



Pauline: My story

I first came to the Charlie Reid Centre (CRC) over twenty years ago. I had been looking after my mother from childhood and I struggled to cope and understand this diagnose of Schizophrenia and the impact of this on my mother, Grandparents, and my own young family.

A short time later I was also carer for both Grandparents. Both of them had been coping with this nightmare for the previous fifteen years. At this point my own mental health was very fragile.

When I first met Tricia Mullen, The Carers Worker at the Charlie Reid Centre, I instinctively felt compassion and understanding. I was invited to the Charlie Reid Carers Group, which for the first time I was able to talk freely about caring for someone with mental health issues.

At previous carers group and at times my own colleagues, one mention of the S.....word or mental illness, you could visibly see people backing away as though it was contagious. This was obviously through lack of understanding mental health issues.

I found the CRC a place of peace, mutual understanding and where I and other carers could relax and understand what each of us was going through and learn not only carer's rights but the legalisation on mental health. At this time the information given from the Carers Worker was so invaluable.

We found the importance of Peer support, sharing information around welfare benefits, housing rights, what the CPN could provide and medication and their side affects.

We learned from each other, we shared the tears of Grief and Loss of this horrible illness with our loved ones. But at last, sharing with other carers, there was hope!!! Sadly just to talk about our journey was indiscernible, the relief, the understanding and sharing our experiences. We supported each other, learning coping strategies, having some ME TIME!! And not feel guilty.

At the Charlie Reid Centre the staff and some carers gave their expertise in therapies, getting our nails done, Angel Cards, and coffee and cake. I look back on these evenings with such gratitude as all the staff did everything they could to bring such blessed ME Time to all of us.

This instilled hope, the feeling of belongings and friendliness. It provided a safe place to talk, where other carers got it! What we were all experiencing and this allowed our self confidence and self esteem to grow.

With the knowledge and information sessions from the Carers Worker, this enabled me to request a package of care for my Mother which gave me such invaluable me time with my family and take a break from caring. With an allocated Social Worker, my mother had input from the local carers which allowed me to remain in employment.

Over the previous decade not one of the agencies, GP, CPN, or Social Work had ever thought of the ripple effect of the levels of stress with this caring role for me and my children and other carers in the same position.

I was able to share this experience with the other carers, so that they also could be armed with what they could be asking for in the way of support and assistance from the services.

Over the years each of the Carers as they developed confidence organised or joined health walks, met for coffee, meals giving each other mutual support. This empathy within the carers took away the loneliness as for most of the carers; the ME Time was few and far between. We had a lot of laughs and tears at our meetings for all of us this was a safety valve.

The carers now had a lifeline, as carers themselves exchanged phone numbers for emergencies and for the opportunity to reach out to not only another carer but a friend. For a lot of carers there is a lack of family networks or close friends that they can turn to. In the past in the absence of any support, carers would turn to the GP and it would anti-depressants that was prescribed.

For some carers sadly are in their later years and have been looking after more than one family member which leads to the person being totally isolated, the long term stress of caring for a loved one without much support from the agencies can lead onto physical and mental health diagnosis, such as heart disease, strokes, depression.

To conclude the journey of carers with the mental health field without complete support can be a very lonely one and indeed the additional statistics for hospital admissions for their own health.

However with the right empathic support, peer mentoring and friendship and access to a support package for carers this also benefits the person being cared for. In short, Recovery is a holistic approach for carer and the person being cared for.

Presentation by Pauline at the Mental Health and Social Support Seminar in Glasgow on 23 March 2017. Seminar ran in partnership: Voluntary Health Scotland, The Open University Scotland and Support in Mind Scotland.