



# **A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE**

**The views of 98 people on what would create a  
mentally healthy workplace.**

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**Highland Users Group can be contacted through Graham Morgan, Highland  
Community Care Forum, Highland House,  
20 Longman Road, Inverness IV1 1RY**

**Telephone: (01463) 723557 / Email: [hug@hccf.org.uk](mailto:hug@hccf.org.uk)  
[www.hug.uk.net](http://www.hug.uk.net)**

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## WHAT IS HUG?

HUG stands for the Highland Users Group, which is a network of people who use, or have used, mental health services in the Highlands.

At present, HUG has 343 members and 13 branches across the Highlands. HUG has been in existence now for 11 years.

HUG wants people with mental health problems to live without discrimination and to be equal partners in their communities. They should be respected for their diversity and who they are.

We should:

- Be proud of who we are
- Be valued, and not be feared
- Live lives free from harassment
- Live the lives we choose
- Be accepted by friends and loved ones
- Not be ashamed of what we have experienced

We hope to achieve this by:

- Speaking out about the services we need and the lives we want to lead.
- Challenging stigma and raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues.

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

HUG's aims are as follows:

- To be the voice of people in Highland who have experienced mental health problems.
- To promote the interests of people in Highland who use or have used mental health services.
- To eliminate stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems.
- To promote equality of opportunity for people with mental health problems irrespective of creed, sexuality, gender, race or disability.
- To improve understanding about the lives of people with a mental health problem.
- To participate in the planning development and management of services for users at a local, Highland and national level.
- To identify gaps in services and to campaign to have them filled.
- To find ways of improving the lives, services and treatments of people with mental health problems.
- To share information and news on mental health issues among mental health service user groups and interested parties.
- To increase knowledge about resources, treatments and rights for users.
- To promote cooperation between agencies concerned with mental health.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since HUG was founded our members have talked about employment. In the last ten years we have produced three reports on employment and two on living on benefits:

- Employment May 1997
- Benefits 'Living or Existing?' December 2000
- A Positive Future, Employment & Mental Health May 2005
- Employment and Mental Health August 2005
- Incapacity Benefit - What we think of the proposed changes November 2006

For some of us getting back into work is our ultimate ambition and would be a very positive marker about how far we have come on our recovery journey. Other members have made a clear choice not to work. We may not work but we would like to contribute, and see different ways of doing so that do not involve mainstream employment. For some of us the prospect of being made to work would inevitably result in a return to illness and sadness. Most of our members are not in work but some of us are and it has been helpful to hear what helps keep us in work.

Current Government thinking seems to state that if we have a mental illness then we are likely to be healthier and have better prospects if we stay in employment. We would have doubts about this and would think that this is in some ways an obvious statement. If we are well enough to work then our prospects are bound to be better than if we are too ill or vulnerable to contemplate mainstream work. Many of us also resent the idea that value and status is to a large extent measured by employment. There are numerous ways of living in society that allow us to contribute without earning a wage and for those of us whose contribution will always be limited the implication that we are lesser for this is offensive.

The forthcoming changes to Incapacity Benefit and the increasing number of our members being assessed as fit for work is causing us great concern and creating considerable distress to some of us who have already been taken off Incapacity Benefit but who still feel unable to work.

In our original response to the changes to Incapacity Benefit we stated that there was little point in trying to get us back into work unless we had a workplace that was accessible to us.

This report is an attempt to work out for ourselves what we think a mentally healthy workplace would be. It is highly influenced by our own experiences of mental ill health but equally is an attempt to see what a healthy working environment would be for anyone, whatever their background.

We held the meetings about this in early 2008 across our network of branches in the NHS Highland area. ACUMEN facilitated a meeting on our behalf in Argyll, for which we thank them.

As usual we held meetings around a few key discussion points and took notes which helped create the present report which was agreed in its draft form by our Round Table and other stakeholders.

We involved 98 people in these discussions.

## WHAT MAKES THE WORKPLACE A GOOD PLACE TO BE IN?

We had lots of views on this, which included:

A basic necessity for all of us is that we get good and fair wages without having to work excessive hours or do too much overtime.

However, equally important to many of us, is that the work we do feels worthwhile and for many of us it is important that what we do helps other people. Some of us want the work we do to have a creative element and other people want to work outdoors. Essentially we want to enjoy what we do and variety can make a big difference.

The environment we work in is very important; ideally it will be bright and airy. It will also be attractive, comfortable, tidy and uncluttered. This makes it pleasant for all of us and we think would make us more productive.

Essential to most of us is the atmosphere - we want to get on with our colleagues and to feel that we are part of a good team. We want our work to be fluid enough so that we can have some flexibility about the times and hours we work. A good atmosphere means that we don't have to be serious all the time, that we can have time to chill out and that when we are at work it feels fun and enjoyable, we can talk to each other and be friendly.

