



Derbyshire Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

2019

Writing Competition

Looking back/looking forwards

Finalists



Making a
positive
difference

Foreword

Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust launched a writing competition on the theme of looking back/looking forwards earlier this summer to provide an opportunity for people to share their experience of our services in a creative and supportive way. People were invited to write a short piece about:

- Their experiences of mental illness, substance misuse, learning disabilities or any of the wider specialist services provided by the Trust including eating disorders
- A story of recovery, challenge or hope for the future
- The experience of children and/or families through our children's services.

The competition was open to Trust members, service users, carers, Trust staff, stakeholders, partner organisations and the voluntary sector.

Successful author and former Radbourne Unit colleague Joanna Cannon (pictured), author of *The Trouble with Goats and Sheep*, was on the judging panel, alongside Joanna was joined on the judging panel by Leanne Walker, Expert by Experience; Marie Hickman, Trust Library and Knowledge Manager; Geoff Lewins, Non-Executive Director; and Rob Poole, Public Governor.



Joanna said: “Having left school at 15, qualified as a doctor in my 30s, and written two Sunday Times bestsellers, I can still honestly say that judging this competition is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

“Anyone who has the courage to write their thoughts on paper deserves acknowledgement and recognition, because it truly is an act of bravery, and so it was desperately hard to pick out a shortlist from the wonderful, moving, funny and often deeply sad entries you sent to me.”

Fifty-six written entries were received and the Trust and its Council of Governors hopes that this competition has helped to challenge the stigma around mental ill health, learning disabilities and wider services provided by the Trust, and celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion by giving entrants the opportunity to explore these topics.

Thank you to everyone who participated!

Shortlisted pieces (in alphabetical order)

Roy:

- 'Looking back over my mind's shoulder'

Molly:

- 'Recovery is like getting into a swimming pool'

Helen:

- 'Feeling like you are stuck down a well'

Nicola:

- 'From a journey from hell'

Anonymous:

- 'We are all acorns and within us there is an oak tree'

Ellena:

- 'A hand, such a simple thing really'

Stephen:

- 'Clive'

Jill:

- 'Memories, shards of a broken mirror'

Looking Back/Looking Forwards

Looking back over my mind's shoulder
The mental illness got stronger as I got older
As a kid it's mental just a fun game
That made every day different never the same
Yes, I was a loner in my perfect place
Sometime imagining I was in out of this space
Am I a cowboy with a stick gun
I was mental but it was just fun
They called me names said it was weird
But I was just being me so who cared
Sometimes the pain of being strange
And the weird thoughts I could never arrange
So looking back it didn't bother me too much
Except the bullying that was rough

Teenage years brought problems of their own
Dealing with my body pains the weirdness had grown
My thoughts seemed different from others
Finding no connection with sisters or brothers
Emotions were high and I couldn't cope
So I sought solace in strangulation with pieces of rope
Never wanting to die but to just to get away
Still I had my peace in times when my mind would play
But inside I knew now this isn't right
So started the beginning of a lifelong fight

Older years now depression anxiety and fear
Dark times of not wanting to be here
Realising I'm weird I don't fit in
Starving myself to just be thin
Obsessive fear of being out of control
It rips me apart mind body and soul
No one understands who cares
Why speak if no one hears

A dark tunnel no way out
I see the light yet inside I scream and shout

This is it then my minds gone
Who can bring me help when there is none
Why can't I eat or stop these thoughts in my mind
Evil thinking paranoid and so unkind
I am constantly being controlled by my mind
No peace no love no rest nothing to find

Under crisis given pills and reassuring words
My mind's shouting out but I am not being heard

Then

Inner strength is found at last
I can learn to be strong by using my past
I understand mental illness, I've learnt how it is
Knowledge is strength, I know I can control this
Hope and understanding have become my rock
Now controlling my subconscious mind is what I have got
I am never cured I am walking a tightrope
But if I focus on small steps I always have hope
And so

Not looking back looking forward to see
I can live each day if I can live with being me
No need to look back the past has been seen
But if I look forward I can see where I have been
Not looking back over my shoulder
Looking forward stronger wiser and older.

Roy

Judges' comments:

"This is a very emotional piece of writing and gave the majority of judges goosebumps. The honesty with which the writer describes how they were feeling was very powerful to the reader. The progression from childhood and being 'different' to having severe mental ill-health, and the acceptance of who they are, is incredible."

