

Richard:

From Hell to Happiness

Introduction

I wrote this story to enable people to see how recovery is possible even when suffering years of mental ill-health and physical difficulties.



Birth and the Early Years

I was born in Ashford, Middlesex on 18 March 1972. I was fit and well and scored high on the baby score. I was a normal baby, cried unless pushed around in a pram.

We had a lovely cat who was, as my parents say, half wild as he had to be put outside in a shed at night as he would go bonkers if he was left in the house, biting toes, clawing furniture and causing chaos.

After I was born, we moved from Ashford to a lovely quiet village called Halliford, just a couple of miles from Shepperton Studios which was active in those days. All around us were fields. It was great, living in the country as I saw it on the edge of the green belt area of London where no properties could be built on fields. Halliford had probably a few hundred residents over a large area with a railway line going along one edge and four shops, a laundrette, sweet shop, post office, corner store and bakery. One of my cousins ended up running the post office for many years.

I went to nursery school from when I was three until I was four and a half years old. During this time, I had half days at nursery school where the staff did the best to help me mix in and have fun. The nursery school was at the rear of a house just a few minutes round the corner at the end of the estate in which I lived. It was run by a lovely couple in their 60's. I didn't enjoy the experience as I wasn't used to mixing and must have been stubborn as I refused to mix with the other children. The highlights of the half day were morning milk time as we were given small bottles of milk to drink to give us calcium and other nutrients and the outside play time where I could play with the table sand pit. There was a large climbing frame / play structure, but it wasn't for me.

My parents did all they could to get me to mix with other children, often inviting them and their parents round for a coffee in the hope I would mix. I did with a couple of children, but didn't want to know the majority.

There were some children in the estate I did mix with, but only when playing in my driveway with the bikes, toy tractor and other toys I had. I never had the confidence to leave the safety of my house.

I went to primary school when I was four and a half, half a day a week to start with and then full days. I don't remember much about primary school other than having fun in the wendy house and getting told off and a smack for wetting myself. I was surprised that no-one bothered to find out why.

I used to hate going through the school gates despite it having its own entrance from the middle school. Mum would have to walk me right up to the gate where I was met by a teacher and walked in to the school. Quite why I hated school is unknown. Probably due to my not mixing and wanting to be safe with someone I knew and trusted.

Towards the end of the First School I used to spend time in the middle school and quite often was asked to read to the students in their reading class. I feel this was to show them up as my reading was advanced for my years at that time.

Middle School

I remember starting middle school with anxiety. I would be upset at the main gates and on one

occasion the headmaster put his head out of the window and shouted who was crying. Not that he was interested, just wanted to get on with his work.

I had some good times at St Nicholas School. These included the annual drama productions and a school trip, to Yorkshire and the Grassington area, which while I was home-sick, I did enjoy. This led to several return visits with my family.

The Teenage Years

I started Halliford School, my senior school, when I was 11. It was an all boys school. Some people came with me from St Nicholas, but the majority went to Thamesmead school, the following year, which was round the corner from Halliford School. Sufficed to say the two schools didn't get on and in my third year, Thamesmead came round to taunt us as we weren't allowed out at lunchtime. After a week or so, things got worse with things being thrown over the fence by both sides. This escalated into being invaded by them and a teacher getting a brick thrown at his head, when he tried to intervene. The police were called and when sirens were heard, the trouble dispersed. We had a police presence each break time for several weeks. Trouble flared up from time to time, but never this bad.

The school said that it was against bullying, but it still happened. We all had briefcases of one kind or another. On one occasion my briefcase was pinched and the combination changed. It took hours to break the combination. My next case had a lock and when that broke, things were changing and people were using sports bags. On other occasions I would have my arms twisted, punched and kicked. In my final year I was being called names and my bag was being kicked by someone sitting in the next row of desks to me. So when he refused to stop, I kicked him back and caught him in the nether regions. Sufficed to say, I was in trouble. The headmaster was annoyed and told me off; but he rang my parents and told them he was pleased that I had finally stood up for myself. I was given a punishment of missing two break times. The boy was told not to retaliate and to ensure his friends didn't.

