

O Patient Story

We met O in a cafe in central Rochdale. She was smartly dressed in a red skirt and blue blazer. There was something incredibly business like about her. After having bought her a fruit smoothie and engaged in a bit of small talk we talked about why we were there and what we were hoping to do. A general conversation about her day to day routine quickly progressed into a conversation about her childhood and what had happened to her.

It soon became clear that O had just come out of her college counselling session and was feeling slightly unsettled. She had spent the previous hour talking about her past and was clear that she wanted to get it over and done with; "I know that is what you want to talk about". She was clear that she was fine, but that she didn't want to dwell too much.

O - Partly because of the way she was dressed, O came across as a serious and determined young woman. She is bright and articulate, and has serious ambition for the future. She spends her days at a local FE college studying health and social care (which she very much enjoys, particularly when practitioners come in to talk to them about the work that they do), and her evenings at home with her dad, R, his wife, L, and their two kids.

She wakes up at 07:00am every morning, makes herself a brew and has thirty minutes to relax before she has breakfast, and heads off to college. She spends all day at college apart from Thursday and Friday which is mostly a free day, in which she gets up later and hangs out (unless she has got some volunteering work to get involved in).

On college days, she often reads over lunchtime in a quiet park nearby. She takes us to this park and it is easy to see why O likes it so much. Although there are other people there it is incredibly beautiful, "no one bothers me here".

She is an avid reader of fantasy and romance novels, as well as watcher of tv programmes of the same genre. Harry Potter and Vampire Diaries are her favourites, although she emphasised that the TV shows were not as good as the books. She enjoys autobiographies, and recently read about Katie Price who she really admired because of how she had dealt with everything that happened to her.

O loved stories with a happy ending: "I'll read anyone's story but mine...mine isn't a happy ending".

O is an openly emotional young woman who has been through a huge amount in her relatively short life. In the last few years she has started to confront what has happened to her. Throughout our time with O, her past never seemed too far away, and that was how she wanted it. She wasn't ready to forget.

Her past - It is important to emphasise that whilst O was incredibly open, she was also very reluctant to go into too much detail about what had happened to her. Having just come out of her counselling session she was clearly slightly overwhelmed, and as a consequence both observers were reluctant to go into too much detail. What follows is as much as O was prepared to tell us.

O grew up with her mum, S, and older sister, C, in Rochdale. Her parents had divorced when she was very small and both girls had remained with their mum. She talked little about her early family life although she did discuss her experiences of being bullied at primary school. Throughout this time she struggled with her learning, and clearly had very low self esteem. She was a quiet girl who didn't say very much and kept herself to herself. She would "fade into the back corner".

When C was about 10 she moved out of her mum's house and went to live with her dad. O stayed behind, until, when she was 16 and in the middle of her GCSE's that she revealed, to her school's pastoral manager, what had been happening to her. Instantly, O was taken away from her mum to live with her dad, with all her school and revision materials remaining at her mums. Despite this O came away with 12 A-C GCSEs.

O didn't share with us what had happened to her at her mums. All she would say was that her mum had isolated her, made her stay in the house when she wasn't at school and had stopped her seeing her dad when she was 12. Leaving her mum's was clearly an incredible relief, but one that came with a recognition of the trauma she had previously experienced.

After she moved in with her dad, she started attending a local college, but struggled with feeling depressed and suicidal. Eventually things became so bad that she was sectioned, moving to a local hospital for just over a month.

Hospital - On reflection, described valuing this time because it allowed her to get away from everything and be on her own. She wanted to get away from exams and her family and concentrate on thinking about what had happened to her, something that she had never been able to do before. Although clearly an incredibly traumatic time, it felt like was able, with hindsight, to see how important it was for her.

There were times in hospital when she felt incredibly disempowered, such as when the hospital staff wouldn't let her go for a walk despite the fact that another parent was willing to accompany her, or when they took her teddy away from her. The reason given to O was that the teddy needed washing but O created her own story that they were concerned about her building an unhealthy attachment to it. This last experience in particular has stuck with O.

She made friends with some of the people that she met whilst in hospital, and continues to stay in touch with them, particularly over messenger.

After leaving hospital she started to attend CAMHS for a period of six months although she didn't go into too much detail about the experience.

College - After coming out of hospital she decided not to go back to sixth form and instead decided to attend a local further education college to do a level three health and social care qualification. She was really conscious of the impact that exams had on her (she hated the stress and became incredibly anxious around exam time) so wanted to stay away from sixth form. Her level three is purely coursework based which she is much happier with.

