

Case story 3: Christina (names, places and identifying features changed)

Christina first contacted the mental health services when she was at college at the age of nineteen. She first approached the college counselling services on campus and was then referred to the local HSE psychiatric service. She describes her experience of the services, including very recent experiences, as being “quite negative” overall.

“My overall feeling from that experience is probably coming from stigma. It’s shame and embarrassment. They are the overarching feelings looking back, and vulnerability. I felt small and invisible... It was unpleasant... especially when I was in contact with people in a time of crisis... I found it belittling at times... certain things I found condescending and disrespectful. I felt it was dehumanising... Lots of times I felt like I was just whinging. It was an awful experience really... especially going through the public services. I was at college and going in through referrals through student services and through the hospital.”

Christina also describes feeling dismissed by treating psychiatrists due to the nature of her own related professional field,

“I was told, “maybe you should stop thinking about it so much.” Their [the doctors’] reaction was like that for ‘medical student syndrome’ with the implication being that I was self-diagnosing when there was no actual problem. So a lot of the time, my mental health difficulties were simply dismissed. Then certain things started happening which made the nature of it far more serious and brought [the psychiatrist’s] condescension to another level, not so much around my professional background but other things...”

During a recent mental health crisis in 2007, Christina went to an Accident and Emergency Department in a very vulnerable and distressed state. She arrived alone due to self-harm and suicidal feelings, hoping she would find a compassionate and supportive response. Christina describes how this did not happen in her view and how the treatment she did receive impacted on her:

“I ended up in A&E. I don’t think there’s much respect for people who enter into the services that way... I was angry [about the way I was treated] and I felt like I was put down - that was the last thing I needed. I already felt awful about myself so it just made me feel worse...”

Christina described being let down by the service she received in A&E:

“I felt turfed out after A&E and was just given an appointment card for this place... I definitely felt worse after than before. I had the same issues coming out as I did going in but I’d had to force myself through the process which was painful from beginning to end. When I came out of there [later that same day], I realised another door had closed.”

Following A&E she was given an appointment for a psychiatric evaluation. She describes the attitudes she encountered in the psychiatric unit as being “an unacceptable way of dealing with somebody,”

“Everything was too rushed and so cold and clinical that I just wanted to run out but because I felt so desperate I thought maybe it wouldn’t be as bad when I got inside... I felt really alone in the whole situation... I had arrived a bit late and the woman at reception was just horrible to me. You’d think the people who work in those places would be trained and employed on the basis of having some warmth or something... She was harsh and asked me why I hadn’t left earlier and then in an irritated way demanded my appointment card. So I

sat in a waiting room full of people and wanted to leave. I ended up waiting and was eventually called into a room with the psychiatrist. He asked me a series of basic questions in a checklist-like format. His tone was rushed and hurried. When I told him why I was there, he said "why'd you do that?" in a hurried, non-compassionate way. I felt so small... When I asked if it would be possible to talk to a psychologist, his sarcastic response of "what's so great about psychologists?" really surprised me... I was completely taken aback by his attitude."

Christina decided to stop seeking help from the mental health services as a result of her experiences despite her continued vulnerability and serious mental health difficulties.

"It was an upsetting experience. He gave me an appointment card [for two weeks' time] but I just threw it away because there was no way I was going to go back there again. I thought at the time, I'll just sit outside the hospital and protest! I hadn't thought of any legitimate avenues to make myself seen or heard at that point. I kept thinking to myself about the injustice of the whole thing and how I could just have walked out and killed myself. I wondered how many other people walked out of there in a desperate state and that's not right. Staff have a serious responsibility when dealing with people who might be at the worst point in their lives."

Christina has reflected on why it is that staff might be treating people seeking help through the local mental health services in such a way. It is her view that this poses a potentially life-threatening risk to vulnerable people seeking support:

"I was trying to think if there was some logical reason for interacting with people that way... Maybe it is to prevent people in such a vulnerable state from forming too much of an attachment but I know you can interact with people as human beings and not in a rude, condescending way while still maintaining a professional approach... I needed somebody to have talked to me like a human being. For example, the flip-side to that was the time I saw a crisis nurse in the hospital who interacted with me like a person, not an object on a conveyor belt that they just wanted to get in and out again... To be treated like a human being is so important. My expectations were very low at that stage so something small might have made the difference"

In discussion of suicide and the risks to people during a mental health crisis, Christina talks openly of her own experience and how she feels the services may be taking one risk too many with people's lives:

"I was desperate at that stage. I don't even remember the rest of the day to be honest. I remember leaving there thinking about throwing myself in the river but I realised that they probably wouldn't care so somehow I kept going... When you've taken the risk to go and seek help and when a person goes to do that and that's the way they're treated, in a very cold, very distant way... and then you're still in that very vulnerable state and told to go home. It was ridiculous. Coming out of there I couldn't believe that had just happened... I was sent away with an appointment card, feeling very unsafe and expected to survive despite saying what I was thinking and feeling... I think if it happens once, the risks are too high. There was a waiting room full of people who were obviously not in a great place in their lives either and also in vulnerable situations waiting to go into the psychiatrist. God knows where they were going to end up after that."

