

# ***Exclusion to Inclusion***

## **a Support Time and Recovery Perspective**

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In February 2004 I was employed in a senior post in the UK Merchant Navy. I was earning a good salary. I was well qualified and considered good at my job. I lived a secure middle class existence in an almost paid for semi in a popular area. While my relationship had been in a poor state for some time I doted on my eight year old son.

In March 2004 I suffered a bi-polar episode.

As this wasn't my first such episode I was aware of my deteriorating condition and contacted my GP hoping to initiate an early intervention. My GP arranged a visit from locally based CPN's who arrived within a day to make an assessment. As a result of this assessment I was given support from Crisis Resolution Services and it was my stated conviction that I believed I had acted in time to forestall this episode becoming a major risk. Unfortunately this was misplaced optimism and three days later I suffered a manic attack which led inevitably to my admission into an acute psychiatric unit. As the alternative was possibly death it wasn't a bad result. With hindsight I hadn't been failed in anyway by the system, rather my perceptions of my mental health were skewed.

This admission, not my first, was to have results which were previously unforeseeable. While in this unit, which was a temporary stay as I awaited a move to a unit nearer home, I had a brief period of lucidity and felt the need to read. The magazines appeared mundane and the books offered nothing either. I took to the last resort of the frustrated mind in a unit... I started scanning the rack of leaflets.

In amongst the women's groups, men's groups, schizophrenic support groups and countless copies of Hull's own "New Dawn" the title of one small pamphlet caught my eye. It wasn't a gaudy colour, nor was the writing in an unusual font or super large. Rather the heading represented something. "Positive Assets"? I wasn't one at this time, in fact I was anything but, in my mind the self cancelling "negative asset" leaving a nice round zero was more appropriate.

Within two weeks I had lost my job and my relationship had shuddered through its final death throws. I hadn't seen my son since my admission.

Seven more weeks saw me discharged into the community, into a MIND hostel as I was technically homeless. It was also technically an improvement. Although the benefits system we labour under meant that financially I couldn't live as well as I had been in the acute unit!

After I had paid rent to MIND who were doing a fantastic job I had about £30.00 to live on. This was socially and economically an unusual situation for me to find myself in to say the least. I had some good friends but I couldn't afford to socialise with them. I had hobbies but I couldn't afford to carry them out. I had a lot of money invested in a house but couldn't touch it. Anyway, I had already made the decision that whatever happened to me there would be the minimum disruption to my sons' life, so asking my now ex wife to help was out of the question.

Contact with my son was limited as my ex partner would not allow him to spend time with me where I was because she didn't want him in a house "full of mad men" although to give credit where its due she wouldn't have allowed him to spend time in a house full of mad women either! To travel to his location was expensive, as was doing ANY of the activities young boys expect from their dads. Movies, football matches, burgers, shopping expeditions, music, bmx parks, especially bmx parks at which we had previously spent hours together, ALL beyond my reach.

"I don't care dad I just love you" brought tears to my eyes and allowed me to feel proud of something I was a part of, but didn't alleviate the sense of failure as a provider. Anyway I just wanted to spend time with him and even that was problematic.

People use the phrase 'rock bottom'. That was also the phrase I applied to myself as I took stock of my situation. Of course rock bottom is subjective and in reality things could have been much worse for me.

However for me, I was reliant on other people for everything, I had no job and couldn't go back to my previous employment on my consultants advice, I could afford none of the social activities everyone, myself included take for granted. I am held by drugs in my system which in reality are keeping me socially viable, I had debts which I couldn't afford to pay off and which were catching up with me fast, I felt a failure and looked a failure, in my own eyes I shuffled and hung my head like a dog. Smiling happy people began to annoy me.

Rock bottom? The correct phrase is "socially excluded" but that hardly seems to be the correct language to use for oneself. "Rock bottom" that's more descriptive. I took stock of my possessions. My beloved Apple lap top, my books at my old address, some expensive toys and my clothes. And my mind which was now functioning in a fashion I could recognise. What else? A mounting pile of angry letters from banks, a growing pile of communication with benefits agencies and a leaflet which I had kept when I left the acute unit.

Positive Assets. That word again, Positive! The one word that so many excluded people are unable to associate with! I am in debt but I am positive about it? I can't get a job but its quite positive really? I can't see my friends but that's a positive? I can't function as a father but that's another positive?

Here was a leaflet telling me I could be positive about something, not only job opportunities but the suggestion of understanding! I made a telephone call.

This very quickly led to a meeting, the meeting with the positive assets coordinator was positive. A first in a while and not the last. Yes I could get a job. You would like to be a care

worker? Definitely something to be positive about and achievable. Lets try and sort that now. Need a bit of positive encouragement to go for that? Here it is. Excellent, lets see what's available, we'll send you letters telling you when posts become available.... Yeah about one a month? Bloody hell not another one falling through the letter box. Need help with your CV? Need help with the application? No? You can do it yourself? That's fantastic that's positive. You can do this.

The Positive Assets Coordinator was so positive towards me I began to feel positive towards me as well.

Excellent, that's alright then, things are going fine, here's another job. Experience in the care field required, at least one year suggested, all is not that rosy in the garden then? What about past experience as a service user, other people in the care field tell me to be very careful about mentioning that. Social inclusion is still a lip service for some. It may hold you back. Or it may not. So that's a don't know then? Thanks for the advice.

Hey here's one. Have you heard of a new post called STR Worker? Yeah but I don't have a years experience of care work. Not a problem. But I have been a service user. That's two 'not a problems'. This post specifically offers the opportunity for employment in the local Trust to service users. You mean service users as in the socially excluded? As in the rock bottomed? The application form came and was filled out. The job description had appealed immediately. It seemed a little like they wanted people like me to support people like me. There was a lot of humming and hah-ing around that. Transferable life skills and a lot of experience of not feeling very well mentally. None of my qualifications seemed relevant, the removal and realigning of a ships tail-shaft with adjustments to the OD box and recalibration of the closed loop feedback systems while setting the cpp to the relevant K mark? Excellent, here's a job in mental health its' yours.

However life skills, values, experience of multi cultural working and living, a firmly held belief system that has never been discriminatory. A willingness to be educated in new skills and an empathy for fellow travellers, how could you not have that. It was as if the STR role was made with people like me in mind. And there are many me's in the mental health system.

How to mention my being a service user without making it sound like a plea for employment? How to mention this fact and maintain dignity? Will this job come because you are the best for the job or because you have a mental illness and someone wants' to tick a box? Yes we've employed one.

On the surface everything appears supportive, will it be? In the end I opt for "as a previous user of services I have gained a limited understanding of the operating of the mental health systems." I left it at that.

I get an interview. I am not nervous in interviews, some are and it's a great shame that this has held some excellent people back. This interview was different; it seemed designed to give the nervous an opportunity to overcome some of the stumbling blocks. Whilst not nervous in interviews I actually found myself enjoying this one. The questions required answers based upon honesty, common sense and values. As usual I assessed my chances. Everyone I talked to seemed to have some degree of experience in care work and seemed relieved to hear I didn't. Perhaps mentally eliminating me.

We are promised calls at 1600 informing us of our success or lack of. By 1800 I figure it had been worth a punt but there'll be another chance. So positively had positive assets changed my thinking.

The phone rings, the usual moment of high tension, I've got the job! You mean I am advancing to the next stage of the interview process? No, you've got the job. I've got the job!! Fuck Me. It's that dramatic. Socially excluded, rock bottom, to employed.

The first step has been taken; social exclusion is beginning its rotation.

Now begins the usual world of bumf.

Forms for this, forms for that, lets inject you in the arm, lets change the insurance on your car, sure as soon as I get one you can.

Have you got a telephone number? An email address? A mobile number? No but I bloody well will have because now social exclusion is rotating and I can feel the centrifugal effect, phones, emails and mobiles. Injections, forms to fill in, want me to have a car? I can because I will be employed. I'll be included.

Do you have a bank account number? Do I ever, I get a letter reminding me of it every day from a pissed off manager, he'll be very pleased at my move into the world of social inclusion. Mentally the pace picks up and with it goes my stature and head, it no longer hangs. I'm going to be an STR worker, employed, included, I'll see my son and we'll go to the bmx park. We might even go to the good one in Leeds, because being socially included these activities are open to me.

I start work, I receive training, the STR leadership is exemplary, enthusiastic and inclusive. I know that's bad grammar but I love the word inclusion. The training is excellent. Lifelong learning I think its called. How inclusive is that!

And this is because someone somewhere thought of having a new role that would be open to service users. Someone said lets call it STR worker. Someone in the Humber area said that looks good and let's put someone with enthusiasm in charge of the initiative, someone who believes in the role and its values.

As a result, myself, and, I know, a large number of other service users are now back in the world so to speak. And you know what? We all have suffered some form of social exclusion at one time or another so we should all be able to fight against it.

And we are. Want to fight social exclusion? Employ someone who's suffered from it!

I myself am now back in the world of the included, please, never let me forget where I was last year, for my sins I get to look back into the dark world of the excluded and sometimes reach far enough into it to help someone pull themselves a bit of the way back from the underworld of exclusion.

That is the great privilege that the STR role has bestowed upon me and others like me.

I'd change one thing. I'd call it Support Time and Inclusion worker!

Phil Kay