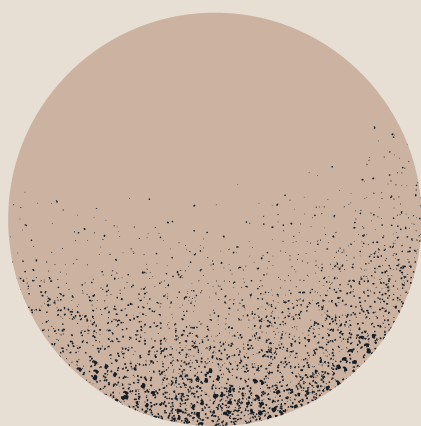
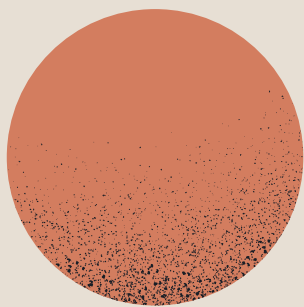


# *New beginnings*

Former headteacher **Juliette Moxham** explains why she said 'farewell' to her primary school in Gloucestershire and a career in education and is now a trainee counsellor





**Juliette Moxham** is a former headteacher of a primary school in Gloucestershire. She is now training to become a counsellor and is a trainee counsellor with *The Listening Post*.

**I** trained to be a primary teacher aged 24 and became a headteacher of a school of 200 children and 28 staff in September 2012. My day-to-day life as a headteacher was busy, working with pupils, staff, parents, governors, the church, the local authority, social services, partnerships, other schools, advisory teams, the wider community; the list goes on. It was a joy to see the children develop and achieve, and I felt a sense of pride watching them flourish. That was our school's vision statement: 'Where children flourish'.

But I also felt frustration at times, with budget constraints; and Ofsted made me fearful. As a headteacher, so much rests on having a good Ofsted report – the school's reputation, your reputation, potential funding; a lot rides on it. It's an emotional job being a headteacher, as you put your heart and soul into your school. You feel joy when things go well and pain when things don't go so well.

### Cancer diagnosis

I loved being the head of my school, but I knew that because of the intensity of the job, it was not one that I could do well into my later years, and I thought I might retire in my late 50s. Of course, life doesn't always go according to plan, and when I was 53 and in the middle of the pandemic, I had a cancer diagnosis, which resulted in me needing a full hysterectomy, urgently. I was incredibly lucky. My local cancer hospital, which had been closed for a number of months due to Covid, had just reopened, and I was one of the first to be operated on. It was all surreal.

After my operation, in the post-op discussion with my surgeon, he said that all the cancer was out. It had been caught early and hadn't spread. As a result of this, he said I was now on a level playing field with everybody else in terms of my cancer returning. We talked about the importance of a healthy work-life balance and a focus on wellbeing. As a headteacher, I didn't have a work-life balance and I didn't focus on my own wellbeing.

I'm not sure that I have yet fully made sense of what happened to me and my health. I may have become ill because I wasn't really taking care of myself as I needed to, or it may just have been something that happened. It is really not about 'Why me?', but 'Why not me?'.

*'It is a marvellous thing to have the chance of a second career, and I appreciate it with all my heart'*

### Life changes

I realised that my time as a headteacher had to come to an end. It was a difficult decision in one sense, but an easy one in another. I had been a headteacher for almost eight years. I loved my school. I really loved it. But I couldn't lead my school if I couldn't give it everything, and I now needed to find another way of working and living.

Post op, as I reflected on the trauma of having a life-threatening illness and the elation of the operation's success, I felt that although I was leaving my career in education, I had more to give, and there was so much I wanted to do. It really didn't take me long to decide that becoming a counsellor would be a fantastic second career for me.

### Power of reflection

I had a wonderful supervisor when I was a headteacher, who would listen to me talk about the challenges I faced at work. It's a lonely role being a headteacher, and these sessions provided me with a space in which I felt validated, recognised and heard. During my reflective supervision, I was able to identify the emotional and psychological impact of headship on my mind and body. After each session, once I had talked, laughed, cried and generally opened up my heart to my reflective supervisor, I felt better resourced, equipped and motivated to return to school and carry on with my role. After I had made the decision to leave headship, together we talked about what I could do next, and my reflective supervisor raised the possibility that I might consider counselling as a second career, using the experience I'd gained over my lifetime supporting others. I have always been 'the listener' in my family and among friends, and people have often commented, 'You'd make a good counsellor'. Nobody seemed surprised when I told them this was going to be my new career.

