

When I first accessed Penumbra's Edinburgh Self Harm Project, I had been involved with mental health services since early childhood and yet no one had ever addressed self harm with me. It seemed to me as though people were afraid of it, didn't really know how best to advise or support me, and were nervous of adopting responsibility of supporting me with it. It was very much seen as being a symptom of something bigger, but despite years of trying, no one had really given me a concrete answer as to what was 'wrong' with me, and everyone I saw seemed to have a different idea of what 'illness' I had, and I didn't really agree with any of them.

When I was given my first appointment, I have to admit I hadn't done much looking up on the service. I had my own reservations and was pretty sure I knew exactly how it would go. Someone would fumble around the subject of what I was doing to myself, try to embarrass me into stopping, or scare me into stopping, I'd lie and make out it wasn't that bad.

They would wonder why I'd even come to the appointment. I would wonder why I even came to the appointment and ultimately I would leave feeling guilty, grotesque and ashamed having achieved absolutely nothing but a wasted hour for us both.

I was nervous as we sat down. The room was small and cosy and it wasn't a doctor's office or a clinical consultation room. The project worker I was meeting with didn't seem stern and intimidating. That threw me a bit. Then there were some forms brought out, and apologies made for the fact we had to do a couple of bits of paperwork. She kept saying that I shouldn't worry, there were only forms the first session. I was a bit confused by this, as I was used to people writing down everything I said in an appointment, it drove me mad...but I was used to it.

This was mainly why I particularly hated first appointments with any kind of service, I was expecting to be asked now to divulge everything that had ever happened in my life within a ten minute time bracket...fast enough that I fit everything in and slow enough that she could keep up with writing it down, so as to justify how on earth I'd come to the point of cutting my own body.

Instead, she began asking me questions about my self harm itself. It seems so bizarre to me now how much that shocked me. I remember feeling like she was swearing at me. The questions were so direct and honest. I felt like someone was blatantly asking me about it, rather than manipulating and tricking the answers out of me. When had it started? How did I do it? What did I do it with? What was it I got out of it? These were really obvious things that no one had ever asked me, and that I hadn't even asked myself in the ten years I'd been cutting myself and been in mental health services. She was very patient and said I didn't have to answer anything I wasn't ready to, but I think it was almost a relief just to be asked straight.

I think this first appointment really represents what I appreciated most about the Edinburgh Self Harm service. I was never treated like a naughty child or as though I was so unpredictable and out of

control I might whip out a knife at any moment and start cutting myself to ribbons. I was treated as an adult, as an equal, who knew myself better than anyone else, who used a coping strategy that made sense to me for some reason. That was an important thing I learned. That me self harming wasn't 'crazy'. For some reason it made perfect sense to me to cut myself when I was struggling to cope. When people have a lot of things to deal with, and not very many healthy resources to handle them all...they turn to negative forms of coping that get them through the day.

The service gave me something I'd never had. A space to explore why self harm had become my way of coping with the world. It also gave me a source of education about self harm outside of myself. When I first said how old I was, I was so ashamed. Twenty years old and still engaging in behaviour that I thought was reserved for thirteen year old little girls. That shame was challenged as I learned that self harm in adults was not as uncommon as I'd been led to believe. I didn't feel I was defending myself while hating myself at the same time. I felt I was learning about myself as a person. About the way my life had affected me and the way I'd learned to cope with it.

There was never any forced attempt to make me stop self harming. That's not what the service was about. I felt respected in the sense that no one was telling me how wrong it was, and what I should do to become 'normal'. I felt in control and I felt heard. I was learning about how self harm didn't restrict itself to my cutting. There are lots of ways people self harm and often people engage in several other forms that are less obvious, less explicit. I may have started cutting myself at eleven, but I'd been self harming in one way or another for pretty much all my life.

The Service gave me just what I needed. Somewhere to go and be understood. Somewhere to really look at the behaviour itself and challenge why I relied on it. But most importantly it gave me an understanding about self harm that was priceless. I learned it wasn't shameful, it wasn't disgusting, it wasn't crazy, that I was far from the only person who did it, and that there were other people out there who had managed to overcome it...so I could too.

We would try lots of different things. Different coping mechanisms, different ways of expressing yourself. Writing, painting, talking. Little emotion exercises from books, self esteem builders. If it didn't work, we wouldn't use it again.

If it did work, I'd add it to the collection of coping mechanisms that worked for me. I felt armed to deal with things in a way I never had before. I felt I had other options to turn to.

I didn't intend to stop. I didn't plan it. There wasn't a set day or a plan in place. But somehow having more awareness of my emotions, my reactions and the difficulties in my life seemed to give me power over something I'd always felt I was held ransom to. It's very easy to get trapped in a cycle of thinking you have no control over self harm. But the more I learned about it, the more control I felt I had. I think I had actively tried to live without it a few times at first. Maybe a few days or even a week. But then something would happen that I felt had ruined it and I'd relapse. It was never seen as a failure. It was seen as an opportunity to learn from it and try again next time. I started to understand that if difficult or stressful things happened, that didn't force me to self harm. I made that choice even if I felt it was outwith my control.

Actually, when I did stop, I didn't even mean to. I just realised one day that it had been several weeks since I'd held a blade to my skin. I wondered if I could go another week. Then another.

Admittedly, there were times when I was completely convinced I couldn't live through another hour without giving in...but somehow I managed to push through the urges with everything I had come to learn, and the other coping mechanisms I had tried. The longer I went, the further away from its grip I felt. The more able I was to realise that self harm wasn't achieving anything, it wasn't fixing my problems. They were still there when I put the razor down, and they weren't any easier to deal with.

I realised how far I'd come one day when I spoke at an awareness raising event for the project. I'd started using the service unable to say the word 'self harm' out loud, but now managed to read out my recovery story to a room filled with people, having not self harmed for a year and didn't feel any shame. I was actually proud of where I'd been and where I'd come to.

I am now working as a peer worker for the very service that helped me to recover. Which is something that I never expected on that first appointment. But it's definitely proof that people can and do manage to live without self harm if they are given the right tools and support and are never given up on.

My experience made me want to share what I learned with other people in the hope that maybe one day I will help someone even a fraction of the amount I was helped.

I'm still learning about self harm even today, about self harm outside of my own experience, about the resources available and about the level of understanding other people have. But today I'm in a position where I have more of a voice, and where I'm really using some difficult horrible experiences to hopefully do some good and help other people who are struggling like I was. It makes me very proud to be part of the service that changed my life.