Claire Elliott-Purdy

Claire Elliott-Purdy discusses her experience of dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder after being redeployed to the COVID-19 frontline

Shock to the system

ILLUSTRATION BY **Ben Mounsey-Wood**

At the peak of the pandemic, I was very keen to take on a new role as a helper in the intensive therapy unit (ITU) at the Whittington Hospital in London. I jumped into my new role with only a day's notice and with my colleague Sian Kelly (thankfully, an absolute warrior) by my side. We did not have any training or preparation for the role, because the ITU was overrun at the time. Redeployment came as a shock to the system!

Many positives came from this experience. I valued working with a team of 30+ helpers and we all felt proud to be part of the NHS on those gruelling 12-hour shifts. Our faces were sore from the masks we had to wear, our feet hurt, and our personal protective equipment made us exhausted from the heat.

I was completely in awe of the nurses and the doctors. Every shift, they were rushed off their feet, yet all the patients continued to receive excellent care. It was phenomenal how hard everyone worked.

The adrenaline carried me through this period. It was stressful and traumatic because people's lives were at risk, and despite everyone's best efforts, many didn't make it.

After every shift I made sure I had a comforting meal to come home to, I offloaded to my family and prioritised watching the TV show *Friends* (my happy place). I felt I was taking good care of my mental health.

> *"PTSD seemed to have flicked a switch inside my brain"*

Once my redeployment had come to an end, my sense of pride in the work I'd done started to slip away. It was replaced with an ominous mind fog that made me feel like there was no way out. I'd perseverate on thinking about the patients and their families, about what they'd gone through, and was overwhelmed with feelings of anger, panic and fear. When I woke up in the morning, I didn't want to leave my bed because even going downstairs felt too scary.

Something I had not experienced before—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—seemed to have flicked a switch inside my brain.

I needed help fast, but when I applied for counselling and support the waiting period was too long. It was then that I discovered the charity Frontline 19 for healthcare workers, which was able to offer me free therapy the next day. This therapy has since helped me to process the trauma I experienced and to understand myself better.

After months of therapy with Frontline 19 I knew I needed and wanted something extra to aid my recovery. This is when I discovered another charity called Climbing Out. They provided me with a community of people with whom I could overcome physical and mental obstacles as we embarked on a wide range of exciting and terrifying activities together. I now have a group of amazing and inspirational friends, a new support network and a toolbox for the future.

I'm forever grateful to Frontline 19 and Climbing Out for helping me to see beyond the dark clouds that had fogged up my thoughts and feelings. I now have sunshine in my sky and I can use my tools to help keep it there.

Everyone is experiencing their own struggles at this time, so I urge you to check out the charities below if you think they could help. SLTs have immense compassion for others, but sometimes we forget to give ourselves the same compassion. ■

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Resources

Frontline 19 offers supervision, debriefing and emotional support to healthcare workers during times of crisis (www.frontline19.com)

Climbing Out runs outdoor activity programmes aimed at rebuilding confidence, self-esteem and motivation In people who've been through trauma (www.climbingout.org.uk)

See www.rcslt.org/learning/covid-19/resilience-self-care for a comprehensive list of other wellbeing and self-care resources