

# Sandra's story

Person centred thinking with people who use mental health services

# Sandra's story

Sandra has just turned 47 and those who know her describe her as someone who is honest, passionate, insightful, courageous and committed to helping others. Sandra has struggled with her mental health and staying well since she was a teenager. She has been in and out of hospital on countless occasions over the past 25 years and has repeatedly attempted suicide. Sandra is now at a stage where she feels she is in recovery. She has lots of good days and fewer bad days where she feels down and is hearing voices. She is doing a lot with her life, including a three year college course learning British Sign Language with the plan of becoming an interpreter.

Sandra was born in Lancashire and moved with her mother, brothers and sister to the Caribbean when she was 3. She has an older sister and an older brother as well as a younger brother. When she was 12, her mum and sister moved back to England. A year later, Sandra returned and then the following year, her brothers also moved back to England.

Once back in England, living in London and at secondary school, Sandra began to feel really isolated. As a child she was described as quiet, caring and overly sensitive. She was bullied at school where she felt she was not as clever as the other children. Sandra left school as soon as possible at 16 to escape the bullying. At the time, she lived on an estate where the

two most popular options for girls her age was either drugs or teenage pregnancy. Instead, Sandra became more isolated, rarely leaving her room. She had no friends, only seeing family. Sandra started to see her GP at this time. She describes not being able to tell her GP what she really wanted - someone to talk to - and just hoped he would understand. She was instead prescribed sleeping tablets for anxiety and depression.

Sandra first tried to kill herself at the age of 20 by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets thinking "If I just go to sleep and never wake, it will all be over". Sandra was found and taken to hospital to have her stomach pumped. She was given a social worker and told to attend day services which she didn't like, as there was no one her age to talk to.

This began a cycle which lasted throughout her twenties and thirties. Sandra's life was mapped by frequent suicide attempts and admissions to hospital mainly under section. Sandra would experience periods of mania followed by extreme lows and would also hear voices. Despite this, Sandra managed to work with the Metropolitan Police for 15 years as a copy typist before retiring on medical grounds.

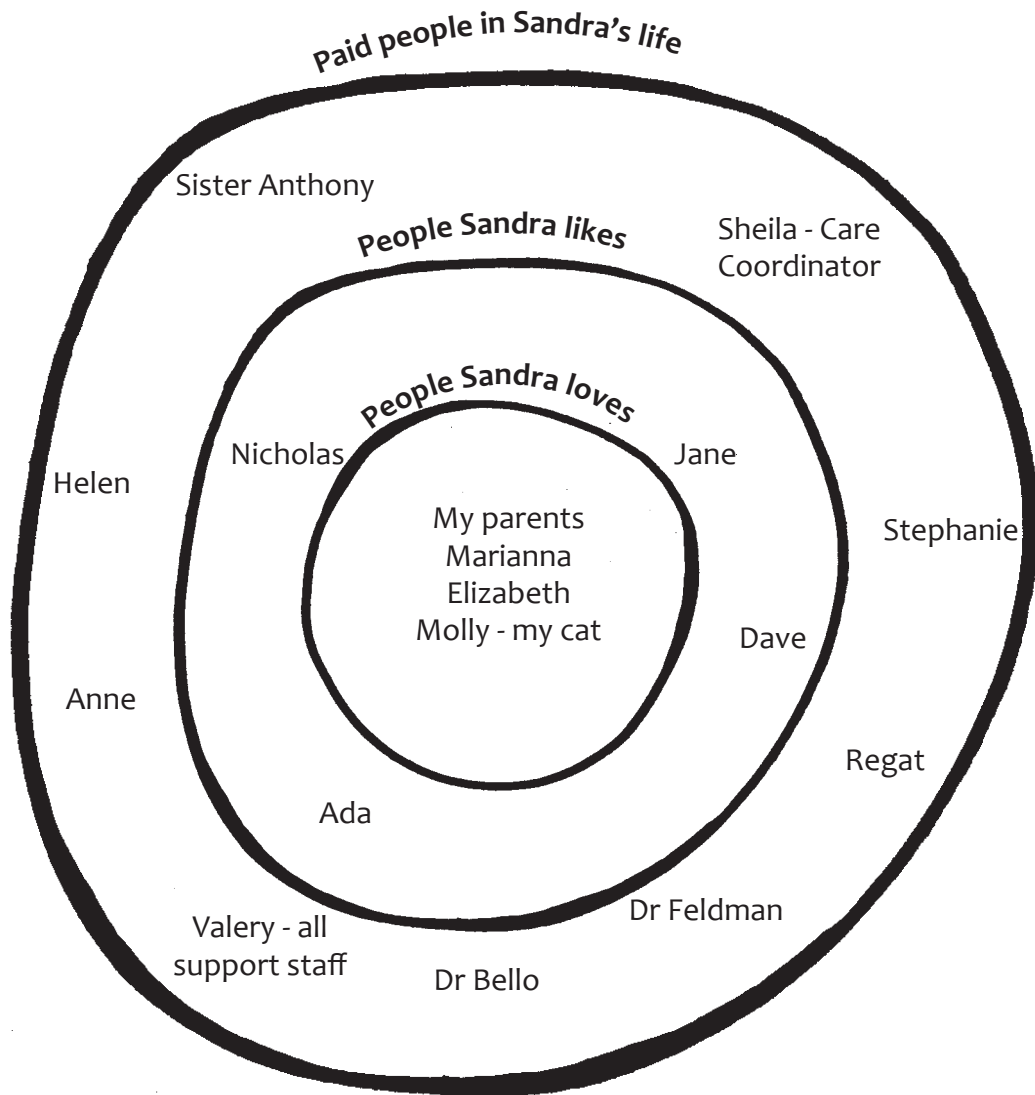
Sandra's support over the years has predominantly been medication, punctuated by spells of therapy. Sandra says that doing group therapy for the first time was a revelation, in that she saw people brought together from a diverse range of backgrounds and walks of life.

