

Case study: how to identify typical barriers

Lee is in his early 50s. Leaving school at 15, he went straight on the unemployment register and remained there for 37 years.

Lee had always been considered 'different' and difficult to engage with socially throughout his teenage years and adult life. He had attempted to find employment but received little or no support. The small amount of support he received was inappropriate and actually worked against him. Year after year, decade after decade, he was passed from one programme to another and referred to every main provider. Over the years he had many confrontations with both the providers and Jobcentre Plus because he felt that they insisted he complete programmes which were of no benefit to him. Numeracy and literacy training became a real issue for him as he has several academic qualifications and an evidenced IQ of almost 180.

Lee lived a solitary life in a one bedroom flat with very little social interaction, His day consisting of watching TV and reading a day old newspaper. Estranged from his family and no friends, he lost what few interpersonal skills he had had and many skills failed to develop.

Lee's life changed dramatically when an employment adviser at Reed in Partnership, who had received mental health awareness training, realised that something was wrong and decided to do something different.

She referred Lee to Real Dawn's First Step Group Therapy for a full mental health assessment. He settled into the group well and, after assessment, the facilitator, who was trained to observe indicators of mental health problems, suggested that Lee might have a condition known as High Functioning Aspergers and that he would benefit from a full psychiatric assessment to confirm the initial diagnosis.

Although it took over a year for psychiatric assessment to take place, Lee's previously unrecognised condition was confirmed. This profoundly changed two major areas of his life. First and foremost, Lee now understood his problem and it understood by others too. Secondly, appropriate interventions could now be offered. These factors improved his life dramatically.

After almost 40 years of unbroken unemployment, he is now employed as a proof reader. He is in his first personal relationship, has joined a walking club, enjoys photography. And his interpersonal skills, although influenced by his Aspergers, have improved to such an extent that he now uses public transport and engages people in conversation without prompting.

Overcoming his barriers to employment would not have been possible had Reed in Partnership's employment adviser not received mental health awareness training. Lee would almost certainly still have been living in his one bedroom flat in isolation.

Many people who had come across Lee in the past had thought him 'uncooperative and aggressive' when he was neither. He was frustrated with a system that just wasn't working for him and of course his barriers were not properly understood.