Looking Back/Looking Forwards

Recovery is like getting into a swimming pool or walking into the sea; hesitant and unsure of what to expect. You dip your toe in and out; maybe even get as far as your waist, but the shock electrifies your nerves and you run back to the warm safety of the shore.

They say, “it’s fine when you get in” or “it’s actually quite warm, it feels good!” But you felt the waves crash on you and an icy yet seductive voice whispers, “You don’t belong here.”

You sit on the shore, so far out on the side with the sun on your back. You can still feel the scaly remains of water, drying into sticky patches and you recognise the sensation. Every grain of salt clinging to you, irritating you like extra calories you gave in to. It makes you feel weak and dirty, you want to rub it off, sweat it off, scrub it off down to the bone until there’s nothing left.

You see it now, looking out on all those carefree, oblivious people in front of you. You feel tricked and deceived, you can’t trust anyone. They made you get into the water, they wanted to see you dive in, into a place that would suffocate and drown you.

They look out to you on the shore and even from a distance you know what they’re saying, “you’re boring, a loner, a weirdo” and they’re right so that’s where you stay, that’s where you belong.

Sometimes I feel like I am out with them in the water, but I’m in one of those giant inflatable hamster balls – that you find at a seaside carnival or a on pier – trying to join in but I can’t get close, when I do I bounce back and ricochet further away than I was when I began.

Instead I find myself floating around groups of friends, in and out of loved-up couples; invisible and not valuable to their lives. Inside my claustrophobic bubble I can see my family laughing and joking but I can’t seem to hear them.

Slowly I drift away and although I want to hold onto them something more powerful tells me “they don’t need you”. I’ve become so frail and small that the gentlest gust of wind or ripple in the water could take me down and the truth is, I wouldn’t fight it even if I had the strength.

My mind is like a manipulated compass: the only driving force of my body and no matter who or what objects to it, it will always win.

Molly

Judges' comments:

“This is an amazingly descriptive piece about what it feels like not to fit in, to live on the periphery. It is a wonderful analogy and we love the last few lines ‘my mind is like a manipulated compass...’. The images and descriptions are lovely.”



Looking Back/Looking Forwards

Feeling like you are stuck down a well, screaming for someone to throw you a rope down so you can get out. The walls of the well closing in on you. Feeling trapped and alone. Stuck in your own pit of despair. Not knowing if you will ever get out. Feeling so low, empty and alone. Not showing any emotions because you don't want anyone to know how you are truly feeling, painting a face on to hide the pain.

In the end you can hide it no longer and your world comes crashing down around you. Having to accept the help you need. Admitting you have a problem to people you have spent years thinking you're protecting. Not knowing what reaction you will get, and being treated differently by the people you love. You feel even more trapped than you did before. And you try so hard to hide away from everyone and everything.

In the end realising the help is there and you need to take it. So much hard work to be put in. It's getting worse before it gets easier. Opening up about things you feel so ashamed of. And having spent many years keeping all these secrets. Trying to change your thought process. Opening up to complete strangers.

Then moving forward is the hardest part. Not knowing where you belong any more. Everyone knowing all about it. You feel more alone now than you did in the beginning. But time is a healer. And you can hopefully make a new start in your life. Accepting the changes you have put in place. Become that person you once were again. And keep going, knowing you conquered it. You beat your own battle with mental health.

You can do this, whoever you are. You may need a little help along the way. But that doesn't make you weak, it makes you strong. You need to fight back and you will win!

Helen

Judges' comments:

“This is a brilliant analogy, and such a clearly written, positive piece. This is obviously someone who has recently experienced life’s highs and lows and it was uplifting to read. This is a very moving description of difficulties faced, yet life-affirming with a positive ending.”