O enjoys college because it is so practical, and she gets to regularly hear directly from professionals currently working in health and social care. They are also really good at

providing support. She has a regular counselling session which she values a lot. Her councillor lets her talk about what has happened to her which feels really important. It also implies that other counselling services have been more behaviourally focused which she hasn't found as useful. She clearly isn't ready to stop talking about her experience.

Her college also acknowledged for the first time that O had dyslexia, which had previously gone undiagnosed throughout her time in high school.

Get over it - O's dad is clearly incredibly supportive of her. He called during our visit to check on how she was doing, and visited regularly whilst she was in hospital. At the same time, he clearly struggles to understand or deal with what she is going through. They don't talk about how she is feeling, and generally he stays away from discussing her counselling.

O's sister, who lives in a town a short distance from Rochdale with her boyfriend, also struggles to understand O's response to her experience. C had similar experiences to O when living with her mum, yet has taken a much different route to coping. O describes her as being able to 'get over it' whilst expressing clearly that she is not willing or able to do the same. C often gets frustrated that O can't move on, as does her step mum, who although incredibly supportive in general, seems to find O's behaviour difficult to cope with.

Relationships - The relationships O really values are with those people that let her move in her own time, with people who are patient and allow her to talk about her experience when she needs to. She remembers a class teacher from when she was five or six who was really kind and compassionate. There are also a number of people like that locally, including her counselor at college and a local charity worker that she has been involved with ever since she was first referred to CAMHS.

It is hard for O to trust people enough to open up. She trusts these people because they are clearly committed to helping her. It is hard for her to believe that this is really the case. She also feels comfortable in the spaces they provide, at college and at the charity. They are comfortable and, critically, they rarely change. O struggles with change and likes to know where everything is.

Ever since becoming involved with the charity (through which she met the worker above) O has done a lot of volunteering. This has become incredibly important to her, not least in the fact that the friends that she has made there are at the heart of her social network.

Although she has a number of friends that she seems to be in regular contact with, her friends from volunteering are critical to her. Her oldest friend is also her godmother (O was christened at 14 so was able to choose). O describes J as the kind of friend that, "if you killed yourself, would pull you out of the ground and kill you all over again!".

Her friends are an important source of support and advice when times get difficult. O regularly uses social media to communicate with them, but is incredibly guarded about who she connects with more broadly. Although she didn't acknowledge it directly, it sounded like she might have had experience of bullying over social media that has stuck with her. O talked about the importance of understanding privacy settings and that her dad had set hers

for her. She felt that schools should cover these in detail to help young people protect themselves.

Purpose - O's volunteering is clearly something she has become incredibly passionate about. She often attends important meetings as a volunteer and describes the fact that "it is nice to know that I can be trusted".

There aren't that many occasions when O feels important, but her work as a volunteer is one of them. She has traditionally been incredibly reluctant to speak in front of people, or be the centre of attention (something she still feels very uncomfortable with) but this has become easier now she can talk about something she is passionate about. The opportunity to talk with passion, and practice being the centre of attention is something she clearly values a great deal.

She also works one day per week (sometimes two) at the local Boots. She is on a zero hours contract that she hates as it means they can call her at any time, but she does enjoy both the fact of having a job and the fact that she has got more money to spend. After one of her first paychecks, O used the money to buy £150 worth of presents for her family. Being able to buy her dad a birthday present in particular seemed to be really important to her.

The future - has lots of aspirations for the future. She talked with real enthusiasm about her desire to go to university to study psychology. In fact she has identified a university in a nearby city that would be particularly good for her, due to its small class sizes, one to one tutoring and the availability of counselling services and pastoral support. She would be the first person in her family to go to university, something that she feels strongly about and something that really motivates her.

It was actually the librarian at her college that helped her to realise that she wanted to go to university. She described the librarian as being incredibly patient with her, providing her with practical assistance with her dyslexia and helping her think through what she might want to do with her life.

She talks about getting a loan so that she can pay for her study, and in the long run having a career so that she can do things like go on holiday. She has never been on holiday. O is nervous that she won't get in, but hasn't thought about that too much.

Conclusion - O is an intelligent, ambitious young woman who is excited about the future, but not quite ready to let go of the past. She has been through a huge amount, and has only recently begun to reflect upon it. Above all she values being given the space and time to do so, by professionals and friends who are kind and compassionate, patient and interested.