

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Daniel Fleshbourne

Hannah Spencer:

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast recorded and produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

This is one of a series of podcasts which really focus on hearing and sharing the career narratives of our diverse workforce and highlight a whole range of possibilities in occupational therapy.

My name is Hannah Spencer and I'm an occupational therapist that's had the absolute pleasure and privilege of facilitating and capturing these conversations with members of our occupational therapy community.

I'm here today with a member of our very much valued support workforce.

Daniel Fleshbourne:

I'm Dan Fleshborne. I'm a senior occupational therapy assistant at LPFT, which is the Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. We are the local mental health trust for Lincolnshire.

Hannah:

Brill. Thank you for joining me today. So the purpose of our conversation today is around career journeys and thinking about your occupational therapy career, your career within the occupational therapy support workforce and your experiences in getting to this point.

What drew you to occupational therapy or allied health?

Daniel:

So I've got a quite an interesting story really, because I used to be a journalist, for my sins, and I did feature writing around IT and hardware and software. So I'd go off to America, do the reports and reviews of hardware and software back in the early two thousands.

I've also been a carer since about the age of four for my mom. She has a severe and enduring mental illness, and so I supported her through my childhood and went off and did my thing when I was younger, and she became more unwell, so I returned home and took a career break to support her.

About five years ago now, I really sort of was getting an itch to get back into work. I was sort of looking for a new career path, I think, because I needed something that would still be local so I could still support her, but also something that would be a challenge and sort of fit with the experiences that I'd gained that lived experience that I'd gained during my time as a carer, because...

I didn't get a carers assessment till very late, so I didn't have a carers assessment 'til I was in my late 30s, so I struggled for a very long time on my own as a carer without support. Once I did get a carers assessment, it really opened up a lot of doors for me. It really gave me a chance to reevaluate what I was doing and where I was going and what I wanted, rather than what the person I cared for wanted. And from those I developed, we developed a personalised care and support plan and part of that was really to get back into the workplace and really sort of use that lived experience that I gained in a positive way. And I was really passionate about actually supporting other people, other carers who maybe hadn't had a carers assessment either and sort of were needing that support, but weren't getting it.

So I joined LPFT originally as a carer governor. I spent three years as a Governor of the Trust and that was really around slowly sort of getting back into the workplace because it had been such a long time that I didn't just want to sort of jump in and lose that caring role that I also had.

So it was a case of sort of could I manage a full time role plus my caring role as well?

So yeah, I came in as a carer governor, spent three years doing that and supported what's called the Triangle of Care initiative and really sort of drove that within the Trust and helped set up things like a carers council, carers policies, carers passports and really sort of drove that carers element within the Trust. I think I found my niche doing that, I really enjoyed doing that. It clicked with my own experiences. And then there was the opportunity to join the Recovery College, which is part of the Trust and for anyone who doesn't know, a Recovery College enables people to use their lived experience and work with people professional experience and bring those together to support our students and service users who come over to us and give them sort of an educational grounding in mental health and wellbeing. And I was able to add to the college and actually bring in support for carers. So we actually started developing and now deliver carers courses as well within the college. And I suppose that's where my sort of AHP journey started because I never really saw myself as an occupational therapist or a therapist of any description really. My sort of comfort zone, as it were, was really sort of telling my story, sharing my lived experience and sort of inspiring others to set off on their own journey and find themselves as well as their caring role. And I suppose the Recovery College and this role that I'm in, this occupational therapy assistant role, has really given me the opportunity to share my lived experience and my journalistic experience of writing and developing and culturing stories really. It really gave me the opportunity to put that into a formal sort of role and gave me some guidance and a path to walk along because when sharing our lived experience we often get pulled in many directions and people will often be like come and tell us your story and it's great sharing your story, but it's really having that ability to focus it to the people that really need to be hearing it, rather than because you get a lot of feedback saying, oh, 'you're very inspirational' but actually it's about sharing that story with other carers and giving them the motivation to change their own lives really.

So, yes, that's what I do at the Recovery College. For me, it's not a job really. Well, it is a job, but it's so close to my heart and then such a passion that actually I enjoy work every day. Every day I get to support people and watch them starting their journey and discovering rediscovering themselves. And it's an absolutely wonderful job, really.

Hannah:

You can tell that you really do enjoy your job and it's almost grown from within you. It's almost an accident, but a beautiful accident.

Daniel:

Yeah. And props to LPFT as well, because it's an experimental post.

Hannah:

Is it?

Daniel:

It is, it's non clinical which is very different for an OTA role, because most OTA roles will be on a ward or in a clinical setting. But actually we don't do therapy at the Recovery College. It's purely educational and lived experience. So this is a role where we are hands on with our students. There isn't a traditional clinical role that you would expect of an OTA.