This includes getting to know our colleagues personally and maybe having opportunities to socialise and do things together if we want to. We want a positive environment where everyone is valued and respected, whatever their job.

In this sort of atmosphere we would hope that our confidence grows and that we feel worthwhile and that we can support each other when we need to. At work we do need boundaries but this doesn't necessarily have to be too restrictive; the expression of emotion is human and can be very healthy. This also means that it is important that we are understood and accepted by our work colleagues. It means being accepted for who we are whatever our weaknesses. This atmosphere means fostering openness, trust, security and creating a supportive and safe workplace. For many of us this is the principal vision we have about what a good workplace looks like.

To create this atmosphere we need to be sure that the workplace will address the stress that inevitably arises at work, that it looks out for the welfare of *all* staff and that it has a flexible approach to us as individuals. If we have been ill and, especially if we have been off work for a long time, we need to be sure that the road back into work is as easy as possible and is responsive to our needs.

If we have a problem then we want to be sure that we can get help to talk about it and address it, and if we are having a particularly bad day we need to know that we can go home without feeling guilty. If we need to then we should have places to go to to relax, especially if something has caused us to become distressed. Providing proper break times is important and it would be good if when we went to the staff rooms there were things to do in them.

Yet, however good the atmosphere and comradeship at work we need to be sure that there are systems and structures that support us. These include clear roles, job descriptions and proper supervision and reviews. We need to know that there will be good disciplinary procedures and that there are clear and helpful routines that we are familiar with. It also means that we need to have common goals in our work. We would expect that our employers would demonstrate loyalty to us and if there is a problem support us until the full circumstances of what has happened are understood. We would like to be encouraged to use our initiative.

We also need training opportunities to learn and increase our skills. Some of us have a great need to gain these skills before we start work so that we can find occupation in an area we are interested in.

Part of a good workplace is knowing that there are enough staff to do the job. If we can be sure that there is a realistic and open culture we will be much happier. Part of getting involved in work again may be helped by having the opportunity to try out the job initially to see if we can cope with it and manage its demands.

For many of us, we want to have a stake in what we do and a sense of ownership of the place in which we work. We feel that it is very important that our employers don't try to take advantage of us or get as much out of us as they can. This also means that we wish to have good 'rights' at work. We wish to be valued so that we feel we can speak out about anything that causes us concern or distresses us without worrying about the consequences.

### **WHAT MAKES THE WORKPLACE AN UNHEALTHY PLACE TO BE IN?**

In many ways the opposite of what we have already said could define a negative/unhealthy workplace. However there are a number of points our members made, often based on their own experiences:

Having poor management, inadequate guidelines, policies and procedures and few rules don't help.

Not addressing the pressures and stresses of work makes it unpleasant and unsustainable, as do long hours and bullying and harassment. If we feel that we are not understood or that people are unpleasant to us and have a bad attitude towards us then it is very difficult to enjoy work. Poor staff morale, office politics and bullying/being unsupportive towards our colleagues all add up to an unpleasant atmosphere.

If we don't have the right skills or tools to do the job and are faced with unfair or impossible expectations then we won't succeed in employment or find satisfaction and enjoyment (equally this applies if we expect too much of ourselves) and the atmosphere that so many of us value will be poor. If our work is repetitive and uninteresting, and if we have little control and no pride in what we are doing and what we do achieve other people take the credit for, then we become disillusioned.

Having few holidays, poor shifts, bad hours, poor wages and too few staff are unpleasant - and become worse if we feel that we are overloaded and have too many and unrealistic deadlines reinforced by a "them and us" system.

If we don't feel valued or cared for and management tends to blame the workers this also makes work unpleasant.

If we have a lack of control over what we do and have to ask for permission for basic things such as going to the toilets or getting a glass of water then this does not inspire us.

If there are poor and cluttered facilities then this is unpleasant.

If there is a lack of vision and communication (especially by managers) and if our management seems remote then again it is hard to be stimulated by our work.

We can get angry if we are forced to achieve targets we struggle to meet, put on performance related pay, made to work harder and harder but given the feeling this is

never being enough and feeling that all that is happening is an effort to get more and more out of us. It is not pleasant to feel that our bosses are just using us to make a profit for themselves. Or that they take our good work for granted and yet come down heavily when we fall below expectations.

It is also unpleasant if we feel that we cannot speak out about our work, either politically or through a trade union.

## **WHAT WOULD MAKE THE WORKPLACE HEALTHY FOR ALL OF US?**

The key ingredients that we felt would make our workplace healthy were:

- The attitudes we encounter: openness, trust, tolerance and respect from the top down and the bottom up make a huge difference.
- Seeing people as key assets gives a positive signal. Making the workplace into a friendly place with an atmosphere of healthy competition is appreciated as is respect for each person's ability.
- A relaxed atmosphere is important and feeling part of a team makes for a healthy environment.
- If we enjoy our work and it is varied and interesting then this helps as does knowing each other as 'people'. Where there is an atmosphere of trust and equality, that is not diminished by qualifications or status, then that is a sign of a healthy business.
- When we are all encouraged and helped to get on with each other in an atmosphere of courtesy, compassion and common sense then again the atmosphere improves.
- Having a boss who makes the tea sends a good sign and helps show we are appreciated by our bosses and care for each other.
- If we have a feeling of job satisfaction and receive encouragement and praise this is also helpful. It would be good to promote values that we can all agree with, and give us help to realise what our limitations are.
- It could also be good to stop the pressure on people to be successful all the time.

