

Self-Neglect – Emily’s story

As you know, self-neglect is a behavioural condition when individual fails to attend to their basic personal needs, such as hygiene, nutrition, or medical needs. It is not a sign of laziness or even a choice; it is often a symptom of underlying issues such as mental health disorders, chronic illness or social isolation.

I did not wake up one morning thinking “today I will start to self-neglect”. I said I was “fine thanks”, I didn’t think I had a problem. It was a slow, gradual process that was picked up by my care company and a close friend. The fact that I was building walls of ‘stuff’ to keep me safe and not eating well was the first thing that they noticed. I would have breakfast as that was supervised, but other meals I would miss. I didn’t feel hunger. My home was, and still is, full of far too much. I now accept I am a hoarder. Hoarding is, actually, a recognised mental health condition.

Myself self-neglect, I think, began with deep depression caused by abuse. Day by day, week by week as my depression deepened so did myself neglect. The simplest of tasks became insurmountable – showering, vacuuming, brushing my teeth and the walls of stuff became higher and higher.

A heavy-handed ‘helping’ comment made things worse for me as shame became another overwhelming emotion. I was a “risk”. A risk to myself

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but that word risk made me feel worse. I felt a failure, subhuman and asking for help beyond my capability which made me feel weak. The fire brigade advised I was “fire loading” my property but I had no idea how to combat it.

Several years later I saw the poster that was the start of changes for me. I saw a poster about a hoarding support group and faced up to my own hoarding. I went along to an open meeting and was met with compassion and kindness. I was offered a support worker who came to see me at home – a hard step for me.

The ‘risk’ questionnaire felt judgemental but was handled with compassion. We set targets together and I was allowed to lead – I was not dictated to or cajoled, simply supported to start to clear things at my own pace.

When I was invited to join the ‘experts by lived experience’ group I found my voice. I was able to talk about my experience of the risk assessment form. Along with the others in the group we looked at how language is so very important, especially with self-neglect.

Through our discussions I no longer felt alone and feel that our combined work will help others be identified more quickly, with greater compassion and building on an individual’s strengths.

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I do have strengths, even if I do not recognise them as strengths. This is where a professional with compassion highlighted these to me. This helped build better self-esteem and helped me to learn to trust that the professionals did have my best interests at heart.

I continue to attend the hoarding support group as peer support is so important – other people facing and beating similar challenges to me. I am still a work in progress with myself neglect, but I have support now. My entire life I have felt like a misfit, suffered depression and anxiety.

On 29 April 2024 I was diagnosed as autistic – I am no longer a misfit! I run a different operating system, and my depression is lifting. My hope is that with my depression lifting my self-neglect may improve.