



A Report On the 'STIGMA' Play

Highland Tour: September – October 2003



March 2004



Funded by the Scottish Executive

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HIGHLAND USERS GROUP

Our Mission Statement

HUG exists to improve the lives of people with a mental health problem in the Highlands by speaking out on the issues that affect them and by trying to increase the understanding of the public and professionals about mental ill health.

Aims

HUG (managed by Highland Community Care Forum) is a collective advocacy group, which represents the interests of users of mental health services across the Highlands. Our aims are to:

1. Represent the interests of users of mental health services living in the Highlands.
2. Break down discrimination against people with a mental health problem.
3. Raise awareness and understanding of mental health issues
4. Identify gaps in services and to find ways of improving services for mental health service users.
5. Provide information about mental health issues to users living in the Highlands.
6. Participate in the planning and management of services for mental health service users.
7. Pass on information and news amongst mental health user groups in the Highlands and to interested parties.
8. Increase knowledge about resources, alternative treatments and rights for users of mental health services.
9. Promote co-operation between agencies concerned with mental health.
10. Promote equality of opportunity.

At present HUG have approximately 300 members and 13 branches in:

- § Caithness
- § Sutherland
- § Easter Ross
- § Wester Ross
- § Nairn
- § Inverness
- § New Craigs Hospital, Inverness
- § Lochaber
- § Skye & Lochalsh
- § Badenoch & Stathspey

Between them, members of HUG have experience of nearly all the mental health services in the Highlands.



STIGMA

Performance & Workshop

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to explain about the process, development and progress of an interactive drama presentation aimed at young people, from inception to completion in order for other groups or agencies wishing to undertake a similar project to learn from our experiences.

The development of the project and the tour around the Highlands in September-October 2003 was challenging, daunting, potentially risky but also exciting and inspiring in both what we were hoping to achieve and in the enthusiasm of the people who helped make it happen.

Due to the innovative nature of this project and the fact that in many ways this was 'uncharted territory' we learnt a great deal on our journey, which other groups may wish to consider and take on board from our 'Lessons Learnt' section.

All in all it was a great experience, which we believe was a success in that it delivered powerful messages to young people in a safe and balanced manner. The use of drama as an educational tool proved to be a great medium as it allowed the presentation of potentially emotive themes in a controlled environment.

This report should be read in conjunction with the evaluation completed by Philomena J F de Lima, (Inverness College, UHI Millennium Institute - March 2004), which presents an external, independent evaluation of the performance based on feedback forms completed by 240 of pupils and includes a description of the evaluation methodology. This is followed by a presentation of the findings and ends with a conclusion which draws together the issues that have been highlighted by the pupils and recommendations for how HUG could improve and take forward our work with young people.

This project should not be viewed in isolation, but as an expansion of HUG's current educational and awareness raising work in Highland secondary schools. It would also be beneficial to see this work in light of the research* HUG commissioned Inverness College, School of Social Studies, which explored, in depth, young people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour relating to mental health issues.

**Stigmatisation and Discrimination: Exploring Young People's Attitudes to Mental Health Issues'*

THE PARTNERS

The **HUG Communications Project** was established in 1999 out of an expressed need from users to challenge the stigma they were experiencing as a result of mental illness. This project is a key part of HUG's anti-stigma work, which includes user-led training, educational work with young people, media and PR work, and exploring the use of information communication technologies (particularly website development and video production).

Lochaber Youth Minds is an informal, multi-agency partnership of people working directly with young people, which aims to raise awareness of mental health issues with young people in the Lochaber area.

Eden Court Outreach has developed a region-wide service introducing children and young people to the Arts, reaching over 5000 young people a year with a skills development programme of workshops and projects for school pupils, including all abilities and disabilities.

PROJECT OUTLINE

Three-year funding from the Scottish Executive has provided HUG with the capacity to develop local work that goes further in addressing stigma and discrimination, and to develop new and innovative projects that directly meet the objectives of the National Programme to Improve Mental Health and Wellbeing in Scotland.

As a result of this support, during 2003 HUG worked in partnership with Eden Court Outreach and Lochaber Youth Minds to research and stage an interactive drama production, '**STIGMA**' to around 1,500 4th to 6th year pupils in 19 secondary schools in the Highland region during September and October 2003.

