



My Headway Story

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In 2002 I suffered a brain tumour (a glioma). I had surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy and mercifully survived. I worked as an actor for a while after the operation, but then a crushing depression set in and I took myself to Beachy Head planning to commit suicide. I was picked up by the police, and voluntarily sectioned at St Pancras Hospital. I was an inpatient for 2 months, then an outpatient. The psychiatrist I saw there suggested I contact Headway to become a member: I came to meet the staff, who suggested it might suit me better to be a volunteer, so in Oct 2006 I started volunteering.

This was a big step for me, as it was my first interaction with the outside world after months in hospital, so I was nervous as I came to Headway's former building on Austin Street. It was a real relief to find I was working with people who had plenty of empathy and understanding of brain injury and of the effects it has on the individual. I soon began to realise how lucky I had been with my brain injury when I saw how it had affected other service users much more seriously. I also began to feel empowered by being able to be helpful. I volunteered once a week, and supported members with tasks such as: art, gardening and music. A lot of time was simply spent talking to people over a cup of tea, as I'd been told how important this was, and could feel how much it helped me too. It is very useful having the picture chart with photos and names of members, volunteers and staff, as it takes away the pressure to remember names, showing Headway's understanding of the effects of brain injury.

I began to understand more about brain injury, which was very helpful for me, especially when I saw how depression was a common after-effect. I saw how injury to different parts of the brain, in different ways, could vastly affect the individual's capacity to interact with the outside world.

I mentioned that I had been an actor, and with the help of 2 actor friends, I put on a drama-therapy workshop for the members. We had spoken to staff about scenes that would be of most relevance to the group (e.g. an individual getting aggressive in a Citizens' Advice Bureau) and performed them before asking participants to suggest other ways to perform them. I took great pleasure in seeing how people responded to this.

I used my growing confidence in front of groups to give a presentation about my trip to Peru in December '08. It was a 20 minute talk with accompanying slides. It was pleasing to note how well the presentation was received even by those with limited communication skills- a sign that I had learned something from my time at Headway about interacting with people with different communication needs. This will be useful in the job I am about to commence.

As part of my own recovery I have also volunteered as a horticultural therapist at Thrive in Battersea Park, and found great benefit from working outdoors. I think this work is remarkably beneficial for



mental and physical recovery (not to mention making the garden look more inviting!) and hope it continues at Headway.

I went on a number of the trips with members, and enjoyed these opportunities to get to know them better, in a different environment to that we usually shared. It was interesting to see how some, who were almost silent in the day centre, opened up when on outings and visits.

The support of staff at Headway was very important: it allowed me to rebuild my confidence in a supportive atmosphere before re-engaging with the outside world. I had been applying for jobs since coming to the centre, and on one occasion Tony, the manager and two other members of staff staged a mock interview for me to practice my responses under pressure in a safe environment. I'd like to thank Tony & the guys for that. I also attended the training sessions on brain injury and was able to contribute personal experiences to the discussions. This helped give me a much broader understanding of brain injury: I thought that because I had my own experience of it, I knew exactly what it was and how to treat it. I'm now aware of how vastly it can differ in the ways it affects various individuals.

The companionship of fellow volunteers made a big difference to my time at Headway: finding out what motivated people to get involved was fascinating, and watching how different volunteers interacted. I'd been unable to work with one member when he got aggravated, and it was very useful to have another volunteer say to me "When X gets aggressive, try simply taking him away from the situation rather than trying to resolve it there and then".

I have recently been offered a job as a support worker at Turning Point's residential home, working with ex-offenders with mental health problems. This would not have been possible without my time spent as a volunteer at Headway paving the way, so I would like to express my thanks to the team for their help and wish them all the best for the future.