

Melissa Goodall

Lead Learning Disability Dietitian



My route into mental health/eating disorders/learning disabilities

At school, my favourite subjects were science and maths and I originally went to university to study mathematics. I quickly realised this wasn't what I wanted to pursue a career in, so changed my degree to Psychosocial Sciences. Whilst studying, I worked as a support worker in a mental health residential home and after finishing uni, worked as a support worker in a private eating disorders clinic for three years. My exposure to working with such vulnerable adults and supporting them to develop healthier relationships with food made me realise that I had a particular interest in nutrition, diet and health promotion. I researched a career in dietetics and felt excited at the prospect and was luckily accepted onto a course when I applied.

During my 14 months as an acute B5 dietitian, I gained invaluable experience working with a range of different patients who presented with different nutrition-related health problems. However, my most rewarding experiences were clinic-based when I got to spend the most time with patients and to provide more holistic care. When the opportunity arose to work as a community learning disability dietitian, I jumped at the chance and have never looked back.

A closer look at my current role

I am the Lead Learning Disability (LD) Dietitian for the Norfolk Adult Learning Disability Service. I have worked as a Specialist Learning Disability Dietitian since Oct 2015 and came into the role of Lead LD Dietitian 3 years ago. After I qualified as a dietitian I worked as a Band 5 Dietitian in an acute hospital for around 14 months before stepping into the world of learning disabilities.

My typical day involves...

I work a full time 9-day fortnight to help maintain that work-life balance. No day or week looks the same and my role is split between clinical and management responsibilities. As a manager, I support the other LD dietitians in their roles and provide regular supervision. I am responsible for waiting list management and participate in LD service clinical governance meetings and managers meetings for the general community dietetic service, who we are integrated with. My other time is spent assessing patients on my caseload which may involve visits to a range of different settings or it may involve telephone and video calls. Our LD service is made up of various different professionals to include: nursing, speech & language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology, psychiatry and also social care. We work very closely as a multi-disciplinary team to endeavour to meet the individual's health, care and support needs.

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The thing I'm most proud of

I have developed a weight management pack designed for the carers of those with a learning disability to support their service users/family member in losing weight and achieving a healthier diet. The pack has been well-received and is widely used within our service. I am proud of our small but effective LD Dietetic team. We all work hard and conscientiously to achieve the best outcomes for our patients.

A particular case I am proud of regards a young lady with a learning disability who was struggling to eat enough to meet her nutritional requirements and there were significant concerns regarding weight loss and low BMI. I developed a good rapport with her and she consented to having a feeding tube fitted with a successful outcome.

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How I want my future to look

Weight management is a prevalent and significant issue within learning disabilities and my goal is to improve and develop a better weight management service for individuals with a learning disability within Norfolk.

I am also hoping to increase access to weighing scales equipment for those who are non-weight bearing within the Norfolk community.

A key piece of advice for anyone considering a role like this one

Do it! If you are interested in specialising in the field of learning disabilities then I would recommend organising to shadow other LD Dietitians, as well as other LD health professionals, to give you a taste of what it would be like. Volunteering in a LD-specific day centre or home may also be beneficial to increasing your awareness of what it is like to work with individuals with LD. I would also recommend doing some research on learning disabilities; there are lots of charities out there with websites who explain learning disabilities in lots of detail with helpful videos and case studies.

I never embarked on a career in dietetics with an ambition to specialise in learning disabilities but I am so grateful that this is where I have ended up. Working with individuals with a learning disability and their carers and family is such a rewarding experience and one that makes me smile every day. I also get a lot of fulfilment working in such a close MDT and would encourage others to pursue specialising in this area.