



Shilla Patel

London Fire Brigade

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For Inclusion Manager Shilla Patel, when she was invited to spend time at Harcombe House, the irony of worrying she would feel like she didn't belong was not lost on her.

“I thought people would question why I was there,” she says. “I was nervous, not only was I not operational, but I was there for mental health, and was worried there'd be a stigma. But we all got on and supported each other. I felt included, like I could just be myself.”

Away from the bustle of London life, Shilla found the serenity of Devon a welcome relief. There on a recuperative break, she was invited to take part in some of the activities, but also to take whatever time she needed to enjoy her own company: “It is a magical place, where you can just reflect. I'd sit outside my bungalow and listen to the birds, or I could go be with like-minded people where no one felt any pressure to open up.”

One thing Shilla realised while at Harcombe is that when it comes to mental health, she is not alone: “Mental health doesn't discriminate. It's like a fire; it doesn't choose who it will impact, it just happens, but its effect is no less devastating. We all had our different reasons for being there, but people just accept you.”

The experience of being able to be herself at Harcombe resounded with Shilla, whose day job is to make sure people feel included and able to be their authentic self at work: “I wanted to talk to people about my experience of Harcombe and how fantastic it was, but because colleagues didn't know about my mental health issues, I didn't know how to start.

“I'd discovered the courage to open up and found the outlet to do so. It's so tiring, having to wear a mask, or multiple masks, every day, so it's nice to be able to take that mask off.”

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