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REDHALL WALLED GARDEN

Joint mental health and the environment event run by FEVA? Sept 09.

MENTAL HEALTH THE ENVIRONMENT AND HUG

Hello, my name is Graham Morgan. I work with the Highland users group which represents the views of people with a mental illness and have been asked to talk about what it is like to have a mental illness, being out in our natural environment, what hug is and volunteering. Now that I look at that that is quite a task for the next 20 minutes but I'll have a go.

This time last year I was a patient in New Craigs hospital and spent five weeks under a section, that means that I was detained under the mental health act. I have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and had tried a new drug that didn't work. It meant that despite the vigour my new medication gave me that I didn't sleep, some of you will be well aware of what it is like not to sleep for days on end. For me despite doses of diazepam and far too much alcohol my nights echoed with my unblinking eyes and the sweaty rumpled sheets of my bed.

HUG is a project of:  Highland Community Care Forum
the voice of users and carers

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I would go to bed at midnight and wake at two in the morning and whether I forced myself to lie in bed hoping that I would doze for the rest of the night or got up to read or write or listen to music I couldn't relax and get back to that blessed soft land of warmth and security instead my world became increasingly harsh and jagged. Sometimes I would get four hours sleep and I would be delighted.

As most of you know if sleeplessness carries on like this for too long then your world can become distorted and hard to cope with. If you have a stressful life in other ways then everything can mount up and become too hard to deal with and that is what happened to me.

I can't remember exactly what I was thinking as my reality began to fall apart and for those of you here today who know little about mental illness it must be quite strange. I am in the strange position that I am an atheist who sometimes encounters spirits and devils when I am ill. I have a constant belief that at the core of me can be found the slime of corruption and evil and that somehow or other I have the dark spirits of devils inside me. As I became more and more tired their reality gained an ever increasing intensity and focus in my thoughts. I was already hearing voices, not conversations as such but the intensely irritating feeling of hearing my name called when no one was there, answering the door bell to find it hadn't been rung, hearing my mobile ring when it was turned off just this buzz of stuff that puts you on edge.

Anyway I was in world where I was so so tired. I was shaky and on edge all the time, often, when I saw my community psychiatric nurse I would burst into tears about my home situation and this incredible tension inside me that wouldn't let me relax, I had begun to self harm again for the first time in years and she was beginning to say that maybe I should go into hospital just to get away from home and to relax and to sleep but all the time my thoughts of evil were growing.

By the time I reached hospital as a voluntary patient I had decided that my soul had almost completely been taken over by a devil, that I was a raging pit of evil that would help to destroy the world and all that I loved about this beautiful planet. I believed though that there was a fraction of the person I knew as graham left in me and that my task was to destroy myself and by doing this to stop this devil in me destroying everything.

There were all sorts of other things in my mind but essentially I decided that for the good of everyone I needed to die.

In hospital I wasn't allowed to leave the ward. Now our hospital in the Highlands is quite nice, it has single rooms, it has wards with big windows that look out to the city of Inverness, the sea and the hills beyond, but it remains a hospital, the air is still and lifeless, the windows hardly open, the smell is of the sterile setting of any institution. It is, however we like to see it, restricting and cloying. It is not invigorating or dynamic, there is not that burst of life that says live and glow here.

When you are confined to a ward you can feel trapped. There is nowhere to walk to except the circular square corridors of the ward itself. We were lucky in that we had a courtyard and you could walk round and round and round on the concrete but at least you were in the fresh air, you could see the clouds and the sky above the walls the occasional crow hopping up and down the roof tiles.

We were lucky in our courtyard in that we had a garden table to sit at that a patient had donated and tubs that used to contain flowers until an irate patient tore most of them out of the earth. But I still felt trapped and confined and frustrated.

Then one day I was allowed out of the ward with a physiotherapy assistant for a walk and it was wonderful. I had problems with my feet at the time so I walked slowly but climbing into the hills behind the hospital was wonderful, seeing the grass and the trees, the grit of the path. The wind; real wind on my face, oh it is so hard to describe the liberation of being back in the world, back in the natural environment, feeling the breath in your chest begin to pant and the muscles of your legs become warm, talking as you walk, looking at the sky and the birds, the bushes , the pond at the top of the hill, the puddles and the mud of the path and looking at a wide world no longer confined by walls or rules with real smells and proper brisk wind on your face.

Then my escort giggled and confessed that she hadn't walked this path for ages and that maybe we were a little lost. Oh fantastic! we might be here for hours they might have to send search parties for us and non of

it is my fault! I am allowed out here with the wild world until my escort finds a way of getting me back again to the ward and the routine.

