Educational Work with Schools

During

Scottish Mental Health Week
9th – 14th October 2000

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HUG's Educational Work with Schools

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Background and Summary to HUG's Work with Schools During Scottish Mental Health Week 2000

A. Context - Why Young People's Mental Health Is So Important

The charity YoungMinds* state that the average secondary school of 1000 pupils will have 50 students with depression, 10 affected by eating disorders and 5-10 attempting suicide in any one year.

Why young people's mental health is so important:

•'20% of the nation's children suffer some degree of mental or emotional problem...'

Mental health charity, Mind

- Approximately 10% of children and young people have mental health problems that are severe enough to require professional help.
  House of Commons Select Committee

- Between 2 – 8% of adolescents suffer from major depression, it being most common in girls.
  Royal College of Psychiatrists

- The suicide rate of young men aged 15 – 24 has risen by 75% since 1982.
  Department of Health 'Health of the Nation', 1992

“Children's mental health matters. When they have it they feel good about themselves, enjoy relationships, learn confidently and overcome their difficulties. When they don't - when they are overwhelmed by misery, anger or fear - all kinds of problems can arise.”

YoungMinds*

*Youngminds is a national charity committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people.

B. Introduction

The Highland Users Group (HUG), in partnership with the theatre company 'Live Wire Productions', staged interactive drama productions during Scottish Mental Health Week in four schools across the Highlands.

The high schools we visited were:

- Millburn Academy, Inverness
- Mallaig High School, Lochaber
- Wick High School, Caithness
- Thurso High School, Caithness

The focus of this year's Scottish Mental Health Week was young people aged 14 – 18 and this provided us with a great opportunity to work with over three hundred and fifty 4th – 6th year pupils.

The information and analysis in this report is based on the evaluation forms and verbal feedback from the schools and HUG members. The main findings of the evaluation forms are detailed in section G, entitled '**Collation and Analysis of Evaluation Forms: Findings, Statistics and Quotes.'**

HUG believes that, in order to challenge stigma and discrimination, it is vital to start raising awareness and understanding of mental illness with children and adolescents.

Our experiences during Mental Health Week, and the findings of the evaluation forms, will form the foundations for planning HUG's future work with schools and young people all across the Highlands. We are not proposing to present any definitive answers and would greatly welcome any support, comments or recommendations.

C. The Performance and Workshops

Live Wire Productions was established in 1994 as a mobile theatre company to promote health, science and environmental issues through the medium of drama. Their mental health play, entitled 'Brief Encounters', is aimed at high school pupils and provides a forum for exploring depression in youngsters and the stigma surrounding mental illness.

The pupils had a valuable opportunity to relate to the three main characters; a young woman, her father and a chat show host who portray their own, personal experiences of stress, bereavement, depression, treatment and recovery.

The performance lasted about half and hour and engaged the interests of the young folk immediately, whilst introducing the main themes and issues in a sympathetic and understandable way.

After the performance the pupils broke up into smaller workshops and had an hour or so to speak directly to staff from community mental health teams, the 'Live Wire' actors and HUG members, who spoke very openly and honestly about their own experiences of living with mental illness.

The organisation and facilitation of the workshop changed during the week as we gained in confidence and learnt to understand how to make the pupils more comfortable and able to speak about such personal and 'taboo' issues (please refer to section L, entitled 'Lessons Learnt').

We also had a large quantity of information leaflets on all the major mental illnesses, stress, suicide and self-harm, which the youngsters were encouraged to take away. The material we had was from:

- Youngminds
- HEBS (Health Education Board for Scotland)
- Depression Alliance
- Mind
- Mental Health Matters/SANE
- The Samaritans
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists
- HUG postcards (which went down very well)
- HUG newsletters and 'Moonstruck'

Overall, the format we developed helped the youngsters to gain a much greater understanding of mental health issues and dispelled common myths and misconceptions surrounding mental illness.

D. How Did You Young Folk Respond?

For most of the youngsters this was the first time they had had a chance to explore and hear about mental health issues. Although the workshops were quite imposing due to sheer number, once we broke up into smaller sub-groups the pupils felt more comfortable and were able to speak to HUG members and the professionals.

In one of the schools, one pupil actually came up, thanked us very much for coming and said how much the session had touched them. She also said that many of the pupils *were* talking to one another about the issues and the impact the workshops had had on them.

E. What Questions Did the Young Folk Ask?

Once the pupils were working together in small groups, they asked HUG members many thoughtful and relevant questions, such as:

- What causes mental illness and how many different illnesses are there?
- How do I know if I am becoming ill?
- How do you cope with having depression?
- How did people react to you when you became ill?
- What can I do to help a friend if they become ill?
- Why do people self-harm?
- How did you feel being in a psychiatric unit?
- How do parents deal with their children when they have mental health problems?
- How easy is it to get professional help?
- How do you know if you are a 'normal' teenager or suffering from depression?
- To what extent are a mentally ill person's friends and parents affected?
- What is psychosis?
- What drugs do they treat with?

This type of direct interaction with people experiencing mental illness appeared to make a great impression on the pupils and, perhaps more than anything, helped them to understand mental illness and realise the huge impact it has on people's lives.

F. Summary of Feedback and Evaluation

The impact and value of this work was extremely evident in the comments on the evaluation forms and informal feedback received from pupils, teachers and HUG members. The majority of pupils credited the sessions as greatly changing their perceptions of mental illness and 'madness', and how they would view mentally ill people in the future.

