

"One minute, I am supporting people with anger issues, and the next I'm looking at helping them manage their own physical health."

Jenna realised that a career in learning disabilities was for her after work experience in a school for children with special needs. She is now working towards a postgraduate diploma in applied behavioural analysis, funded by the NHS.

Jenna Szymanski

Community learning disability nurse

Employer or university

Solent NHS Trust

Salary range

£25k-£35k



How I got into the role

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My first experience of working with people with learning disabilities was completing work experience in a school for children with special needs and volunteering at a local summer playscheme, again with children with special needs. It gave me a real taste of what working with people with learning disabilities might be like. I loved working with the children and seeing the difference the staff made to their lives.

After a period of travelling I returned to the UK and began working at a care home for the elderly. This experience made me realise how suited I was to working in the care industry and how much I enjoyed it. A nurse at the home advised me to look into learning disability nursing after talking to her about my experience of working with children with learning disabilities.

I started my three year advanced diploma in learning disability at Southampton University in 2005 and have never looked back.

What I do

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A typical day starts with organising my workload. I need to know who I am seeing and what therapeutic work I will be doing that day. Much of the rest of my day will be spent seeing people with learning disabilities and their carers. Unfortunately, some of the people I see don't have anyone to help them, and may need additional support from myself and other services.

My work with service users is wide-ranging. One minute, I can be therapeutically supporting them with anger issues or planning approaches to challenging behaviour, and the next I'm looking at helping them manage their own physical health.

The best bits and challenges

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The best part of my job is definitely working with service users. There is no better feeling in my job than seeing the improvement to the individual's quality of life from the point of referral to discharge. I love knowing that I am empowering them to be part of the wider community while ensuring their health needs are met.

Sometimes the administrative side of my job is a challenge but I know it's crucial, not only for the benefit of our service users but to develop our service. We do a lot of work with outside agencies, such as the police, to help them better understand the needs of people with learning disabilities.

There are still a number of myths about learning disability nursing. Many people just don't understand what we do and often confuse us with mental health nurses which is a very different career option. People often still think of learning disability nursing, as they

do with other branches of the profession, in an old school, institutional way where we direct a service user's care. The truth is very different. Today's nurse works in partnership with service users and patients to make sure the care is right for them.

Career plans and top tips for others

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The NHS is currently funding my studies and I am working towards a postgraduate diploma in applied behavioural analysis. It will take me to the next step so I can help with assessing people with learning disabilities and empowering them to change behaviours.

As for my future career, I am very happy where I am but looking forward to using what I have learnt in my diploma in practice. It will make a massive difference to the service users I work with and, I hope, to their quality of life.

Learning disability nursing is a great career. I really love my job. In fact, my top tip is if you don't love it, you shouldn't do it. That is why it is really important to do some volunteering or get some work experience in a learning disability service before making the decision that it is the career for you.

To be a learning disability nurse, I think you need three main qualities. You need to be:

- caring
- able to communicate with people with learning disabilities
- compassionate

Life outside work

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At the moment I am studying and working full-time so I don't have a lot of spare time. But when I do, I like to go to the gym which really helps if I have had a hard day. It gives me time to unwind and forget about what has happened before I go home.

Guide

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