

CATHY: ENGLAND

My name is Cathy and I would like to share with you my experience of being on probation for two years and offending in my late forties to early fifties. I had never offended before that and there was never going to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

I left the Crown Court in a complete daze and while that daze stayed with me for a good while. I was so relieved that I had not gone to prison. I could not wait to get home to my two children and just cuddle them and never let them go. They were the most important thing in my life and I had now been a single Mum for a few years, and I had worked hard to bring them up to be social and caring teenagers.

When I left the court I was given a name and date to go and see the probation office and the probation officer, whose name was Chris. I was absolutely distraught and suffered panic attacks and depression for a few years and as the offence was mostly committed by my ex-husband who had disappeared off the face of the earth, I felt like I was so alone in my head and I was very bitter and angry about him. I had all different emotions and I had no way of channelling them anywhere so I suffered in silence; I did not think I would make it one foot in front of the other. I was shaking and crying, however she made me feel that by the time I left the office, things didn't seem so bad but I knew I had a long, long way to go and would I survive it? The ups and downs carried on and it was a hell of a long road.

In the coming weeks, Chris had talked to me about a Women's Centre that was due to be opening very soon. So women like me could go there and sort a lot of problems out. However, at first I had to attend a women's programme at the probation office, which was very daunting, but one of the most insightful women's courses I have attended. There were four of us. They were a very small group and the facilitators were absolutely fantastic. However, yes, the ups and downs carried on, but every time I went to the programme, I came out feeling a little more human.

I finished the course, well the four of us did, and we were presented with certificates and a presentation. Again the nerves took over, because I still had no faith in my self-confidence,

self esteem, the ups and downs and worries of everyday life. Then I went with my probation officer to a new women's centre where I was allocated a support worker, Jayne and I know that without these people, would I have given up? I began to attend my probation sessions there. My support worker gave me so many insights to financial debts and so on, and how we would deal with it all and how I would make it to that light at the end of the tunnel. I attended anything I could, all different courses, including *The Power to Change*, *Stress and Anxiety Management* and *The Freedom Programme*. These are all courses that help you to gain your confidence back, self esteem – slowly may be, but personally I think that's the best way as we all know part of the rehabilitation has to come from us and keeping strong is not easy.

My group also practised tai-chi, street dance – which was fun. However I had my one-to-one with my probation officer and the courses were the best I had ever attended. Let's face it, when you go to probation, you see your officer, then week after week, the same conversation, then leave and back into your routine. I thank God for these women's programmes and, yes, you do have to be ready to take it all in. However, I can assure you that anyone out there is not going to feel strong enough at times going down that road. It's not without its problems as crimes are committed all the time and people will reoffend as their patterns and the stresses and strains of everyday life is enough to drive anyone barmy.

I can only speak for myself and I was in a fairly abusive marriage for a long time. I have my ups and downs and I am on the road and I can see that light at the end of the tunnel. Yes, there are days when I have no money and I have my ups and downs like anybody in society. However, I just cannot thank enough Chris, Jayne and people I met on my courses. My children who are now 17 and 15 have just taken all their exams so I must have done something right! However, I am still working on my self-esteem to be proud of myself of what I have achieved along the way, and will carry on doing so. I would like to say that the Women's centres are the pathway to success, even though sometimes I think 'I'm 53. Where is my life going?' But for the first time in my life, I know where I want to be and what I want to achieve and I could also go on forever. When I see women go to centres and not give it a chance, because they have panic attacks and depression, they cannot walk through that door, I just want to round them all up and tell them my story. It is obvious we get the

strength from somewhere and most of it comes from dedicated people who have also had experiences in life and want to better this world by not thinking that crime is just about petty little things, that rehabilitation is the key, and also men I believe have places to go to. It's down to yourself, I believe, and the right time. Thank you for reading my journey.

