



### **Clare Brown**

Clare Brown is a 44-year-old, married and mother to three wonderful children and student on the BSc Critical Counselling programme. After being a self-employed business owner for 25 years, she decided to change direction and embark on a new career path. Clare feels extremely passionate about mental health and the lack of support, adults and children suffering from mental health issues receive due to insufficient funding by governing bodies. She believes there needs to be more awareness raised and more people being able to help our communities by volunteering or qualifying as mental health workers. She feels grateful for being on her programme because it has increased her personal development and gained a deeper understanding of the impact mental health issues has on people and society. By qualifying on from her programme, she hopes to go on to have a successful career supporting adults or children with their mental health or impact from trauma.

## **Volunteering with the Childhood Experiences Team Sefton Council – Working to Make a Difference**

My name is Clare Brown, and I am currently studying BSc (Hons) Critical Approaches to Counselling and Psychotherapy. I decided to embark on this course through my passion of wanting to help as many people as possible, including adults and children, with mental health issues or adverse experiences. I believe that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of people has declined in many respects, and I feel people now more than ever need extra support from services such as counselling.

At the age of 42, I developed the confidence to follow my ambition to help people who have experienced childhood trauma. This was something close to my heart because of my own experiences and witnessing the experiences of others who have faced trauma in childhood. I always wanted to make a difference because of the prolonged and damaging effect this could have on people, and I wanted to make a difference and make changes for the better. So, after 28 years of being out of education I finally had the opportunity to make a difference, and one that is permanent and not a one off. When I started my degree, having been through FastTrack, alongside bringing up my three children and running my own business, I saw the negative impact COVID-19 had on my children and staff and this made me want to make a difference.

I decided to volunteer for 6 months at Sefton Council in Liverpool, working alongside the Adverse Childhood Experiences team (ACE). This was a real struggle to fit in alongside a full-time degree, being self-employed and having three children, however, it gave me a real sense of achievement knowing that I was making a difference in children's lives. Whilst there I helped the team deliver food parcels for families who were living in poverty and we covered a large area of Sefton, making sure there was healthy food such as fruit and vegetables in each parcel for each person within the household. We also provided bedding, toiletries, and supermarket vouchers for single parents who are unable to work due to mental health, addiction, or adverse experiences, this enabled them to purchase a weekly shop to feed their family. School uniforms were also provided as there were many children whose carers could not afford to buy the correct uniform that their school specifies. This brought home to me how many people there are in the UK who are living in poverty and cannot afford to feed their families. Without the likes of local councils, charities and volunteers providing these services it is difficult to imagine the position these people would be in.

I also helped the ACE team deliver an ACE programme to school age children who were also suffering adverse experiences or trauma. These sessions would allow the children to mix with other children facing similar challenges and discuss how they were being impacted. However, there are many children who do not get any emotional support at home, and this can have a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, so I believe, these sessions were vital for children's emotional development and prevention of a decline in their mental health. I also witnessed first-hand how at the beginning of these 7-week programmes, some children would present with anger issues or volatile behaviour and some children would be extremely withdrawn. However, at the end of the programme the changes within these children were clearly noticeable, I could see how they had developed, they were less defensive, more regulated with their emotions and spoke openly about how it was nice to feel supported and understood, this gave me a real sense of achievement, knowing that I had made a small positive impact on a child who was suffering.

Also, whilst I was there, using the skills I was already starting to develop on my programme such as empathy and unconditional positive regard, I was asked by management to design an interview tool for practitioners to use when interviewing children who are experiencing adverse experiences or dealing with trauma. I thought long and hard about this and I thought about the ways children use emojis to communicate how they are feeling. I felt the use of emojis would capture the child's imagination and were a perfect tool for children who are not emotionally mature enough to be able to verbally express how they feel. I felt these images would make it easier for the child to connect with the practitioner and aid them in expressing their feelings without trying to find the words. I figured this would allow the child to feel safe with the practitioner and help the practitioner to fully interpret the child's emotions. This design proved to be a huge success, I was commended by the entire team at Sefton Council, and it was put into immediate use across the borough of Sefton.

I feel a huge sense of achievement from this, and it has given me even more passion to be successful in completing my degree so I can go on and help other children or adults who are suffering from the impact of trauma. I feel this is an excellent achievement because from starting with no confidence in myself to do well in education and alongside the pressures of life, I was able to find some resilience and strength of mind to use my skills to make a difference in children's lives, that will continue in the future.