Written by Ilona Munro, one of Eden Court's Outreach workers, '**STIGMA**' addresses a range of mental health issues in the context of the lives of young people, including depression, self-harm and suicide. The performance also, importantly, provides a forum for challenging stigma, misconceptions and stereotypes, and the damaging use of language and attitudes that many people in our society still use to refer to people experiencing mental health problems.

The whole programme lasted 1 hour 10 minutes and included a 35-minute play (performed in the round) and a workshop, of similar length, allowing pupils to air their views in a forum. The forum encouraged the young people to voice different decisions from those made by characters in the play, or to propose different behaviour for characters in scenes from the play – in a quest for happier outcomes and to emphasise how negative or uninformed attitudes about mental illness can make young people feel they are to blame and can discourage them from seeking help.

The total budget for the project was £8,000, which covered the commissioning, research, writing and performance of '**STIGMA**', and any associated costs. HUG staff time, travel and administration costs were met by the organisation's core budget.

RATIONALE

HUG's rationale for wishing to address mental health issues with young people was based on a number of key factors:

- i. Current research reveals that many young people have misinformed and unbalanced images of mental illness.
- ii. People who use mental health services say that young people can be the cause of great distress due to their damaging and negative views of people with mental health problems.
- iii. A number of HUG members first experienced mental health problems during their teenage years and believe that if there had been open discussions about mental illness whilst they were at school, this may have minimized the impact of their illness.
- iv. HUG has been delivering awareness raising sessions in schools over the past 3 years and from this work it has become evident that particular issues, such as self-harm, are topics that young people wish to talk about.
- v. Based on previous experience, HUG has found that drama is a powerful medium for exploring sensitive and emotional issues.

AIMS

The overall aim of the project was to challenge young people's misinformed views, provide them with accurate information on key mental health issues and to communicate the idea that mental health problems can affect anyone, but with help and support people can recover and lead fulfilling lives.

OBJECTIVES

Our main objectives were for young people to:

- § Gain a greater understanding of mental health problems and issues, and the lives and perspectives of people who live with mental illness.
- § Realize the damaging impact that stigma can have on people experiencing mental ill health.
- § Explore the use of language currently used by many young people when referring to mental health issues.
- § Gain greater knowledge and understanding of depression, self-harm and suicide, and by bringing these 'taboo' issues out into the open, create a more accepting and open environment.
- § Provide young people with accurate, responsible information on a range of mental health issues.

DEVELOPING THE PROJECT – THE PROCESS

The development of the play was as important as the final product, and this was clearly reflected in the process undertaken for consultation and research into potential themes, although a pre-requisite to the funding was that the damaging effects of stigma were explored. Presented below is the main process undertaken to take forward the project:

Consultation and Research for Play: In the June 2003 meeting of Lochaber Youth Minds there was in-depth discussion around young people's attitudes towards suicide and there was a strong feeling from the group that some young people, tragically, think suicide is an option and it is vital that they feel able to talk about their feelings and be provided with real viable alternatives. People felt this would be an important theme to draw out in the play.

The issue of self-harm also received a strong emotive response. Many people felt that, as this was an issue widely affecting many young people and a subject young people seem keen to hear about, this would be another strong theme to explore through the use of drama.

In addition, informal discussions were held via phone, emails and meetings. Ilona Munro talked to young people from Lochaber High School, and Kinlochleven High School and Youth Café. These conversations, current media reporting on mental health issues and constant communication with members of Lochaber Youth Minds helped to inform the structure and facilitation for the workshop day. From these conversations the major themes being raised were: stigma/labels; fear surrounding mental illness, and treatment and recovery.

Ilona's research included an exploration of the language surrounding mental health and mental illness, reading relevant articles produced by mental health and young people's organizations and searching the Internet.

Workshop – Brainstorming Themes and Messages: In June a workshop was organized for a range of individuals to further explore and brainstorm themes, ideas and messages and consider drama techniques for the play and workshop. The day was very much drama and improvisation-based to explore stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness.

Participants included:

- Members of Lochaber Youth Minds
- HUG members
- Young people with an interest in drama work, mental health or peer training
- Workers with a special interest or expertise of young people and mental illness
- Workers and members of the Celts & Comrades Drama Group
- Primary Mental Health Worker
- Pupils from Lochaber secondary schools

The workshop began by exploring some mythical stereotypes - like caricatures of Freudian doctors, Hollywood portrayals of people with schizophrenia and those experiencing psychosis. Themes around depression, suicide and self-harm were explored and the media's role also featured strongly.

