

Changing Lives: Involvement in Learning

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For our psychiatric attachment we do a session with Story Book, which is some volunteers coming in who have mental health issues, and they come in and they have a chat to us about their experiences. For example, when they were diagnosed and how it impacted on their life. But I think what was particularly good about it was how they came out of it and how they are now adapting and living with their mental health condition.

As a society we tend to have this idea that people with mental health issues can't function or that they live some sort of strange parallel existence. I mean, if you ask your average man on the street what reminds him of somebody for example who has schizophrenia, he might point to the Norman Bates character or something far-fetched and very Hollywood-y. The interesting thing about meeting these people was, actually there were normal people whose lives became affected by a mental health condition, they dealt with that and they've carried on living a normal and healthy, happy life.

We sort of walked in and we were a class of I think about 20 odd people, and there were three tables. Sat at each table was a Story Shop volunteer, and we were invited to go round, sit down and just talk and ask questions really, engage in a conversation. The Story Shop people obviously were there to talk about their life and they did that, and then we were given an opportunity to interact with them, to ask any questions about anything that we wanted.

What was quite nice about it was, they were very very candid. They were very happy to answer any and all questions that we had, be it somewhat trivial to the big things and the really really deep questions, such as you know, 'how did this impact your life', 'at your darkest moment, what was this like', up to the trivial stuff such as 'how you feeling today?' you know, 'how's everything going' and all that sort of stuff. I think it was a good opportunity to get a grasp of a timeline of their mental health condition.

Having a psychiatric attachment as part of a fourth year, you get the opportunity to interact with patients and you get to be able to talk to them. So we do a placement within the ward, so we were based at Highbury Hospital, and then there was out in the community. It gave us the opportunity, it gives medical students the opportunity to interact and meet with people within their home and in a clinical setting.

All medical students are obviously future doctors, and I think it would do well to both destigmatise the condition from a medical student point of view, but I think it would also do very very well to see actually from the volunteers' point of view, actually here are future doctors who care about mental health, who actually have an idea about mental health, who won't be dismissive of that patient who's particularly having a psychotic episode, who won't just brush them off as 'oh, that's what he's like'. It will give them an opportunity to say 'actually, the medical profession cares about me'. I think it will benefit both sides.

The biggest thing that I took away from it was actually, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. For a lot of these people, they were able to regain back to the life they had prior to their mental health illness, and I think that's a very very important message to take forward. I think we tend to see a lot of mental health issues as life long, and so we condemn people to a particular standard of life and I think that was one thing I took away from it.

What was also really good about it, was that they were talking to the next generation of doctors, and so if they can get their message across, and even if it has a small impact, I think the hope for them will be 'well actually, if I come and see this person in A&E or if I come and see them on whatever ward, if I've got a stomach problem or whatever, actually that person

knows me and knows my mental health condition, but also has an experience of other patients with mental health conditions, and so will bear that in mind when they're treating me'.

I think it has impacted upon me insomuch as if I were to see a patient with a mental health condition, I think the idea is to see the person behind the condition more than just the condition.