I hated school and spent most of years 1 to 4 crying and upset for most of the time. My parents tried another school — I passed the entrance test, but didn't like it as it was a boarding school. Looking back on things, I feel I would have been better in a mixed school.

In my third year, in agreement with the headmaster, my parents took me out of school once a week for an afternoon, usually a games afternoon, to visit the Child Guidance, which became CAMHS, the Child and Adolescent mental health service, as people were certain something was wrong, but not what was wrong. The social worker was OK, but didn't help as she made me feel it was two against one and led me with questions whereas she should have used open questions. I was glad when dad stopped going due to it being a waste of time, as I didn't feel it had helped either.

During my time at Halliford School, I joined the chess club which was run at lunchtimes, to avoid some of the bullying as it was a supervised session. I won the chess prize one year. I then went on to run a computer games session in the lunch time when I found I was good with the "BBC Master" computers that they had. I quickly learnt quite a bit of "Basic", the computer language, and was often called on by staff to help when problems arose.

I got involved in several drama productions. On one occasion, the headmaster was so annoyed with the way things were going as he was directing the production, that he took the chorus, of which I was part, outside. He grabbed me by the tie, up against the wall to the main hall and threatened us to ensure we learnt the songs by the next rehearsal. This I have never forgotten or forgiven as he was against bullying and violence and here he was doing it to me.

I was no good at sport, but one thing that I did enjoy and that did help me, was my faith. I joined the Christian Union at school. It met once a week in the lunch hour. I was also an altar boy at church and in the scout band. I enjoyed taking part as I felt important and wanted. I enjoyed scouts, but had problems on the first scout camp I went on. I was upset, but coped. I managed to bribe the farmer to let me call home. This only led to problems as the leaders didn't want the farmer bothered and also led to my parents worrying about me. When the second camp came round I went on it as I'd forgotten

how much I hated it first time around. I lasted 1/2 hour and despite the leaders saying it was illegal for me to return, I called their bluff and won and the coach driver brought me home to my Granddad. A leader, who hadn't gone to the camp, called my parents who returned from holiday as my Granddad couldn't have looked after me. I left the scouts after that and really missed the activities and being part of the band where I had progressed from playing the cymbals to the bugle and on to the drums where I became solo drummer. I solo drummed for several years including summer parades and remembrance parades. We even performed for our marching licence on a stage in front of a hall of people.

At school I took 8 GCSE exams in my fifth year and despite really enjoying the final year as I was given responsibility by the headmaster who wanted me to stay on, I passed only 1 GCSE at C grade and that was Music. Maths, English and French I got a D grade. Art a D grade, Biology and Spanish an E grade and a G grade for History, which I had done as I liked the teacher and needed a subject I could enjoy and not worry about the exam on.

In the summer holidays, I worked for the Elmbridge Borough Council in their Depot doing admin duties and making the tea. I was bullied there by one of the staff who quickly found out I was better at his job than he was. One of the managers found out about this and stopped it. During this period, I had a day off to go to Halliford School's Prize Giving Day where I won the Progress Prize for the pupil that had progressed most in their time at the school.

After the summer, I went to College to retake my English and Maths. I was allowed to use a computer to type up my Maths, but not my English coursework. I also took Business and Information studies. I passed all these with a C grade. I gained a D grade for Photography which I had changed from French as I didn't get on with the teacher. I had a blip at college and this was picked up by a counsellor who during his sessions tried to help me, but only made things worse by telling me that I would go mad if I didn't stop talking to myself. Years later we dealt with this and I accepted that talking things through is the brain's way of processing information and that it is normal.

One thing the tutor did help with was by getting me to help with his drama group, which led to me getting involved in amateur dramatics. I joined the Shepperton Players for 6 years until a falling out with one of the members when I transferred to the Youth Theatre as a leader. I had spent 6 years in the technical team and unless the director wanted someone else, I looked after lighting. In the Youth Theatre I was the Assistant Technical Director, but usually ran the group as the Director worked for the BBC and was often called away to work on outside broadcasts.

