Anita's story

73-year-old white female with atrial fibrillation and history of breast cancer. Accessed support via exposure and habituation for agoraphobia.

"Suddenly out of the blue I started to feel unwell. I was experiencing anxiety and felt unable to be in a room with other people which was scary as I had never felt like this before. This is known as agoraphobia".

I found being in a noisy environment with lots of people intimidating. Leading up to feeling this way, I was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation and breast cancer. Typically, I am an optimistic person that deals with all sorts of issues quite well so how I felt was baffling to me.

I heard about NHS Talking Therapies after visiting my GP. At first my GP suggested prescribing antidepressants which I don't knock at all because for some people that's the right route. However, I had this gut feeling that I wanted to try and understand why I was feeling the way I did. During that time, I was taking various medications already which can cause side effects, but I did not want to suddenly stop taking my medication. I also discussed my feelings with my breast cancer nurse who reassured me that what I was feeling was not unusual for someone going through what I was at the time.

I felt alone for a few months with my feelings. It took me a couple of weeks to build up the willpower to complete the self-referral form as I felt poorly at the time, I just wanted someone to look after me. I did not know what to expect but I was pleasantly surprised to hear from the service the next day and the staff member on the phone was sympathetic. My experience of receiving treatment was brilliant. I received cognitive behavioural therapy over the telephone which I feel was the best thing for me. However, I was offered the option of face-to-face sessions if I changed my mind.

From the start, my therapist explained what sessions would involve and provided resources in advance. The materials shared during sessions were easy to follow and thought provoking. My therapist treated me as a person and made me feel comfortable throughout my treatment. So instead of being frightened, I said to myself, this is OK and I worked through my difficulties one step at a time. During treatment I took part in gradual exposure with my therapist where I tried to go into a shop and stayed there for longer each time. By the fourth trip to the shop, I could stay longer, and I started to feel less anxious. It is important to remember recovery can take time however knowing there is a service out there that can help is reassuring to me.

From treatment I have taken forward strategies to employ if I start to feel overwhelmed. If I were to feel unwell again in the future, I would be straight back to the team to access support again.

For anyone who may be feeling uncertain about accessing support I would encourage them to reach out and grab the opportunity with both hands. Nobody will make you do anything you do not feel comfortable with. Having somebody that gives you time and space to talk, and who understands the problems you are facing is like a revelation. I wish more people knew about the service NHS Talking Therapies can offer and the benefits you can get from accessing support.