Mountain rescue saved my life...

Izzy de Santis and David Bartles Smith. Images courtesy of MIND.

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Izzy de Santis and her partner, David Bartles-Smith are members of the Teesdale & Weardale team. Their story featured in a presentation by Faye McGuinness, at the UKSAR Conference, about the Mind Blue Light Programme. What came over loud and clear in the video's narrative was the strength and support Izzy has taken from her involvement in mountain rescue. She has kindly agreed to share her story here too.

This is my story. It's about me and my illness and how mountain rescue helped save my life. My experience of mental health difficulties didn't come from my MR experiences. Rather, I believe I am representative of a now widely-stated statistic: Mental health will affect 1:4 of the population at some point in their lives. Mental health challenges are more likely to find their way into team members' lives through routes that have no link to the work or function of mountain rescue.

The impact will be very individual, from well-hidden needs to more obvious trauma. The Time for Change programme seeks to highlight the reality of mental health, its occurrence and, most importantly, the pathway to stability and how those around people who are struggling can make a big difference. This might be family, friends or work colleagues and these relationships will have a uniquely varying degree of relevance and input to your mental health survival. Core to this may be self esteem, acceptance and the feeling of being valued and needed. These needs will be individually different but I am sure many who have suffered with mental health difficulties will be able to reflect on their own feelings and may recognise this in themselves.

My needs also extended to the desire to forget, to find distraction and step out of my dark world into something where I could feel much happier and safer. Being safe from dark thoughts was a constant battle. The more intense the distraction the better. So I climbed, I free climbed and I fell. I climbed more and raced horses and fell again and so the attraction to adventure, and the brilliant drug that it is had begun.

I climbed extensively from a young teenager, benefited from the Jonathan Conville Trust with my first Alpine summits at 18 and, later, enjoyed exploits with my university mountaineering club. The mountain bug has always been there, but some years later, as my mental health struggles intensified, it became more than that — it was the fabric of my survival. I felt better for periods of time, I had found new friends in MR and felt part of this new family that really cared and accepted me.

On reflection, I could have remained curled up, holding onto my blanket, and put my despair, fear and dark thoughts and perhaps hope in others to change everything for me. I didn't. I sought to fight and my chosen battle ground was my passion: the mountains. My survival is not just down to the support of those around me. It is entrenched in those very intense experiences provided by mountaineering, mountain rescue and working outdoors. My prescription for stability in mental health is much more than drugs and more about these individual experiences and how they have woven my own survival blanket.

MENTAL HEALTH WILL AFFECT 1:4 OF THE POPULATION AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES

Far from being traumatised by what I have seen, witnessed and experienced in mountain rescue, if anything, I have found peace and safety. My inner world was more often far worse.

When I joined the team, I disclosed my mental health needs and was accepted. I contributed well. So it was particularly difficult for me when my health declined. The underpinning problem wouldn't go away and, gradually, I was swamped. I found I functioned at my best when with the team. Despairing days would be offset by call-outs or team training. My self-harming — away from the team — escalated, and although I had confided in the team leader and some team members about my difficulties, the overriding fear of rejection from my MR family started to gain strength. Although I knew my MR colleagues would be there for me, I struggled to believe they would stay loyal to my needs forever.

I was sectioned a number of times and later spent a year in a therapeutic community which helped me turn my life around but, before that, the lowest point was when I attempted suicide and hung myself. I had placed a ligature around my neck and dropped from the back of a door. Fortunately this was while I was in hospital and I was found quickly and, after a period in intensive care, I survived.

That was fifteen years ago. Steve (our current team leader) came to visit me, as did other team members, and I was left in no doubt that the team wanted me. My future safety blanket was to be very much woven by these amazing colleagues.

Although my mental health issues are still there, my stability has gradually returned. I've been able to extend this horizon of positive functioning. Naturally, there has to be commonality and this has remained very much framed in mountains and adventure. I've had some amazing times and to share my experiences is a privilege but also very much part of my continued attachment to this new found 'safe place'. I remember a teenager on an expedition in Africa commenting on my arms and asking if a bear had done that. 'Yes', was the reply. He didn't believe me, but the rest of the conversation was massively empowering to all.

I would argue that mountain rescue provides a very unique context. Much is written about mental health strategies, now being acted upon in workplaces throughout the country. Mental Health First Aid is a growing concept. Listen to and provide support to your colleagues, be aware and recognise that mental health issues will affect many of us at some time in our lives.

Volunteering, however, adds a new, far more empowering dimension. The mental health survivor will no doubt place greater store in these volunteer colleagues, may expect more, and may be more likely to accept this support than in their workplaces. This concept makes absolute sense to me as I feel that MR does provide a strength of bond, kinship and trust, and acceptance that is not just unique to its volunteer setting but crucially these attributes dovetail with the very needs identified to achieve survival from a mental health crisis. MR teams can make a greater difference to their members than is realised!

If my experiences of positive team support can be mirrored throughout MR and beyond, then I would be very, very happy. And that is my mission. I would ask you to help me achieve this and perhaps help your colleagues and consider a couple of questions:

- **How can your team make a difference to team members who are struggling with their mental health?**
- **How can you make your team a safe place?**

MR helped save my life. My team had no plan, it just had people who cared, in the right place at the right time. Please think about it and look at how your team may respond to members who express mental health needs. If MR reflects the society we live in, there will be a need — more likely, a hidden need. Can it be just left to luck that the right people are there at the right time or can we be better prepared? I believe we can and the solutions to support teams are out there right now. ✪

IZZY JOINED TWSMRT IN 2000. A SEARCH MANAGER AND ADVANCED MR MEDIC, SHE HAS HELD THE POSTS OF SECRETARY, YOUTH TEAM LEADER AND DEPUTY TEAM LEADER.
IZZY IS ALSO A QUALIFIED TEACHER, FREELANCE EXPEDITION LEADER, COURSE DIRECTOR/TUTOR FOR MOUNTAIN TRAINING AND AN EQUINE VETERINARY NURSE.