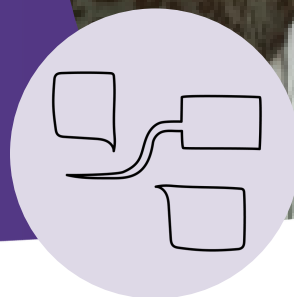


My Story: Kirsty

2022



In 2014 my whole world was turned upside down when I gave birth to my daughter. She was born with severe complex needs and it was clear from the start that her life was going to be very different. At the time I was a practice manager at a local dentist and after finding suitable childcare following maternity leave, I decided to return to work.

Juggling work alongside being a parent and a carer was difficult and I began to feel out of my depth. In early 2015, after returning to work in November 2014, I was diagnosed with cervical cancer and had to undergo life changing surgery to survive. My managers were incredibly supportive throughout this period and after some time off I returned to work again.

These two significant and traumatic events stripped me of my identity and psychologically, I was struggling. I had no idea what happened to the life I was living, and my time was mostly spent either at work, in hospital appointments or talking to healthcare professionals.

In early 2016 I faced another significant change when my daughter suffered a huge epileptic seizure which landed her in intensive care. It was at this point I knew something had to give and I gave up my much-loved job. My daughter spent most of 2016 in and out of hospital with pneumonia and eventually in 2017 she went from feeding orally every day to being fed by a tube. My self-esteem, self-worth and self-care went through the floor, and I felt like a failure.

I became a full-time carer for my daughter, a path I never saw myself walking, and slowly but surely, I lost myself completely. I carried on this way for the next few years, surviving but never thriving. In 2020, like many others, my world again was flipped on its head by COVID and the impact of this along with the trauma of previous years put a huge strain on my marriage. By the end of 2020 I decided I Wanted to do something for myself. Becoming a carer has been so incredibly difficult, but six years in I felt as though I had learnt so much, but I didn't think my life experience was enough to start a career. I signed myself up to the city of Bristol college to complete a health and social care course in the hope this would lead to a job I would love.

“Since becoming a Peer Support Worker for NSPCWT, my life has changed dramatically”

When I signed up for the course, I wasn't sure of the route I was going to take but I knew I wanted to help people. By the time I was halfway through this course we had entered another lockdown and the pressure of home schooling and completing my college assignments meant I had to sacrifice some of the jobs I was doing to help with my then husbands' business. Unfortunately, this was the beginning of the end of my marriage and in July 2021 I separated from my daughter's dad and a whole other chapter began. The relationship breakdown has been far from easy, and I have been forced to think on my feet about providing a financially stable life. When my daughter returned to school in September 2021, I started to think about how I could use my college qualification and began job hunting.

My daughter is away from home 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday so I needed something that was going to fit with these hours. The job would need to be flexible and understand the complications of working whilst being a carer and a parent to a child with complex needs. The hours and wage needed to fit in with the benefits I was already receiving and not make me financially worse off. It seemed every job I came across needed a commitment bigger than I was able to give and I started to feel at a loss. One day while scrolling on social media I came across a job advert for North Somerset Parent Carers Working Together. I was familiar with this organisation as I used their resources to help find more support.

They were advertising for the role of Peer Support Worker and as I read through the job advert, I began to feel excited. It was everything I had been looking for - a job helping people, a wage that would make me financially better off and hours that were flexible around my daughter and her needs. As well as that, the organisation was also actively looking for a person who had life experience of a child with a disability. I emailed them straight away and requested an application form. I spent hours completing the application form ensuring I was demonstrating how I met all the criteria.

This was more than a job to me; it was an opportunity to provide for my daughter and ensure stability in our lives. It was a chance for me to find myself again after being lost for so long. I interviewed for my role in December 2021, and I prepared myself for rejection. Deep down I knew that if I was successful, it would set my life on the most positive path it had been on for a very long time, and I would get to share my knowledge and skills that I have learnt since becoming a carer with other parents who are just at the beginning of their journey. Obviously, my interview was a success and I'm sharing my story here with you today. Since becoming a Peer Support Worker for NSPCWT, my life has changed dramatically and although this is still very much a journey for me, my life is so much more positive because of this job. I have had comments from close friends and family members about how much brighter my smile is, and how much they can see “me” again. It's so nice to have somewhere to go in the week, somewhere where each individual brings something new and different to the table.