***“The press make you feel like you are the only one to hear voices or feel so low you want to die. Meeting others who truly understand made me feel, that it’s not me alone - if they can talk about how they feel then so can I”.***

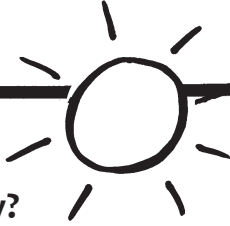

In 2000, there was a turning point in Sandra’s life when she was allocated a black social worker. For the first time she felt listened to – particularly in relation to her cultural needs. It was her social worker who found Fanon Resource Centre and who stuck with her for the 8 months that it took Sandra to build up the courage to go there.

Sandra credits her social worker and Fanon Resource Centre for not judging her on her past, instead focusing on the present and the future. Through Fanon, Sandra started to get involved in groups and even completed college courses. For the last year she has acted as an Ambassador for Southside Partnership – which has involved speaking at public events and supporting others to identify the support they need in their recovery.

# Sandra's relationships



## Sandra's good days and bad days

 <b>Good day?</b>	 <b>Bad day?</b>
<p>I have had a good night's sleep and wake feeling like I can cope with the world.</p> <p>I wake up without hearing voices. If I can't hear them, then at least I feel like they are not controlling me.</p> <p>I want to get up, have a wash and get dressed - I am excited about what I want to wear.</p> <p>I take my medicine.</p> <p>I feel good about myself.</p> <p>I know what I am doing with my day - I have a plan and am happy to get out either walking or using public transport.</p> <p>I go to a group or college. At the moment I am really enjoying my woodwork group. I have made a CD cabinet and am now making a cat house.</p> <p>I initiate conversations and am able to ring a friend for a chat and catch up.</p> <p>I eat well and have 3 meals throughout the day. I go to Take Two to get a nice Caribbean dish or cook myself something.</p> <p>I listen to music in the evening ( I really like instrumental jazz) or watch TV ( I like programmes like Grand Designs and rom com films).</p> <p>I spend some quality time with my cat, giving her lots of attention and playing games with her.</p>	<p>I haven't slept well and wake up tired.</p> <p>I can't hear my voice - just the ones in my head.</p> <p>I feel paranoid and can't trust my decisions because I feel like everyone is out to get me.</p> <p>I have a flashback triggered by something on TV or somebody saying something like "you're selfish" to me.</p> <p>I won't take my medication.</p> <p>I have to wash and clean myself and the flat repeatedly - I cannot leave my flat in case I contaminate other people.</p> <p>I won't get out of bed, answer my phone or watch the TV in case people come out of it. I will just sit or lie in the dark.</p> <p>I won't cook or eat because I think all food is contaminated.</p> <p>I can't pull myself back and need to be admitted to hospital.</p>

## One page profile

### What people appreciate about Sandra?

Her honesty and her loyalty. • When Sandra gives her word, she keeps it. • Sandra is unfailingly kind; she treats everyone equally and does not discriminate • Sandra is determined and does not give up. • She is willing to share, especially if it will benefit others. • Sandra has a real passion for wanting to help others. • She has a warm sense of humour and is able to laugh at herself. • Sandra has a real curiosity about the world and is always looking to learn something new. • Sandra has great courage.

