

Asthma - Kristina's story

Salford office worker Kristina Wall was sceptical when doctors suggested physiotherapy might help her manage her severe asthma.

But 18 months after working with a specialist respiratory physiotherapist, the 23-year-old has returned to work, delights in practising yoga and can "take a flight of stairs without keeling over". "I'd never heard of it before then," Ms Wall said, of the specialised field that helps thousands of patients annually.

Ms Wall said her childhood asthma was "nothing out of the ordinary" until she turned 14.

"Then it just got worse," she said.

"I couldn't walk up and down stairs. It was horrible."

Triggers included leaving a warm room on a cold day, aerosol sprays, common cleaning products, hair dye and air-conditioning, she said.

Asthma causes the muscles around a person's airways to tighten, narrowing and inflaming the small tubes that carry air into the lungs, making it hard to breathe.

Severe attacks hospitalised the Manchester resident.

Ms Wall said a secondary condition which affects her ribcage made it painful to breathe and forced her to give up full-time work when she left Wales in 2008.

"The move and the pollution made it (asthma) worse," she said.

She sought help from Salford Royal Hospital's asthma clinic and worked one-on-one with a physiotherapist to practise breathing techniques to get the best from an inhaler.

"They were basically teaching me how to breathe, how not to panic, how not to hold my chest and crunch up into a ball," she said.

"I've been able to make sure that I'm breathing the correct way - if my heart rate starts to speed up I know how to slow it down."

Ms Wall said being aware of her heart rate also alerted her to changing blood pressure - an early warning sign.

During three subsequent severe attacks these skills were invaluable to keep calm, she said.

Now Ms Wall is educating workplace first-aiders not to panic in an emergency when helping someone with asthma or epilepsy.

"Lack of knowledge can kill a person at work," she said.

Asthma UK's mission is to stop asthma attacks and cure asthma, we do this by funding working leading research, campaigning for improving care, and supporting people to reduce their risk of a potentially life-threatening asthma attack.

Cerebral palsy - Helen's story

For cat-lover Helen Aveling, relaxing with feline companion Bubz in her lap is an unexpected joy. Miss Aveling has cerebral palsy, a non-genetic condition which affects muscle movement.

Sudden noise, unexpected movement or even the sound of someone calling Miss Aveling's name, would send her arms or legs into spasm.

But a pilot program for virtual personally held budget funding which gave the 55-year-old access to physiotherapy at Medway Community Healthcare CIC in Kent proved life-changing.

"I've got a new pair of legs!" the Chatham resident said, laughing.

Miss Aveling had previously received botulinum injections at the back of her thighs, inner thigh and calves about three or four times a year to minimise muscle spasticity but did not have any neurophysiotherapy. Helen wanted to use her virtual personal health budget for massage but following her first visit to neurological physiotherapy clinic she changed her mind for good.

She said using her virtual funding to add physiotherapy sessions to "spread it (botulinum) all over my muscles" had dramatic results.

For the past two years, Ms Aveling has worked with clinical lead and neurological physiotherapist Gladys Nadar Arulmani and diligently practised at-home exercises to improve her balance, muscle tone, dexterity and speech.

"I have learned how to control my muscles in my legs in a way that my mother would never have thought possible," Ms Aveling said.

"My speech is clearer on more 'good' days and I stroke my cat when she's curled up on my lap without the jerkiness of former years."

Ms Aveling, who uses a motorised wheelchair, said she no longer relies on tight ankle or waist straps for balance and can go barefoot on hot days.

"All these things will never set the world on fire, but they have changed my life," she said.

Miss Aveling, who is writing a fantasy novel, said she gave up on physiotherapy as a teen in the late 70s, when she believed adults were left to "simply live with cerebral palsy".

"What is crucial for GPs and other healthcare professionals to know is how much things have changed...it is quite simply the difference between sweet and bitter," she said.

Medway Community Healthcare CIC neurological physiotherapist Glady Nadar Arulmani said: "One thing burning in my mind is a lot of adult cerebral palsy patients are missing out on access to neurological physiotherapy."

"They are seen (by physiotherapists) regularly as children, but the moment they finish schooling they are completely lost in the system," he said.

Chronic Pain – Marie's story

At the height of her pain in 2010, Marie Lovell says she had reached a point where she thought life was not worth living.

Marie is now pain-free: "Keep an open mind and know that it is possible to recover"

Struggling with chronic back pain, which had increasingly become worse since 2009, the mother-of-three could not sleep for more than about 20 minutes before the pain woke her.

She believed she would never be able to sit through a movie on the couch with her family or join her children for a swim.

"I couldn't drive, couldn't work. I had that feeling that I would never do those things again," she said.

Now, just four years later, Marie has completed a number of open water swims with her son, has entered obstacle course challenges, goes for regular bike rides, walks and is pain-free.

The 48-year-old's story is quite remarkable. After seeing a number of doctors and physiotherapists, she was diagnosed with a "massive prolapsed disc" and was put on a waiting list for surgery in 2010.

During this time Marie saw chartered physiotherapist and Stress Illness Recovery Practitioner's Association (SIRPA) founder Georgie Oldfield and began a treatment programme Georgie had brought to the UK from the United States, which focuses on the patient's psychological state and how that could trigger pain.

"I think for me, a lot of it was suppressed emotion," Marie said.

Along with tailored exercises, Marie's treatment included journaling, meditation and training herself out of the habit of negative self-talk.

"We were encouraged to do positive affirmations and it was hard, I felt like it wasn't true that I could get better," she said.

"But it was about acknowledging that our minds and bodies are intertwined."

The now-active Durham resident reached a point of no pain by the start of 2011 and encouraged others suffering from chronic pain conditions to consider all methods of treatment.

"Keep an open mind and know that it is possible to recover," Marie said.

"For me it was about acknowledging psychological issues and stress, making time for meditation and doing physical activity – even if you're scared of it."

Georgie introduced the Stress Illness Recovery Programme to the UK after studying the method in the United States.

"I got into this because I was finding just as many people without pain can have the same condition (as those with pain), so that diagnosis can't be the cause of the pain," she said.

"To see a life-changing result in someone like Marie who had such a severe degenerative condition is just wonderful.