

Real-life story - Chris Millar

Chris has had a passion for mental health from an early age, having grown up with friends and family members who experienced mental health difficulties and distress.



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Employer or university Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (based at HMP Downview)

Salary range £15k-£25k

How I got into the role

My early experiences inspired me to volunteer in the mental health sector and pursue a psychology degree to learn more about the causes of mental health difficulties.

After I graduated I loved gaining a range of experience, ranging from working with young offenders in children's homes to personality disorder services, acute hospital wards and latterly in the prison service. Working with young offenders who had parents in prison, I was aware of the devastation prison can cause families and the impact on mental health.

What I do

Some days I help facilitate talking therapy groups, carry out one-to-one interventions or attend Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) reviews, which aim to reduce the risk of prisoners' suicide or self-harm.

Other days are more admin- and office-based when I contact community teams, plan groups, research interventions, and write clinical notes, summary reports and letters.

My work is always changing but that means I'm always gaining skills in a number of areas.

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The best bits and challenges

The best part of this job is being able to work with service users with a range of psycho-social needs who might otherwise have difficulty accessing support. It gives me the opportunity for health promotion, education, signposting and working with individuals to develop coping skills to reduce distress and rates of reoffending.

A continued challenge is that I'm employed by the NHS but work at HMP Downview, which is obviously run by the prison service. The prison regime can be quite complex; trying to organise numerous women to be in different activities and to do everything safely. Security has to come first and this means healthcare staff have to think in a slightly different way, so it's important to remain flexible and diplomatic.

Life outside work

I'm a firm believer in the benefits of maintaining a healthy work-life balance and I find playing sport and exercising with other people really beneficial. It enables me to socialise, keep fit and manage my own mental health so I'm able to help those in my care.

Career plans and top tips for others

I've just applied for further training with the Clinical Psychology Doctorate, which is notoriously difficult to get on to as places are so competitive. I'm also keen to further develop my abilities and progress within the NHS on the full-time, three-year Health Care Professions Council-approved course. The training is split between clinical placements and allocated time for teaching and research.

If you work in a prison, you have to leave any preconceptions at home, keep an open mind and be prepared to provide care rather than judgement. If you do that, you'll give compassionate and quality care to help meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our society.

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