

Thinking outside the box

My covid-19 story began like many others while I was on holiday in mid-March in Tenerife. Within 3 days of arriving, Spain entered lockdown and we were confined to our hotel room, I got to know the balcony very well. During this same week, I received news about my daughter, Jess. Jess has Down's Syndrome and has lived in a Walsingham Support service for 3 years. I was informed that to stop the spread of the virus and minimize the risk to individuals supported, Jess's residential home would no longer be accepting visitors. Although I suspected this would happen, knowing and experiencing it, are two completely different things. It's a very vulnerable and scary place to be as a mother but as the mother of a child who is vulnerable, health wise? It's even more difficult. I openly admit to crying, my heart was breaking that I wouldn't be able to see Jess for several months. Facetime and phone calls were not the same as and held no comparison to seeing Jess. It was a constant balancing act, staying upbeat and positive for Jess despite the fear, anxiety and sadness swirling internally.

Once I finally returned home, I had to self-isolate for a week, after showing no symptoms of covid-19, I was able to return to work. After self-isolating myself, I had a glimpse into how difficult the people we support were feeling and coping. Within a couple of days, I knew I needed to think outside the box on how to support the emotional and mental well-being of the people we support. I drew inspiration from the fact they lived in the countryside and decided to use this to our advantage.

I managed to find a golf club and soft balls from a ball pit, with this we went to the field 2 mins from where David lived and supported him to hit the balls towards a mound of earth. I also sourced some Top Trump football cards as he was missing his Soccer 6 and live football, the idea being he could make his own football teams up and pick out scores for them. I also asked him to pick a card from the pile and helped him research the player online. I've helped support him with his faith, helping him watch and listen to sermons online, on the iPad. I think it's important especially at a time like this when morale can be low, a little faith can do a world of good.

I work to make sure that the people we support are mentally stimulated while they can't access their usual activities such as day centre or see their friends. Lisa, another person we support and I have gone on some wonderful nature hunts. We spot scarecrows, listen for different birds based on their song and recognise smells i.e. grass, wild garlic and various flowers. We've had some down days where the people we support struggle to understand, and are tearful, scared, angry. I completely understand how they feel, I receive regular texts from GOV.UK for Jess and each one makes me stop and tear up, instantly. However, once I leave my front door for work, I leave those emotions there and I work to reassure the people we support that it's ok for them to feel this way. We cry it out, talk it through and hug it out. My job is to see them through this period, to ensure they always find something positive to look towards whether it be Soccer 6 fantasy team, a takeaway or a karaoke session.

In mid-April, I came down with a temperature and had to self-isolate again. My manager Kath, arranged for me to go and get tested. Arriving at the centre was a weird and confusing experience, I couldn't see or work out what the procedure was. After a long wait, I was finally tested, although an invasive test, I knew it was necessary for the people I support and my family. As I was being tested, I was mentally preparing myself for the result. If negative? Fantastic, I could go home to my family and go back to work to support David and Lisa. If positive? I began to think mentally go through all the things I'd put in place for Jess' future, whether I had properly prepared my family for the roles they needed to play for Jess, ensuring they knew her wishes and rights and would fight for them, the way I do. I had written letters for each of them, I wanted to make sure they had all the information they needed. My thoughts then went to my team, what if I had passed it onto them, what if I had passed it onto to the people I support? David and Lisa?

Luckily the test came back negative and I was able to return to work 2 days later.

When this is all over and we return to some semblance of normality, I won't take the small things like hugging my child anymore, I'll embrace her and each day with whatever it may bring, knowing that I'm a stronger person.