

Your First...experience of working in the NHS

Rose speaks to Lucy, an occupational therapist, about her first experience working in the NHS.

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Rose [01:00:02]

Welcome back to another episode of your First of Everything. Today I am joined by Lucy, who is an occupational therapist. Hi, Lucy. You okay? Hi, Rose. Yes, good. Thank you. Good. So today I want you to talk about your first experience of working within the NHS. What was that like? The very first day? So. Oh gosh, I remember turning up.

Kay [01:00:22]

Probably quite naive to my first job, and it was a community post and it was in an area I didn't know and I turned up a little bit anxious and I walked in and don't get me wrong, the team was so lovely and welcoming but very quickly realised the pressures that come with working in in the NHS. And the thing that struck me was I was sat in their referral meeting and their kind of wait time should have been something between 2 and 4 weeks and it was getting up to 20 weeks for people. Wow. And I thought, Gosh, is this what happens? I mean, I'd had, you know, little contact myself with many services, had some contacts with with the NHS services. But I thought, gosh, people think the NHS is always open and always there and ready. And, you know, there's people here really, really trying to get as many of these people through as possible. But it was just quite daunting to me that I thought, Gosh, I'm going to be part of this, trying to catch up and explicitly remember that on my first day thinking, Wow, where do you start? Was my thought, Where do you start with this? And and it was, yeah, eye opening, I think was the the term I'd use.

Rose [01:01:41]

I think a lot of the time in the NHS now, I mean all of us know about the struggles and everything that we're facing and we think it's an absolutely fantastic service, you know, that we have you look at the rest of the world and I can say this because, you know, we've both worked within the NHS that it is amazing and we're so lucky to have it. But unfortunately the pressures that are there on the service, on the people that work within that service and also the funding aspects of it, it's immense, you know, and if you go into it with that mindset of I know I was exactly the same, the NHS is amazing thing. So it's just going to be great and it's going to work and it's going to like a clock kind of situation. You know, you've got every cog that works all

together. One of those cogs doesn't work, the clock doesn't tick, and that's that kind of situation at the moment with the NHS, I think. But there are a lot of positive aspects in it as well. So from that first day and that experience, did you go in with a mindset of, Right, I'm going to make a difference, I'm going to have this this way and I'm going to change the way it runs.

Kay [01:02:44]

I think I went in with the mindset of I want to do a really good job and be part of this. And I think, you know, I'd been through uni and I'd been on placements and I knew that I knew that things were busy, things are fast paced and and I kind of knew that. But I think until you qualify and go into your first post where some of that responsibility sits with you is quite difficult. But what stood out for me in the team was how much everyone was fighting for the people they were looking after and supporting and how much everybody was saying, you know, okay, we know the waiting list is bad, but we're just going to keep going and keep going and keep going and keep going. And the lovely thing was that actually by the time I was leaving that service to pastures new, that waiting list had come right down. And it was a situational thing. It was about the staffing at that snapshot of time. But I think what's really difficult is if you walk into that environment and that's all you see and that's all you know, that can be really daunting and really scary and then put people off. And and I think the positives for me outweighed the negatives. I never thought at one point I'm not going to work in the NHS anymore because actually all the good that you see that goes around it outweighs a lot of that that difficulty. I think what I wish was that when I was a student, perhaps I took note to some of the the challenges that maybe come with working in a clinical environment and, and kept them and kind of kept them with me so that that naivety maybe wasn't there when I first started in practice.

Rose [01:04:27]

Yeah, definitely. I think what you said there that really resonated with me is that resilience of the staff that everywhere I've worked, there's always been that consistent resilience from the staff members to ensure that people are getting the treatment that they need and that they're well looked after. And and that little piece of advice there is. Well, you know, from your perspective, when you were a student, is there a piece of advice you give to students that are going to go and work then the NHS, something you'd recommend for them to do?

Kay [01:04:56]

I think for me, I think as a as a student I would. Really recommend to all students, not just occupational therapy. All students in health care is is to take stock when you're on your clinical placements and to try and expose yourself to as much as you possibly can, because I think that arms you for you if you're in practice and you know, as a student, sometimes you might not see lots of the realities because you're a student and you don't need to at that point take on that responsibility. But for me, I wish in hindsight, which is a wonderful thing, I'd open my eyes to the wider systems a little bit more and looked at what goes on above me, what goes on next to me and all those things. Because I think by doing that, you prepare yourself to know, actually, I can make a difference to somebody. It might not be to the whole system and the whole service because I'm one person, but I can make a difference to somebody in a

system that's got its challenges, but also it's real, real like shining stars and kind of positives as well.

