

## **Dogs Work in Mysterious Ways**

In the middle of the July, as I recovered from my flare up of anxiety, I joined Jake and Kay for lunch at The Box Tree café. After lunch, Jake and Kay were going into town and I decided to get some fresh air and stretch my legs. I set off walking down Cambridge Road and then, for some reason, I felt the need to walk down Southport Pier, without my dog Coco.

As I was stood at the end of the Pier, looking at the distant sea, I noticed a black Labrador puppy sitting with its owner. Thinking it was a guide dog in training, but being unable to resist a tickle, I asked its owner if I was ok to stroke him.

It turns out that he was in training for a charity called Dogs For Good who provide dogs to people with disabilities, children living with Autism, people suffering from Dementia and families struggling with their own challenges. The dogs are companions, they can empty the washing machine, pick up things off the floor, give people the confidence to venture out and socialise, recognise and support an autistic person in difficult situations and bring calm to fractious family life.

After talking to his owner and I'd tickled Bee for 5 minutes, I left to walk back down the Pier with more of a spring in my step and realised that Bee had worked his magic on me!

A week later I met someone who I've never met before and will probably never meet again.

A group from Rochdale, a place close to my heart, were visiting our church for their annual away day. I was there, during my walk with Coco, to set up the audio/visual equipment for their use during day.

After they'd settled in, I left to walk home but Coco wanted to get a lift with Grandad Bob who was just setting off in his car.

As Coco dug her heels in a man from the group came over to talk to her. I explained that she was nervous and that it wasn't a good idea to get too close due to her issues from before she was rescued.

The man said, "Dogs never forget do they and, unlike us, they don't have coping mechanisms".

He then went on to tell me that due to his active service in Northern Ireland and as a prison officer during the riots at Strangeways, he struggles with PTSD.

During the riots the prisoners on the roof tied t-shirts doused in oil from the kitchen on to 25 foot scaffolding posts, set fire to the t-shirts and then threw the burning posts on to the prison officers below.

He had said that it is impossible to avoid the triggers in everyday life.

He explained that when he walks down the street and sees scaffolding, it triggers memories of the riots and brings back all the difficult, frightening experiences of the prison

and his time in the army. But over time he has developed coping mechanisms that allow him to handle the triggers.

There are so many different types of anxiety and stress, some invoke mental trauma, others physical difficulties and each have their own unique, individual triggers.

After speaking to the man for a few minutes, Coco decided that she was ok to walk home and on the way I pondered the message the man had shared with me and how I could apply it to my anxieties.

I concluded that recognising the triggers is the first step but developing coping mechanisms is the key to dealing with the associated anxiety. Easier said than done but, as the man had proved, not impossible.

If that man hadn't travelled from Rochdale, if I had left earlier, if Grandad Bob hadn't left at the same time and, most importantly, if Coco hadn't refused to walk, the conversation would not have happened and the words of wisdom wouldn't have been shared.

Like Bee the week before, Coco had created the opportunity for the lift that I needed.

Dogs really do work in mysterious ways!

**Mike Owen**