

The Exchange

Recovery College, Barnsley



Learner and volunteer testimonies



Testimony 1

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"Before I came to the recovery college, I suffered with anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and agoraphobia. I couldn't go out of my house; I was a prisoner in my own home.

"I hadn't ever experienced this before; it was totally alien to me. I had lost all of my confidence. From being a very independent woman to not being able to do anything or go anywhere was devastating to me. I had to rely on family to support me and I had few reliable friends.

"I first came to the recovery college at last year's 'celebration of learning' and I remember thinking, "this is not for me!" But I soon realised that it was for me, and is for people, regardless of their severity of mental health."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"Ever since coming to the recovery college, I have had immense support from learners and staff, which has encouraged me to develop my confidence, self-esteem and knowledge. I have also established new friendships and even consider myself to have close friends!

"All courses have played a part in my recovery journey. Since the very first course, I have never looked back.

Things that have changed for me in a positive way since coming to the recovery college are:

- An increase in my self-awareness
- My mental health and wellbeing has improved
- My confidence has increased and my knowledge has improved, and I am now inspired to give something back and want to help others!

"I felt empowered and enriched when I completed the very first course which was Cook and Eat with Maria. Maria was very supportive when I found it difficult to attend and because of this support and encouragement, I am now co-producing and co-facilitating a course alongside her."

Where will I go from here?

"I have gone on to do numerous other courses, but the ones that have made an impact on my journey so far are 'Renew yourself' with Georgina who has been fantastic in helping me to think about myself differently. Kevin has also been a big influence and I am now involved in the gym. As a result of all of these things, I have realised that I CAN do it and that positive things are on the horizon!

"If I can overcome this, I can achieve anything!"

"I am now a volunteer at the college. My involvement and interest in the gym has led me to recently complete a qualification in gym instructor training and I am hopeful that I will gain paid employment in this area. I now feel that I'm looking forward with hope and positivity for my future."

Testimony 2

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"For the past five years, I've suffered with chronic depression, severe anxiety, mood disorder, post-traumatic stress and nursed my mother with cancer. I was deteriorating massively. I truly believed I would never be a part of society again."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"I've been attending The Exchange for around eight months now. In this time, I have progressed more than I could have ever hoped for. I can't praise the staff and quality of courses they offer enough. They offer a feeling of safety, security and unspoken understanding in this beautiful building. The care, patience and help from staff and tutors is something which is not on offer in the outside world.

"I've watched the development of others and find it overwhelming to see how people have grown from nervous wrecks to people with strong personalities and a sense of humour! This is as rewarding as my own progression."

Where will I go from here?

"I am in the process of stopping smoking after 35 years because I was persuaded to join netball. I feel healthy, mentally and physically, for the first time in years. I truly believe my future is going to be wonderful instead of feeling apprehensive and fear.

"I will never be able to praise and thank the staff enough at the recovery college for caring and respecting our needs."

Testimony 3

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"My story started around 18 months ago; I was in a bad way suffering with really bad depression and anxiety. I locked myself away in my own home and was afraid to go out. I wouldn't answer the door or the phone. My occupational therapist came to visit me and asked me if I'd heard about the recovery college."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"I made an appointment to look around, although I was so uptight and frightened when I arrived. After speaking with staff, they made me feel so safe and were very friendly. I've now completed four courses and feel so much better. I can't wait for the next class!"

Where will I go from here?

"I honestly don't know if I'd be here today if it wasn't for support from the staff here and my mental health team!"



Testimony 4

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"I was placed in Barnsley by the home office after my financial support stopped from Iran for a master's degree I was studying for in London. My son and I went from living a comfortable life in London to living in poor conditions with no job or car. I was nervous, emotional and recovering from shingles when I arrived at the recovery college, but I wanted to be back in control of my life again."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"I decided I wanted to get involved in volunteering. Staff here truly valued my work experience. I worked giving learner support, I was a member of the editorial panel and I even gained a gym instructor qualification! I've loved every minute."

Where will I go from here?

"I've just secured a full time job. The recovery college has taught me how to live my life better and I couldn't be more grateful. I've learned so much from learners and staff; something I'll treasure forever."

Testimony 5

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"It was like being in the pitch black. I was drowning. Giving up. I couldn't swim anymore. I wanted to die, because I was so embarrassed about how I was feeling. I didn't understand myself or why I was the way I was. I felt that there was something seriously mentally wrong with me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I felt failed by services. I felt there was no help for me. Then I was thrown a lifeline."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"Since coming to the recovery college, I have been able to listen to other people's negative experiences. I've realised I'm not alone. I have made lots of new friends. The staff and the learners are so nice and friendly. I haven't been judged once about my past. Everyone is so supportive of each other. It now feels like an extension of my family which I've never had but always wanted."

"I'm now facing things I would have normally avoided because I have learnt so much about my behaviour and how to deal with it differently, for the benefit of myself and others."

"My environment has also changed for the better. I chose to move away from living around chaos because of the learning I have done. This had to change so that I could develop and study."

"In the past I have felt embarrassed about having difficulties reading and writing, because people have made fun of me; until I came to the recovery college."