On another day I am allowed out again and this time we go to the old hospital and the graveyard where we are caught in a torrent of rain. Wonderful, I have water on my skin, my clothes are soaking and cling wetly to me, the wind in the storm makes my cheeks cold and I am exhilarated. Then I have to go back to the constant unchanging environment of the hospital.

Then I get sectioned and stuck firmly on the ward. I have a nurse besides me all the time. I walk round and round the featureless corridors and if I veer towards the doors they stop me walking out. It is just the four square corridors, the plain room and the courtyard for days at a time. Sometimes I escape and run and run to the entrance of the hospital and the alarm goes off and the nurses chase me and they always catch me and amidst the stares of the public in the car park near to the trees, near to freedom, I am surrounded by nurses holding me, forcing me, step by painful step back to the ward and its clinical isolation.

In retrospect in all the bundles of logic and of self awareness I know I was looked after well and kept safe and that if I had been allowed to leave that I wouldn't be here to talk to you today but there was that feeling of restriction and confinement, that trapped airless feeling where you want to scream but cannot. When the nurses stopped following me everywhere I would lie by the glass windows and watch the ants and the beetles wandering over the pebbles and look at the hills with the sun setting on them and fill myself with self pity.

Once my behaviour became more based in reality my freedom was increased and then my section was lifted. I found that occupational therapy offered occasional walks; not many people ever really bothered to go but one day I did and spent a wonderful couple of hours wandering the paths of a forest talking and breathing, getting mud on my shoes and feeling normal for the first time in ages.

That story was really so you could hear a little about severe illness and see the liberation the natural world can give. You all know it so much

better than me but I love to walk a beach and see the sand blowing past my feet in shimmering pale vale in the wind, I love to sit by a stream and read a book, to walk a path lost in the world of solitary thoughts, to come out of a forest and sit on a bench looking over the tree tops to the cloud hazed mountains beyond. This is wonderful, it fills my spirit. It is what I stop doing when I am consumed with the grey sadness of the cloying world but when I can, when I have the energy, when my spirit knows it will glow I seek out nature and the clouds and the trees and the sea and there I feel my mood and my being uplifted and I feel both energy and melancholy, peace and exhilaration.

That is just being exposed to the world to that joyous feeling of the wide world beckoning you, I rarely do anything physical in fact I am so unfit that I doubt i could run a hundred feet without collapsing with my lungs heaving. It is easier to sit and drink and eat and drift but when you have spent a day of activity when you have dug into the fresh earth and become dirty, mowed the grass, snipped the twigs, sawed the logs, split and stacked the wood, when the garden or whatever it is blossoms and all you want to do is walk between the bushes and the flowers the trees and the ferns and the logs and herbs and you shower the sweaty dirt off you, you feel so good in your tiredness. It is not the tiredness of a lost day where nothing can change, nothing be achieved; where all that beckons is the bland hours of telly, the jitter of the radio and the echoing emptiness of the bed that says you have successfully completed the wasting of a day. It is this rich feeling of I have done something, my tiredness is justified, my world was today one of colour and effort and hopefully maybe I will wake up tomorrow and look forward to the world outside my door.

Basically I am saying that despite our sometimes complete lack of motivation if we can only summon the energy and the vigour to get out then the environment, nature, physical effort can reap dividends that turn the soul of the saddest most defeated into that tentative blossoming that at long last sees the beauty in a flower beginning to blossom or a mountain veiled in cloud by a silver sea. But it takes so much. To believe in yourself to see a reason to get up in the morning to become well enough physically to turn the soil or plant the vegetables can take so long and need so much patience. The world of the environment is a precious liberating world it can change lives and bring

peace and joy but it is not just a missing secret we all need to know about it is a place that to engage with a appreciate takes effort and courage and energy and the belief in something better.

I suppose places like Redhall are all about recovery but before we talk about recovery let is remember what illness is.

Mental health is something we all have and because we all have it we all have some inkling of what mental ill health is and if we don't we will have seen it in the lives of those around us.

Mental illness can come from lives that have been blighted by horror, it can come from the jagged irresponsibility of genes and chemicals that have lost their way and from a host of other causes. It can be the strange unrealities and delusions, the dimensions that people think they don't understand that I am subject to. It can be the aching sadness the grey bland featureless days of depression where nothing stirs the darkness of the passing days, it can be the exhaustion of the highs and lows that seem never to end and moderate into the everyday, it can be the biting anxiety of not being able relax or calm down not being able to associate with anyone, not being able to speak to sleep to find peace from thoughts that fill our minds, it can be the compulsion to do things again and again just somehow to keep safe. Its result can be despair it can be the slippage of hope, it can be loneliness and no one to hug from month to month, it can be unemployment and poverty and stigma and suspicion and homelessness and and it can be all sorts of horrible things and consequences that should have nothing to do with the simple fact that we are ill.