### Lived experience

Naturally, I'm now interested in working with the public sector, school staff and particularly headteachers. I am currently completing my placement with the Staff Counselling Service at Gloucestershire County Council, and finding it fulfilling. I also feel attuned to the impact that ill health, or a cancer diagnosis, has on our lives and

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decision-making when it comes to our careers, and this is an area of interest personally and professionally.

I am loving my training. I am about to begin Year 2 of the Level 4 diploma in therapeutic counselling with the Listening Post in Gloucester. The first year was a mixture of workshops, skills sessions, process groups, weekly learning reviews, assignments, self-reviews, observations, assessments and personal therapy. It is full of highs and lows. The highs are when feedback from tutors and colleagues is really positive. The lows are when things don't go so well.

### Facing difficulty

I admit the lows included a time during the third term when the tutors were deciding who was ready to move to placement work, and initially I wasn't considered ready. Wow, did that have a massive impact on me. It was so difficult to sit with the fact that others considered that I wasn't ready and that I needed to take a bit more time. It has been enlightening to reflect on this and to try and understand my feelings of outrage, indignation, denial, and where they came from. I now recognise the importance of sitting with my emotions, embracing them and trying to understand them, rather than pushing them away and just ploughing on. It's probably no surprise that I now think everyone should do a counselling diploma!

### Gaining experience

The second year will be similar to the first, with the addition of 100 hours of voluntary counselling sessions and the supervision that goes with this. I have just begun my first placement with Occupational Health at Gloucestershire County

Council (GCC), which I am loving, and I start a second placement at Hereford Mind this autumn. Working for two organisations gives me the opportunity to work with two very different approaches, which is good learning, as at GCC clients can have up to six sessions and at Hereford Mind they can have up to 25 sessions.

I intend to gain as much counselling experience as possible in order to broaden my knowledge and learning. It's been helpful to discover that BACP has journals dedicated to specific areas of counselling to support practitioner development. I think it would be good if BACP also had a journal dedicated to trainees and recently qualified counsellors, with articles about important lessons learnt, inspiring tutors and to explain theories.

### Gains and losses

Of course, I still miss being part of a wonderful community and all the daily interactions that being a headteacher brings. Schools are small worlds and so much happens in a day. Often, they are places of laughter; children say such funny things. You learn such a lot from them about finding joy in simple pleasures, living in the moment, being curious – I miss being part of that world.

I thought I knew myself pretty well, but through the counselling course I am now aware that there is quite a lot that has been buried. So, as the layers of the metaphorical onion are peeled away, I have a better understanding of why I did as I did and do as I do. I can now make more conscious decisions rather than unconscious ones – it's an amazing gain.

I also now have a fabulous Romanian rescue dog – Solly. I have always wanted a dog, but felt it wasn't fair as I was working so many hours. But now I have the time, and it is such a joy to be



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with her. She is full-on, and we do a lot of training together, as well as walking, some running, socialising and just being. It is a wonderful thing. I also have much more time for my family and friends, and I have made so many new friends from my course. Being able to go on holiday in term time is always a bonus!

### Self-compassion

Today, my greatest challenge professionally is moving from being a problem solver to a listener, enabling people to solve their own problems within the therapeutic relationship. In counselling, people have time to really think about how they feel. It is quite a revelation. I found this difficult initially, but the more I live it, the more beneficial I see it to be.

I hope to be able to continue my career as a counsellor, with a healthy work-life balance, for many years. I dream of embracing all that counselling can offer, including therapy work, teaching, CPD, research and writing. My aim is to do this in a gentle, steady, self-reflective way – which allows me to be, to grow, to give, to help and to love. It is a marvellous thing to have the chance of a second career, and I appreciate it with all my heart. ●

### Your feedback, please

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this article or if you would like to write an article of your own, we would like to hear from you. Please email the editor: [workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk)