

Martin...My Story

Martin, 44, Performance & Reporting Analyst, developed severe depression with psychosis and attempted suicide, triggered by work related stress.

About me

I'm a tall ex-soldier with an engineering degree, I have worked for Network Rail for about 12 years. I'm happily married, enjoy nature and history, and my favourite holiday destination is the Alhambra Palace in Spain. I also appear to have been adopted by next doors cat.

My crisis point came in September 2012, upon reflection I had been becoming ill over a long period of time, perhaps 18 months, but I just thought this is what happens when you are trying to manage a stressful job, I thought I just needed to crack on. I was diagnosed with a mental health condition aged 42.

At work I was very good at hiding what was happening and I appeared to be keeping a lid on things, somebody once commented that "I was the last person they would think of who would have had a breakdown" but it was all superficial. Inside I was really struggling and my mind was just unravelling until I was just completely overwhelmed. However it was pretty obvious to my colleagues that something was wrong when I didn't come into work one day, I had attempted suicide and was now an inpatient in hospital and didn't come back in the office for six months. It's pretty hard to hide that!

Support and Managing my mental health

Whilst I was in hospital my department sent flowers to my wife and during my absence from work I was in regular contact with my Line Manager and HR Business Partner. I was invited to team social events and not made to feel like an outsider.

As the risk of relapse was severe, my doctors stated that on my return to work I should be moved into a different role, this was agreed and I started a phased return that was at my pace. My Line Manager and HR Business Partner both held regular meetings with me during and after this period where empathy and trust were displayed by all parties. I was also allowed to attend Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Mindfulness Meditation off site during work time which was vital to my recovery as during the CBT it was identified I had Panic Disorder which I was then treated for.

As I was preparing to return to work I was surprised that no clear mechanism seemed to be in place to abide by the conditions of the 2010 Equality Act in regards to implementing "Reasonable Adjustments" between NR and myself. Whilst still quite fragile it seemed that the onus was on myself to manage the process of getting a "Stress Risk Assessment", "Reasonable Adjustments" and "Wellness Recovery Action Plan" in place. This did add unnecessary levels of stress and raised doubts about the willingness of the business to take this matter seriously.

The major disappointment has been that even though doctors stated that work was the major contributor to my illness, little action has been put in place in my department to see why this happened and what could prevent this happening to other colleagues. I cannot help but think that if it had been a physical injury sustained at work that led to me being



everyone fit
for the future

hospitalised for three weeks and requiring six months on sick leave things would have been approached differently.

Where I am now

Things are much better now. I say that having a mental health crisis was the worst thing I have ever experienced in my life. However getting a diagnosis and treatment has been the best thing to happen to me (except marrying my wife of course). I now realise that the thoughts I experience can be managed and changed for the better. I don't have to see life through a dark coloured lens and there is hope in the future.

The biggest change I have made is not to be in denial and to accept that I have a serious chronic mental health condition. I have been told that I have a 50% chance of the illness returning and to help prevent this I need to actively manage my lifestyle even when I am feeling healthy.

To interrupt my daily stress I ensure that I take lunch breaks during which at least three times a week I train at a gym near to work and I practice Mindfulness Meditation every day. As alcohol and depression really don't mix I now don't drink, I have also cut out caffeine as I am hyper sensitive to it. Gaining a positive work life balance is extremely important as it prevents me fixating on issues so I am very careful to ensure that I leave the office on time and do not take work home, even a mobile phone. This allows my mind to "switch off", something I really struggled with in the past.

However much of a cliché it sounds my outlook on life and priorities have changed. I try to take each day as it comes and not try to predict what will happen in the future. I accept that whilst work is important to me because it offers structure, companionship and a wage, I realise that you really only have one life and the important things that matter are family, friends and fulfilling the experiences that enrich you as a person.

I am open about my illness and the effect it has on me. My colleagues are aware and supportive. As per the Equality Act 2010, because I am managing a lifelong condition I am classed as disabled and I do have "Reasonable Adjustments" agreed between myself and NR, this has proven to be crucial during re-orgs and change in Line Managers.

I attend a peer support group at my local branch of MIND, which have been a fantastic source of support because I realised that I'm not the only person who is going through these issues and that unfortunately Mental Illness is extremely widespread.

My advice to others is to remember that getting stressed is a normal part of life. But when you start feeling overwhelmed with things or start to feel things are not quite right there is no shame in seeking help. Mental illness is just that, an illness that affects the brain. When we suffer an illness to any other organ of the body we are not embarrassed or think it as a sign of weakness, so why do we when it comes to the brain? It makes absolutely no sense.

The vast majority of mental illness can be successfully treated with therapy or medication. We wouldn't think twice about going to the GP about feeling unwell elsewhere in the body and we need to adopt this attitude in regards to the mind. As with all illness, the sooner you seek help the better.