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**INVERNESS COMMUNITY CARE FORUM**  
**A CELEBRATION OF 'SERVICES' FOR OLDER PEOPLE**  
**MAY 09**

**Hug and isolation**

Hello , my name is Graham Morgan and I work with the Highland users group or HUG for short. I am going to very quickly talk about HUG and about isolation.

Hug is a group that represents the views of people with a mental illness in the Highlands and tries to raise awareness of what it is like to experience mental health problems.

Maybe I can do a little awareness raising today? I have a diagnosis of Schizophrenia and depression and in the past was told that I had a personality disorder.

Mental illness, as we all know, is extremely common and I am sure that every one of you in this room knows someone or have yourself experienced mental health problems.

But let us reflect for a little while; even things that are as seemingly as simple and common as stress, depression and anxiety have huge consequences for us and those around us.



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When we become ill the world may turn into a dark, sad, grey and featureless place, we may find that where once we had joy and vigour now life seems meaningless and drab , where once we could love the world and those around us now the effort of a conversation and the burden of company is beyond us. Sometimes we find the buzz of tension just too much to handle and our words stutter, our hearts beat fast and the faces of our friends become a whirl of fear that is too much to deal with. Those thoughts that we don't want to have rush through our head and we can't avoid them or relax or find the blessed comfort of sleep. On some occasions life implodes in on itself and our reality becomes distorted and frightening and different to everyone else's and in this new world of difference and confusion we may find our very grasp on life hard to keep a hold of.

It is so sad that so many of us have experiences at some point in our lives that have these effects. It is even sadder that we live in a society where it is still not easy to talk about or be open about these experiences. We may hide what we are going through from our family and our friends and where we may have got help we only find silence and unease and loneliness.

It is even sadder that the very condition itself can alienate us from those we love and keep company with , we can find our friends no longer know what to do with us and we can find that we no longer know how to speak to our friends that we no longer delight in the free ease of conversation but find ourselves caught in a hesitant darkness.

And in this world we may withdraw and remove ourselves from company and find our lives echoing with the drab bored loneliness of nothing to do and nothing to say and nothing to look forward to and in this dark isolation we may find that the original problems magnify themselves as the sadness of our lives flourishes in the emptiness of our existence.

This is a terrible place for anyone to enter and so so lonely and distressing for us and those around us.

Life however can get better, there are treatments such as medication and talking therapies and ordinary activity that can help so much, there is the simple balm of time that heals so much, there is the buzz that a simple activity that has worked out well can do to us and there is the blessed joy of our fellow human beings. We may isolate ourselves but as we travel a road of recovery we may reach out to those we trust and find peace with, we may gain the courage to seek out new company and in this company find warmth and joy and the solace of shared conversations.

Sometimes we meet people who have had similar harsh experiences and on occasion this means that we can let the mask of conformity drop and find that we gain new connections and new understandings and new ways of seeing our world.

There are drop in centres across the Highlands where people can pop in for company and companionship and someone to talk to and in these places are people who have gone through or are still going through similar things.

HUG is a group of 360 people who have all experienced mental illness, it developed from our mutual dismay at the agony of illness, the lack of services and the degradation of the way some people with a mental illness are treated.

It is not a support group or a therapy group it is a campaigning group where we join together in common cause. We speak out about our lives and what we think would improve the lives of us and those like us. We try to make the world a better place for those affected by illness. A huge part of our work is based on challenging stigma and discrimination by working with young people, by providing user led mental health awareness training, by creating dvd's and by using our website and other creative methods to get our voice heard and listened to.

Although we don't set out to provide therapy we do find that some of us get huge strength from meeting people who have been through the same things and through joining together in a shared journey for justice.

For any of you who have also experienced things like this maybe in search of something to get engaged in again or in the wish to meet like minded souls then a group like hug may be for you. Just as easily if you are melting out of the isolation of illness then sometimes the sort of company that you can get in drop in centres or groups where people with similar interests gather may one day appeal to you. I hope so anyway, I have certainly found them helpful for myself.

Chris will now talk about her own experience of the effect of illness on isolation and the benefits of company.

Thank you.