A voice: if we find we can express dissatisfaction and raise difficult issues and this is welcomed without repercussions, we see signs of health as we do if we have a voice in the workplace including through unions if we wish. If "whistle blowing" is not seen as a threat then that is appreciated.

Training: we wish to have good training and induction possibilities and chances to get qualifications with room for personal and professional growth.

Workforce problems: it is important that there is a robust personnel policy and bullying and harassment are dealt with effectively, and that managers are aware of conflict. It would also be good if those who feel that they are the 'top dog' spend time finding out what it is like to be the underdog. Respect for diversity is of course very important.

Return to work: we would like to be sure that there is a good rehabilitation scheme if we have been off work for some time.

Welfare: we need to be sure that the workforce will be looked after. Promoting a good work/life balance and even promoting the good elements that may be seen in an extended family may improve the workplace. We need to know there are people we can turn to for help and to have access to mentoring and shadowing schemes for those who would benefit from it.

We could celebrate the difficult issues our colleagues face and try to overcome, maybe by getting them a present. It may be good to help us with problems at home and work.

We would like help for staff to enjoy work and even enjoy life outside work, which includes recognising the effects of pressures outside of work on work. Adopting family friendly policies makes a big difference and maybe adopting a 'Duvet Days' policy - if for some reason we cannot face work then let us take a "Duvet Day" to recuperate instead of taking false sick leave. Provide an agreed number of 'Duvet Days' to each employee. Establishing links with the local community can have positive repercussions.

Ownership: many of us felt that companies that were owned by the workers or shared the profits were a great idea. Profit should not be the only focus of a business but it would be good if there are incentives for the workforce. Weekly meetings for all staff to discuss issues are important as is making sure that the workforce is involved in all major decisions. If profits are put back into the workplace that sends a powerful message.

Targets: make sure the goals we are set are achievable. Help us share the work between ourselves. Help us perform when under pressure but make expectations reasonable.

Staff: we need to be sure that there are enough staff to do the job.

Organisation: if there is good communication, working hours are flexible (if this is possible depending on the work and organisation) and there is good and regular supervision then we will benefit. If there is consistency and a clear, but flexible, job description this also helps. Some of us would like as few rules as possible. It could be good if people experience each others jobs to see what they are like.

Wages: if we get good pay we will be happier.

Environment: giving us access to cold water, providing plants in the building and a pleasant canteen/cafeteria. Having access to music, and a room to rest in if ill or stressed with a settee, nice lights and music. Having access to fresh air and breaks for people who don't smoke. Providing new buildings and giving access to activities such as exercise or a gym could all be good ways of making the workplace healthier.

Policy: get organisations to sign up to the "healthy working lives programme."

## **WHAT WOULD MAKE THE WORKPLACE HEALTHY FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?**

Quite a few of us objected to this question. We felt that a genuinely mentally healthy workplace should be healthy for everyone and looking at our individual requirements may create and enhance difference and stigma. Therefore we should have no special concessions because of our illness. A few of us also said that although it would be good to have a mentally healthy workplace, we need to be realistic and that the commercial demands of a business may not be able to adapt to the needs of us as individuals.

Despite this many of us did have ideas about what would improve the workplace for people with a mental illness:



- We should have the option of reducing our hours when we need to (if this fits in with the demands of our post).
- We could change the sort of work we do or our workload.
- Liaison with occupational health may identify solutions.
- We should have access to mental health services and other medical services in working hours.
- We shouldn't lose our psychiatric support networks just because we start work.
- Access to line management who we can speak to about anything that concerns us.
- Keep our illness confidential or alternatively feeling able to be open about our illness if we wish.
- Access to a quiet room.
- A cheery workplace and an attractive physical environment.
- Provide training to help us learn to do the job.
- Be positive about employing us in the first place.
- Recognise that we can make a valuable contribution.
- Provide mental health awareness training and information provision across the organisation.
- See us as people not just people with an illness.
- Respect the fact that we will perform well on some days and not on others.
- Adapt to the way different illnesses make us behave.
- Keep the job open when we are off sick, even if this is for a long time.
- Access to support from a disability team.
- Reduce the pressures that have a negative effect on us.
- Help us believe in ourselves.
- Provide alternatives to mainstream employment.
- Provide flexible working hours if possible.
- Give us access to support when well and unwell.
- Promote the Disability Discrimination Act.
- Reduce stigma and promote mental health first aid at work.
- Provide some opportunities that are just for people with a mental illness.
- Provide peer support.
- Offer help routinely and recognise signs that we are getting ill.
- Provide ways of filling the gap between being off sick but able to work a bit and at work but not being able to work to our full ability.
- Help people understand how our illness may affect us and that a bad irritable day may not be an expression of anger at anyone but an expression of ill health.
- Make provision for people who need to arrive for work late due to the effects of medication.
- Provide a staggered return to work.

## **HOW COULD EMPLOYERS DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMITMENT TO A HEALTHY WORKPLACE?**

Some of us felt that a healthy workplace was an unrealistic option because of the commercial pressures that employers are under.

However we did have some suggestions to make. The most frequent idea was that words are only useful if followed by action. A healthy workplace will be a happy and vibrant place and word will spread quickly about its benefits and quality. In other words, just do it! Everything will follow from that.

However we did think that developing stress at work policies and mental health in the workplace policies would also help, as would adopting the Healthy Working Lives Programme. Good quality standards and procedures can make a big difference if they are implemented properly.

Demonstrating to us that the organisation really does have our welfare and wellbeing at heart goes a long way. Small things like being let home early occasionally can have a big impact.

Listening to the staff and acting on what they say is a big step.

A healthy workplace is a place free from exploitation; if that can be demonstrated it will have a big effect.

We had the feeling that for too long people have had to adapt and fit into the requirements of a job. If we could promote a culture that looked at what we have to offer and what our abilities are then jobs may be more usefully designed around us which would mean that we could work more effectively and happily.

We thought senior managers could be instrumental in setting a good example. If management works all hours and are stressed and pressured then what signal does this pass on to the rest of workforce?

### **THE 'See me' STIGMA PLEDGE**

For some years 'See me' (Scotland's national anti stigma campaign) has been promoting the 'stigma pledge' in which organisations publicly commit to stopping stigma in their organisation.

We discussed this and found our members divided on it. We all agreed that we need to increase awareness around mental illness and wellbeing within the employment field and largely agreed that user led mental health awareness sessions were one good route to doing this.

However as far as the stigma pledge goes we were divided. Many of us were in favour of it and felt that any gesture such as this will increase awareness and contribute to the eventual reduction in the stigma of mental ill health. However a large number of us felt that it was a cosmetic gesture that was good for the image of a company but which we were doubtful would have a lasting or immediate effect.

### **WHAT CONSTITUTES REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT?**

The Disability Discrimination Act makes it a requirement for employers to make reasonable adjustment for people with a disability caused by mental illness to allow them to do their job.

We discussed this issue amongst our members and our first problem lay in deciding what constitutes 'reasonable' which we couldn't answer.

Whilst we did come up with some ideas of possibilities for reasonable adjustment (which could also come from the previous list of how employment could be improved for people with a mental illness) we generally felt that reasonable adjustment was a very individual process. We are all individuals and although we may have mental illness in common our needs are varied as we are different people.

We felt the best way of deciding on reasonable adjustment rested in an individual conversation between employee and employer about what adaptations could be put in place to allow us to have the best chance we could have in doing our jobs to the best of our abilities.

We also felt that there is a balance between adjustment and the need for us to be able to do the job in the first place. Some of us sadly are not up to the jobs we would like to do. We felt it would be easier for larger employers to accommodate our needs.

However things that may help us stay in work do include:

- A staggered return to work.
- Flexibility over medical appointments.
- Adaptations to where we work – perhaps moving a desk to the window.
- The use of advance directives.
- Letting our employers know what the early warning signs are and what they should do if they see them.
- Giving employers permission to tell us if they think we are getting ill.
- Giving line managers and others mental health first aid training and mental health awareness training.
- Help with any bullying or discrimination as a result of our mental ill health.
- Discussions about how to deal with anger.
- Give us breaks when we need them and opportunities to go somewhere to relax and calm down.
- Flexibility over our working hours if this is possible.
- Being able to take days off and then make them up at our own pace.
- Somewhere safe and quiet to go when we need to.
- Access to therapies such as aromatherapy or relaxation (these might benefit the whole workforce).
- Flexibility for everyone – room to pray, to go for a walk, to do some yoga. These could benefit everyone and even if abused may have a good effect.
- Part-time work may be an option for some of us.

We also felt that any medical questions should be asked after we have been offered a job rather than before the interview.

We felt that some of us would like to work but that sheltered and supported employment or opportunities to work in social firms and clubhouses would be better for those of us that would struggle with mainstream work. A few of us felt that self employment may help with unpredictable health while for some of us voluntary work (maybe with a token payment) would be something we would prefer. We strongly felt that being unfit for work doesn't mean that we are unproductive and that work is not the only way of measuring our success.