Looking Back/Looking Forwards

From a journey from hell
To the pits of despair
What happened to me
Nobody cared.
I didn't care
I just wanted to die
But failed every time
No matter how hard I tried.
The torment
Frustration
Nobody knew
Nobody cared
What I wanted to do.
The doctors just stopped me
And gave me some pills
They stopped the voices
But didn't stop the will.
Determination
Fire
The will to succeed
The doctors they sectioned me
To stop my deed.
A mood stabiliser stopped me
From going high
But with the depression
I still wanted to die.
But the therapy helped
The psychologist too
Stopped me from wanting
To do the things I wanted to
So now about to leave
It's a scary world out there
But the doctors wanted
A package of care.
Fear
Hope
A mix of emotions

But hopefully this package
Will help the commotion.
The strain of my relationship
My kids in despair
The package will help show them
That somebody cares.
It's hopeful that soon
Their old mum will return
Get rid of those stings
Get rid of that burn
A mum who can function
In society
And care for her children
A mum who can be
The person that loved them
The person who cared
Who held them in her arms
A love they still share.
The tablets will bring me
A life I can lead
With support from professionals
I hope it's not tough, I plead.
For I see things in the horizon
The sun in the sky
A mum who now lives life
And doesn't want to die.

Nicola

Judges' comments:

"This is a very moving and emotional poem. The writer clearly describes their feelings of despair and how these are overcome with support. This ends with a really positive outcome."

Looking Back/Looking Forwards

We are all acorns and within us there is an oak tree waiting to grow. How that tree grows will depend on the soil that the acorn finds itself in. It is time for my session with Andrea. As I go up to collect her from reception, I remember the first session and the background story behind her depression. I remember her telling me about the early years – the breaking glass, the doors slamming and her self-hatred. This was her soil.

Andrea's life was one where she had always seen herself in the losing position. She told me she felt powerless, a powerlessness that became clearer in the subsequent sessions. Her family felt powerless. She said that they had told her that "they were always treading on egg shells around her". They had recently become more angry with her, telling her to "get a grip". This made her feel worse. In the last session she said:

"People treat me like a nobody."

I recognised how her mood was making me feel powerless. I told her that her mood had an effect on me. Inevitably she took it badly.

"Well I will just shut up then."

I responded:

"It is not about shutting you down. It is about saying that I feel this and my guess, because it is only a guess, is that others feel the same. We can try and do something about this."

That "something" was assertiveness. We spoke about it in the last session. I was, as usual, enthusiastic, but she was unconvinced. She was afraid that if she said what she felt all of the anger would spill out. She was too scared of her anger. I taught her some assertiveness skills in the session, looking at what she could do to choreograph a situation where she could use them. We looked at her body language, and her tone of voice. I spoke about taking one step at a time and not second guessing all of the ways that something could go wrong. She didn't say anything at the time. I wasn't building up my hopes. The risk of being assertive can sometimes feel too big. The memory of those early years was still strong. We sit down and begin the session. She tells me a story about a GP appointment where she felt that she was being patronised. She tells me that she told him assertively how she felt. The doctor said that she was

“like a little pit bull terrier.”

She smiles at the words and says

“You would have been proud of me.”

I am proud. She says she will build on this.

You slowly tap away at a rock with a tiny hammer, and then suddenly a hairline crack appears. This is how change starts. If she changes, the people around her will change. I too will change. I will become a better therapist because of her. Kierkegaard said that “life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards”. Andrea was starting to let go of the past. She could now think about living her life.

Anonymous

Judges’ comments:

“The idea that the acorn’s growth is determined by the soil it lies in is just the most stunning analogy. What a brilliant way to see a link between a person and a landscape. Whoever has this writer on side is truly blessed.”



Looking Back/Looking Forwards

A Hand

Such a simple thing really

'Let me give you a hand'

'Want a hand?'

'Need a hand?'

We are all so quick to offer one

That is when there is something obvious to see

The old lady with the heavy bags

Your co-worker juggling the tea tray with the all-important choccie biccies

Your sister struggling with her homework at the kitchen table

We all offer a hand – reflex

Whether they take it up doesn't seem to matter

We offer, end of

Almost without thinking

But what about when it's something we cannot see

Where the hand we offer isn't so much flesh as words

Want a hand?

The mother of three sobbing quietly on the bus, overwhelmed and drowning

Need a hand?

The elderly man who can't remember home though he only just knew, it's getting dark and he's afraid

Let me give you a hand

The teen, promised a bright future, worked so hard but is now floundering with mental health problems alone

A hand?

Those who do not conform - what is deemed by the wider world into type, function, labels

Not many offer a hand then

In the world of tags and 'likes', shouting hidden voices and in-your-face public ones It's a world of anger, misinformation and fear so the few hands being offered are slowly being withdrawn

But...

I know a few who do

Want a hand?

