



Sarah Holden

Senior Occupational Therapist

“ Being part of a person’s recovery is a great privilege. ”

What is your job title, what does it involve day-to-day and how long have you been working in that role and/or at the Trust?

I’ve worked in the NHS since 2001 and in my current role in rehabilitation and recovery inpatient services for around four years. I’m a senior occupational therapist (OT) and I work both clinically with a case load of services users, as well as in the capacity of a line manager to several OTs. My days are very varied but include supporting service users with engaging in everyday tasks such as getting ready in the morning, budgeting, shopping and preparing meals, to getting to grips again with their home environment following an extended stay in hospital. I’ve been known to paint and decorate with service users and explore a totally new locality with someone who has chosen a new area to settle. I have also been to church, swimming, and pilates on graded exposure programmes with my service users. I tend these days to act as a supervisor to other OTs doing similar types of duties, but I enjoy sharing my experience and knowledge with existing staff and the many students that come through the service. I spend a fair amount of time in meetings now, but my passion is to work directly with service users experiencing difficulties with their mental health. My expertise is working with people with psychosis and I facilitate groups such as the hearing voices group where service users can talk openly and confidentially about anything that concerns them and gain peer support from those with lived experience.

Why did you choose to work for the NHS?

I’m interested in the human experience and I’m passionate about the rights of people who have been traditionally marginalised and not had access to experiences that many of us take for granted. I believe that every person is unique and has the potential to live a happy and successful life given the right set of circumstances. My role allows me to work with people to support them gaining access to good, suitable accommodation, resources and activities that can offset some of the stressors that they routinely experience. My role allows me to get an overview of what resources are out there and to support or advocate for the service users that I work with.

What’s your favourite part about your job?

The most enjoyable part of my job is watching the transition of people coming into the unit quite unwell and lacking in confidence, then developing into someone who starts to

get to know themselves better and start the pathway back to recovery. Being part of a person's recovery is a great privilege and gets me up and out of bed every day. I also enjoy the opportunity and expectation to keep learning and this keeps me motivated and enthusiastic. I recently completed a Masters in Mental Health Practice and feel this has given me lots of new skills to use in my job, for example CBT and family work skills. Even when I don't have the answers myself, I know someone in the team who will, or we know where to look externally for the answer to any issue we come up against.

What's the most challenging part about your job?

There are challenges in the NHS that are well reported, lack of resources, an increasing number of complex service user presentations together with an ever-changing case load which is now the norm for NHS staff. In my unit we now see not only people with severe mental health problems, but increasingly people with complex issues around their physical health and substance related issues. Sometimes the work can be overwhelming and there often doesn't feel like there is enough hours in the day to complete everything. This is where good team working comes in, so we can share the load. High quality supervision also allows you to focus on what you can do as opposed to what you can't realistically achieve.

Tell us about:

a time you were really proud of your work

I think as an OT there are times when we must stand up, be counted and adhere firmly to the professions underpinning principle that activity/occupation are vital in an individual's health and this can be a battle when inpatient resources are so limited. I am proud daily when I hear my OT colleagues championing these values and fighting to ensure that the service users they work with are getting high quality holistic care.

your fondest memory of working at the Trust

One of my most recent fondest memories was on the inpatients unit when I was working with a lady who had a lot of trust issues and a background that had been quite challenging which had negatively impacted on her in adult life. She had a lot of energy and sometimes it got her into trouble! We worked together for a while and I got to know her well. We discovered there was something she was proud of, which was swimming as she'd won competitions as a child. Although this was decades ago we started a plan to get her involved in swimming again by visiting the swimming baths and looking at the facilities. During her first tentative swim, she started did less than a length but was covering about 40 lengths on her own at the end of our sessions together. The change in mood and sense of achievement for her reminded me how vital occupation/activity can be in the life of someone with severe mental illness. These types of interventions require time and resource of course, because without the support of an understanding mental health worker in the initial stages, this can be difficult to achieve for some service users alone.

What do our values of integrity, simplicity and caring mean to you? How do you show these values in the work that you do?

I show integrity by promoting the values of my profession. These values include promoting the autonomy of the service user 'and their right to live, not just exist'. Caring to me means being supportive and compassionate, but also seeing the bigger picture and being able to explain my thinking and rationales. If you can explain clearly and compassionately why you want to engage someone in a conversation or an action, this can be the first stage in getting there. OTs grade activities that service users wish to pursue and do this over a time frame that is comfortable but offers some challenge and allows the individual to influence the process. This type of collaborative working is vital and establishes a good therapeutic relationship that builds trust and ultimately a move toward independence. Having clearly stated goals that have jointly been agreed with steps to achieving them, are in my opinion the bedrock of good care planning. Integrity also means being able to listen to ideas and opinions of other team members but also work in a way that promotes the voice of the service user. This can sometimes be conflicting if the service users' ideas do not appear practical or realistic. Having a good working knowledge of the Mental Capacity Act and being able to articulate this in a straight forward way that promotes the best interest of that individual manner can be useful.

How has the NHS made a difference to you/how have you seen the NHS help people?

The NHS is a wonderful tradition, from the cradle to the grave...it is the lifeblood of the country and I fully subscribe to the principles of a free service to those in need. Personally, it has saved my son's life when he was a baby following a severe bout of tonsillitis and has served me and my family on many occasions. The staff are its greatest asset and are dedicated and committed to quality patient care. I am proud to work in this public service.