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# We're standing up for mental health

The Think Ahead programme is a graduate scheme training remarkable people to become mental health social workers, writes **Niki Chesworth**

AN ESTIMATED two in three adults have experienced a mental health problem at some point in their lives. And while it's well-known that medication and talking therapies can help, people's social circumstances are often neglected – even though social issues like finances, housing, employment and relationships play a vital role in maintaining good mental health.

But who can provide the kind of one-to-one practical and personal support needed to address these types of issues?

Meet Suzanne, Arnold and Jan – three of the people training to become mental health social workers on the Think Ahead graduate programme.

Think Ahead is a charity funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and the programme is delivered in partnership with the University of York and University of Central Lancashire.

The programme strengthens social work by attracting talented people into the profession, providing great training and supporting services to unlock the potential of social work. The programme's participants are already having a positive impact on the NHS Trusts and Local Authorities where they are placed - and they're helping thousands of people to lead fulfilling, independent lives.

## 'I WANTED A JOB WHERE I COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE'

Suzanne, 29, studied Law at the University of Cambridge, and then embarked on a legal career but realised it wasn't the right career for her, because she wanted to make a real difference to people's lives.

"One of the things I've enjoyed most on the Think Ahead programme is being able to work directly with people with mental health problems within just a few months of starting. These people have different situations with different needs, so my days are never the same. So far, this has included helping people to prepare for tribunal, advocating for them to access better accommodation and getting their benefits restored.

"Seeing the difference my interventions can make to individuals' lives has confirmed for me that I made the right decision in leaving law.

"In my opinion, mental health social work is like the missing piece of the puzzle. For years, people with mental health problems have been treated with medication and psychiatric interventions – but there are aspects of a person's life that these don't touch. A mental health social worker



**Unlocking potential:** The Think Ahead programme strengthens social work by attracting talented people into the profession like (below, left to right) Arnold, Suzanne and Jan



looks at the whole person, their social circumstances and how it impacts on their mental health. It is these day-to-day aspects of their lives that can make a difference to their long-term recovery."

## 'IT IS REWARDING WHEN YOU HELP SOMEONE RECOVER'

Arnold, 21, who studied Film and Literature at the University of Warwick, was looking for a role where he could help people.

"While I was at university, I started volunteering for a student helpline and I realised I had an ability to listen and support people without judgement. After graduating, I came across Think Ahead, which introduced me to the idea of mental health social work.

"I'm in a community mental health team that works with people who have depression, anxiety and

personality disorders. Being on the programme has been a steep learning curve, but I've been given support at every stage and I'm not on my own in making decisions.

"One of the insights I've gained on the programme is that situations can change rapidly so you need to be able to adapt. The nature of mental health means that things can turn around quickly, and you need think on your feet, which I enjoy. It is very rewarding when you are able to build a rapport and help someone recover."



*One of the insights I've gained is that situations can change rapidly so you need to be able to adapt*

## 'I DIDN'T FIND MY FIRST JOB IN THE CITY FULFILLING'

Jan, 27, who studied Ancient History at King's College London and Psychology at the University of Edinburgh, talks about why he changed career to become a mental health social worker.

"I didn't find my first job in the City fulfilling, so I left and chose to work with young people with learning difficulties. That was where I met a social worker who I found really inspiring. In fact, I was so inspired I decided to go back into education to study Psychology.

"When I graduated, I applied for the Think Ahead programme because it offered the perfect opportunity to study for an MA while also being paid to train in mental health social work.

"Being on the programme has given me the opportunity to work with

adults who have a wide range of mental health problems. It has given me a deeper understanding of the effect that mental illness can have on both the individual and the people who care for them.

"I've also gained insight into the impact that housing, benefits, poverty and deprivation can have on people's mental health, and the plight of some people in London, where I am working."

● *The Think Ahead programme is a paid, two-year graduate programme that combines on-the-job learning, a master's degree, and leadership training to enable talented people to make an impact right away and throughout their careers. You can find out more about the programme and how Think Ahead is strengthening mental health social work at [thinkahead.org](http://thinkahead.org).*