

CAB THE GATHERING

I have been asked to start this workshop by talking about hug, why we do what we do, what the issues are that we face, what links we might have with CAB and what our members think of CAB.

At the most basic HUG is a group of 470 people with experience of mental illness in the Highlands. We act as a voice for with people with mental health problems.

Well let's start off with the easy one first, our members have been commenting on CAB frequently over the last couple of years and to be blunt – they think you're fab. Overworked, busy, often stressed but fab. You are there when they feel they have nowhere else to turn to, you turn complex insoluble issues into ones with solutions. You listen when it feels that they are in the process of being kicked away to the very edges of society. When people worry that their entire income is at risk, when people are bemused by the whole devastating awfulness of the benefits system you take the sheer helplessness out of their hands, you make it possible to deal with the situation and in many cases find a positive outcome and I know it's about more than benefits and money you deal with but this is the main thing people talk of.

And now for the difficult part, what is hug? what is mental illness? why should you be interested? how on earth does it connect with your daily work?

I'm going to start off with the obvious; you will all know people with a mental illness and some of you will have experience of it yourself.

It's horrible isn't it and I'm not going to just say that we are an oppressed marginalised group that should be listened to although we are that, but it is more complicated than that.

Let's start off with the uncomplicated or at least the uncomplicated at face value. In terms of equality and social justice we languish somewhere truly miserable. Here's a few statistics that I natter about at every opportunity – they are fluid statistics just echoes in my memory but sort of close to accurate. Here we go, 85% of people with a severe and enduring mental illness are unemployed, just think of that that huge, huge fact and whilst you think about it, think of some of your welfare rights work and what is likely to happen to such people now that there are all the looming

changes to sickness and disability benefits. Think about that as you think of yourself or your friends and think how hard it is nowadays to pass medical reviews and yet how obvious it is that people who will soon be seen as fit for work are patently completely unable to work. Ah I see myself getting indignant again, just as well as I think I am almost a professionally indignant person! More statistics: 40% of the homeless have a mental illness, 90% of prisoners have a mental health problem, 33% of people with a mental illness have experienced harassment as a result of it and a tiny statistic that I can't remember where I found it; 3% of people with a mental illness have been physically assaulted because of it, a tiny statistic but when we remember one in four of the population will experience mental illness, maybe not so tiny.

And that is why hug exists – we want to stop this – we want a fairer world – we want equality – we want opportunity but above all we want the horrible suffering to stop if ever it possibly can. A brand new hug member said yesterday that his vision of what we want is compassion from those trying to help us or live with us and that is crucial isn't it?

I wonder how you measure an outcome such as compassion?

And why do we need compassion. Compassion is such a good word because we are not smiley, happy, confident people suddenly struck down by incomprehensible discrimination; we are people who have had life experiences or illnesses or live in circumstances where life uproots itself and we tilt into the incomprehensible and the difficult and the edgy world where life is both grey and dark as the prisons some people feel we have dug for ourselves. That is where compassion gains its greatest meaning.

Let me tell you about myself.

Maybe the beginnings of the last time I became seen as ill will resonate with some of you.

I am going back two years now. I had separated from my wife a year before and the split was bitter and desperate, all connection with most of my friends had disintegrated, my son had ceased to talk to me or communicate in any way to the extent that I didn't have any way of contacting him at all, simple things had happened; all my photo's of my wife and son had been destroyed, all my personal possessions such as writing and letters and birth certificates and pensions schemes had been destroyed or were unavailable to me, even simple things such as my welly boots and my skiis or my bicycle had vanished. My MBE medal and certificate had been thrown away, life was truly horrible and where fault

lies is perhaps impossible to say. No one does such things unless they feel they have been subjected to great pain and so I do not stand here to state my cleanliness; just that I was in a place where I had run out of people to talk to and where each time I opened my e-mails I dreaded in a cold sick way the latest message that I would get and, in this place, I dissolved.

