

PRESS RELEASE

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Work can play a vital role in tackling loneliness and social exclusion

First Step Trust (FST) welcomes the Mental Health Foundation's report 'The Lonely Society' published today, which draws attention to the extent of loneliness within our society and its impact on mental wellbeing "only 22% of us never feel lonely and one in ten of us (11%) say we feel lonely often." The Report also points to the fact that those experiencing mental health difficulties are one of the groups most at risk.

Karen, 26, from North London, experienced loneliness and isolation as the result of agoraphobia. "It started when I was in the house and wouldn't open the door. Then I was mugged, which made it ten times worse. I felt everyone was out to get me. When I did go out, I'd start to panic. I wanted to hide away. It made me feel so very, very lonely."

The Report sites busy working lives as one factor behind the increase in loneliness because people don't have time to invest in social contacts. However, for those people with long-term mental health problems, of whom only 10% are in work, employment can play a major part in the recovery process.

Ronnie Wilson MBE, CEO of FST, says "Work not only provides people with a chance to meet others and develop their social skills but it also gives people an opportunity to contribute and be valued by others. Loneliness and isolation grinds away at your confidence and you can end up feeling you have nothing to offer."

Things got more and more desperate for Karen then somebody told her about FST which supports people with mental health problems and other disadvantages, back into work.

Karen wasn't interested at first – she couldn't imagine actually getting herself to work, but with a lot of support from FST, she managed it. The results were amazing.

Says Karen, "Going from being isolated at home to being in a busy workplace was the most daunting thing I've ever done but once I settled in and got to know people I realized that it wasn't as scary as I thought. Once you've been at home on your own all the time, you find that you can't stop talking because you're so happy to see someone."

Karen did get support from mental health services but she says they can't always give you the friendship and social contact you need. "Instead, by coming to work, although I don't have to talk about my mental health, I've got colleagues in the same boat I can talk to if I need to, so it feels like it's on a level playing field and I'm always there for them if anybody needs me." FST recognises the importance of peer support in the workplace - "we set out to compliment the support offered by clinicians" says Ronnie Wilson.

"Basically," says Karen, "work gave me a role and a way out of my isolation."

To find out more about FST visit: www.firststeptrust.org.uk

To view the Lonely Society – a report by the Mental Health Foundation, visit:
<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/loneliness-and-mental-health/>

More information

Only 10% of people with long-term mental health problems are in work, the lowest rate of employment for any of the main groups of disabled people. FST challenges this by providing real work opportunities and training to people with mental health problems and other disadvantages. Studies show that a job can reduce symptoms, decrease hospital admissions, reduce service use and improve the social skills.

The way FST works is that each of their projects runs as a small business providing a service for real customers. People with mental health problems, drug or alcohol misuse problems join as workforce members and fully participate in the every aspect of running the business – they are critical to its success. Joining FST gives people the chance to become part of a team, build up their work experience, gain qualifications and get help in finding a job.

FST has 13 projects around the country with its head office in Woolwich.

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For more, go to First Step Trust website <http://www.firststeptrust.org.uk>