Emerging Themes: During the workshop various subject matters were looked at. Initially there was some focus on schizophrenia as well as depression and self-harm, but it was felt that to provide something effective focus should be on the things that could touch most young people's lives. So, whilst there is some reference to schizophrenia, the play centered on self-harm, depression and suicide.

The Play and Forum Theatre: By inviting participants to share their experiences and views, enough material was gathered from the session to produce a scripted play, '**STIGMA**' which follows a week in the lives of four young people, one of whom has depression and has attempted suicide and one of whom self-harms. The play is performed by four actors who play numerous different parts from a dad to a psychiatrist.

The whole programme lasts 1 hour 10 minutes and includes a 35-minute play (performed in the round) and a workshop, of similar length, allowing pupils to air their views in a forum. The forum theatre style invites the audience to interact directly with the actors and change the actions and behaviour of the characters by offering alternative outcomes and providing more positive solutions to the problems.

Practically the play had to be for no more than four actors, contain virtually no set and include letting the actors stage manage their own sound effects and music.

Post-workshop Consultation: From the workshop day Ilona Munro produced a draft script which was circulated for consultation, feedback and checking for accuracy to Lochaber Youth Minds, HUG members and mental health professionals. A final 'working' script was produced by the end of August and rehearsals started in September.

Rehearsals: Rehearsals took place during September and HUG members worked with the actors to increase their understanding of self-harm to ensure accurate and real representation on stage. Members talked openly about their own personal experiences of why and how they self-harmed and the function that self-harm served for them. The understanding and empathy of the actors to the issues they were representing could be clearly seen in the performance and gave real credibility, power and emotion to their performances.

Showcase Performance: A showcase performance was scheduled for the week prior to the launch of the play and it provided an opportunity for an invited audience of councillors, MSP's, staff from Highland Community Care Forum, Primary Mental Health Workers, members of the See me alliance and key stakeholders in health, social work and education to experience the production, discuss issues raised and consider the best way the workshop session could be facilitated and clarify its function.

SUPPORT AND INFORMATION PROVIDED TO SCHOOLS

Communications with the 20 schools who originally opted into the performance (which was offered, free of charge, to all 28 Highland secondary schools) was an important, and challenging element. Eden Court was responsible for the day-to-day contact with the schools in-order to work out a tour schedule that was achievable in a two-week period.

HUG's main responsibility was to provide information to the schools and ensure the pupils were fully briefed by their guidance staff. The paragraphs below explain briefly about this, but is worth referring to the 'Lessons Learnt' section.

Briefing Pack: A briefing pack was sent to each school and aimed to provide relevant staff with general background information, including young people's attitudes to mental illness, an outline of the main issues that will be raised in the performance and contact details for additional information on mental health issues, outlining roles and responsibilities, considering boundaries and the emotional safety of the pupils. Staff were also encouraged to contact HUG should they require further information or support.

Information and Support for Young People: Due to the content of the play it was vital that accurate and appropriate information was made available to the young people. A wide selection of leaflets, website addresses, national organisations, help-lines and booklets on a range of mental health issues were available on the day for the pupils to take away with them. The school was encouraged to set up a display for pupils to access later in a quiet and private place e.g. in the library or guidance office.

Primary Mental Health Workers were involved in briefing staff and pupils in some schools and some were there on the day to offer support should it be required by any young person. Other mental health professionals attended, but some felt they were not able to offer direct pupil support as their remits were not specifically to work with young people. However, they were there to respond to any issues or concerns of teaching staff.

Guidance staff were on hand and indeed a number of pupils did go and speak to their guidance teacher immediately after the performance.

A HUG worker also attended each performance and the young people were invited to speak to them if they felt the need. A few pupils did come and ask HUG for additional information and to share some concerns they had about friends or family members.

OUTCOMES AND SUCCESSES

All in all the tour proved to be a successful one in which all the partner organisations consistently showed enthusiasm and a strong belief in what they were trying to achieve:

Target Audience Reached: Over 1,500 young people from across the Highlands saw the performance and took part in the interactive workshop.

Greater Understanding of Users' Lives: One of the most desired outcomes for HUG was that the pupils would gain a greater understanding of the lives and perspectives of people who live with mental illness, and so act with greater empathy. From the informal feedback received from pupils and their teachers (and echoed in the formal feedback forms) the young people realized that mental health issues were relevant to their own lives.