When I left college I worked for Elmbridge Borough Council in their Rates and Poll Tax office. The staff were fine, except my line manager who didn't like the fact that his boss knew my father well and that had got me the job. He caused me a lot of upset and problems which ended up with me leaving 9 months later and going to work for the London Borough Sutton in their Housing Department. I was given a double promotion as I could type and had skills they wanted. It was a temporary position as I was covering for maternity leave, but they knew dad and had pulled strings to get me in their department. I had a great time and enjoyed myself. I went for a permanent job in the surveyors side of the job and was given it. I knew that I would have to go to college and felt I could cope, but a month before I was due to go, couldn't cope with it and left the job. I was then unemployed for 18 months. I signed on and was so scared when signing in each fortnight that they might have something that I started becoming unwell.

Adulthood

It was 1992 and I was getting unwell. I dreaded the phone ringing in case it was work. I advertised for work to keep the benefits office happy, but I couldn't cope with anything. I hated being in and regularly went out for walks to escape. On one occasion I went to the woods to cut my wrists, wrote a note and couldn't go through it. I went to my GP and he told me to pull myself together and not be so stupid. A month or so later he put me on asthma drugs to help my breathing.

When I left the London Borough of Sutton, a contractor said he would employ me, but during the 18 months nothing had happened. I had lost confidence, but then he rang and said yes. I went to work

for Thorpe and Laidlaw and Alan Rhodes builders looking after their admin. My main role was to set up a quality assurance scheme to enable them to win the tenders with London Borough of Sutton the next Spring. I had 8 months to do this. We did well, but didn't get the contract. I left in the spring as I had failed them.

After a holiday with mum and dad, it was suggested I work for dad and build up the family business. Brabrook & Co. was formed and soon became a limited company. I enjoyed it at first, but after a couple of years I became ill again.

I had helped out at a local ballroom and Latin dance class and Saturday dances since 1990 when I went along to have some fun. On three occasions an ambulance was called as I had breathing difficulties. The second and third times I was taken to A&E and referred back to my GP. I was convinced something else was wrong and started worrying about it. I went to see my GP in a state. He was busy and I broke down in reception. The receptionist took me through to their staff room and spoke to another GP who had recently joined the team. She saw me immediately and chatted with me for ages. Her appointments were moved to other GP's. She had recently completed the rotation in the psychiatric department and recognised my signs and symptoms. She was convinced it was a depressive illness and prescribed Seroxat. I took this for a few days and went back to her worse than ever and she prescribed me a tranquilizer - Diazepam - to help me through the first 3 weeks. On the 3rd week a miracle happened and I felt better. I was fine for a couple of years and then got ill again. Mum took me to see my GP. She saw how ill I was and wrote a letter and asked mum to take me immediately to Ashford A&E. On arrival the psychiatrist was called and it took him over an hour to come. Believing this would help me, I calmed down when he did see me; he refused to sign the section and put me on more pills. I went back to my GP who was furious and referred me to the Priory Hospital in Knaphill, Surrey as a day patient.

Whilst at The Priory I had lots of therapies including Counselling, Art Therapy, Grief Therapy, Individual and Group Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. I got on so well that after 6 months I went on holiday on my own. However, when I returned I had a blip, probably because I had pushed myself too far.

Around 1996, I joined the Red Cross and when I passed my 10 week First Aid course, I went out on public duties and had a lot of fun meeting lots of people. Part of my work was to attend Sandown Race Course during race days. Here I progressed from first aid to controller where I ran the communications for the medical teams from both Red Cross and Surrey Private Ambulance Service who supported us. I met lots of people during the events including the Queen Mother where I was allowed to get within feet of her and sat in front of her when I was the communications controller. One day I had to cross the tracks while the race was in progress. Quite a nervous time, but I made it with a minute or so to spare. The reason this had to happen was a heart attack in the middle of the race course in the silver zone. On arrival, the person was having bad heart pains and all I could do was to call it in and request paramedics, who arrived as soon as the race finished, quickly backed up by Surrey Ambulance Service. Two years later I joined a private ambulance service as a first aider and later qualified to assist on the ambulances. The wages were crap, but I had lots of fun and got in to many functions including Christmas parties at Epsom Race Course, lots of horse riding and art / craft shows. The injuries at these events were worse and I was able to do more as I was always partnered with a paramedic. I also started setting up my own business covering first aid at local events. Two local stables used me a lot to cover their events. This meant I attended lots of injuries, the worst was a spinal. However, the person was fine after treatment.

