

## MARTIN GRAY SIZE 8

Audio Producer: Mark Vernon

My name is Martin Gray. I'm thirty two years old and I'm married to Ashley and on the twentieth of April of this year we had a little boy, James, who's four weeks old now. We live in Saltcoats in Scotland at the moment. I'm doing volunteer work within the N.H.S. as a peer support worker. And I suffer from fibromyalgia, depression and anxiety. My main health problem is fibromyalgia, which is a chronic pain condition which affects my whole body. It causes extreme pain and severe fatigue, which leaves me feeling extremely tired and with very little energy and, and day to day life, I'm almost always in constant pain, one place or another.

I'm not able to live my life in the way that I would like to do, so, for example, sleep in for a lot of parts of the day and not being able to work, and it impacts every aspect of daily life really, and it's just, a lot of it's frustration. The frustration of not being able to do the things that you want to be able to be doing, not being able to, not being able to work, not being able to use my degree that I got, and it's also because of these things, that then leads to more, so, depression and more anxious about yourself, and you don't know from day to day how you're going to be, so it's difficult to plan ahead to do things, and for me it's also, it's, it makes me feel a bit of failure, although it's not my fault that I've got it. Because you're not able to do things you want to do you feel quite down about, so, it's living within these sort of limitations. It's just difficult. I worry in case they think I'm lazy, or that kind of the thing, when it's just I can't do things because I physically can't, can't do it.

I always feel like I'm getting judged, because there isn't a physical thing that they can see what's wrong with me, if, if I have suddenly put a plaster on my leg or something like that they would then go "What's wrong with your leg?" and, but, when you can't see it, it's difficult, and I think that also applies to mental health. I think people don't know how to approach people sometimes that have got mental health problems. There's just, there's just too much of a stigma around, and that people need help and support, they don't need to be made to feel worse about it, and I think that's a really big problem, that there's still a stigma about mental health - it needs to be broken.

My experience of the health care system's been great really, I think it's one of the best things about the country that we've got, you know, it's something that we're really lucky to have, and I don't think at times people realise how lucky we actually are to receive that kind of care and attention. My GP made a huge difference to me, right from after I went to see about what was actually wrong with me. And then from being diagnosed from the fibromyalgia and just even getting a definitive answer to what was wrong with me, because for a while it was just unknown and that was difficult. It's that the fear of the unknown, which is, at least when, if you know what you're dealing with you can move forward a bit more with it.

My GP also recommended me and put me forward for my self help counselling. And that's just made such a massive difference to me. Just over a year ago, that I had my first appointment, and it was to, basically, to have, to have someone listen to me and make me feel that there was nothing wrong with me. I was feeling, I wasn't, wasn't normal with how I was feeling, with things that happened to me, but just to have that reassurance that, you know, that you are a good person. There's nothing wrong with you. There's nothing wrong with what you've done. You just had bad circumstances that you've had to deal with, and from that I learnt coping skills and just, even that's empowering, and sort of gives you just a wee bit of self confidence. Especially at a time when I was really, really, not in a good place.

And, from the individual sessions, I then moved on to, there was like a group which was called 'Moving on together' and it just opened your eyes, to see other people have to deal with, you're not having to deal with it on your own, you're hearing other people's experiences and you help sort of

push each other along and help each other along and after I was in that group as a participant, I was then asked to be sort of a co-facilitator for the group, so that was, it was quite humbling to be able, to be asked that. To have somebody see that I had the potential to be able help people and they needed somebody to deliver it from a lived condition point of view, as well as having somebody who's got the medical knowledge, and that was a really important step for me to have had that boost. It made such a difference to see how people, where from week one to the fifth and final week their confidences were just completely different. They'd gone from not speaking to anybody to all laughing and joking, and it just opened up outlets for people and that group has just been hugely important to me. Both from a participant point of view and then helping to teach it, because it also shown me what I'm actually wanting to do now. I have always wanted to help people and it's, because of what I've been through myself, just gives me that determination to, to be there, to try and make even a small difference to people.

My wife Ashley and my mum and dad have given me so much help and support, just being there for me, and that's just so important to anybody who's going through a difficult time. I've also had a lot of support from two of my friends – Stephen, who I've known for over thirty years, known him since I was three, and Mark, who I've known all my life, he's almost just like a big brother to me, and I go, always go over the Hearts games with him and, and they've always just really, really helped me. And they're never sort of bothered that I've got conditions or illnesses.

I support Hearts – I've had the season ticket for twenty five years now and I've always felt a bit of an outsider in life, and, because of health problems and I never sort of feel I fit into environments, but going to the football it makes you feel part of something and they don't care. People don't, people around you don't care who you are, you've got a scarf on so you're part of, a part of them really. Even playing with our dog Poppy, you know - as long as she's got her food, then, you know, you're throwing her toy. She doesn't care that I've got depression or fibromyalgia, she just follows me about and just wants to play all the time, and whether it's even, just coming and sitting beside me, which helps on a bad day.

I look at it, there's the, so many people out there that have got a lot, lot worse than what I've got. And it's just that it's being grateful for the things I do have, it's about being positive about yourself and having a good outlook, rather than thinking I can't do this, and letting whatever problems you have define who you are. It's just the, one of the big things for me is that I don't want fibromyalgia to define me. I don't want to be my illness and that's one thing that I've really learned over the last year or two, that, although I do have the fibromyalgia, it's not who I am.

From a young age, I just wanted to, to have a family, be married, have kids, and now, with having that, it's been just so, just life changing for me and just, I can't wait to experience what's ahead. It's important to have hopes and dreams and goals in life, that helps to drive you forward. Being a dad is the greatest gift possible. And it's hard for me, because due to my fibromyalgia I don't have the strength that I would like to have. I can't hold my son for very long, and that's difficult for me to take, because he's still only four weeks old. But my arms get tired and sore and I then worry that I don't have the strength to hold him, but I just want to look after him, but I also have to realise that all I'm doing is, is the best I can and as a parent, that's all we can ever do, is do the best that you can for your child. For me, it's, it's, it's, one, to show James that life is to be embraced, all the sort of challenges, I want him to be proud of me, even though I've got an illness, I'm not going to let it stop me doing everything. You know I may not be able to run about for hours with him, which just in itself is really quite difficult - the thought of that, you know having to say "No, dad can't run around with you today," because it's really sore, but, it's not going to stop me from having games of football with him, because I might be in even more pain at the end of it, but if I didn't, then I'd be in much more pain inside, because I'm not getting that opportunity, and it's just not wanting to disappoint him by not being able to do these things, as he gets older. I just want him to be happy and be proud that I'm his dad.