### What's important to me...

Going to church every Sunday. My faith is really important to me and it is helpful if people around me understand this and don't think it's my illness when I say God is talking to me!

Spending time with Molly, my cat. I love playing with Molly and will spend ages throwing balls for her to chase and stroking her. Molly gives me a reason to get up in the morning.

I love having lots of channels to choose from on my TV and use TV and music to relax. I love listening to instrumental jazz like Kenny G.

Keeping busy! I always have a plan of what I am doing on any given day.

Keeping the voices under control. The medicine I am taking at the moment is good for doing this and giving me a sense of normality. The weight gain that comes with the medicine is a small price to pay.

Doing things and going to places that aren't associated with being ill. I like going to college and meeting people who don't know me for having mental health issues and accept me for who I am.

Setting myself little targets. I like achieving and pushing myself to achieve.

### How best to support me...

I prefer to have people around me who understand me and my illness so I don't feel like I have to pretend.

I can appear really confident when inside I am really scared. You need to check with me at each stage of doing something.

If you are going to ask me to do something, don't give me too long to think about it as I start to really worry about it and the fear takes over. It's better if I am told about something as close to the event as possible so I don't think too much and just do it!

I find it really hard to join a group. If possible I will want to arrive early so that I can be the first and be settled before the crowd starts to build.

Change really upsets me. If there are going to be changes in who is supporting me, it is better if this is done gradually. It is important that you tell me that it is not personal and that you give me a chance to talk about how I feel.

I find my CPA meetings really stressful. I find them a waste of time and get angry really quickly. I am told that I behave completely differently in these meetings to anywhere else. I need those supporting me in these meetings to stick up for me and take a stand if they feel something isn't right.

I can get overwhelmed by going to places and meeting people. If I am asked to help out in some way, this is a good distraction for me and I feel more comfortable.



## What is working and not working in Sandra's life



### What's working?

My emotions are in a good place. My good days are getting longer and my bad days last for a lot less time now. The medication I take and the therapy I am having, which is looking at the 'whys', are helping.

I am working with someone I trust who has restored my faith in professionals.

I feel confident in knowing who I can ask for help if I need to.

I am able to recognise when I am getting down and I know what to do. My bad times have gone from lasting 6 months to 2-3 days.

My relationship with my parents has improved. I feel that they are more interested in my care now; they accept me and are open to listening to me.

Molly! I enjoy having the responsibility of looking after my cat.



### What's not working?

My CPA meetings do not work for me. I don't feel listened to and I don't feel decisions are made from my point of view. I don't feel supported in these meetings.

I don't feel like I have a good circle of friends - I don't think I have many friends and I do get lonely.

I don't like having my money controlled by social services.

### What I want in the future...

To be in paid employment.

To move to a bigger house.

To look into fostering.

To go on holiday more often - short breaks in Europe.

To do more writing. I have had my poetry published in the past and would like to write again.

To run a group for Fanon - I was looking at running a group on internet safety for women.

**What am I communicating to you?**

**At this time**

**When I do this**

**It means**

**You should**

Anytime.

Say "it doesn't bother me" or "I don't care".

Actually it really does matter to me.

Rephrase what you have said - it may be that I have got the wrong end of the stick and not understood or don't feel able to say what I really think.

Meetings.

Giggle or laugh.

I am actually nervous or angry (or both!).

Not be offended and let me know it's ok.

When I am asked to do things by people I like, who are nice or who I feel I owe in some way.

Say "yes".

It might mean that I don't want to let you down but actually I don't want to say "yes" at all. I find it really difficult to say "no".

Phrase what you are asking in a way that gives me a way to say "no" if I need/want to. Let me know it's ok to say "no" otherwise I will worry that I have upset/offended you.

When I am depressed.

I stop eating and drinking.

I am feeling really low or I am feeling paranoid that my food is contaminated.

Encouraging me and cooking with me can help.

Anytime.

I pay a lot of attention to my nails - paint them different colours.

My self esteem is low - I use my nails as a distraction from my face or from what I have to say as I don't think I am worth it.

Listen to me and acknowledge how I am feeling.