"I've also:

- Felt accepted for my struggles, which has helped me to learn and come this far.
- Felt understood, and then able to understand myself.
- Had a few light bulb moments!
- I've often felt buzzing leaving the college - always with a massive smile on my face."

Where will I go from here?

"I want to learn how to read and write, so I've enrolled on a course at Northern College that starts in September. I will also be doing more courses at the recovery college, and will continue with the gym and start up jogging - which is something I used to enjoy."



I am also thinking about how I can use the negative experiences I've had to help others - give something back



Testimony 6

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"Before I enrolled on Feel The Fear course, I was highly anxious and I was scared to meet and engage with people and I had given up the thing I loved most which was football."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"During the course my confidence grew, and by the end of it, I finally felt I could actually meet and speak to people without feeling scared."

Where will I go from here?

"I have returned to football! I feel on a very comfortable level with myself and feel like I am now able to change the way that I live."

Testimony 7

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"I was very isolated, controlled and very haunted by negative behaviours."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"The 'advanced confidence and assertiveness' course helped me to retrain my brain. I loved the people there - students and staff. Everyone was warm and approachable.

"The College offered me much guidance and structure. I feel a lot more content and sure about accepting myself for who I am and sharing that with others.

"I feel I now matter more. I've started to speak out more for myself and know how to say 'no!'."

Where will I go from here?

"I've just enrolled for a few more courses and I'm going to encourage other learners who I think would benefit from coming to the college."

Testimony 8

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"I was extremely anxious and didn't see much of my family and friends. My eating habits were terrible and couldn't even think about exercise."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"Since completing 'Feel the fear' I have met new friends, engaged again with my old ones and have a more stable relationship with my close family."

Where will I go from here?

"I'm trying to control my eating habits. This is the most difficult thing for me to do, but I'm getting there slowly. I'm now also a member of a gym!"

Testimony 9

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"My life was very empty and unchallenging. I didn't go anywhere. After speaking to a friend who had been to the college, I decided to enrol on a course. Because I was enrolled, I could use the gym and soon became interested in this field."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"The college pushed me out of my comfort zone and as a result, I gained lots of confidence and felt good about myself for the first time. The staff are very knowledgeable and approachable and supported me fully."

Where will I go from here?

"I plan to help out as volunteer and gain qualifications."

Testimony 10

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"Previously, I ran and organised a junior football club in my local community. The club had 10 teams from under 6s to under 18s. Running the club was very hard work, and took up a lot of my time, however I enjoyed the role immensely, as not only was I giving my time and experience to kids in the community, but also a lot of joy and happiness to a lot of people - the kids, parents and their grandparents.

"Unfortunately, due to health problems, I had stand down from my position within the club which lead to the club's demise. What took ten years to build was lost in weeks.

"My illness took me into despair, I lived alone and isolated myself from the world. I very rarely left my home. At this time, I found life in general very hard to handle.

"I was first introduced to the college with an invitation to attend an open fay in September 2014. Not knowing what to expect, I decided to give it a go as I needed to try turn my life around for the benefit of my health. When I arrived at the college, I was overwhelmed with disbelief, the house and its gardens wowed me, on entry I was immediately welcomed. I took an instant liking to the place."

Immediately I knew this was going to be special

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"The house and its grounds are beautiful. The courses available here are well structured and very enjoyable. All staff are friendly and very knowledgeable. "I have enjoyed a range of courses, which include 'How to manage depression', 'Feel the fear', 'Renew yourself' and 'Mindfulness' - just to name a few. I also attend the gym. This has helped improve my fitness levels and I have lots of confidence back.

"I have recently been given the opportunity to complete a gym instructor course which comes with a recognised qualification."



**All of this has given me a new lease of life,
I have a purpose and want to succeed**

Where will I go from here?

"After completing courses with Northern College, I have now gained qualifications including an ILM Level 2 award in 'Effective team skills' and a City and Guilds level 3 'Learner support practitioner' qualification.

"The question I now need to ask myself now is 'How will I take this learning forward to support further progression?'

"I have completed the necessary checks required to become a volunteer at The Exchange, and have recently been successful following an interview to become a learner support mentor.

"I would like to personally thank all the management and staff at The Exchange recovery college for all their support over the past 12 months. I'm really looking forward to my volunteer role!"

Testimony 11

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"My life was absolute hell. I was lonely, isolated and depressed."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"The 'Living with depression' course helped me to realise I'm not alone. I gained lots of knowledge and coping mechanisms and I was able to put these into practice in my day-to-day life.

"I'm now able to socialise better, I've improved my personal care and feel positive about the future."

Where will I go from here?

"I plan to enrol on more courses! There are lots of different varied courses and I love the building, it makes me feel so calm and relaxed."

Testimony 12

What was life like before being introduced to The Exchange?

"I'd completely lost my independence and who I was. I couldn't even travel on public transport on my own."

What has the attending The Exchange done for me?

"My confidence and health has increased. I have new friendships and I've even travelled to the college on a bus! This is the first time I've been on a bus for years."

Where will I go from here?

"I plan to enrol on more courses and maybe become a volunteer. I absolutely love coming here."

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