The RMN on her way home from a busy shift on the bus offers a shoulder, gives advice on who she could talk to, the services out there for her, so the mother can gain the help she needs to keep going

Need a hand?

The carer guiding their charge safely home after a fun day in the sun
making the most of life

Let me give you a hand

The team who with hard work and dedication give a young adult the tools
and support to live a happy and fulfilling life and above all to see that
there is help and people who care.

A hand

For all those who need one

Let us give you a hand.

That is what we do.

It's simple really

We offer a hand

We offer a hand to those who need it

We offer a hand to guide

A hand to support

A hand to take that important first step onto the start of a new life, a new
path, a new vision

That is what we do

We offer a hand

We take those hands reaching out for help

We give our hands

We are the NHS.

Ellena

Judges' comments:

"This is very, very clever and so true. It really looks at the weight and power of the word. It is incredibly perceptive and well written. It really makes you think about giving someone a hand – very powerful and positive."



Looking Back/Looking Forwards

Clive

I live inside my head, the voice I hear, my own
Amid the static hiss of other voices passing like the wind.
My home was where my childhood passed, the years of mother's love
and tears.
She helped me through the special schools, the doctors and my fears
And kept me in, to shelter and protect me,
Then left me, by her graveside, to face alone the world.

My brother gave his job up, to live with me at home.
His life sacrificed, to see me safe and fed and in my heart I know,
He misses conversation, gets frustrated, sometimes lets it show.
He asks me questions I can't answer, because I can't find the words to
say,
But I know he loves me, burden though I am
And he would never have it any other way.

My oldest brother and his wife have us for meals each week,
Pay my bills, repair my house, fix any pipes that leak.
At meals, I only eat my favourite food and never try
A spicy dish, or gravy, pasta, or certain types of pie.
I do not know how much he dreads the passing of the years
In case I may outlive him and find myself with no-one left
To pay my bills, maintain my home, calm my fears.

He sits with me through interviews, with experts to review
My chance of work, they found that I could not understand their questions
Though ask me who sang songs so many years ago and I know them all.
And recognize old cars and bikes most people can't recall.
My writing, stilted, yet I like to write a crossword answer
With my sister-in-law and brother now and then.

I only ever cried once, I remember it was Christmas time
At my brother's house, I watched The Railway Children
And cried when she found her father at the end.
My brothers and sister-in-law had tears in their eyes too,
But that was probably the film.

I know I'm lucky because I'm loved
Although I don't know how to show it.
I walk the same streets every day and wave or smile to the people I pass
In certain shops and the museum and galleries.
Some smile back, others may laugh, I don't know what they really think.

My heart is still a child's though now my hair is grey
The teddies in my cupboard all remind me of the days
When I was loved as a young boy and comfort me although.
I'll never know a woman's love or how that love might feel.
But my brothers know I'm special and they'll never let me go.

Stephen

Judges' comments:

"This is very moving and describes very clearly the bond between the brothers. It is a really good description of what it feels like caring for someone else day to day."



Looking Back/Looking Forwards

Memories; shards of a broken mirror or the smoky wisps of dreams upon awakening.

Some are sharp and painful, jarring and stabbing. I drop these quickly before they cut open old wounds; before they solidify and drag me back to where I can't escape.

Some are soft and fragile, like dandelion tufts. The more I try to grasp these, the quicker they dart out of reach and drift away.

Times and places, names and faces; they jump, never settling or staying for long. The narrative of my life constantly being reedited and rearranged.

No sense of self. No sense of a life which is mine. Just disjointed fragments. Shards of pain and wisps of smoke.

To go forward when you don't know where you've been is to step into the terrifying unknown.

So many choices, so few hopes. A rush towards this. A retreat from that. The direction and intention constantly shifting. The future looks like random paths made of crazy paving.

To set off in one direction and to arrive somewhere unknown and unexpected. To be somewhere forwards but finding myself somewhere back then.

Looking forwards, looking back; it all looks the same – a broken mosaic of unconnected pieces, the original picture lost long ago in the confusion and the pain.

Jill

Judges' comments:

“This is beautifully written. The combination of the imagery and words is incredible. The emotion felt within this piece of writing really made the poem stand out.”



Many thanks to all those who entered our 2019 writing competition. We hope you have enjoyed reading our shortlisted entries and that the pieces will help to challenge stigma around mental ill health, learning disabilities and the wider services provided by Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

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