



## Student Case Study – Cara McLeod, NHS Lothian

"My placement has had a profound impact on my future career plans and my approach to my final year of university."

### Cara McLeod – BN Nursing (Mental Health)

#### Please tell us a bit about yourself

I am a third-year mental health nursing student who is incredibly passionate about mental health, both professionally and personally, having navigated serious mental illness throughout most of my childhood and teenage years. Now, in recovery, I have made it my life's ambition to support others in developing an autonomous, balanced relationship with their mental health; something we often preach professionally but don't always practice. My love for people and their stories has taken me on multiple journeys, ultimately leading me back to supporting individuals in their day-to-day lives. With a passion for rebuilding communities we have lost, I believe each of us has a role to play. By reconnecting with elements that help us feel integrated and grounded, we can all contribute.

#### What was the opportunity you were involved with and did your role entail?

I provided care for individuals with severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. My role as a student nurse within the team fundamentally focussed on learning and contributing within the dynamic environment of community care. I spent a significant portion of my time accompanying qualified nurses on home visits, observing and contributing to the assessment of patient's mental health and social circumstances. I would assist with completion of mental state examinations and gathering information for risk assessments.

I was also responsible for supporting patients in accessing community resources, often liaising with other agencies. I meticulously documented patient interactions and observations, contributing to the team's record-keeping. I also participated in multidisciplinary team meetings, learning about collaborative care planning and the importance of interprofessional communication. In essence, my role was to immerse myself in the practical realities of community mental health nursing, gaining hands-on experience in patient care, documentation, and team collaboration.

#### What were your highlights and key successes of your time on placement?

A significant highlight was the opportunity to build rapport with patients in their homes, seeing the positive impact of consistent, compassionate care in familiar surroundings. A key success was my ability to develop my therapeutic communication skills, enabling me to engage with patients who were initially reluctant to interact. I successfully supported a patient experiencing severe anxiety to engage in collaborative conversations about their care plan, noticeably reducing their distress. My confidence in navigating complex home environments and contributing to safety planning grew, particularly in situations involving challenging social circumstances. I found it rewarding to contribute to multidisciplinary team meetings, where I was able to offer insights and observe the collaborative decision-making process. Ultimately, my key success was the ability to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills, demonstrating my capacity to provide patient-centred care within the community setting and making a tangible difference in patients' lives.



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"My experience has solidified my passion for working with people at all stages of their lives."

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### Did you face any challenges during your time on placement?

The primary issue was communication regarding working hours, leading to uncertainty and stress. I encountered outdated and stigmatising attitudes, particularly towards individuals dealing with addiction or those who self-harm. Despite these challenges, I learned valuable lessons about the importance of clear communication, constructive feedback, the impact of team dynamics, and the ongoing need to challenge stigmatising attitudes within healthcare. Navigating anxiety and exhaustion during my placement required me to prioritise self-care, especially given the demands of community work. I discovered that using my lunch breaks for relaxation was essential. Sometimes, this meant simply sitting outside, taking in the city atmosphere for a few minutes, or visiting a local café for a moment of quiet reflection. These brief respites helped manage my anxiety, recharge, and return with renewed focus and a calmer perspective. Finding these moments of peace was invaluable for maintaining my wellbeing.

### What key skills did your placement teach you?

My placement provided a unique and highly practical learning experience. While I participated in essential clinical skills, the placement also emphasised often-overlooked aspects of patient care within their homes, including paying meticulous attention to the patient's immediate environment to ensure a safe and supportive space, especially in challenging situations like conducting risk assessments in potentially volatile domestic settings.

For example, during a visit where a patient expressed concerns, I learned to assess and manage risk effectively. This required careful observation, sensitive communication, and a thorough understanding of safeguarding principles. Additionally, I focused on supporting patients in maintaining their dignity and wellbeing within their own environments. This emphasis on holistic care, combined with the practical application of clinical skills, taught me the importance of adapting nursing principles to the unique challenges of community mental health. I understand that true patient care extends beyond medical interventions to encompass the individual's lived experience and environment.

### How do you feel that your studies at Edinburgh Napier University prepare you for this placement?

My studies laid a strong foundation for my community mental health placement in several essential ways. The curriculum's emphasis on person-centred care and recovery principles equipped me with the theoretical knowledge and ethical framework necessary to work with individuals facing mental health challenges. The university's focus on therapeutic communication and active listening skills was invaluable in building rapport with patients and fostering meaningful conversations. The modules covering mental health legislation and policy, particularly the Mental Health Act, provided crucial insights into community practice's legal and ethical considerations. This knowledge was essential to navigate assessments and contribute to care planning. The simulation-based learning and practical skills workshops allowed me to practice essential nursing skills, such as administering medications and conducting physical health assessments, in a safe, controlled environment. Finally, the emphasis on reflective practice encouraged me to critically analyse my experiences and develop my professional judgment. While the community setting presented unique challenges, my comprehensive education at Edinburgh Napier University provided a solid foundation for my learning and development during this placement.



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"My placement has been an invaluable opportunity to gain real-world experience, develop essential skills, and enhance my understanding of nursing."

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Do you think your experience from the placement affected your future career plans or last year of university?

Witnessing the diverse challenges and rewards of community mental health work highlighted the importance of holistic, person-centred care that goes beyond clinical needs to include emotional and psychological well-being. This experience inspired me to approach my final year studies with renewed focus on building strong therapeutic relationships and advocating for patient preferences, regardless of their mental health presentation. I am eager to integrate what I've learned about strength-based approaches and the 'What Matters to You' framework into my future practice. My goal is to provide compassionate and individualised care to every patient I encounter. While this placement deepened my appreciation for the complexities of community mental health, it has ultimately reinforced my commitment to working with people throughout their lifespan and empowering them to live fulfilling lives within their communities.

Would you recommend doing a placement to others?

Placements can be challenging, but they offer significant potential for personal and professional growth. Through placements, you have the chance to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting, build relationships with patients and colleagues, and contribute actively to a healthcare team. These are experiences that cannot be replicated in the classroom.

In particular, placements allow you to learn directly from patients by hearing their stories and perspectives firsthand. We cannot learn about life with mental illness as effectively from books as we can by engaging directly with those who have lived it. These real-life encounters foster empathy, challenge assumptions, and deepen our understanding in ways that textbooks alone cannot achieve. Overall, placements provide a unique window into the realities of nursing, enabling you to explore your interests, solidify your career goals, and ultimately become a more competent and compassionate healthcare professional.

What advice would you give to someone considering doing a placement at university?

Embracing opportunities with an open mind and a willingness to learn is crucial. It's important to be proactive. Seek out chances to apply your knowledge, even if it means stepping outside your comfort zone. Building relationships with patients, colleagues, and mentors provides invaluable support and insights into the nursing profession. While placements can be demanding, viewing challenges as opportunities for learning is essential. Don't hesitate to ask for help when needed. Actively seek feedback on your performance, as constructive criticism is vital for your professional development. Lastly, prioritise self-care during this emotionally and physically taxing time by ensuring you get adequate rest, eat healthily, and manage stress effectively.