Some of us doubted that discrimination was decreasing and felt that before we do anything we need to make sure that it is something that we won't be exposed to.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report uses the experiences of people who have experienced mental illness to describe what they think a good workplace would look like. We also look at what we think would make for a healthy work environment and what can be done in particular to ensure that our transition back into work is as positive and pain free as possible if paid work is the route that we want to take.

Whilst many of us haven't worked for a considerable time many of us have worked in the past and all of us have some idea of what we personally would like to see in a healthy workplace.

We doubt that our views are very different to the views of other communities and see the atmosphere in which we work, the systems that support us and the attitude of our

employers as crucial to our health and wellbeing. Where we may have slightly different views is our strong belief that the whole workforce needs to gain a greater understanding of mental health and the effects of mental illness in particular in the context of the workplace.

We did feel that jobs are usually designed around the needs of the organisation concerned. It is rare for anyone to have every skill that is being asked for but not at all unusual to find someone whose skills could be broadly used to great advantage. We may be better advised to design our jobs around the individual rather than our employees around our jobs.

We recognise that we would be better able to work if our condition is recognised and adjusted to. This is best done by treating us as individuals and seeing what our particular needs are rather than making assumptions about what people with a mental illness generally need.

We hope that this report can act as a guide and inspiration to employers and businesses of whatever sort. In many ways the things that we think would make the workplace healthy are simple and relatively cost free options and even where cost is involved a visible investment in the workforce would, we think, inevitably improve not only productivity but the public profile of the business/organisation.

We have included a couple of personal accounts about employment when we have a mental illness which we think may make interesting reading.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Presentation to workers at the Ministry of Defence (MOD), Caithness**

#### **TESTIMONY 1 from HUG Worker**

Hello

For my part of these presentations I am going to talk about what makes for a mentally healthy workplace.

I am not an expert in this, I have not been on any courses and read no books and as many of you are managers I expect you may have more knowledge about systems and procedures that make for vibrancy than I do.

However what I do have is the knowledge that I work in what, is for me, a delightful setting and also the experience of having what is meant to be a serious mental illness and yet still being able to maintain a full time job.

This may be my first message for you when we look at mental health in the workplace we need to look at the mental health of everyone not just those of us that have a mental illness and these means leaving preconceptions at the door. I have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and yet I keep very well for most of the time. I am rarely off work and need few overt adaptations to allow me to do my job. If we are ill we may need people to look out for us but we may not and if we are not ill but are going through a miserable patch we may need help at work and then again that help may not be welcome. To me a mentally healthy work environment boils down to respect for the individual and their particular situation. Perhaps not an easy task in big organisations.

My second message is to think about what keeps you mentally healthy at work or maybe doesn't – what works for you may be what works for other people and what makes you fed up at work may make other people unhappy.

I'll describe my work and my workplace and then reflect on what it is that keeps me so happy to do the work that I do. Sometimes I think that without the work that I do I would spend much more time being ill. For me work is my own unique therapy; it keeps me motivated, occupied, engaged, interested it provides social networks, challenges and vibrancy. It enhances and helps make me flourish.

I work for Highland Community Care Forum (HCCF) which is a charity with about 20 staff and whose aim is to be the voice of users and carers of people using community care services. The bit that I do is to work with HUG, which is an organisation that fits under the umbrella of HCCF and which speaks out on behalf of people with a mental health problem and seeks to eliminate the stigma of mental illness. My role is to manage Emma and Karen (and now recently Heidi) who are our anti stigma workers and to help find out the views of our members and with them lobby for lasting change. I also manage Christine who does the same sort of work but with people with learning disabilities. So I am a cross between a manager and a grassroots worker.

The first thing that keeps me mentally healthy in my work is the fact that I believe in what I do. I don't know whether that applies to everyone but for me I need to believe that there is a point to my work. I am one of those people for whom a cause and a purpose can be all consuming. For me this came about as a result of being a patient in a psychiatric hospital in the 80's. For me, seeing the sheer injustice of what people had to go through when at their most desperate was a huge shock, watching grown adults scrabbling in ash trays for cigarette ends, seeing the decay of the hospital and the terror of people when nurses piled onto them to restrain them in crisis, seeing homeless shelters where the bare floorboards were the bed and dustbin bags people's suitcases and seeing myself becoming identified with this community was a complete wake up. It made me see the world differently and made me see that here was something that I could get involved in and change and maybe make some difference in. At that point I had little self belief and sense of value but finding something like this gave me a grounding and an inspiration which 8 years later led to the sort of work that I now do. I am now 20 years on from that first revelation and in my heart I still have that burning desire to make a difference, to achieve and change and succeed. That is the core of my work when I walk into work or meet members of HUG my heart is usually filled with lightness. Now not every job has that same sense of passion but surely a healthy workplace is built on the fact that the jobs the people are doing are the jobs that they want to do.

