Staff experiences of being a Peer Support Practitioner

Ryan Attree – Peer Support Worker

“I am them. They are me. Every morning when I walk onto the ward, I make a point of acknowledging everyone. Sometimes it’s just a smile or a quiet hello. I know how isolating mental distress can feel, and how difficult it can be to imagine that life could ever feel different.

“When I say I am them, they are me, I don’t mean our stories are identical. Every person carries their own pain, and their journey is their own. But beneath those differences, the emotional landscape is familiar: the fear, the exhaustion, the hopelessness.

“Recently, I spoke with someone who told me they were terrified they would never have a job, relationships, or the life they wanted. As we talked, I shared that I once stood in that place of disbelief. If someone had described my current life back when I was in crisis, I wouldn’t have believed them either. And yet, there I was, evidence that life can look very different from the way it does in the middle of a crisis. I told them that if they couldn't carry hope for themselves that day, I could carry it until they were ready.

“They looked at me and smiled. They were still struggling, but I noticed a little more light in their eyes than I had when we first started talking. They told me that our conversation had helped them realise that their mental health problems didn't necessarily have to stand between them and the life they wanted.

“I remember wondering whether they fully believed that yet, or whether they were simply saying what they thought I wanted to hear, as I know I have done when someone has tried to support me during a crisis. I’ll never know. But perhaps they didn't need to believe it completely that day. Perhaps, for that moment, it was enough that another possibility had entered the conversation.

“I’m learning that peer support isn’t about fixing someone or having all the answers. In another conversation, it meant sitting with someone experiencing frightening beliefs and knowing that I don't need to share the belief to understand the terror. After listening, I found myself shifting the question from “What do you want to escape?” to “What does a life worth living look like to you?”

“Before taking this role, I worried about what it might cost my own wellbeing. Instead, in my first few months as a Peer Support Practitioner, I have found walking alongside others unexpectedly healing. When I sit with someone who cannot yet imagine getting through the week, I am looking back at a past version of myself. And perhaps, when they look at me, they see that another chapter can exist. I am them. They are me.”

Perinatal peer support

“I feel very fortunate in my role, being community based gives a freedom and flexibility that isn’t always possible in a peer role. It would be really difficult to summarise a day in my working life so instead I will focus on the many varied things I can encounter in any given day across weeks and months of working.
Some days are very much office based, catching up on admin and sharing time with MDT colleagues in meetings and these are definitely my least favourite. I feel happiest and like I stand a chance of making the most difference when I am out in the community with the patients I support. We could be sat on their sofa talking and sharing resources together or perhaps in their garden noticing moments of calm together. We could be out for a walk, getting fresh air and exercise together, which brings a lovely meaning to “walking alongside someone” and isn’t it always nicer to go for a walk with company?

“I often find patients talk more freely in such a situation, when they feel less like the spotlight is directly upon them. Sometimes we will attend groups or appointments together, always planning these for most comfort (no lanyard, who they want to introduce me as if the occasion arises etc). I take a huge pride in rapport building, really getting to know the individual and what they want me to know about them, they get to know about me too as and when they want, on a level they’re perhaps not used to in services. I truly believe this helps support a great working relationship that’s progressive and mutual. Sometimes being gifted with time and the effort made to build such rapport means I find myself advocating for patients and helping them to use their voice when things don’t feel right on a wider level.

“My role is so varied. I run groups, pitch ideas and partake in many meetings, but overall, my favourite place to be is alongside patients on their journey, doing all I can to support them build the skills they need for the future and providing whatever hope I can that things can and will get better.”

Natalie Phillips – Peer Support Lead

“Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting Rebecca Lewis, our Peer Support Practitioner at Newhaven Lodge Rehabilitation Unit.

“I was genuinely struck by the incredible work Rebecca does every day. The connection, calmness, and genuine empathy she brings to her role are evident in every interaction and are deeply valued by both patients and colleagues alike.

“During my visit, I joined a group activity that Rebecca created called the Music Quiz. Staff and patients are encouraged to participate if they feel comfortable doing so. Rebecca ensures that everyone in the room has an opportunity to contribute by sharing their favourite song, the artist, and the reason it holds meaning for them. The level of engagement from both staff and patients is a huge testament to the trusting and inclusive environment that Rebecca has fostered.

