

Hello everyone, my name is Cormac. I was approached by Jane Mulcahy through the Cork Life Centre to come here today and share my experience. I was more than happy to do so-having had my own journey through the care, mental health and addiction services I feel it is important that I can play whatever part I can in improving things for the young people coming up behind me. I'm here to talk about my experiences in the care system but they are inextricably linked to my experiences in mental health and addiction services so I will speak about this also.

My experience within the care and mental health system- Short and shit!

When I was 14 I tried committing suicide to no avail. Before doing so my mother and I had gone to our GP and discussed how poor my mood had been and that I had suicidal ideation. When we visited the GP I was put on the waiting list for CAMHS and told I would be waiting 6-8 months. This to me was and is a clear indication that something is wrong in our mental health service. The conclusion I take from this is that the threshold for intervention is way too high. If my suicide attempt had been completed I would not have received any help at all. My worst fear at the time was waiting for 6 months, how would I cope for this time period? I became completely overwhelmed.

The first time I was engaged with by a professional from CAMHS was after the suicide attempt -this was a huge indication for me at the time that the service was not functioning as it should be-if I could understand this at 14 I have to wonder why little has changed 5 years later in the mental health service. I was told I would need to link in with CAMHS and the addiction services and that this had been approved by my social worker. At the time I was smoking cannabis regularly and binge-drinking in order to sooth the pain I was in.

Once I entered the addiction services I felt that the engagement with the mental health services was detached. I felt at the time that the label of being an "addict" or having a "disease" was being pushed on me. This made me frustrated and resentful. I would react through anger and aggression. I recognised that drug use was apart of the problem but I knew and voiced that it was more complicated than this.

While I resented being labelled as an addict part of me really wanted to know what was wrong. I was frustrated that the mental health services never provided me with the sense of guidance and care that I needed. I never received the level of diligence that I and many other children deserved.

A key part of my treatment with addiction services was attending group therapy sessions. This was about challenging your behaviours-breaking everything you did down and analysing it. If you did something wrong you were berated and shunned in the group setting. This often left me feeling very vulnerable and scared. I say this knowing I am an ultra-sensitive person but then surely that should have been catered for.

When I look back at this time I know I was angry because I was falling between the two stools of dual diagnosis. Referring to someone as only an addict or someone with only mental health issues just is not adequate. For me I was struggling with both, but when I look back the mental health piece of this jigsaw was very much neglected.

I was an angry young boy who was stuck between services and living with a mother who suffered from huge trauma as a result of our past relationship with my father. He was the catalyst that enabled our trauma and abusive experiences to heighten one another's. We both lived in a constant state of anxiety. Living with one and other was unfeasible, unsustainable and unsafe. I became destructive and violent at home and outside of home. My drug taking and actions led to my removal from my mother's care.

When I found myself in the care system at 14 I rejected being there completely and wanted to live with my mother. This might not seem to make sense given the difficult living situation I described but it felt a lot safer than the unknown that I found myself in. After a reasonably short period of time I did return home but inevitably things became strained and would move from difficult to unsustainable so I would return to the system at later times. Overall I lived in 5 homes. 4 of these I ran away from multiple times.

One of my experiences within the system was at 16. I was waiting at the time to enter a residential drug treatment centre. I could not live at home in the interim it had become a toxic environment for me and my mother. The state's solution was to put in a B & B with no supervision or access to a safe place. During this time the social work department were pushing hard that I would return home post-treatment. I was not given money or vouchers to buy food and my mother was told she could feed me. In spite of how strained our situation was my living arrangement was a source of great stress for my mother. She knew that I was someone with an addiction at 16 with the ability to come and go as I pleased with no one to answer to. She looked after me while I was in the states care.

In relation to my experience with social workers there was a clear lack of stability in these relationships. I would feel I really connected with a particular social worker and they would be moved on or allocated less time to work with me. This is a pattern that I recognised throughout my years within services and institutions. The fact that there was no room to build consistent relationships built on trust left me in a void of uncertainty.

As I have noted there were social workers I felt I could build a relationship with-unfortunately there were others where I felt this was not possible-with one social worker in particular I felt that all they concentrated on was exposing my mother for her downfalls in parenting.

This approach was harmful to both my mother and I. Even though at the time I was angry with my mother and apart of me wanted her criticised I never let this happen in the context of meetings which could get very heated and unprofessional as a result. This was part of a larger blame culture which I didn't find helpful-regardless of how fractured my family relationship was and how angry I felt. I did not want to engage with people who I felt disrespected my family badly. My love and sense of loyalty my family did not allow it.

In conclusion I feel that at many times there is a lack of responsibility taken by services to acknowledge that their approaches and actions worsen rather than improve the situation of vulnerable individuals. If I was to name 3 changes that I feel are needed in our services they would be as follows:

- Teenagers to age out of the care system with proper support.

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I have worked hard as I prepared for today's talk to be fair and balanced and I would like to close on a positive note. I feel very passionately that there is the ability and capacity for every person and every service to change for the better. For me the biggest factor here is building services based on trust-a holistic, individualistic and above all else caring approach can be taken with each person that takes into account and respects their own personal journey.