

*Peter is a thirty year old living in Shepherds Bush. After graduating from University College London with a first class English degree he worked in a variety of organisations, finally settling at Barclays Financial Planning for three years, where he worked all over London. When his contract ended in November 2006 things took a turn for the worse.*

'I had struggled for most of my adult life with mental illness, mostly anxiety and depression, and had been to some fairly dark places in my time, but nothing could have prepared me for what happened over that period. I was completely broken, and didn't really see the point in carrying on. I ended up in a psychiatric unit in Charing Cross hospital and couldn't really imagine ever getting my life back to normal. I felt completely cut off from society, totally helpless, and just a few months ago I had been working full time, living in a nice flat on my own and generally having a good time of things. It took me a long time to find my feet again after that. I used to attend groups at the hospital after I got out, Pottery, Relaxation and Men's Groups, but I still didn't really feel like I was making progress – in my eyes I was still institutionalised, and I couldn't imagine living my life as I had been before.

After six months of convalescence my occupational therapist recommended that I try to do some voluntary work. Initially I was completely against the idea, not only was I petrified of returning to work but also I didn't see the point in giving my time up for no reward – if I was to work I should at least get paid for it! However I reasoned that going back to a full time job immediately would be too much of a strain and that the best way to get back to normal would be to make small steps. In September my occupational therapist recommended the Hammersmith and Fulham Volunteer Centre and I went there with a great deal of trepidation, and was still not entirely convinced that volunteering was for me.

Happily I was to be proven wrong. The staff at the centre were very friendly but I decided against telling them about my history of mental health issues – I was ashamed to a certain degree and didn't want to be stigmatised. I had convinced myself that I was some sort of pariah, and even worse, a failure. I was shown a database of volunteering opportunities and chose about half a dozen that I was interested in. The adviser then called them up and arranged very informal meetings to discuss whether I was suitable for the opportunities and more importantly if they were suitable for me. I was still terrified about meeting potential employers but the process was incredibly relaxed, and my fears were assuaged. The meetings were a far cry from the pressure cooker of attending a formal interview, the employers seemed genuinely interested in someone prepared to give up their time to help them, and my mood brightened. This was nowhere near as hard as I thought it was going to be. I settled on working two days a week, one day at Hammersmith and Fulham MIND, and one day at the Volunteer Centre itself.

I decided on MIND because I felt that I was in a fairly good position to understand the charity and wanted to give something back to the service that I myself had used, and the Volunteer Centre seemed like a friendly and relaxed place to work in. To begin with the work was mainly simple administrative

tasks, designing posters and timetables for MIND, and chasing up clients and employers for the Volunteer Centre, trying to find and fill voluntary positions. After a few weeks I felt my confidence returning. I finally felt as if I was a part of society – it was incredible that giving up a few hours each week could make such a difference to my general well being. I appeared in a funding video for MIND, and became production manager for a film they were making about mental health – for the first time in my life I was actually working in a field that I was interested in. In December I received a certificate at the Volunteer Centre awards ceremony for my work at MIND. Two years ago I would have scoffed at the thought, but now I was proud.

Voluntary work had given me my confidence back and I felt that I was actually doing something important, not slaving for the company wage. I had opened up to both my employers about my history of mental illness and of course they were incredibly understanding. I should never have been worried. Three months after starting volunteering I feel that I am now ready to start applying for full time paid work, and because of my experience of volunteering would like to work in the charity sector. I wouldn't have had either the confidence or the enthusiasm if I hadn't started volunteering. It sounds glib, but it really has changed my life – I couldn't recommend it highly enough.

***Do you have mental health issues?***

***If you have been in a similar situation to Peter, and feel that volunteering would help, give the Volunteer Centre a call on 020 8741 9876, or email [enquiries@hfvc.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@hfvc.org.uk), to see if we have anything suitable for you.***