“One interaction in particular stood out to me. A resident initially chose not to participate and sat quietly without engaging in the activity. However, with Rebecca’s “gentle encouragement and support, they gradually became involved and ultimately ended up being a joint winner of the quiz, proudly receiving a certificate. It was a powerful reminder of the impact that meaningful peer support can have in helping people build confidence, connection, and a sense of achievement.

“This is a particularly challenging time for many teams, with pressures including staffing shortages, patient acuity, and organisational consultations. What continues to stand out is the resilience of our peer workforce, who consistently show up as beacons of hope and recovery despite these challenges.

“Rebecca truly is a ray of sunshine. Her positivity, compassion, and unwavering commitment to those she supports make her an invaluable member of the team at Newhaven Lodge. The difference she makes every day is clear to see, and both the unit and the wider trust are incredibly fortunate to have her.”

Life as a peer with bipolar

“I have worked as a peer for the NHS for five years. In that time there have been a lot of changes in my life but one constant is my love for the job. I was diagnosed with Bipolar affective disorder in my early twenties but started becoming mentally unwell as a teenager. It is an understatement to say it has been very difficult at times. There were times when I didn’t want to be here. I genuinely thought I had no use in the world to anyone.

“Due to my condition I left school with no qualifications and was in and out of work. My pattern was that I would find a job then sooner or later become unwell and leave. I also had a lot of workplace bullying directed at me. I felt ashamed of my condition for so long and of myself. It’s so hard when you can’t enjoy simple things and when your mind is racing all over the place you are unable to even watch a show you used to like or read a book. I think a lot of people don’t realise that being mentally unwell can also leave you feeling physically exhausted. I would get extremely paranoid and think that no one liked me and everything was my fault and the only way I can describe it was a fear of dread. The feeling terrified me.

“It has taken me a long time to not be ashamed of my condition anymore and to feel at peace with myself and surround myself with people who genuinely care about what happens to me. The five years working as a peer have been amazing. I have still struggled with my mental health during my job. When you have a condition like bi polar it does not go away it is about managing it effectively and trying your best to have a contented and worthwhile life.

“I truly believe that the reason I feel so contented has a lot to do with my job. When I first started I was not very confident and it has taken me a while to be fully confident in my role and there are always more things to learn. Also I had worked in a peer role briefly before and was not supported at all and did not feel strong enough to stand up for myself at the time. I was called “incompetent,” by a colleague and my line manager at the time said “I looked vacant.” I felt so unsupported I would

sometimes hide and go and cry in the toilets. I am so glad that, that experience did not put me off from applying again.

“I would definitely say working as a peer is a complete privilege. I get to meet the most, funny, bright, intelligent, creative, kind, caring people. They may be struggling but it doesn’t stop them being those things. When I tell people what I do they say it must be challenging and rewarding and it can be those things, but it’s also a laugh. Joking with my clients and colleagues. When things are tough being able to laugh and have a joke can be so important.

“Being a peer is not about telling the person what they should do or saying I’ve conquered all my challenges now it’s your turn. It is a reciprocal relationship. We learn from each other. I have learnt so many things from my clients and I will always be grateful to them for that.

“No two days are the same and I like that. It is about compassion and I feel one of the most important things is not to judge but to truly listen. On my Imrocc training one thing that one of the trainers said that really resonated with me was that “when someone is on a boat and it is sinking they might not want to you fix the situation but just sit with them while it sinks.” I took this to mean that not everyone wants or needs a solution just being there is enough.

“Doing this job now I feel I have a purpose. I love going into work. I also have incredible colleagues who are just as passionate about the work and incredibly supportive towards me.

“When I talk about my job I make it sound like Hogwarts. I absolutely love it. For me it is not a job but a calling. I cannot tell you how good it makes me feel I had one client say I was her backbone and if it wasn’t for me she might not be here and another say that after our first meeting after speaking to me she felt rejuvenated. Hearing this feedback made me feel humbled and so good about what I do and the difference I can make.

“I get paid to help and support people. What can be better than that. My job and the people in it clients and colleagues alike have given me something so precious. They have given me belief in myself and what I can do and that is more important to me than gold.

“When you have serious mental health difficulties I am not exaggerating to say it can feel debilitating. Having something your passionate about can be so important. My job and the people in it have given me everything. There is a saying “when you find a job you love you will never work a day in your life,” that’s how I feel!!”