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**Nature and wellbeing talk**  
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Hello thank you for letting me speak with you today. As has been said my name is Graham Morgan. I manage HUG (action for mental health) which is a voice for people with a mental illness in the Highlands.

We speak about everything from hospital to medication to employment to spirituality in connection with our mental health and today it is our task to talk about the natural world.

For the last two years we have been working with the Scottish Waterways trust around the idea that getting into the outdoors can be a good for your mental health, we have been on creative trips up the length of the Caledonian canal, we have walked round nature reserves and all over the place, just ambling looking at the water and the hills, having the privilege of having bird calls pointed out to us and the odd bit of vegetation and we have loved it.

We knew we would in the first place, but getting out, walking in company, even if sometimes lost in our own thoughts has been great.

It is not something for all of our members and some people with major mobility problems felt a wee bit excluded but for many of us it brought some light and freedom into our lives and a break, a break from what can, sometimes be, difficult lives.

We loved the last couple of months of walks again with the Waterways Trust and Dunain Community Woodland.

It does, I have to confess, sometimes feel a wee bit ridiculous walking in a long, very slow, very mindful line along some lane in the middle of the countryside, but that connection with the world, feeling the wind on our face, the rain on our cheeks and at other times the sun on our hands and of course the company and the laughter and the welcome cups of tea at the end was a great experience.

It took us out of the office and work, out of hospital and the bare walls of home, out of the kerfuffle of the city, into a place in our heart where you could see more clearly or at least in a different way. It broke down barriers and created something positive and rewarding. It felt like some great shift in how we feel about what we think is important to us.

I really hope these walks continue, it was great to see patients from the hospital finding a wee bit of freedom in their minds and it was great to see the possibility of something else, other than sadness in peoples' lives and just that absence of ordinary life grinding people down, whether they were workers or people with mental health problems or people with both experiences.

And it was great to see people getting the support and the encouragement to get out of the house and the city into the hills and along the canal.

Sometimes nowadays, in the NHS, people can labour the need for us to be responsible and independent. And in some ways that is fine, but in other ways it is not. In our world we can lose confidence and motivation, we can lose a lot more than that, we can lose any appreciation of what is around us and can grow used to watching day time tv or curling up in bed or sitting in the pub. We can find it impossible to think of getting out for a walk or appreciating the reflections of the sky on the water, and so, strange as it may seem, people can need that encouragement or that lift in the car or that voice on the ward that gives us enough energy to get out and find something different to the routine of the everyday in our lives.

I am not going to say much more about the last couple of years with the waterways trust, as so much is already being talked about today, instead I am going to take that rare privilege some of us get when we are allowed to speak and talk about my personal connection with the natural world as a way of hopefully giving a personal perspective to what all this is about.

To be honest, I don't think that my diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia or of depression or anxiety has much bearing on my appreciation of being outdoors but maybe some of the things I will talk of have some connection.

I was mainly brought up in rural areas, mainly in England.

It seems strange to talk about a life, that now I look at it, seems to be one of privilege. Much of my childhood was spent walking with my family; in the woods, over hills, along beaches.

I spent an inordinate amount of time stuck in trees and building dens and not catching fishes in ponds. I spent a lot of time at sea on yachts when the sea was a glittering maze of reflection and at other times when the

clouds were dark and the wind vicious. I went rock climbing and wandering among the hills and later I travelled.

Some of the highlights in my memory are of being on the top of Mount Kinabalu in Sabah or chugging down rivers on the decks of freighters in Sarawak, of swimming in the very middle of the Atlantic thousands of miles from any land and throwing the flying fish that landed on our deck back into the sea. I will never forget being in the desert in the south of Morocco with our battered Citroen Diane or slipping through forests on our cross country skis with the snowflakes swirling around us and wee clumps of snow falling from the branches besides us.

For me being in the natural world has been integral to my life and yet in later years it has become a smaller and smaller part of my life.

Mainly because I am so much more unfit and claim to be too busy to get outside and it is this time that I would like to talk of.

I have put on so much weight since I went onto the atypical antipsychotics and grown so used to sitting at home with a whisky in my hand that when I set off on a walk I often find myself all hot and sweaty and uncomfortable soon after setting off.

It sort of works against what I know will be a good experience and so I get out less and less and therefore get more and more unfit. And so on. I think it all came to a head after my last admission to hospital over four years ago.

Despite having the gym and the offer of getting outdoors, it becomes very easy to lie on your bed when in hospital, to sit in chairs doing nothing other than eating toast and coffee, to do just nothing much at all.

I remember my shock when I was let into town and when I climbed up the steps onto the longman by the bus station I found my legs trembling and my breath tight in my chest, it should have been a wake up call, but somehow I got used to it and remained unfit.

At that time in my life I was very, very, sad indeed, my marriage was over, my son hated me and had stopped all contact with me and I seemed to have lost most of my friends. I was in a new town with new people learning basic things about managing a house that I had never had to deal with before. I was very confused and very lost and despite having lovely new people around me, very lonely.