And maybe this is where I can make a connection. I was tired, I was just so unbearably tired and out of that tiredness I couldn't think straight or relax. I found it hard to cook or wash or keep things tidy. I slept on a mattress on the floor with dirty unwashed sheets, I craved alcohol to stop me thinking, to provide oblivion I craved a simple hug, a kind word that didn't judge and yet at the same time I lost the ability to reach out for those hugs and conversations. I began to feel suspicious of my friends, I was exceptionally busy at work and convinced I couldn't slow down, I rejected even the slightest comment that I was becoming argumentative or irritable. Life for me became something that lost all appeal it was grey and dark and the sleep I craved unavailable and full of dreams and images I wanted to escape from. Maybe you know these times when you are so tired that you feel your eyes are full of grit, maybe you know those times when you lose the ability to charm or to touch those you love with those light touches of joy that lift everyone's hearts. In these places depression and anxiety are commonplace and the truly horrible thing is that when we are in such places people at first reach out to us but often, they feel at a loss for what to do. They witness our disintegration and to be frank we are not pleasant to be around and there are no obvious solutions and between us we can all become profoundly helpless and hopeless.

And that is what hug is about really – we don't want that horrific despair to be there. We want to rub life clean of it so that people can be helped to learn to smile again, can one day phone their friends with confidence can dream they and others will one day go to sleep soft in the knowledge that the bed smells clean and dreams will be welcome. We are no different to any other movement; we want to stop the sadness and the injustice, brush it away and help people to learn to greet the world with a smile. Maybe the belief that we can do such a thing is incredibly naïve but the fact that our members set out to create a world like that by speaking out about their lives and what would improve them, is, to my mind, admirable.

As an aside my diagnosis is one of schizophrenia so when life became so harsh I entered a place where I believed I was evil, a place where I thought I would be doing those I loved a blessing if I burnt myself alive and turned into a spirit in the sky and for this reason I was detained and put in hospital for some months and still two years later I am detained and made to take my injection but life is in many ways better and that is a whole other aspect of mental illness.

So what are we? We are a group that says come to us, those of you who know what despair is and out of that despair let us find a voice that speaks with that purity, that purity that says that was my reality, that understanding and out of that understanding maybe we can together find different ways of being seen, different and better ways of being treated and different possibilities in our lives.

That voice which by being shared with others who have come to see the sadness of the world can create belonging and acceptance and hope and the desire for something different for all of us.

That voice that says through dialogue, through reflection, through the help of our helpers, we can learn to communicate those simple things that we know will make a difference for those like us who are part of the community of people who have experienced mental illness and even the wider community of all of us who belatedly are realising that our mental health needs as much nurture if not more than our physical health.

So that is us – we are a voice – we speak about anything – we can comment on new craigs, we talk about medication, we talk of hope and identity, we talk of poverty and employment. We can go into detail over critical incident reviews and mental health officers and then we can engage with the smoking ban and minimum pricing of alcohol.

You can find us talking to schoolchildren about how it feels like to have our children taken from us because we have a mental illness, you can find us talking to student nurses about being bi polar or mental health officers about the concept of recovery. You can see us on dvd's talking of self harm or how faith and music helps us. You can read our poetry and see our paintings in our e.books. You can hear our messages through the 100 000 postcards we have distributed. You can hear us on the radio discussing our favourite music or on the television talking about the old hospitals or in the papers trying to keep our drop in centre where we want it.

And the connection with you, well I hope it is obvious, just as we refer people to you all the time so might you want to encourage some people who may want to change the world into something better to come to us.

You are an organisation built on ideas of social justice and we like to think we are too. By sometimes working together we make the voice of our community and your advocacy of individual issues stronger. We can find issues of common concern and common cause and between us if we learn how to, we can have a better chance of reducing the inequality so many of us face.

By engaging with the subject of mental illness and by being open about it we can reduce stigma and promote understanding together.

By remembering what that HUG member who joined us yesterday said we can remember the need for compassion – learning compassion if we are capable of it, even for those of us who step beyond the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and acceptable emotion and through that compassion we can learn to respect our difference and grow from the desperately negative into a more just and bright world for all of us.

Thanks so much

Joanna is now going to talk about hug from the multiple perspectives of being a member and also a cab welfare rights worker.