

Before Lady Z met Riding for Smiles

One of RfS's beneficiaries is a lady, Lady Z. Lady Z was diagnosed with Bipolar 18 years ago, though she believes she has had depression to some extent all her life. She had a good professional job working for the Abbey National Building Society as an Office Manager prior to her diagnosis.

She was at that time living in North London with her husband. However, after the long illness and death of her husband Lady Z found her depression becoming significantly worse and was referred for treatment to a psychiatrist who diagnosed her with bipolar. For a few years she struggled with a variety of disabling symptoms which severely affected her life. She suffered with severe mood swings and frequent suicidal feelings and often had to contact the Crisis team. She suffered with a lack of motivation, self-control and binge eating. Being unable to leave the house left her with no friends or self-confidence and she slowly became a recluse and socially isolated. Her weight gradually increased until she reached 17 stones.

Under psychiatrist supervision she tried various medications to control the bipolar but many of them left her with unpleasant side effects, including the increase in weight. Although she depended on the medications Lady Z was eager to find one which suited her better and had less side effects, so she persistently worked with her doctor to find the right one for her, which she feels was eventually achieved. A few years after the death of her husband, and after partially successful treatment, she met and married her present husband. In an attempt to rebuild her life and start a new chapter, they decided to move away from London and the house which held so many bad memories for her. They chose the new area because it was affordable yet close enough to York which held special positive connotations (where she had her Honeymoon with her 2nd husband). She was subsequently discharged from the psychiatrist and referred to her GP, although she still had access to the Crisis team. The London Mental Health Services referred her onto the local one and to MIND, so she could continue accessing the care she needed.

Lady Z meets Riding for Smiles at Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre

Lady Z was introduced to RfS initially by MIND when RfS ran the "Get Set to Go" programme funded by MIND. She continued to attend sessions throughout the first project funded by Healthy Bolsover. When we first met Lady Z, she weighed 17 stone and was unhappy about her weight gain, how it made her look and feel and the restrictions it brought her. She was eager to join the RfS Project and talked positively about animal therapy and how contact with animals makes her feel much better. She has a large number of her own animals – cats, dogs, rabbits, rescue hens and lizards.



Lady Z tells us that stroking animals and caring for their needs relaxes and calms her and gives her a purpose and a reason to get up and do something. She also feels that they give company without being judgemental of her. She hadn't had any contact with horses before but was sure that this would be another positive avenue for her which would add to her well-being. She was therefore a little anxious getting near them to begin with but, with one-to-one support, over a few weeks, gained confidence and soon was happy to stroke and brush them.



To begin with Lady Z had to have a carriage ride because she was too heavy to ride a horse. It was not long before she started to want to lose weight to be able to ride a horse. She set herself the 2 stone weight loss target and joined Weight Watchers. Each session, during the drink/chat time, she would eagerly tell the other group members how much weight she had lost and the recipes she had cooked over the last week. Her interest in healthy foods had grown significantly, as had her determination. Her success in achieving her goal had increased her self-esteem and confidence and others in the group were motivated by what she told them and by observing achieved success. This made for an incredibly positive feel in the group sessions. Having such an important end goal in mind helped motivate her and throughout the first project she religiously curbed her eating.



By the beginning of this 2nd Project funded again by Healthy Bolsover Lady Z had reached her goal and weighed 15 stone as was therefore allowed to ride. She rewarded herself by buying her own hat which made the activity seem more definite and long term to her.

Encouragingly Lady Z was also aware of the need to sustain this new weight and recognised the situations which may deter it. She also joined and took part in walking groups, giving herself another social outlet, which would help keep control of her weight and bring her interaction.

Her inspiration helped other group members as she encouraged them to also take part, so the benefits reached them too. Throughout this Project Lady Z has faced her fears and insecurities and pushed herself to her limits, all in her own time.

Lady Z also suffers from hypermobility and sometimes walks with the aid of a stick. She often finds difficulties walking on uneven ground and has limited flexibility and movement. Mounting a horse is a challenge for her and she often needs a great deal of support to do this as she needs help swinging her leg over the horse. However, as she has lost weight and practiced the action over time, she has become more confident and has developed her strength and flexibility which has increased her independence. She is slowly building her physical health in all ways. In addition to this she is building a relationship with the horse she rides and loves to have her photograph taken with him. She recognises, and states, this animal is special and invaluable to her and involvement with him brings her immense pleasure and benefits.

Lady Z and the benefits of Riding for Smiles

When talking to Lady Z about the impact of attending the Project sessions she is very complimentary and lists many benefits. She claims to normally be an introvert but feels quite different in relation to the group. She states that she "Feels Safe" with us and this has enabled her to make friends with others who have mental health problems who do not judge her and who understand her problems. She puts the success of the group interaction for her being down to a

“laid back group with no pressure or expectations, just friendly support”. In our sessions she can chat with her friends, giving and receiving peer advice in dealing with difficulties

This, she claims, is different to a hospital or organised medical setting which offers counselling or support. The Project sessions have helped her by providing an activity outside in the fresh air, and access to nice scenery and interaction with animals, all of which help make her “feel chilled and relaxed and better about everything”.

Throughout the Project Lady Z has been observed to have developed a clearer insight into the triggers to her difficulties and a better understanding into her abilities and limitations. In the past she has been involved in volunteering and completed a Peer Support qualification. However, she has recognised how, now, she finds it difficult to deal with other people’s problems and negative feelings in a work role and doing so would cause her greater stress and anxiety.

However, in our more relaxed setting she thrives on helping others by championing her own successes. Our Project sessions have provided Lady Z an outlet to develop emotionally, socially, and physically at her own pace, reintegrate back into society and thrive once again, despite the difficulties faced by us all at this unprecedented time of coronavirus pandemic.

Riding for Smiles

Riding for Smiles is a charity offering inclusive and innovative equestrian based activities to disabled and vulnerable children, young people, and adults. We work with those who have physical, social, learning, behavioural and emotional/mental disabilities, or multiple needs and those who are disaffected, excluded, or marginalised. Our sessions and activities provide enjoyable, enrichment experiences and recreational opportunities which develop confidence and self-esteem, self-regulation, positive social interaction, motivation, calmness, thoughtfulness, resilience, and physical exercise. We work with Schools, Special Schools, Behaviour Units, Disability Sports Clubs, and other Charities to bespoke projects to meet individual and group needs.

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