During this time I met a friend and helped her set up a Saddlery workshop and shop. However, things were going down hill with my health and so in the year 2000, I moved to Devon as my parents had retired and moved there in 1997. During 2000, I recovered on my own due to the lovely green fields, which replaced concrete and traffic jams.

In 2001, my parents bought me a house to rent off them to enable me to gain my independence. I tried to tell them I couldn't cope, but we put it down to nerves. They went out with their friends and I cut my wrists. Somehow I took myself to Honiton minor injuries unit and was seen immediately by a nurse and a student nurse who sat with me for 3 hours and talked to me. They searched my car for a knife I had there and contacted my GP. He came at lunchtime and apparently had been arranging a

bed in hospital. He gave me the option of a voluntary admission or he would section me as I was too ill to stay at home. I agreed and was taken by ambulance to Wonford House in Exeter. I was admitted in to the Cedars, a new building, purpose built as a psychiatric acute admissions unit. They called my parents who were very upset, but accepted that I needed to be in hospital as I was so ill. I spent two weeks in there. During this time my medication was changed to Venlafaxine, Propranolol and Buspirone. I also received a top up of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. This really helped me and helped to relieve the boredom when the video player packed up. I was on assessment for 4 days in a shared room with a curtain at the window. I was only allowed plastic items while they sorted out how much of a risk I was. I was then moved to my own room in the male ward. I hated being around the men as I was scared and spent most of my time in the lounge. I went to the Occupational Therapist as often as I could to have fun and do some relaxation sessions. I had lots of support in the hospital, but there were lots of ill people on the ward. I was scared of lots of their illnesses as I didn't understand them. I have got to know some of the patients since discharge and they are nice people, but at the time I didn't know this.

When I was discharged from hospital, I was referred to the Community Mental Health Team in Honiton. I was assigned a CPN who was in her 50's and rubbish as she treated me like a son and there was no relationship. During this time I was referred to MIND and after 8 months asked to change keyworker. However, there was no-one else available, so the manager at MIND took me on for 3 months. During this time, I was asked by the Service User Group to go on interview panels. One of these was at the Honiton CMHT and it ended up with me appointing a social worker who became my care coordinator as their titles now became. I got on well with him as he worked hard to get a relationship with me that worked. When he changed jobs, I was referred to an Occupational Therapist whose job was to support me to enable me to move on. In 2005, I was discharged on to the Rapid Referral Protocol, which means if I get ill, I can be fast tracked back in the system. During my time at the CMHT, the only therapy I had was Anxiety Management. I had several reviews of my care plan. My first therapist wrote these before I arrived in the session and just asked me to sign it which I did as I knew no different. My social worker and OT asked me to be present and wrote the plans and reviews with me and only when they had seen I had read it would they let me sign it. They then gave me copies.

In 2001, I was referred to MIND. I felt very nervous, but it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened. I really appreciated the time I was given and the support to enable my recovery. I was asked 6 weeks after attending to go to a conference with them and to write something that I could read out. I didn't feel able, so the manager read it for me. During my time at MIND, I helped out with Orchard Crafts, a group that made and sold craft work. I also joined the local Self-Advocacy Project where I attended lots of meetings and conferences including setting up the PALS service at the Devon Partnership Trust, the Mental Health Local Implementation Group, Interviews up to senior manager level, training events to name a few.

Through this work I took on some Voluntary Work by looking after the agenda and minutes mailouts which I have done for 4 years. I also went on lots of courses and workshops to help me in my roles.

