



Press Release
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For Immediate Release

Why I'm Driven To Improve Mental Health Care

'My time in a mental health hospital has inspired me to help others and give them hope for a positive future' Lee Millington-Millar, 30

I was admitted to Cygnet Hospital Taunton in the summer of 2021 after years of suffering with severe depression and suicidal thoughts. The hospital provides an acute inpatient admissions service for men and it gave me the help I desperately needed.

For me, it was a gradual build up over years and it all came to a head one night. My mind was in a place that it had never really been before. I was taken by police to a place of safety in Plymouth. Then the next day I was admitted to a hospital in Exeter. It was my first time experiencing anything like this. It was extremely distressing, upsetting and at times, scary. I didn't know what to expect, who I would meet and what would happen to me.

Soon after I was transferred to Cygnet Hospital Taunton where I was met by a couple of really nice and pleasant staff when I arrived. I was really quiet and unsure the first few days and spent most of my time in my room. Over the next few days I socialised more. My psychology sessions opened my eyes to the fact I really needed help. The psychologists helped me understand how I felt and process the thoughts that were going through my head. They gave me the tools to better understand myself and overcome the thoughts that I was having.

The Occupational Therapy team helped me get involved on the ward with activities and brought me out of my shell. The ward staff were great too and I made some great bonds with the service users as well. We understood one another. By the time I left I felt like I was on the road to recovery. It's a long journey but to wake up in the morning and enjoy my life again has been invaluable to me.

Yet I vividly remember how powerless and resentful I felt at the time of my admission. It is that memory that spurs me on now to want to help others. I can be a beacon of hope for people who are currently in the pit of despair. That's something I take incredibly seriously.

In the summer of 2022 I was told about the role of Expert by Expert by the Hospital Manager. I was invited back to site and met a couple of staff members who had

helped me during my stay. I felt like it was a beneficial role for service users and it was empowering to know I could be responsible for improving their care and getting their voices heard. I also felt that it would help me and give me a sense of meaning and purpose too.

I want to speak up for people who don't have a voice. When you're in a mental health service, sometimes you just don't have the strength in yourself to speak up about what you need. I've been there and I know what helps and what hinders. I want to share that expertise to help get others into a good place.

My role is primarily focused around peer support. I talk to patients and their families within three of Cygnet Health Care's services in the South West. I have walked in their shoes and that helps to build up trust between us. They feel safe talking to me. It was empowering going back and stepping into the hospital as a member of staff. It sends a strong message to the people still in treatment that it can be done. I got through it and it's possible for other people to do the same. It was the biggest marker of my recovery when I stepped foot into the hospital in my new role. I'm finally in a place where I feel I can make a difference.

I love every minute of it. With the regular visits I do, I can see the changes and improvements of the service users through their journeys at the sites. To see them at the start of their journey and to be a tiny part of that process is really fulfilling.

I feel like I have connected with some of the service users across the sites too. I have tried to get their points across and their opinions listened to. They have some great ideas too including one service user who is running an IT course for other patients and even some staff. To give the service users the empowerment and make them feel like they can be a constructive part of the process is so helpful.

Seeing the staff in a different way has been eye opening too. When I was first admitted my judgment was clouded by the way I was feeling. It was hard for me to see how the staff could help me. I didn't really recognise the efforts they were going to, to support me. Now I'm in a better place, I can see the patience and kindness they showed. They truly care and are passionate about their jobs. They treat the service users with respect and always try to do their best for them. I can give that reassurance to service users who are filled with the same doubts I was.

As former service users who have experienced receiving care first hand, we are in the unique position of being able to drive real change and make a huge difference to so many people.

I do feel a big responsibility because this role has the potential to be incredibly powerful. Being able to sit down with a service user and tell them you've been through what they are experiencing, and that you understand the place they are coming from is a real privilege. You see the moment their shoulders relax when they realise you have shared experiences.

As the role develops, I know I'll be able to help more people. I also hope to connect with other Experts By Experience to collaborate and share learning so that our network of support can benefit even more people and raise greater understanding of mental health.

