In today’s workplaces, many people work very long hours and have unrealistic workloads – but it takes a lot of courage for people to admit it, and to reach out for help. For 30 years, Angela Mileham has worked for the NHS. In 2015, in addition to her role as community nurse; she took on the additional role of Sister, helping her team out, because they were short-staffed. Her workload grew immediately, and she found herself on her work computer from morning till night. In addition, she was trying to support her staff and ensure patients were receiving good care. “I’m the sort of person that, if I’m going to do a job I’m going to do it well,” she admits. So, it is no surprise to hear her say: “Basically, I was doing far far too much from the word ‘Go’ – and I wasn’t eating or sleeping properly either.”

When an extra member of staff was appointed, things improved temporarily, but with the pressure off Angela just a little, her body told her it had had enough. Completely out of the blue, and for the first time ever, Angela started getting anxiety attacks. “I was becoming anxious about things all the time,” she says. “I would fiddle with things and couldn’t sit still. And I found it difficult to go outside – especially for longer periods – so I would cancel appointments.”

A visit to her GP led her to attending a course on mindfulness, and it was there that she discovered the severity of her situation. Asked a series of questions about stress and depression, her scores were far in excess of the usual warning levels. The evidence was now in front of her, in plain black and white.

“I realised I had two options,” says Angela. “I could carry on – in denial. Or I could accept it and start to deal with it.” Medication was not an option, she says, although she did accept it later. But going off work was a hard decision to make. “I felt I had failed, and that I was letting people down,” she says. In January 2017 she was diagnosed with depression.

Angela already knew about Pathways Care Farm, which was local to her, near Lowestoft. It wasn’t her usual or preferred environment – she doesn’t particularly like animals, nor gardening – but she accepted their invitation to come and see their cute baby goats. Then they found funding for her to come once a week for 12 weeks, which her GP supported.

Looking back on her visits to Pathways, Angela rattles off the benefits. “I found being with the animals lovely and calming, especially the alpacas and grooming the goats. It was stress-free, and meant I focussed less on what was going on in my head.” She also compares the environment very positively with most workplaces: “There is no pressure there – no ‘them and us’ – and everyone is interested in you, and really knowing (and listening to) whether you’re having a good day or a bad one.”
“At Pathways I was around people who are positive and happy,” she continues. “There was laughter – and even if I didn’t feel like laughing, it was good to be around people who are. It lightened my spirits.”

In fact, she liked it so much that whatever the weather – and even when her doctor advised against attending because of a couple of small injuries she had, from an insect bite and a fall – Angela carried on attending. “Wednesday’s became the highlight of my week,” she says. “I never wanted to miss a day out.”

And her husband saw its positive impact on her, too. So, despite her initial ambivalent feeling towards animals and gardening, the care farm has restored her back to her usual self. After nine months out of work, Angela returned to her NHS job – but on a phased return and reducing her working week from four days to three. She still goes to Pathways, but now as a volunteer one day per week.

Angela’s anxiety and depression have passed away, and she’s no longer on medication. “I’ve now learnt to switch off from work at the end of the day,” she says. “I can turn my guilt button off, and make sure it stays off,” she continues. “I am more aware of the importance of my own self-preservation – and I am quick to tell others to look after themselves.”

“Going to Pathways has been truly amazing – the whole team, and the animals,” Angela concludes. “I never want to go back to how I was.”

Messages to others

Angie has four messages for others facing similar challenges:

“You’re not a failure if you’re feeling this way.

Listen to what your family and the people around you are saying – they will observe the impact that things at work are having on you.

Don’t suffer in silence – you don’t need to stay that way. Get help. Speak to your GP.

If there isn’t a care farm near you, you can still tap into the restorative powers of being outside with nature.”

For more details

Tel: 01502 219064 or 07434 915734

Website: pathways-care-farm.org.uk

Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive, are delivering the Growing Care Farming project. See www.farmgarden.org.uk/GCF for more details.