I remember I took to taking long, long, walks along the beach.

I especially liked to walk on the beach in winter, when the sand was rattling along the beach in beautiful waves and the clouds were grey and the sea merged with the sky and I would lose myself in walking.

I remember one walk in particular.

It was a Sunday and I was lost in my thoughts.

At that time I slept very badly and couldn't stop thinking and this day it seemed like my thoughts, my life was a burden; that I was consumed by the weary weight of my existence. On this day I set off, wrapped up in my coat, walking down by the river to the beach and then along the beach to Culbin forest and the tide was out and it was a quiet cold day and, as I walked along, it was like my thoughts were raging inside me, they were battering me and I had no peace.

And yet as I walked I became aware of the movement of my legs and the feel of my feet on the sand and the wind in my hair, I began to look around me and to listen to the seabirds and the sound of the waves and slowly, as I walked, my muscles became warmer and my movement smoother and by and by this cacophony of thinking died down and I began to relax until, by the time I returned home, my body was relaxed and tired in a good way and my emotions settled and calm.

It was such a lovely afternoon and gave me so much peace.

In those days I would find a similar peace sitting on the bench on a curve of the river Nairn where the little beach is, I would watch the brown water, the ripple of fish, the occasional crash of noisy visiting dogs into the water and I would like to say I was being all mindful but often I was texting or listening to music on my ipod but I was very happy and free there.

Equally on a summer evening I would walk down to the end of the harbour and watch the sun set while reading my book, I would take photographs and occasionally take sips from my whisky flask and feel soft.

It is good to feel soft and, out of that softness, to listen to the oystercatchers and seagulls and sometimes, if you were lucky, see dolphins leaping off shore.

For me getting out is a way of feeling release and peace, it is a way of finding connection and, in some senses, a walk on the beach, lying in the heather, sitting by a loch represents freedom, although what sort of freedom I cannot define.

But something liberating, something that leaves me feeling so much better than if I had spent the day watching television.

And now I turn to the natural world and hospital. I do not know if ever I can express this bit in ways that you all will understand. I have said it in some forums before.

When I am in hospital, I am usually, initially, under constant observations so I have a nurse close to me all the time, I am not allowed off the ward and the only access to the outside world is via the enclosed courtyard in the middle of the ward.

At such times, I feel trapped and claustrophobic and frustrated. I spend a lot of time, especially at night, staring out the windows of the quiet areas at the city below or walking around and around the courtyard.

I remember the path I made in the snow one admission; when the snow all went, we were left with my icy circles of footsteps that took ages and ages to melt.

At those time you crave so much, you want to be outside, to stretch out your arms and feel the world in them and you a part of it; free to walk, to breath, to sing, to engage with the bird song and the wetness of mist on your face, you crave that so much.

The last time, after I don't know how many weeks on constant obs, I was summoned to a tribunal across town. At that tribunal a decision would be made about my freedom and my chance of life for the next 6 months so it was really, really, important to me and yet, as I walked along the corridors with my escort; I could only feel joy, walking down the corridors and no one was chasing me, pausing in the hospital car park, to feel the air, to walk on the grass and earth.

Oh! my heart thrilled!

Just that escape from the cloying staleness of the ward.

Considering how bad my life was at that time, that feeling of exhilaration, of being out in the wide,wide, world even if only for a little while was up there with one of the best experiences I have ever had.

And that is where the connection to mental illness and hospital comes in. when we are in hospital we can become completely divorced from ourselves and the wider world and the restrictions on our freedom can only serve to reinforce this.

For me, having escorted walks around the hospital as I got into a better place was great. Those walks were in what, at present is a pretty bland site, if people like me could get out when we are bored out of our minds, whilst at the same time being both disconnected and desperate, that would be great.

For many ,many people the chance to spend a wee bit of time outside, having a picnic on the grass, splashing in the sea, standing on top of a mountain, sitting on a bench by the water or a log in the woods is something priceless that we can easily forget we have the ability to access with what seems like ease.

We don't need to be fit and active and mobile, sometimes when I have my gouty foot I am content to sit on a bench and listen to the sound of the waves and feel that wee bit more content and at peace.

For some of us it is hard to do these things, whether we are acutely ill, or just in a certain place in our lives, to get outside can be impossible, it can be impossible because we cannot physically do it, because of limits on our freedom or on access, or we cannot do it because life has become grey and we lack the motivation or because we lack confidence and new things are hard to do or because we are lonely and walking alone with no one to talk to makes us even more lonely or because we cannot afford to get out away from the city or town we live in .

There are a million reasons why we don't do the things that so many of us enjoy if we just take the chance to. And to my mind that is why projects that connect with people of all backgrounds and types but especially with those who find it hard to get into the natural world are worth their weight in gold, for some of us, but by no means all, because we are all different, they are the first steps on that long journey to a better life.