for many people’s mental health but personally every time I enter employment I get ill not long afterwards. I think it’s part of the curse of having a mental illness that can be triggered by stress.

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Due to the way that my mental illness manifests, its unpredictability and the way in which it reacts to stress, the more traditional 9-5 type work is something I am not certain I will even be able to do long term. Like everyone else though I still want the structure, purpose and sense of accomplishment that employment can offer, not to mention the connection with other people and just simply a reason to leave the house.

This is where volunteering comes in.

The great thing about voluntary work is not only do I get that sense of purpose, accomplishment, community and usefulness that many get from employment, but I tend to also get more flexibility, understanding and far less stress. Volunteering gives me the motivation to leave the house, it gives me a connection with other people, and often it gives me the opportunity to not only learn new skills but to discover what I can already do. In short it gives me some sense of normality and helps me feel like I am living rather than merely existing.

When I first started to volunteer with York Ending Stigma (YES) it was the start of the first lockdown (in 2020), I was not entirely stable mentally, was still hiding a lot of things from people and like most other people was struggling to get my head round the pandemic. I had been having delusions and hadn’t left my house in several weeks due to very high levels of anxiety and paranoia. Not that anyone at the first zoom meeting probably knew this as I was working very hard to hide my illness at the time.

“I no longer feel the same level of self-stigma that I did”

Since then I’ve gone from someone in total denial of the fact that I even have
psychosis and claiming that all my issues were anxiety based or blaming some vague “mental health stuff”, to someone who feels perfectly ok speaking completely openly online and on podcasts/blogs about the fact that I hear voices and experience delusions. I no longer feel the same level of self-stigma that I did and have even started to be more honest with the professionals and more accepting of their support.

“I think the unique thing about YES is that there really is no judgement, and no competitiveness”

I think the unique thing about YES is that there really is no judgement, and no competitiveness, we can all speak openly and don’t have to hide. And doing this within the volunteering role I think makes it easier to do it day to day. YES is not my first voluntary role, but it's probably the one which resulted in the fastest/greatest positive change in my mental health.

In the last 2 years of working with YES I have discovered that I can do all sorts of things that I never imagined doing, and also learnt that I genuinely enjoy a lot of activities that I would probably have never tried otherwise. I have even gained the confidence to do some anti-stigma and mental illness campaigning independently.

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One day maybe I will be able to manage “real work”, I have not given up hope that I will eventually find a way to manage my mental illness well enough to cope with employment. But for now every-time I enter the world of work I end up getting more ill, volunteering though is something I can do. It's something that makes me feel like I have a place within society, and I also hope that by sharing my own experiences of mental illness I could maybe be helping others.

There are so many voluntary jobs out there, spanning almost any activity and interest you can think of. Many, like YES, even have multiple activities within the role meaning that you can not only experiment to find out what you enjoy and what you are good at but that no matter where your skill set lays there will be something that you can excel at. They often come with opportunities to learn, to meet new people, and hone existing skills. And most importantly the act of volunteering can feel hugely worthwhile, especially when you can see your actions helping others.

Personally volunteering has been a huge part of my regaining a connection with society after being ill, in fact it is so important to me that it is part of my “wellness
“plan” written by the CMHT. It is nice to feel like you may be making a difference, and amazing to see your ideas and/or input becoming a reality. Often when you have a mental illness you can feel worthless and like you have nothing to offer the world, for me volunteering has proven these thoughts wrong and really helped me feel able to engage with the world outside my home again.

York Ending Stigma

To find out more about our work and to join us to end mental health stigma in York, please refer to our website [https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/](https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/) or email us on [yes@yorkcvs.org.uk](mailto:yes@yorkcvs.org.uk)

Volunteering in York

York CVS host York Ending Stigma and York CVS is also home to the York Volunteer Centre – if you’d like to find out more about different volunteer opportunities in York please visit: [https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/volunteers/](https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/volunteers/)