When we live in this world the idea of hope can be an insult and the joy of the positive only a threat to look beyond getting through a day too much to think about but if we are lucky and have the right people around us we can slowly with many steps backwards many reversions and pitfalls look to the world of recovery. This does not mean the world of cure and never taking drugs again, it doesn't mean being who we once were because we are always changing but it does mean that tentative vision that begins to believe in ourselves again, that dares to think there may be a glimmer of hope in our lives, a trickle of pleasure and the ability to slowly live a life that adapts to illness, to the vagaries

of our society and culture and says I am going to believe in me and the people around me I am going to live a life that may be bound by the most unbearable pain but despite this I will struggle and I will find that unique path and journey that I will be content to travel and in my journey in its ups and downs I will try to believe that though life will not be perfect it will be my life that I determine that I live that I take responsibility for and in this world hope can blossom and a whole world of opportunities beckon that help us leave behind that dark days and walk to brighter futures, difficult futures but brighter ones.

There are so many routes to recovery. The world of the environment is without doubt one but there are others and one that appeals to a small number of people like me is the world of the user movement and hug and setting out to change the world.

HUG has 380 members across the highlands all of whom have experienced illness and most of whom have been in hospital at some stage.

What we go through is often awful it is not something we can let down lightly and walk away from. Sometimes we have had great help and wish to give something back and at other times we are shocked at the way people are treated. You have a mental illness and find you can't get help, that you are suicidal and can't get admitted to hospital, that you are getting better and are discharged and all help goes that you have completed a course in talking therapy and are happy with your new tools for growth but that you enter a void where no one seems to have an interest anymore. There are so many things to grumble about, pills that blunt you pile on the weight cause diabetes and so on an absence of anyone to talk to at those desperate times on the weekend or the evening when you beg for at least a friendly voice.

Then of course there are the huge numbers of us on benefits, unemployed, subject to stigma and discrimination, homeless in prison harassed and despairing.

Well groups like hug exist to change this and that is our own vision of recovery. We stand back we speak up we state this is wrong and we will do all we can to change things for the better.

We are a group of witness and testimony but we do not need weep in the shadows of injustice and we do not shout with rage. We gather our views, we find the problem and look to the solution.

We find comradeship and support and a joint vision and a wonderful community when we come together to share our experiences. By speaking out with dignity and respect we build strength and power and our voice is listened to and acted on. By standing together and saying this is wrong and these are the simple things you can do to help us we find confidence and self esteem and worth and value.

We work in two ways there is hug speaking out where we find out the huge variety of our members views on various subjects and turn them into reports that we use to achieve shifts in policy, practice and services . we go to the interminable committee meetings which few people other than the likes of me are happy to do and we meet together and natter and drink coffee and write letters and respond to this that and the next thing and we meet other users and professionals come to consult us and gradually we change the world.

Then there is speaking out stopping stigma a project with the aim of changing things over generations but with the ability to make a difference in a day. We work with young people through drama, music, and other forms of creative expression. Our play stigma which we commissioned with eden court theatre company went out to at least 5000 young people and in its last evaluation 97% of them said that they would now be more tolerant. We go into schools and help young people educate each other.

Then we provide mental health awareness training where the testimony of our members can change things for ever. In our last five sessions 100% of the participants said that it was very good or excellent.

We work with the media , we create and produce dvd's on subjects ranging from the mental health act to self harm to recovery to social inclusion. Some of these have now been seen by thousands of people. We have a website hug.uk net where we post our talks and reports, we have a newsletter mainly written by our members, we have a creative

writing group which is about to produce its first book. We have artists and postcards and we give talks and we do whatever we can think of doing which will change the world for the better for people with a mental illness.

Its wonderful it keeps me going illuminates my life brings me into contact with a crowd of different people with a host of different messages to take forward helps us join together across the highlands, Scotland the UK, Europe and further afield and find joint hope shared experience and a common cause.

We can't do what we do what we do without our members. Without them we would be almost nothing they are all volunteers in their different needs all with different needs and things to bring and motivations to be involved and all with a mental illness.

When I first got involved in this area of work it was as a volunteer, I found through it, occupation, motivation, friendship, something to believe in, something to be proud of the realisation that for once I could be valued and appreciated and needed. You can't hope for more really in return I gave of myself and I was supported just as anyone else would be as an individual who had needs like everyone else but still had something to contribute something to give even at the harshest most desperate times when the people I helped were probably giving me far more than I was capable of giving them.

I understand that the rest of the afternoon will mainly be held outside. It sounds perfect I hope its not raining and between us we find the wonderful value of fresh air and shared experiences.

Thank you