Hannah:

We've talked a bit about the experiences that you kind of brought to your role, what other skills, experiences and opportunities have contributed along the way as part of the role?

Daniel:

I'm actually developing my educational training experience so as I'm working towards QTS, which is qualified teacher status and I didn't ever really see myself as a teacher either and I'm not sure I'll ever be in the classroom. But actually having that grounding and fundamentals in educational theory really supports my role and is something that was offered by the Recovery College as part of my role and is something that I'd never really thought of before.

In addition to that, all members of the Recovery College develop a wellness plan. So I don't personally have any personal live experience with mental health, but supporting people I do. So it was really interesting to write a wellness plan and think about actually when supporting other people, you really need to support yourself as well and keep yourself well. And that was kind of a new thing to me because I was very used to supporting other people, but actually thinking about how do I keep myself well in the role and how do I look after my own well being a moment or help while supporting others was interesting.

Hannah:

That's really good that you've been encouraged to do that as well. I think the value of that reflection speaks for itself, doesn't it?

Daniel:

Yeah, and I think it's really part of the way the LPFT really cares about their staff and that sort of staff development. So along with the regular supervisions, actually, the door is always open, so if I need to talk about my caring role or get some carers leave or some sort of additional support or just a listening ear, really my team is there and

I feel really supported by them as well. So it feels more like I'm in a family of like minded people rather than sort of a bunch of professionals doing their own thing.

Hannah:

So I was going to ask, how has your environment kind of enabled your career journey? Sounds like it's been instrumental.

Daniel:

Yeah, so it's been interesting because of COVID so I currently still work from home. We do have an office base, but unfortunately current restrictions in place, so we're back to wearing masks and limited numbers, et cetera, et cetera. So I've actually continued to work from home and being quite social myself I've struggled with that at times. You can get a bit of sort of cabin fever just talking to everybody over at Zoom or Teams or having those connections, I think, to my team and working with people rather than screens, I think makes a big difference when it can be done.

Hannah:

You touched briefly on your experiences of supervision. How has that helped?

Daniel:

Coming into this because obviously, not being NHS previously, I was quite worried about the supervision and what that would entail because it's quite thorough and it's very regular.

Hannah:

Brilliant.

Daniel:

Yeah, it's every four to six weeks and generally every four weeks. But actually it was an opportunity for me to reflect on what I'd been doing and sort of offer advice on what support I needed to get the best out of my role and the best out of myself and sort of a chance to reflect on how well I'm working with the team and how I can better integrate with the team and sort of share good experiences as well. So I've recently been nominated for a national award and so they're able to share that with the team. And so, actually, I look forward to supervision, actually, I don't fear it anymore. It's really sort of it's become a part of the process and a really good part of the process, and it gives me an opportunity to offload in a positive way. If I'm having difficulties in my job or difficulties with certain aspects of the role, it gives me a real good chance to work those out with the supervisor without feeling like I've got to hold back or I can't say anything bad about the trust or the people that I work with. It's a really good way to work that out in a positive atmosphere.

Hannah:

Do you feel that you've been able to be and bring your authentic and best self to your role?

Daniel:

So, yeah, that's really the point of the college it's really to bring my own lived experience and my own experiences to the role and use them to develop and shape the courses that I run and to share them with our students.

So often in these kind of roles we're told not to share our personal experiences, but actually, at the

college, it's positively encouraged. And it's part of my job description, in fact, to really share my own experiences as needed and as required, to really inspire the people that we work with and give them hope that they don't have to be stuck in the situation that they're currently in. There is a path out of it. And actually, you can use those experiences to your advantage and really support you to move on. And I suppose that hope, control and opportunity is why I joined the Recovery College and why I wanted to do this role because it allows me to be me and isn't asking me to be someone else or pretend to be something I'm not. It's an amazing role and we need more people in these kind of roles as well as OTAs. Peer support workers as well.

Big shout out to our support workers, which would have been sort of another kind of role that I might have chosen, which is a similar aspect, because a lot of support workers that work with carers as well. And it felt quite hidden because I'd never heard of a Recovery College. I'd never heard of using our lived experience in this kind of way. I'd heard about it in drug treatment, in alcohol recovery, but actually for carers and just Joe Public to use their lived experience and use that in an educational, therapeutic way is absolutely amazing.

Hannah:

I think it's what brings things to life as well, isn't it? Like you say, that essence of hope, if you can see it right in front of you through someone's narrative, is all the more tangible.

Daniel:

Definitely, yeah.