Rose [01:06:00]

Yeah, no, I completely agree. Completely agree with that. I think that's really good advice. What was the moment that you decided I want to be an occupational therapist? What was that.

Kay [01:06:10]

Moment for you? I think so. For me, I had a family member who had an occupational therapist, so my nan had a stroke and I didn't know what occupational therapy was. You know, most of us will say that it's a small profession and lots of people don't know what it is. But my nan had a stroke and she had an occupational therapist who came to the house and it sticks with me and I'm chuckling to myself because she used to turn up in this little sports car. And that's just always stuck with me because I was obviously quite young at the time. And and she was lovely and she was so kind. And she would come and she would spend the time and she would listen. And she really kind of made what was a really difficult time for my nan and family, a real better experience. And and from that, I remember in when I was kind of in school and having to do some research around different professions, I thought, well, okay, I'll have a little look into that one because, you know, and no one else was doing it. So I thought, I'll have a look. And once I've kind of looked into it, I thought I could. I quite like this. I think I could do something with this. And it was a bit of a snowball effect. I can't remember the exact moment. I thought, This is what I'm going to do. It's kind of a variation of things. I then found out that somebody who lived near to my mum and dad was an occupational therapist went and spoke to him. He was a really senior occupational therapist, really experienced, and that was brilliant because I found out this information when I did a bit of work experience and then the snowball obviously got big enough for me to go, I'm going to apply for you and you never go with this and see if I can do it. And and you know, and hopefully I can because I'm still doing it now. And that's and that I think that for me was just a bit of a snowball. I always I always knew I wanted to work in some kind of health care or education. And I always worried. I just didn't know where that was going to be. And I didn't have that eureka moment. You hear people say, you know, I was born and I knew I was going to be a nurse or I knew I was going to be a physio. Didn't have that for me. It was that snowball effect. And I didn't immediately think after researching the profession, I'm definitely going to do that. But I thought, I want to find out more. And it was that for me, and I think that was necessarily not necessarily a bad thing because again, I went into it with a bit more information than maybe some people might who might have, you know, B know about the profession because they have a family member who does it, for example, and that sticks with them. So I think for me, that snowball of understanding it and trying to. Trying to really get as many perspectives as I could on the profession made me go, Yeah, that's for me. And then from when I started the course, I suppose that was probably maybe when my eureka moment came, you know, in first year thinking, yeah, actually, you know, I remember my very first place mean it was only a week long and I remember thinking to myself, This is it. Yeah, I can do this. I want to do this. And they did the placement quite early on in your program, which was good because it gave you an opportunity to see it in real life. So perhaps that was where my kind of probably a bit late really. I have to start in the

course, but when that final moment came for me to think, yeah, this, this is definitely going to be me.

Rose [01:09:30]

Yeah, well that it comes at different stages, doesn't it? Definitely people. And I suppose from that perspective, when you're actually in there and you would you would learning on the job you're in that place when it was like, yeah, this is it. Definitely. That's really, really good along the course of your career then. So if you face any challenges along the way or you've needed any additional help or anything like that at all.

Kay [01:09:53]

Yeah, I think, you know, on more than one occasion, and I'm really not embarrassed to say that because I think that lots of people need support. And I think sometimes people don't reach out and get that support. I remember a particularly tricky time that probably sticks with me was when I was working on the mental health wards and we'd had a really difficult. Time clinically. It was quite, quite an intense time. And and something happened. And to be honest, the incident happened really insignificant. I can't remember what it was in detail, but something happened and that that was it for me. It was like a stress bucket and it was like just one drop of water too much. And it tipped over. And I remember coming back to the the department and someone said, Are you okay? And that was it. It was like the floodgates opened and I couldn't stop crying. Then for about an hour and every time someone said, Are you okay? It just carried on and on and on and and I think I wasn't okay. And I remember sitting down with my supervisor at the time and she said. Have you had some annual leave? And I said, Well, I was off last week. And she said, Well, maybe that's why maybe you took stock while you were off and you've come back and you know, things are just too much. And, you know, I didn't feel in a position where I couldn't work or anything like that, but I just needed a bit of extra help and sitting down with my supervisor. And I think what stuck with me was I didn't know I needed that at the time. It wasn't until something happened that I could say was really insignificant and that I thought, oh my goodness, things are things are tough for me at the moment. And and I sat down with my supervisor and, you know, she was brilliant. She was really, really brilliant and and known and now for many years. And she's an excellent clinician, but an excellent manager. And we sat and we had a really in-depth conversation and I took some time out. She said to me, and when I say that, I mean, she said to me, Don't go back to the water for a couple of hours. Everything's in hand. Go and do some of your admin, you know, just take take stock. And then she almost as well and changed up my role a little bit. She said, you know, you maybe you need to try something slightly different, give you a bit of a break. And I did. And I think without those things, I you would I would have been at risk of that that burnout phrase that people like to use and and people who then you know people and really, really struggle to to get back into their their role and that was something I really didn't want to happen. And but I think the the thing for me was reaching out and asking for that help. Sometimes people don't always notice and don't always notice that you're not okay, especially when you don't know people. If you're starting a new team or a new area, people don't know if this is you or not really. And so that that stuck with me. Really?