Impact of Stigma on People's Lives: Through the medium of interactive drama, HUG was able to give a voice to people's experiences of the damaging impact of stigma, some insight into the emotions, feelings and behaviour of living with depression and a clear message of what self-harm is (and what it isn't) and why it is a coping mechanism for many people in distress.

HUG's Profile: HUG was represented at all performances and a worker introduced the performance and gave an explanation as to why these issues were so important, and how they related to young people themselves. HUG's profile in schools has been raised as a result of this exposure and we were able to promote the awareness/educational work we could offer to schools.

PSE Sessions: As a direct consequence of 'STIGMA' HUG has delivered 6 follow-up sessions in one Inverness school.

Provision of Information: An important outcome was the provision of accurate information on a range of mental health issues. At each school a wide range of leaflets, web addresses, information booklets and guides were made available. We are aware that for the majority of young people this was the first time they had had an opportunity to access this type of information.

Support for Young People: A number of young people sought help from guidance staff immediately after the performance. In one school in particular, over a dozen pupils requested support from teaching staff.

Relationship Building: Through the process of researching and developing the play and workshop a good working relationship between HUG and Eden Court Outreach has developed, which we intend to maintain and indeed strengthen. Furthermore, we now have a drama production which is relevant to many different audiences, not exclusively young people.

Added Value: Choose Life monies enabled HUG and Eden Court to work together to develop a one-day workshop for 10 Eden Court Outreach Workers to use as follow-up work to the 'STIGMA' play or to stand alone to explore the issue of the stigma that surrounds mental

illness. The aim is to offer workshops to schools and youth/community on the themes of stigma, mental health and wellbeing.

Feedback from Mental Health Professionals: *“I felt that the overall message of the play was very clear and demonstrated so many important aspects in terms of mental health awareness raising, identifying themes and helping to breakdown stereotypes and identifying where young people can go to get help. Most of all, the way in which the use of audience participation enabled the young people to think of different scenarios to change the outcomes for the two young people in role and enabled people to change their ways of communicating with each other in a more positive way.*

Some of the young people I have spoken to since were impressed with the play and found it very useful and it has helped them particularly in relation to raising awareness re self-harm”.

Systemic Practitioner/Family Therapist

Feedback from Ilona Munro, Script Writer for ‘STIGMA’: *“General feedback was good; with a number of young people (from Kinlochleven and Lochaber High Schools) saying the play was powerful and kept their attention.*

As the writer I was interested in whether the language was perceived as authentic, and of course, whether the play itself seemed rooted in reality. Both language and content were authentic according to comments. So much so that some young people started to relate similar instances and told me of friends and siblings going through such mental illness.

The question that I was nervous about asking arose from watching the teenage girls I saw either crying or often concentrating hard on the floor during the play. However, they said that it was because the play was so “real”, that they occasionally had to look away. More importantly they said that the “full on” scenes were justified. They also thought that because mental health was such a serious issue, that the play needed to “grab them” in order to get them thinking.”

Media Coverage: The media target for this event was both highland and national press, radio and TV. Good Highland and national coverage was achieved, including:

- § BBC TV (Reporting Scotland) covered the launch of the play during Scottish Mental Health Week 2003 (6th-10th October)
- § Aberdeen Press and Journal, headlined with ‘Pupils to Remove Mental Health Stigma’
- § Inverness Courier, headlined with ‘New Play to Banish Stigma of Mental Health Problems’
- § West Highland Free Press, headlined with ‘Highlighting Stigma around Mental Health’
- § The Scotsman and The Highland News
- § BBC Radio Scotland – BBC Highland news and Good Morning Scotland
- § Moray Firth Radio – Highland news bulletins
- § BBC1 Scotland – Reporting Scotland

MAIN LESSONS LEARNT

- i. Young people are able to handle very emotive and fairly explicit messages and drama is a safe and contained medium for presenting taboo themes. Our own concerns that the messages were too powerful were not borne out, except in one or two cases.
- ii. The difficulty of communication with the schools was a major issue. Knowing who to contact or ensuring that the information reached the right people at the right time was problematic, particularly in regard to the briefing of the pupils. Follow-up calls two weeks and a week prior to the performances were made to ensure that the pupils were fully aware of the play's content. These revealed that the greater number of schools had not done this very important task. Indeed one school believed the performance was actually about smoking. However these schools were able to do some preparation work the week before the performance, and it must be stressed that some schools prepared thoroughly, often with the help of the Primary Mental Health Workers.