The next ingredient that makes my life so good is my colleagues and the members of HUG . I am nearly always thrilled to be around the people I work with and for. We are a team of incredible closeness and warmth, we work in a challenging environment and as such need the support we can offer each other when faced with difficult or traumatic situations. I don't really know how I can convey what it is that makes working with the people I do so good. There is humour and silliness and a combination of talents and ways of looking at the world that enhances our own individual abilities, there's Emma's flights of fancy that if we lived them would commit us all to working 24 hours a day for the next 10 years, there's her passion and enthusiasm, there's Karen's fantastic commitment and warmth and ability to deal with the horrors of life calmly, there's her technical and organisational and visionary qualities and both can be bribed with bars of chocolate when things go wrong. And of course there is our membership to whom we are accountable, they are a wonderful collection of people with histories and experiences and views and talents that need to be respected and treasured and valued. I have the privilege of touring the Highlands every two months and am constantly delighted and amazed at how

welcome I am made when we meet up and settle down to plan once again how we will change the world.

People make the difference don't they? Few of us live in total isolation to others and all of us are affected by the way we all act. A workplaces atmosphere and health can be gauged by how we all get on with each other. Not necessarily by measuring our emotional health but by seeing how we look out for each other. If someone is having a bad day what do we do, if someone is having a hard time at home what allowances do we make. If we have made a mistake do we apologise to the colleague or client we have offended. For me it is the values that we bring into work that are a measure of a healthy environment. Such things as respect, tolerance, support, empathy, flexibility, shared goals and visions; going that extra mile to celebrate a success or to help with an area of work we have difficulty with. For me one of the marks of health is to see what we do if someone is off sick, whether that be physical or mental – what *do* we do? In some workplaces there may be a collective sigh of frustration as people realise that their workloads may increase, in others people rally round and take up the slack and send cards home and visit people in hospital and see what can be done to make sure that their colleague still feels supported and valued and important and that when they come back to work it is not to the glances of reproach but to a celebration and discussion as to what if anything can be done to make things better what sounds best to you?.

For me there are a number of crucial things that make my workplace mentally healthy.

One of these is control and autonomy. I know what I want to do and how to do it and I am given the freedom to carve my own path. Yes there are bits I have to do in my work which I don't like doing and which frustrate me but the central goal which is about helping create a strong and vibrant voice is left to me, it doesn't mean that I never discuss or consult on what we do, in fact sometimes I think we might do that too much but it does mean that people trust the quality of my work so much that they let me get on with it and just do it. I am given a degree of leadership and responsibility that I relish and which gives me freedom and enhances both my confidence and self worth.

The next bit is safety. Just being amongst other like minded people keeps me reassured and safe. Knowing that there are people who can provide support or advice if I get stuck or into areas that I feel out of my depth in is great. My boss's door is always open or at least ajar and if I need to discuss an area that is risky or may have bad repercussions if it goes wrong is really good. So although I have room to be my own person I also have the sure knowledge that I can turn to other people when I worry about what I do. It is not always my boss that I would go to, it can be Emma or Karen or a HUG member.

In all areas of work we can build up warehouses of resentment, something hasn't gone right, a piece of work hasn't been delivered on time, you think a fellow worker is cross with you, your boss is making unreasonable demands, the whole ethos of your parent organisation is wrong. I can spend the early hours of the night winding myself up to pitches of anxiety and rage that completely dwarf the reality (if there was any) of the original problem. And, as we all know that is a fine ingredient for disharmony. When we give vent to these feelings we have the potential to implode amongst ourselves. For me one of my vents to frustration is the hastily written email that at the time seems like a polite way of disagreeing with something and which in retrospect seems like a venomous hate mail. My boss has grown used to these and so when she gets such a thing lets it ride in a way I sometimes don't deserve. With anxiety comes lack of confidence and Karen and Emma as well as our HUG members are well used to my not so obvious expeditions to gain compliments about what I do which serve to reassure and make me believe that what I do do is good and helpful.

And that is crucial isn't it. Part of the reason I cracked up in my late twenties was because I had no idea whether I was doing a good job or not. People seemed to assume

that I would know but I had no idea. Nowadays I get lots of feedback and praise and that makes me feel great. It reinforces all the good things and renews my enthusiasm.

What else – flexibility. I am good at some things and bad at others. I can give a personal speech in front of 200 people with only a few ripples of anxiety and yet set me in front of a spread sheet and my eyes glaze over and all my thoughts start wandering in their own directions. However Mary, Emma, Karen and Sheena gloss over it and set all the inadequacies right. Put me in charge of an action plan or business plan and I become twitchy and yet Karen and Emma will rescue me without the slightest reproach. We do need to do the jobs we are paid to do but equally it is good to build on the skills that other people have and to adapt to those things we're not good at.

