



## COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPION

### FACTFILE

#### NAME

MANDY TORBITT

#### ALTOGETHER BETTER PROJECT

YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER REGIONAL  
MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

#### WHAT SHE DID

Took a two-day course in Mental Health First Aid and used the skills she learned to help a woman who was suffering shock after witnessing a suicide.

#### WHAT DIFFERENCE DID SHE MAKE?

Gained a greater insight into a broad range of mental health issues and how they impact on individuals and used this knowledge to benefit her personal and work relationships.

#### ABOUT THE PROJECT

Yorkshire and Humber Regional Mental Health First Aid is England's first regional provider of Mental Health First Aid. Through MHFA training, the project aims to empower people by giving them the knowledge, skills and confidence to help those experiencing problems at work, at home and in the general community and address stigma about mental ill health.

**'I WENT UP TO HER AND SAID: 'ARE YOU OK?' SHE WAS IN SHOCK BUT I JUST LISTENED TO WHAT SHE WAS SAYING. I JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE SHE WAS SAFE'**

After taking an Altogether Better course in mental health first aid Mandy Torbitt helped a woman deal with shock after witnessing a suicide.

As the skills for life manager at the Swarthmore Centre, a voluntary organisation in Leeds that offers part-time educational opportunities for adults and young people who can't access it, Mandy is used to working with all kinds of people, including those with mental health problems.

"I run courses in maths, English, ESOL and sign language. There's also a programme for people with learning difficulties and another for young people excluded from school.

"We get people from all sorts of backgrounds – a lot have had a variety of mental health problems. We try to help all of them to move on."

Mandy took the two-day course run by the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Mental Health First Aid project to

▶ help deal with situations she came across at work.  
 “I tend to be the person who’s called upon to deal with difficult situations,” she said. “It’s hard for people to come to literacy and numeracy classes. So I have to listen to people a lot. I also have a close friend who has mental health problems. I thought it might help me.”

Having previously studied emergency first aid, Mandy knew that the first rule was: ‘Don’t make things worse.’ She found that the MHFA approach was similar.

“You’re not there to solve the world’s problems, just to try to be useful,” she said. “It’s also about keeping yourself safe. I found that comforting.”

During two days of talking, listening and sharing experiences in a supportive atmosphere, many misapprehensions about psychosis, schizophrenia and depression were dispelled.

“What the course taught me is that mental health belongs to each individual,” she said. “If someone’s having a difficulty with something, there’s no point denying it. You support them to help themselves. You might feel very sorry for them but it’s more important for you to be a rock to help them move on.”

This philosophy was quickly tested when Mandy came across a shocking incident on her way to work.

“A woman had just witnessed a man tying a rope around his neck and jumping off a motorway bridge near where I work. I approached her asked if she was OK. She was babbling and in shock but I listened to what she was saying. I just wanted to make sure she was safe.

“Drawing on my training I spoke really clearly to her, took her to my workplace and asked if she’d got anyone at home she could share her experience with. Then I explained that the situation could cause her problems

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later on and if that happened, she should seek help from a doctor.”

The course has also helped Mandy to deal with a friend’s depression.

“She’s been on medication and has self-harmed,” she said. “I can see now when she’s having an episode that’s causing a lot of distress – and back off. She might ring up and say: ‘The whole world has dumped on me and I’m thinking of cutting myself.’ Now I can say to her: ‘That’s one way of coping with it but there are other ways too.’”

Relationships at work have improved too.

“People are very interested in mental well-being now,” said Mandy. “They’ve realised that you need to know the whole person, including the issues affecting them outside work. We have 2,000 people every year coming through our door and if you can’t get to know every one of them, you can at least make sure they are heard.”

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Altogether Better was founded on the firm belief that community health champions have the potential to make a significant impact on health inequalities. In 2008, we were awarded £6.8m from the BIG Lottery Well-being Fund to run our innovative, five-year programme in Yorkshire and the Humber. We have 16 locally-delivered flagship projects across the region, testing out different community health champion approaches in a range of settings.