One course I paid for was Web Design and I was invited to take on the East Devon CVS website and some local ones. This increased to include the original Recovery Devon website and also the www.wellnessdevon.co.uk website.

Whilst on the LIG, I was asked to represent them with some colleagues at the NHS Effective Teamworking and Leadership Programme which was a lot of fun and has been extremely useful. I was asked to create the Contact Directory for East Devon as part of this programme.

During this time I was invited to attend the Mental Health Awareness Training course that MIND ran. I attended and was asked to join the training team. I found I really enjoyed this and attended the Training the Trainer course at Exeter CVS which ran over 6 months. I loved it and found I had a skill and something I loved doing.

In 2004 I was asked to attend the WRAP course and to take it on, on behalf of the MIND East Devon Project with another member. This I did and created several different workshops on the WRAP over the years.

Having completed my level 3 teacher's certificate, I went on to do my level 4 Certificate in Further Education Teaching with Exeter CVS. Their style was superb as it was aimed at the voluntary and community sector. Once I completed this programme, I was invited to join my tutor and deliver some of the level 3 courses which were the new City and Guilds 7302 Certificate in Delivering Learning. I have delivered around 3 courses a year for them. My role was to assess portfolios, something I'd never done before. One of the requirements was for me to take and pass the City and Guilds A1 Assessors award, which I did in 2006.

In 2004, MIND in Exeter and East Devon put me forward for the NHS Positive Practice Awards and was awarded runner up in the Making a Difference category.

In 2006 I was put forward by East Devon CVS, without my knowledge, for a Year of the Volunteer medal as recognition for the volunteering I had done. The photo is of me receiving my medal from the Lord Lieutenant of Devon. Also that year, I was awarded Partnership Student of the Year by Exeter College under the achievement section as I had achieved a high teaching award with a mental health disability. These were terrific to receive. as I hadn't been awarded anything since I was at school and I felt very proud and honoured to be awarded them.



In 2005, I was starting to have problems walking as I had pains in my arches. In 2006, this was diagnosed as fallen arches. In 2005, I started having asthma attacks, one of which finished with me in hospital on a nebuliser. The doctors felt certain that this was caused by my hayfever allergy.

During 2005, I was given a place on the NHS Support Time and Recovery Programme and asked to teach the WRAP element of the course which I still do.

In 2006 I was given a job by MIND to head up the training team for Exeter and East Devon writing and teaching courses and workshops.

In April I helped to organise and run the Recovery Conference in Barnstaple. This was hard for me as it was the biggest thing I had been involved with and loved every minute. I met lots of people including the key speakers and made lots of contacts.

I was invited to teach the WRAP for Cornwall Partnership NHS Trust and have had a lot of fun and gained so much experience and confidence doing so. One of the things I have learnt is the importance of using public transport, trains, to give me time to relax and prepare on route. Also the importance of staying over the night before as travelling early in the morning lowers one's ability to teach as well as I could.

I joined the Recovery Devon (Partnerships in Mental Health) Group to further my skills, knowledge and promote recovery in Devon and beyond.

Since having medication, I have put on a lot of weight and had some physical health problems including fallen arches and asthma

Conclusion

I do feel that my anxiety disorder is probably inherited as my grandfather suffered with anxiety and a cousin was admitted to hospital in the early 1900's.

I have had some difficult times in my life, but also gained so much in my own development increasing confidence and self-esteem. I have had lots of therapy and support and am very grateful for this. I feel I have been very lucky and fortunate to get the support and help I have received. I have learnt that there is no point pushing oneself. One needs time to relax, recover and then start the road to recovery. I manage my wellness by having a WRAP plan which I created on a 1:1 basis with a friend I trusted, time to go walking, gardening, spending time with my cats and working.

The Future

I see a good future for myself. I would like to increase my work load as I am able to, so I can work 4 days with a mixture of teaching and development, as I need variety or I get bored. I love my work and the organisations I work for. I enjoy helping others and seeing other people recover / improve their lives / recovery.