

Goats and Mental Health

What am I doing writing in here? Well, here's the conversation that led to this piece, which will hopefully provide the answer:

- Jon: Now that you are a 'service user' do you fancy doing an article for our next newsletter in June?
- Nathan: Sure, but what do you want me to write about?
- Jon: Goats and mental health, duh - what do you think I want you to write about!
- Nathan: How am I a 'service user' anyway?
- Jon: You're seeing a psychologist on the NHS hence you are using a service
- Nathan: I was (stopped now as I ran out of things to say!) seeing a counsellor and I think it's a charity rather than NHS... I could talk about the experience, though.
- Jon: Yes that's a good idea
- Nathan: How long do you want it and when do you want it by?
- Jon: Side of A4 end of first week in June
- Nathan: Double or single spaced?
- Jon: That's a bit technical but we will go for single.

So, here I am, writing a single-spaced side of A4 for the first week of June on my experiences as a 'service user', although as established above, I wasn't actually a service user. However, I did go and see a counsellor for about eight sessions over two months and that is what I'm going to write about here.

I had been meaning to see a counsellor for years to discuss various issues that I had been coping with, or 'managing' to use their speech, but not actually addressing. Last year I finally got around to doing it.

Locating a counsellor was a problem in the first place. Initially, I was referred through my NHS doctor in London and set up with an initial assessment at Barnet Hospital. That went well and I was looking forward to further sessions. I was put on the waiting list. However, nothing happened. Then, I got a job in Aberdeen. Once I moved to Aberdeen, I received notice that I had gotten my first appointment (typical!), which, for obvious reasons, I couldn't take. Once up in Aberdeen, I tried going through 'Couple Counselling' (the Scottish version of Relate; don't ask me why the name is different) and had an initial assessment session there. I returned for a second appointment only to be told that the counsellor felt that she wouldn't be right for me. I told her that I'd need counselling to get over the fact that I had been rejected by a counsellor. When she looked alarmed, I reassured her that I was only joking.

I was then referred to an independent organisation called Aberdeen Counselling and Information Service (ACIS), managed by Mental Health Aberdeen, where I (eventually) completed my eight weeks of counselling. Of course, at ACIS I had to have another assessment session so by the time I finally met with the counsellor, I had repeated the same thing about four times and was sick of repeating it. It sounded like a pre-rehearsed mantra which, by this time, of course, it was.

Anyway, once I finally began my sessions, I found the whole experience, at first, liberating and quite enjoyable. For one thing, I got to talk about myself for a whole hour with someone who was paid to listen and couldn't tell me shut up as I was talking rubbish as my friends and family make a habit of doing. Nor was I made to feel guilty about it. I could be as selfish and self-centred as I liked as this was the point of the whole session.

Yet, I found the experience simultaneously frustrating. Every week I had to decide the topic of discussion and she listened – disconcertingly attempting to maintain eye contact the whole time – while I ranted. I'm not sure what kind of counsellor she was – I think it was a 'person-centred' approach whereby she helped me to find the resources within myself to deal with the issues that I raised. But this is not what I wanted. I wanted to be challenged; not to be told I'm wrong but for someone to say, 'Hey, look at this way'. She did it once and it left me speechless with wonder but this only served to exacerbate my frustration as I wanted to be challenged more often. I found that we were going round and round in circles. Eventually, as a result of this, I actually ran out of things to say which, for anyone who knows me, will tell you is a miracle! After eight weeks I had exhausted the things that I wanted to talk about with that particular type of counsellor. I now realise that, while the experience was worthwhile, that I needed another kind of counselling, although which kind I'm not certain. My search shall continue.

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