Considering the serious nature of Christina's contact with the mental health services, it is important to note that Christina cannot recall if a risk assessment was completed but remembers not being offered any interim supports other than the Samaritans being mentioned in passing.

"I don't remember unless that's what he was doing at the time but he didn't even look at me, hardly at all. I think on paper it was all fine. I was studying, I was in college and still doing what my role was at that time. So I think when certain things are in place, there's an assumption that everything is going to be fine... At the time I was told that the waiting list [to see a psychologist] was ten months long unless you're about to throw yourself in the river which he assumed was not going to happen, how he knew that I have no idea though... [being admitted into hospital] wasn't offered or suggested. At that stage I would have welcomed it as an option rather than being sent home. I asked someone, not that particular person but another one later on, if there was anywhere I could go because I felt I was not safe, like I was a risk to myself. He said it was expensive and there was a waiting list and so on... maybe he didn't think I was serious but I explicitly said that I don't trust myself right now and to ignore that, is a bit of a gamble."

Upon leaving the hospital, Christina recalls a very limited follow up process being provided in her case:

"I got a few appointment cards sent to me, the 'you've missed your appointment' type but there was no follow up apart from another card renewing the appointment. There was never any follow up, I could have been dead and they wouldn't have known. They would have just crossed me off the list and that would have been the end of that."

In spite of treatment she describes as being "consistently bad," Christina did not take the opportunity to make a formal complaint for a number of reasons. These include that she was unaware of the complaints process available to her, that she didn't feel able to make a complaint and that she was uncertain whether her complaint fit in with any complaints process.

"If the information had been there in the waiting room and if I had seen it before going in, I would have felt stronger in the situation and I would have had a voice... the other people waiting there too. It would put you on a more equal footing that you're not at someone else's mercy. You could have some say in the whole thing. It's important that people using the service have some say. It really is because it's very unbalanced in my experience anyway. I mean the power hierarchies between doctor and patient. When you go in publicly, it's free. Someone even said to me that I should be grateful for whatever I get because I'm getting it for free and to shut up about it because it's the best you're going to get... even though the service is dehumanising."

She also explains how difficult it would have been for her to try and find the information on her own given the nature of her distress at the time. She says,

"I definitely wasn't in the head space to have gone looking around for it then... It didn't even cross my mind to make a written complaint. I didn't know about it... I was thinking more along the lines of a public protest [being necessary]... because of the injustice of the whole thing. I had to go through it. Other people had to go through it too. They might have found it different but I can't imagine that would have been the case... I thought that if something was publicised about it, not just me writing a letter, but attracting some kind of media attention. But it was more of a fantasy and it was what I was imagining could happen as I walked home afterwards. I thought about how the way people are being treated needs to be exposed for what it is; a completely unfair system... It's hard to

complain about a person's manner. It's a private thing that happens as well but it definitely was unethical the way he dealt with me."

Christina was fortunate in that eventually she did find the support and help that she needed to get well outside of the mental health services. She saved money to attend a psychotherapist privately and has managed to develop her own recovery based on her needs and on her own terms:

"I was trying to piece together my life at that stage because it went into a mess. I didn't engage with the services again because I had no faith in it. My faith in it had been damaged for years so I thought I was stupid to go back again but I was hopeful... they'd referred me on to an addiction counsellor, I did go to him hoping counselling was maybe more on the therapeutic side of things but I didn't end up engaging with that much either at the time. I think it was just a rapport thing... I didn't go about it that way but I did eventually find an alternative way through other supports and professionals to get help... I had to get back working so I could afford to do it as it's not cheap. Therapy is expensive. There is a whole [public] service there that a lot of money has gone into but I could not engage with it at all. I found it so much more helpful to do it off my own back and do research on the person I was going to see next because I didn't have it in me to face another disappointment like before. So that's what I did and thankfully that worked after everything.... It's great now and I'm in a better place. It was tough going at times but I'm so glad coming out the other end of it and I know I have my own resources now. I know some people benefit from medication and things so I'm not anti that but I think for what I was dealing with, it just wasn't the answer because I was able to work on it on-going and not put it down to changes in the medication. I took the bipolar medication for a while and I did feel a bit better I suppose but I just didn't feel any sense of achievement from it or anything, just felt like now I've got to rely on these things all the time... I didn't want to have it there as something tying me together but I'm fortunate enough that I wasn't dealing with something that required medication ... I suppose looking back at it now, I would think that I should be angry about it but I'm not. It's hard to say how I feel now but if someone had told me the same thing, I'd probably find it upsetting and would be angered by the situation. I guess I've just learned not to think about it that way because throughout [my experience of the services] there wasn't once where I felt like I had the opportunity to explore and channel my feelings."