

How it was

I still recall the day that the prison staff told me the news. I remember the early morning light gleaming through the window and how heavy my tired eyes felt when I heard the knock on the door. But then again, I always felt tired back then. There had already been talk of me moving to a different unit, but these transfers usually took a considerable time. So, when they explained that I would be moving to a medium secure service half an hour away, I had mixed feelings. There was a glimmer of hope that there might be an end to all of this, but there was also trepidation.

I entered medium secure weighing in at 105 kg, my last health check confirming my obesity. For most people, being 'obese' brought a sense of urgency, a need for immediate action. Me, I never liked labels much; but they were something you became accustomed to in this place. My weight was something I had chosen not to think about...or how I dressed. Or whether or not I'd showered that week. I'd grown numb to the glances I received in the corridors. It wasn't a numbness created out of self-acceptance, but one born out of denial, a lack of confidence... or habit maybe. That's just how it was, how I was.

My diagnoses of autistic spectrum disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder meant that I craved routine. I didn't like to stray from my rigid, daily plan which rarely included any physical activity, never mind exercise. During the first exercise classes in the medium secure unit, I would sit there and watch the others play basketball or volleyball,

counting down the seconds until I could crawl back into bed and hide away. It was just me and another guy who didn't join in - he didn't talk much and that was fine with me. The staff often tried to encourage me to 'try a little bit of something' but they were starting to realise that I didn't like to try new things. New activities, new plans, new people.. I became angry and shouted when they first told me I would have to do exercise. I couldn't have done it. The thought of running or passing a football to another patient would cause my hands to sweat.

A glimmer of hope

I kept up my low -levels of activity for the following six months. Despite becoming out of breath just walking between wards I was still content to just watch others exercising whilst I chatted to Alex, one of the health care assistants who liked to keep me company. I didn't speak to many people here, but Alex was different in the way he approached me so understandingly. He had a calming voice and a caring nature that reminded me of someone I could trust.

"There must be some exercise you like to do? Trust me it will put you in a better mood, you'll never know if you don't give it a chance" Alex said hopefully.

I doubted that exercising would put me in a good mood, but Alex's encouragement Made me think back to when I was younger, when I used to play squash with my dad. It was something we had both loved. He spent hours teaching me how to hit the perfect shot and I remember the rush of enjoyment when we played the

final tense moments of a match. I didn't think there was a squash court at the service, so I never expected Alex's response when I suggested it.

"Sure, that can be organised! When would you like to go?" he answered with a grin on his face.

I started to play squash with Rickie, a sport therapist. To begin with we played just once a week but soon built up to twice. It was quite intense and initially after the first twenty minutes, I could feel my clothes start to stick to my body with sweat and my breathing becoming heavy. But that didn't stop me. The deep, echoing sound of the ball bouncing off the wall was familiar to me. Playing reminded me of how it used to be, of how I used to be.

Afterwards, my throat would be dry, my body exhausted and aching. But something about a simple glass of cold water satisfied me. My body deserved every last drop. I sat there going back through the squash game in my head, every shot I had made, every point that had been won or lost. Sometimes I would talk it through with some of the staff on the ward, and they told me how well I was doing. I felt myself becoming more open with others. Not shying away from encounters as much. The squash court was near the pool, so I would often see guys from medium secure swimming lengths when I walked by. They were always smiling proud and joking when they got out, looking like they had all accomplished something. I could barely believe myself when I told Alex that I would like to try swimming, part of me

regretted saying it the minute he left. I feared the anxiety that swimming might bring, but I wanted to feel that sense of achievement again, the satisfaction of learning something new.

New beginnings

I was a quick learner when it came to swimming. Even though it was hard to trust the instructors, and I panicked the first few times I put my head under, swimming brought me happiness. I felt more aware of how my body moved when I was swimming, how my arms and legs worked together to propel me forward. I started to see a change in me after this. Alex noticed it too. I no longer wanted to stay in my room all day letting my anger build within me. Now I just wanted to breathe and find my body's rhythm. Although I still became frustrated when plans were changed suddenly, or I couldn't get my back-stroke right, I found myself becoming better able to cope with change and setbacks by staying calm. I made an effort to listen to staff rather than shouting over them. When I started to feel frustration in my body I would take deep breaths, the kind of breaths I took when I was in the water. Swimming helped me to feel safe and in control.

Life in medium secure was different from then on. I lost weight and spent most days in the pool or sitting in the lounge chatting and playing board games with other patients. My room was for sleeping only. Every night I looked forward to the next day. Days had more of a purpose and for the first time in a long time, I had a purpose too.

