

Martyna Beloviene

Highly specialist mental health dietitian



My route into mental health/eating disorders/learning disabilities

What attracted me to mental health was diversity, complexity, and challenges of physical health in people living with severe mental illness. Very early in my practice I have learned how much knowledge, creativity, patience, and sensitivity is needed to address these issues and to help people to achieve their goals no matter how little those goals are. And what really encouraged me to keep working in this area, was the sense of fulfilment in seeing how much difference small changes in daily eating habits can make to someone living with severe mental illness (SMI).

A closer look at my current role

I am a highly specialist mental health dietitian working in Forensics in Oxleas NHS Foundation trust in Bracton centre, and in Cygnet mental health hospital in Maidstone. I started working as a mental health dietitian in 2017 and my previous experience was in eating disorders/ weight management/ IBS. I still consult clients with IBS and weight management issues privately.

As a full time, mental health dietitian, I attend handover on the ward, take part in the MDT meetings and facilitate 1:1 patient sessions. MDT working is important and I regularly work alongside physical health teams, OTs, consultants, medics, fitness instructors, care support workers and SALTs. I regularly communicate with staff about how to support patients to make healthier food choices and deliver staff training sessions. I am also involved in the supervision of clinicians and students and support resource development. Other activities within my role include catering audits and quality improvement projects.

What are you most proud of?

Being part of the MDT and raising awareness of the importance of healthy and balanced diets within mental health is the biggest impact I deliver as a dietitian.

I think one of the most fulfilling aspects of my role as a Dietitian is to be the one who walks alongside someone in their recovery journey. It is truly rewarding to see someone to re-discover healthy eating, grow in confidence and independence.

It is rewarding where patients chose to fully trust my expertise, knowledge, and experience. It was also a learning experience for myself, where with each patient I learned how unique each of them is and requires a very individual approach

“MDT working is important and I regularly work alongside physical health teams, OTs, consultants, medics, fitness instructors, care support workers and SALTs. I regularly communicate with staff about how to support patients to make healthier food choices”

You trained overseas in Lithuania, how does UK dietetics differ?

Some of the similarities include roles after graduation. Dietitians can work in personal health care institutions of the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, or to create their own workplace. In both countries there is unfortunately a lack of awareness from others regarding a dietitian's role in mental health.

There are also differences. In Lithuania there is no career progression for dietitians who just qualified such as the band system in the UK. There are also differences in salaries, less opportunities for CPD and no eating disorders centres in Lithuania. People suffering from eating disorders would be placed into general hospitals with mental health departments.

“For someone who has trained overseas and is considering practicing within the UK, I would advise to take time to learn about your scope of practice in working within the UK, don't forget the importance of regular CPD”

What advice would you offer to someone who has trained overseas and is considering practicing within the UK?

For someone who has trained overseas and is considering practicing within the UK, I would advise to take time to learn about your scope of practice in working within the UK, don't forget the importance of regular CPD. Try to learn as much as you can about interesting and emerging areas of practice such as nutritional psychiatry (there is one new course delivered by Deakin university, Australia 'Introduction to nutritional psychiatry). There are also great courses delivered by National centre for eating disorders. Make sure you are not isolating yourself, find time to reflect on your practice, talk to your line manager or colleague dietitian. Working in mental health is truly challenging. You will need a lot of support and encouragement.

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

I would like to encourage all dietitians working in mental health to be confident in their skills and knowledge. Dietitians in mental health have specific skills to plan, monitor and evaluate evidence-based dietary interventions at the same time as taking a holistic approach that considers key determinants of health acting on intervention plans. This includes co-existing physical health conditions, psychotropic medication side effects and nutrient interactions, as well as behavioural, motivational, social, and financial challenges. Very often it feels very lonely and isolating working in mental health, and although the role of dietitians in supporting the physical health of people experiencing mental illness is becoming more widely recognised and studied, it will take some time for dietitians to become fully valued member of the MDT. I would encourage all mental health dietitians to network, to make sure they are having regular clinical supervisions, where they could safely express their concerns and struggles in daily practice.