The decision was made to cancel one performance as the school was not able to brief the students and the play was scheduled for the Friday afternoon before half-term, and it was felt to be too risky.

- iii. It is vital to inform young people in advance about the issues to be presented so that they have an opportunity to opt out or to mentally prepare themselves
- iv. The need to work much more closely with mental health professionals was acknowledged, particularly the Primary Mental Health Workers in each school who would provide a vital role in preparation and support prior and after the play. Any future plans would ensure that this happened.
- v. Another lesson learnt was based around the branding of the project. Due, possibly, to the fact that Eden Court is well known in the Highlands, the schools gained the impression that it was an Eden Court project and did not realize HUG's vital role in commissioning, guiding and development of the play.
- vi. At any one time, there may have been young people who had been excluded from school who could have benefited greatly from participating in '**STIGMA**', particularly as this group of young people could be at increased risk of developing mental health problems.
- vii. As a result of feedback from the external evaluator, it is apparent that HUG workers need to undertake training on the design and analysis of questionnaires and to explore more inclusive and innovative ways of evaluating projects.

SUMMARY OF INDEPENDENT EVALUATION FINDINGS

This summary is based on the analysis of 240 evaluation questionnaires designed and distributed by HUG, following the performance. The evaluation questionnaire included a mix of restricted and extended responses, leading to both quantitative and qualitative information. However, a large proportion of students did not complete the sections that required extended responses.

In general, the majority of students who responded evaluated the experience positively. This is also supported by the comments made by students who were interviewed as part of the Young People's Research Project, undertaken on behalf of HUG by Inverness College School of Social Studies. However, it is important to bear in mind that the questionnaire design posed some challenges to drawing specific conclusions.

Nevertheless some strong outcomes were evident:

- § **The majority of students (99%) considered it important that young people are informed about mental health issues.** Recognition of symptoms, including being aware of what it feels like to have mental health problems, being aware of sources of support and help and the pervasiveness of mental health were highlighted as important reasons for young people to be informed about mental health issues.
- § **70-85% of young people felt that the play had addressed issues of stigma, depression and self –harm well or very well,** with none feeling that these issues were handled 'very badly'. However, the pattern for suicide was different, 43% reported that the issue was handled 'ok' and 12% reported the issue as being handled 'badly' to 'very badly'. However, it needs to be noted that the theme of suicide was very much a tertiary one and was not dominant in the play.
- § **With regard to the effect of the play, the majority of students felt that the play had been thought-provoking and emotional,** although there was a minority where the responses reported the experience as distressing (3%).
- § **The majority of students reported an increase in knowledge and understanding of mental health issues.** However, it is important to note that there was a substantial number (33%) who reported 'not much' or no changes.
- § When asked to prioritise the three most important things that students had learned, '**better understanding of mental illness**' was highlighted by the majority, followed by issues of support and help and information about the pervasiveness of mental health.

In conclusion, the interactive drama was welcomed by the majority of students and for most of the young people the messages relating to the issues of stigma, support and help and the pervasiveness of mental health came across clearly through the play.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The advantage of time has provided an ideal opportunity to reflect on how this project was conceived, developed and delivered. Initial enthusiasm from HUG and Lochaber Youth Minds to use drama as an educational tool on a mental health theme resulted in a great partnership with Eden Court theatre and the staging of a professional production which toured the Highlands over a hectic two-week period in autumn 2003.

'**STIGMA**' took the ground-breaking step of tackling often unapproachable subjects such as self-harm, depression and suicide through drama and success has been demonstrated in a variety of ways. Notably, visiting 19 secondary schools and getting our messages across to around 1,500 school pupils. So providing them with a solid grounding in key issues which could affect their own mental health and helping them to gain greater understanding of the lives of people who live with mental illness.

Indeed, the majority of young people (who completed feedback forms) reported that their knowledge and understanding of mental health issues had been increased, and this has been echoed in informal, anecdotal feedback received from professionals, parents and young people.

Of great significance, is the fact that almost all the young people felt that it is important young people have an opportunity to hear about, and explore, mental health issues.

For all involved, this has been an extremely worthwhile project and has laid firm foundations for future partnership work with Eden Court and for HUG to work more extensively in schools in the Highland region.