Rose [01:12:41]

Yeah. I think that's really brave for you as well to have spoken about. So thank you for sharing that. That actually there are times when we do struggle with our own mental health, and although we're trying to help everybody else, we we become a little bit ignorant to our own needs at times. It sounds like you had a very supportive manager there as well, which is really lovely to hear and it was really good as well that she changed that role up for you. What advice would you give to a student who was in that situation where they felt like they needed that mental health support?

Kay [01:13:13]

I think the biggest thing for me is to reach out to someone. And I think you've got to reach out to someone you feel comfortable with, and that's not always your line manager. And I think that's okay. Lots of trusts have pastoral leads. You know, universities will have pastoral support. And I think it's the first step is just reaching out and saying, I'm not okay and in whatever form that is to appear to, you know, your family or within work. And because, again, I think you just if you think of a stress bucket, it just keeps rising and the top keeps dripping and it just takes a couple of drips too much. And you could, you know, really your mental health could really, really suffer. And and someone always said to me, actually, if your mental health's not okay, how can you help someone else? And they use that analogy on the aeroplane. If you put your own oxygen mask on first because you can't help anyone else if you've not got it. And, and that stuck with me really, because I think that's true, you know, and, and without helping yourself, how can you support other people? And so I just think asking for that help is a starting point. And sometimes, you know, you might not get the answer that you want and that's okay because that person might not be the right person to help you at that point. And I think it's acknowledging that really as well.

Rose [01:14:47]

Definitely. I think I really I agree with that. Definitely asking for that help and you need it. And I think there's also a stigma that's attached, particularly within the health and social care sector, that we. Well, you're a nurse or you're an occupational therapist or your physiotherapist or, you know, you work within this sector, so you should be okay all the time. And actually, no, they're unrealistic expectations. And we are also human. So we have our own emotions and our own thoughts and feelings and our own breaking points. So you aren't a failure simply because you're having a bad time? Ask, ask for that support, ask for that help. And you know, there will be people there that are willing to provide it, particularly people like yourself, you know, occupational therapists. They are absolutely fantastic and they help a lot of people. Yeah. Is there any other advice you'd give to any student?

Speaker 3 [01:15:45]

Anyway.

Kay [01:15:47]

I think. The biggest bit of advice for me is from me is do your research and look into a wide range of professions in health and social care. If that's that's the path you're going down or, you know, if you're in any kind of path that you decide to go down. And and I think there's lots of things out there that talk about the negatives and but there's so much more positive out there. And I think we don't talk about the positives because they're not as exciting to talk about. And but I think it's those little wins that

get you through the day. And I think that's true in all kind of areas, not just health and social care. And and I think sometimes you feel that you're not moving and you're not moving forward. But if you take stock and, you know, as as a student, I suppose, again, hindsight's wonderful. I wish I told myself this at the time, but look back on your week and thing. Actually, I feel like I had a really bad week, but there was something positive every single day that happened and that could just be something as small as kind of a patient saying thank you to you. And actually there's always a positive. And and I think don't be afraid to ask for a bit of support, because without that, you really can't help anybody. And you need to support yourself and make sure you're in a good place. And I think that's really, really key. And and we all we all need support sometime. I don't think I've ever met anyone who's never asked for help at some point, ever. So, you know, people aren't on their own.

Rose [01:17:31]

Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much for sharing your experience with me. Thank you for being here today.

Kay [01:17:37]

Thank you for having me.

Rose [01:17:39]

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