Decision making and leadership can be vital. I remember when I was a yacht skipper in the far east and we were sailing in fifty knot winds between oil rigs and coral reefs and the Sabah mainland with no engine and the owner of the yacht panicked and said that we were in imminent danger and needed to send out a mayday. In those circumstances I needed to take control and tell him quite forcibly that we wouldn't summon help and, sometimes at work here, there is a need for a quick and decisive response but on other occasions there is the need to make sure that what we do and how we do it is owned by all of us instead of imposed by the authority of someone's standing or salary. Leaders do not necessarily gain those skills through promotion or rank and sometimes we all get along much better if we acknowledge this. A fine example is that this session is being led by Emma and I do what she expects of me instead of acting as her boss. To acknowledge that many of us have skills and qualities that are not reflected in job descriptions is important and, as a good former public school boy, I would say that we need to earn our status and respect the same qualities that we see in our colleagues whether they are our superiors or we manage them.

I'm running out of things to say about how I blossom from having working conditions that suit me.

What remains? Variety is important to me – it keeps things buzzing. In one day I can be sitting in a member's house hearing a powerful story, holding a meeting about faith, sitting in a committee meeting and dealing with letters and emails. The variety keeps me filled with energy which sometimes flops out of me when I get home in the evening. For me that is another element – I don't see a rigid distinction between home and work and will share stories from both parts of my life; to me that is a natural thing to do.

Everyone works in challenging environments in one way or another and of course in HUG where we deal with the world of mental illness some of the things we witness are unpleasant. In the last three days I have met three HUG members who I know well who either have well developed plans about how to kill themselves or who see their lives as being so awful that death would be a kind release. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I have heard HUG members talking about being beaten up and heard HUG members talking about their stories being ignored and dismissed. Sometimes your voice is all the power you have and when even that is dismissed you have nothing left. In HUG we need the tight and supportive team that we do have because without the support and the silliness and the passion, the sadness could sometimes be overwhelming.

I think I'll begin to finish here. Those were my reflections on what keeps me mentally healthy at work. You will have your own ideas about what keeps you mentally healthy and so will your workforce. It is that deep personal knowledge of what works that makes a difference and maybe if we draw on the experiences of the individuals we spend our working lives with then we have the ingredients of a positive place to work in. Yes we need our policies and our supervision and our health and safety and our development plans but if you want to know what keeps the workplace healthy for me it is all the people that are around me every day.

A last word – you wanted to know about stopping stigma and preventing absence. Having a healthy work place keeps me well and prevents my absence, when I have become ill in the past there was no shame and I was visited all the time I was in hospital. I live in a workplace where it is completely natural for me to talk openly about having a diagnosis of schizophrenia. There is no shame and no intrusion into my story. I know of others in Highland Community Care who have experience of mental illness who choose not to discuss it openly and that is fine but, for me, knowing that that label is not a problem is one of the litmus tests to use to see if the work environment is an emotionally healthy one. Having that keeps me healthy, knowing that others can also have this openness if they wish means that we have good foundations to build and develop a mentally healthy working environment.

I don't know how you turn the individual experience into the collective and am sure that you could find other people in Highland Community Care Forum who have completely different perceptions about our workplace. But I would say look at what keeps you and your fellow workers healthy as the odds are that what works for you may also work for others. Coming into work shouldn't stunt or diminish our individuality or shared humanity –to me it should be a place that celebrates our talents and diversity.

Thanks

## **Employment and Mental Illness**

### **TESTIMONY 2**

Anne's testimony

#### *Management*

I first became ill, after working for nearly 20 years, due to huge levels of stress within my job.

We seem to be within a work culture that makes it 'OK' and acceptable to be under great amounts of stress and that we should have a 'stiff upper lip' and accept it, get on with it. But it's *not* OK and employers have a responsibility to ensure there are enough resources to enable people to work in a mentally healthy way.

For me, what is vital is having a good supervision system in place, to avoid mental health problems developing in the first place; stress at work is a major cause of mental illness.

My experience of this was negative. I was working in child care and social work, which were new areas of work for me professionally and I was also working within a new legal framework which I was not familiar with.

The pressure was great and I was over worked and constantly taking new cases around child protection.

My manager was not supportive, wasn't really ever available to speak to, which put the entire team under pressure. So, as well as managing my own stress I had to support colleagues which, as you can image, added greatly to my own stress levels.



If I'd had someone to talk to at that point it would have made a huge difference; it may even have prevented me getting ill or at least reduced the impact and magnitude of my illness.

My main message here is: I know it's not always possible but it's important to be aware of the stresses for individuals in terms of their whole life, not just at work. What support do they have at home, are they new to the area, are they moving house? Alongside the stresses of work (which can take its toll if you not supervised properly) this is a big burden to be carrying. And for a time, you may need additional support and flexibility to ride out these transitions in your life.

If employers can support their staff by good management and supervision and communication then the stresses at work have *got* to be less.

### *Colleagues/Peers*

It's hard to influence your peers but if management take a lead in their approach to mental ill health that would then be followed by workers. Peer support is so important – whether your colleagues are supportive in understanding you may need time off and or flexibility. But this should apply to everyone, not just someone with a mental health problem.