Hannah:

Really valuable roles. I think I know the answer to this question. Have there been points where your career journey or your river, in a sense, has turned or changed course in a way that you'd not anticipated?

Daniel:

Yeah, so as I say, my original journey was as a journalist and really successful, I suppose I can big myself up that way. Sort of part of one of the largest Windows support communities in the world and I thought that would have been my journey forever. I thought that was my path and that's where I was going to suddenly come up towards sort of a dam, if we continue the river analogy. So it really just felt like a dam in the river and I was stuck sort of behind that dam and I couldn't see a way past it, couldn't see a way to continue and sort of and get to where I wanted to be. And I think I sat there for quite a long time, longer probably than I should have, and kind of accepted that was going to be kind of my lot in life and sort of lost my aspiration, I think. Sort of lost my way a bit for this sort of role to come along and sort of undam that river and allowed me to flow along again. The great part is, is that it's not a linear journey now. There are so many branches, so many different things I could do and so many different ways I can go, really. I think the choice is now endless. It's exciting, I think, because it's unknown that there is all those possibilities and all those different sort of journeys that I could make.

And I'm really excited to see where I go because even I don't know and I think that's a really good part of the journey is sort of that exploring the unknown and not having things fixed for you and just being able to sort of enjoy the journey again, I think is really nice.

Hannah:

What is next?

Daniel:

I could train to be full OT. I could do an apprenticeship in OT. I could, like I say, get qualified teacher status. I would certainly want to do something with carers because obviously that's my passion and that's sort of where that's my ground, I suppose. My base is supporting other people, but who I support, that's the question. And where I go, I don't know. And I'm looking forward to finding out, I suppose.

Hannah:

What has been or is the most important or helpful aspect for you in your development or progression as a member of our support workforce?

Daniel:

I think the biggest thing for me, the first day that I became an AHP, I was, like I said previously, a governor and switched over. And on the first day I was in the car park trying to plug my car into the charger and make the charger work and struggling with an electric vehicle. One of the directors came over to me, his name is Chris, he knows who he is; a brilliant guy. He came over to me and said, 'Dan, would you like a hand?' And I thought that was amazing, really. He didn't just pass me by, didn't just leave me to struggle. He came over and used my first name, so remembered who I was, which was amazing and really helped me out and we got the car charging. It didn't feel like I was talking to a director of the Trust, it felt like just talking to another work colleague. I think that stuck with me. I think that's the way it's been from day one. I felt sort of a part of something bigger rather than just a cog in a bigger machine. It doesn't feel like that. It feels like a real family of people trying to do the best for other people. And, yeah, I really enjoy being part of.

Hannah:

That sense of belonging just echoed loud and clear from what you said

Daniel:

And having the people around you that really kind of see you, acknowledge you, for you, value you, and not just being a band, not just being part of that hierarchy. Because there is that sort of traditional sense that you are what your band is and sort of never the band shall meet sort of thing I mean sometimes... And it really hasn't been like that at all, that we're not sort of graded by our band or talked to as, if you're lower than me, we're allowed to be ourselves. And I think that really gives us a supportive workplace.

Hannah:

Individual people with a wealth of skills, experiences.

What do you wish you'd known prior to joining the support workforce? And what would you say now to your early career or younger self?

Daniel:

So I wish I'd known about it. It's really the big thing. I wish that I had come across this much earlier. I may not have taken a career break, rather just have changed careers, I think is what I would have done. Telling my younger self. I think it would have been like giving me a bit of a bit of a kick up the bum, a bit of rather than sit there and accept a situation, actually go and look and see what was happening, give it a try. Because even when I did apply for this role, I still wasn't sure that it was right for me and I still was in two minds as to whether I should attend the interview and go for the role. And actually, I'd have been telling myself, yeah, you should have been doing this 20 years ago, you should have really started much younger and, yeah, I wish I had.

Hannah:

Is there anything else that you'd like to add to anything we've discussed today?

Daniel:

I think really, it's a case of, like, be yourself, you already have the best you inside of you and it's just really a case of believing in yourself, believing in your role and getting out there and doing it, because anything is possible. You are still only halfway through your journey, you're still on the road. Keep walking the path and you will get there. And set yourself a goal. It doesn't have to be a big goal, just lots of little goals and eventually you'll find that you're a mile down the road and you didn't even notice you got there.

Hannah:

I guess a quick fire finish the sentence question to end with.

Daniel:

Go on.

Hannah:

Being part of the occupational therapy support workforce is...

Daniel:

Where I belong.

Hannah:

Thanks so much for talking to me today, Daniel.

Daniel:

Oh, you're more than welcome.