

DANIELLE MURPHY

SIZE 5

Audio Producer: Rachel Simpson

You have to want to do this job. It's not something you can do if you didn't have that empathy and wanting to help people. I do think you have to have it in you, like a vocation.

My name is Danielle Murphy, I'm a mental health support worker from Northern Ireland and I work in 53 Hourglass Road, which is a facility that provides support for people with chronic mental health problems to integrate back into the community. This is the front door, so we'll go on in. So this is really the entrance, this facility is for 18 people. It's only been open four years. It's split up into four different houses - each house has their own kitchen, dinette, living room, quiet room, and each tenant has their own bedroom and en-suite bathroom. As you come in, there's a long corridor here, with all the tenant's bedrooms coming off. These tenants came from long stay mental health wards. The only privacy they had was a curtain around their bed at night. They all stayed in bays of six people and one sink. And basically a communal bathroom. So the privacy and the dignity that they have over here, having their own room, they can close the door to the world if they want. It's great to see, they all deserve it, you know. There's another couple of tenants' rooms here - they all got to pick their own colours for their bedrooms and bedclothes.

One of our residents, he had actually been in hospital for eleven years previously. That's how long he stayed in hospital for. That's why he's moved over here. So they really lost all their skills. Even things like making a cup of coffee, cup of tea. Over in the wards they had to ask for a glass of water. When they first moved over here, the kettle was never off - constantly making themselves teas and coffees because it was such a novelty! It eventually calmed down, but, you know, little things like that, that we take for granted and they thought it was great. So over here, that's what we do - we're helping them regain all those skills that they maybe lost. Working washing machines, tumble driers, tidying up around the house, keeping the house in order, cooking small meals, starting with very basic things like boiling an egg - starting very simple.

We work long days - day shift is thirteen hours, night shift is eleven hours. So there's someone here 24 hours a day. I had someone come to me last night, and she'd had a very vivid dream and it was nasty, but she really thought that it was true - so I just explained that it was a dream and to try and push it out of their head. And then you're trying to distract them, maybe put on some music watch a bit of TV, take them out, out for a coffee, out for a walk - anything to try and distract their thoughts. But maybe if they're having a bad day, they can take, maybe, a bit of medicine to try and calm them down, relax them. A typical day, we would come and hand over from their night staff and then we would have a chat with each tenant, see what their plans are for the day, see if we could have any input give them any ideas - if it's a good day maybe, go out, do a bit of shopping, food shopping, then we would plan what they're having to eat that day and then we dispense any medication at certain times. We go by what they say, you know, they're making the decisions, we're trying to make them independent and we just help facilitate that.

At 18, I finished my A-Levels and I decided to go off to university to do geography. I wasn't enjoying it, so I left. I'm out of university, no job. You're really thinking about, 'What am I going to do with my life?', so going through all the different professions. I thought about nursing and looking after people and I thought I could really do that - so I went and got myself a job in a nursing home, loved it. Moved into the hospital as a nursing auxiliary and then this post as mental health support worker came up - went for it and it's the best job I've ever had, really enjoy it. I've always been fascinated

by mental health. Why do these illnesses affect people and how, and it baffles me, the way people's brains, something just can go, and why does it affect this person and not that person? A lot of my family work in mental health. An auntie, who is a community psychiatric nurse. I have an uncle who runs a nursing home, another auntie who is a ward manager in hospital. So maybe it's just in my genes.

There definitely is a stigma around mental health, but at the end of the day they're just people like you or I. To do this job, you definitely need a sense of humour and a thick skin. Patience, definitely, and an understanding of mental illness, because things just don't happen overnight. You know, you approach every one differently, and their mental illness has an effect on how you communicate with them. You know, these people, they may be bombarded with thoughts and voices, you know, and they're on high doses of medication that would make you and I, you know, you'd hardly be able to get out of bed in the morning. So for these people to get up and get motivated needs a few hours in the morning, to get up and get gee-d up and get ready to do what they need to do for the day. Whereas another person, you could go in and they'd be full of plans, and they want to do things right away, so you have to really get to know your residents.

People judge someone with a mental illness, whereas, if someone broke their leg, they wouldn't be judged. So what's the difference? It's their health. You know they need just as much help and support as someone with a physical illness. I have a one year old, so when I was on maternity leave, it was strange not having that purpose in the morning, and although, of course, you know, my wee girl, she kept me busy, and when I came back, it was like I'd just had a week's holiday, you know, it was like I was never away. I just fitted right back in. I have to say, when I was on maternity leave I called in quite a lot - to show her off. I still go in with her, the tenants all know her - they all love to see her, and she always has smiles for everybody.

When we opened there was a lot of interest from other trusts. So I think this will be the future of mental health. Giving people the support that they need in the community rather than having people stay long term in wards. Giving people with chronic mental health problems a better quality of life within the community. The end goal is for the tenants to move on to a place with, maybe, either less support or go off to live independently in the community. We have had one tenant move on to a place with less support. It's sad to see them go because you miss them, but you're happy because it's better for them. They're getting more independence and, fortunately enough, he just moved down the road, so you see him down the street all the time, and he'll always stop and talk to you.

I go home at the end of the day, and I feel very fulfilled that I've helped them. What I love about it is, I seen what they came from, and they're over here, they deserve their own room. They deserve their en-suite and they're happy here. I have a tenant and every day he has a new joke for me, that he's made up and they're always the worst jokes, but I look forward to them everyday.