### *Becoming ill*

I really wished someone had recognised what I was going through and had said 'stop', you are reacting in ways that are not you. You are not managing. No one said this to me – maybe because it was too hard for them to say, or maybe it wasn't seen.

I was very embarrassed to speak to anyone about how I was feeling. I would stop the car and cry and cry before making visits. My own mum had had a mental health problem and I saw how she'd been treated and this made me very aware of what the reaction from others could be like.

I can remember thinking how awful it was - the way I was feeling in myself - and how I knew things weren't right but I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't know it was mental illness even though my mum had had it. It didn't enter my head, I just thought I was really down, really overworked, overwhelmed by everything.

Eventually I went to see my GP, who suggested I take some anti-depressants, but I refused – I guess still not acknowledging what was wrong. Things got worse, and I finally went back again and took the medication and realised I needed time off; that I had depression.

Looking back I wish my employer had said something to me – said something about my mental health. They must have seen it because I was acting so differently. That I was busy but not getting anywhere, that I was crying in work. But people just left me crying and never came over to me, just ignored me. It must have been obvious I wasn't coping.

Yet even then I thought it was the job that needed changing and, if I got a new job, I would be OK. Well I did change jobs and it wasn't OK, far from it. After 3 months at

work I went off for 3 months and they didn't speak to me, didn't send me a card, did nothing until I tried to go back to work. When I did they told me my 6 months probationary period was over and said I had lost my job and said I had kept the project back 6 months.

I can remember when they took me in and told me this and said that surly I knew I was going to become ill. I just cried and cried that I had lost employment because I had worked since I was 15 years old.

Loosing my job was the final straw. I ended up in the depth of despair as employment had meant everything to me. Work gives you a value, self-worth, self-esteem and financial independence, and to suddenly loose all that was devastating.

Then I was off sick for 5 years.

### *Getting back into work*

Gradually I started to feel better in myself and started to come off some of the medication. I went to the TAG unit (Training and Guidance) and it made me a bit more confident about getting back into work.

Then I did voluntary work for HUG which made me feel so much more confident. Eventually I thought as I had done work within mental health I would apply for related jobs in social work. I secured a part-time job but my return wasn't easy.

My confidence was low and I felt really embarrassed about having a mental health problem and worried how my colleague would feel. But neither did I want to cover it up as I was a member of HUG, and part of me knew I had nothing to be ashamed of and should not feel forced to hide what I had been through.

I had committed to certain days working with HUG and had undertaken some demanding work and this gave me enough confidence to think I could return to work. But when I got to work I felt I was out of my depth – for instance, having to learn new things and also coming in contact with people with mental health problems and wondering how I could manage this.

My employer knew I'd had a mental health problem and had been prepared to give me the opportunity to work. But I have to say that I did have the right skills, attitude and qualifications to do the job.

When I went back I had a very supportive manager. He managed my case-load and gave me good supervision and had an open mind about my mental health problems. He treated me ordinarily and I didn't expect that. He also made me feel that I could speak to him about my mental health problems – he opened that door for me.

Since then my managers have always known I have a mental health problem and have been supportive. Over time I managed to increase my days from 2.5 days to 4 days per week.

Anytime I feel I am becoming unwell I have shared this with my manager and recently I have had a relapse and my manager has been very supportive despite the fact they are now one down in the social work team. He has a management style that is approachable.

There are constraints within the organization about time off and getting back into work but I hope it will be phased return; starting off going back one day per week and gradually building it up over about 3 months.

So far most of my colleagues have been OK and very supportive but there are some who you feel are disapproving and frustrated at someone being off for so long. I can understand the frustration as I have been off for nearly a year and no-one filled my post so it is more work for everyone else, but the other bit is the attitude to mental ill health which is problematic.

Knowing this doesn't make you feel very good. You have to be resilient to this, and I am able to do but not everyone could. I have a belief that mental illness is an illness like any other; that I can get better from this and therefore it is someone else's issues if they don't like it. But this is a very tentative state of mind.

I think my final message is one around patience - you need to be patient and remember that relapses can occur, but also that people with mental health problems have a huge amount to contribute to the employment market and *can* work with the right support, supervision and tolerant attitudes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We hope that you have found this report interesting. If you wish to comment on it then that would be very welcome as we love to get as wide as possible a perspective on the work we do.

The people we need to acknowledge most of all are our members and other people with experience of mental ill health in the Highlands. Without their voice we couldn't produce these reports and pass on their views and opinions

So a big thank you to all those that support us and work alongside us. Long may it continue!

For more information on HUG, or an Information Pack, call:

Graham Morgan  
Highland Users Group  
Highland Community Care Forum  
Highland House  
20 Longman Road  
Inverness  
IV1 1RY

Telephone: (01463) 723557  
Fax: (01463) 718818  
E-mail: [hug@hccf.org.uk](mailto:hug@hccf.org.uk)  
[www.hug.uk.net](http://www.hug.uk.net)