Sam

Sam, who identifies as non-binary *(they/them)*, explains how photography changed how they manage their illness.

Sam was diagnosed with ME/CFS and fibromyalgia at 52 years old but their consultant suspected ME/CFS was triggered by glandular fever when they were just 16. Diagnosed with depression at 21, following their second mental health breakdown, they spent nine months as a day patient in a psychiatric unit.

Sam has been a constant user of NHS services ever since: this includes an ME/CFS specialist service, fibromyalgia pain and compassionate pain courses, frequent courses of physical therapy, talking and psychotherapy, six months CBT, mindfulness and a behavioural activation course. Incidentally, Sam says fellow





fibromyalgia course users recommended getting a dog and a robot vacuum cleaner - both of which proved very helpful.

Sam's work life and personal life have been affected by their mental, emotional, physical fatigue and pain caused by their ME and fibromyalgia. From a young age, education and work were interrupted for months at a time so it was difficult to progress. At 36, a graphics degree specialising in photography had to be abandoned after just one term.

At 49, following a period of severe emotional stress, continuing any work became impossible. Losing muscle strength from inactivity led to increased exhaustion, pain and frustration and they gradually became more and more housebound. What turned this around for them was joining the photography programme.

Frequently unable to get dressed, let alone go out and hold up a camera, Sam had given up thinking they could do photography. However, the course is designed to be completely inclusive, an emotionally safe, non-competitive supportive space online, where everyone can learn and progress using equipment they already own (usually a mobile phone), at their own pace. The programme sessions encompass themes, usually based around nature, but always considers what people have access to, especially if they find it hard through any kind of disability to leave their home. Rather than the photographs standing alone, text or discussion is used to provide personal narratives and reminiscences giving a voice to many who feel under-served and often unheard.

Sam started going out and walking more to take the best photographs they could for