

Florence Nightingale Foundation - Leadership Development programme

Jen Connor, Assistant Practitioner, Cumbria



HEE committed to funding this year's Florence Nightingale Foundation Leadership Development Programme, offering mental health nurses a unique career development opportunity.

Since 1929, the Florence Nightingale Foundation has been committed to advancing the study of nursing and midwifery practice, promoting excellence, and preparing nurses and midwives to follow in the footsteps of its namesake.

It offers: 40 mental health nurses (2 cohorts of 20) and 20 nursing associates (working in a mental health setting) bespoke leadership development to become Florence Nightingale Nurses and develop as future leaders of healthcare.

How did your career change come about?

I never ever imagined myself in healthcare. As a creative, teenage dreamer I had plans to go to art or dance college! I decided on the latter and completed a 3-year diploma in Performing Arts and Dance. After a misfortunate accident, my dance career was cut short and I retrained as a personal trainer and fitness instructor. I was then offered a job in the hospital teaching cardio rehabilitation. Both the care I received as a patient, after my accident, and the staff I worked with in the hospital inspired me greatly to want to work in healthcare and do more.

I completed an access to health course at night school while working full time and worked my way up through various healthcare roles (in children's services, learning disability and adult services both in acute settings and community). I have worked in teams from stroke services to weight management.

Three years ago, I decided to challenge myself further and apply for my first role in mental health, I had previously always worked in rehabilitation services. I took a leap of faith and it paid off, not only was I offered a position in the memory and later life services, but I was also successful in the apprenticeship scheme and completed my foundation degree in healthcare. I am so glad I took the gamble and entered the complex world of mental health. I qualified as an Assistant Practitioner in April 2020. I love caring for people and that is just who I am as a person, making others happy makes me happy.

What is a typical day for you?

I work in adult mental health services, memory and later life, supporting service users with complex mental health disorders and memory problems. The myth around dementia is that your life is over, but our ethos is that you can still live well with a diagnosis of dementia. A typical day in my role is unpredictable, anything goes! I work in the community visiting service users in their own homes. The best part of my day is getting to meet people and to feel like I am making a positive difference to their lives. I also love the freedom of travelling around a beautiful part of the world, Cumbria. I am from a city originally, so it is a nice pace of life here.

The challenge now is to provide service users with the best possible care during a pandemic. Services and resources are restricted with the closure of day centres etc. It is a very busy service with constant referrals.

Looking back, how have you benefitted from the programme?

I feel I have become more self-aware and gained confidence. Before the programme I lacked confidence in my own ability and constantly looked for reassurance. I have also gained a fabulous cohort of fellow nurse associates. We set up a WhatsApp group and the group's positivity and encouragement has been invaluable.

What are you most proud of? Where do you see yourself heading?

I am most proud of gaining a place on such a prestigious course, with only 20 places allocated around the country.

What advice would you give to some considering applying for the programme?

Just go for it – don't be shy about telling your story about the things that drive your passion for nursing. Be yourself.