Below are some **direct** quotes from the pupil's evaluation forms:

What did the words 'mental illness' make you think of *before* today?		**How have your ideas and thoughts changed?**
People going mental, crackpots.	⇒	*I understand mentally ill people much more ... they just seem normal.*
People being carted around in straitjackets with metal cages around their mouths.	⇒	*I understand more about the illnesses.*
Nutcase, weirdo.	⇒	*It made me realise these people are normal.*
Nutters, mad people.	⇒	*I realise it could happen to anyone, and you can make a full recovery.*
Loopy people, Craig Dunain – not really sure.	⇒	*A lot – now know a lot more about illnesses and how they affect different people. Lot more understanding now.*
Men in white coats, padded rooms and straitjackets.	⇒	*Completely different.*
Difficult question. Probably people who were completely mad, if you know what I mean, rather than an illness like depression.	⇒	*I think I am probably more open-minded about mental illness and the breadth of illnesses this term covers.*

These types of quite dramatic changes in attitude were echoed in the majority of the returned evaluation forms from the pupils.

G. Collation and Analysis of Evaluation Forms: Findings, Statistics and Quotes

The findings in this part of the report will provide the base-line evidence for HUG's future educational work with schools and young people. The results are quite startling and provide confirmation in the value and necessity of providing a safe forum for discussing mental illness.

Just over two hundred evaluation forms were returned from the schools, out of the three hundred and fifty pupils who attended the sessions. It was clear that the pupils had completed their forms with great honestly and thought. Only a very small handful of forms were 'spoilt' and not included. The statistics and

outcomes are based on 201 evaluation forms.

The responses in *italics* are direct quotes **from the pupils, and have not been changed or paraphrased in any way. In questions 1 and 2, percentages have been calculated to the nearest half percent.**

1. 'HOW WELL DO YOU THINK THE PERFORMANCE ADDRESSED THE ISSUES COVERED?

Very well	**19%**
Well	**53%**

OK	**24%**
Not at all	**4%**

2. HOW INFORMATIVE AND INTERESTING DID YOU FIND THE WORKSHOPS?

Very	**24%**
Quite	**41%**
OK	**26%**
Not at all	**6½%**

In the following questions, the percentages relate to the main themes/common strands that emerged strongly from the evaluation forms:

3. 'WHAT DID THE WORDS 'MENTAL ILLNESS' MAKE YOU THINK OF *BEFORE* TODAY?'

❖ Crazy, mad, nutcase **29%**

"Nutters, mad people."

"Old fogies in loony bins."

"People going mental, crack pots."

❖ Straitjacket and padded cells **9½%**

"Men in white coats, people being carted around in straitjackets with metal cages."

"Pulped food, wheel chairs, institutions, padded cells, straitjackets."

❖ Killer, violence, unpredictable **5½%**

"Psychopaths, down's syndrome, serial killers, pedophiles, schizophrenics."

"Crazy people capable of doing inhuman things."

"Mental breakdowns and killers."

"Psychopath."

❖ Learning disability/mental handicap **3½%**

"I thought it was people with a mental handicap or learning disability."

"A small minority who are mentally handicapped."

"Craig Phadrig, people bashing themselves off padded cells, nutcases that are old."

❖ Some understanding and sensitivity **14%**

"I wasn't aware of definitions, but was about the stigma attached and some of the stereotypical media coverage."

"Someone with psychological condition which affects the way they feel, think or act."

"That people were the same as other people but just had something wrong with them, not their fault."

"I have had experience with people who are suffering from mental illness and have suffered from stress myself."

4. 'HOW HAVE YOUR IDEAS AND THOUGHTS CHANGED?'

❖ Clear, positive change in attitude towards mental illness **69%**

"They [my ideas] *are very different - the performance has really opened my eyes and I feel a lot better that I know that it's not what I thought."*

"I learnt more, especially about depression which I didn't know could have such serious hold on someone's life. I hope I would be able to react to people with a mental illness in a better way and not judge them."

❖ Greater awareness and understanding of mental health issues **66%**

"They are just normal people with an illness."

"The talk made me understand the illnesses a lot better and not to be scared or judge people with these illnesses - I understand mentally ill people much more."

"They don't seem mad anymore, they just seem normal."

"I am a lot more understanding now as I have been more closely associated with circumstances that could potentially arise in my own life."

"It has made me question my views and helped me to understand how and why mental illness occurs."

5. WHAT ARE THE MAIN THINGS YOU HAVE LEARNT OR DISCOVERED?

How common mental illness is **18%**

"Depression is very common and anyone can be affected sometimes in their lives."

"How many people are actually affected by mental illness."

"1 in 4 people suffer from this at some point in their life."

That mental illness happens to 'normal' people/anyone can become ill **15½%**

"Mental illness is like a normal illness and you are not strange for having one."

"That normal, everyday people can become mentally ill."

"Mental illness can happen to normal people."

People can recover, become 'cured' **11½%**

"That people can get rid of their mental illness in a bit of time. Also that people with a mental illness are just the same as everyone else."

"Illnesses can be cured or stabalised, depression is more than just feeling down."

"You can be cured, you don't have to have a history of mental illness to suffer from it."

6. ARE YOU SURPRISED BY ANYTHING YOU HAVE HEARD/LEARNT TODAY?

Yes **66%**

How common mental illness is **14%**

How 'normal' the HUG members were **4%**

"Yes, and what they have to go through because they suffer from depression and because people say things about them."

"That the people with real mental illness were brave enough to talk about it."

"One man was a schizophrenic and he had a wife and children. I would never have thought this possible."

No/not really **34%**

"No, because I have seen it before on TV and in real life."

"No, I was just interested in the information they gave us."

7. *'HOW* WOULD YOU LIKE TO EXPLORE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?'

❖ Discussion **52%**

(Many young people specified they would want to speak to people who had experienced mental illness)

"Discussion was very beneficial."

"I would like more discussion because I feel that people need to know more so they can deal with it."

"Discussion with people who have experienced mental illness."

❖ Drama **34%**

"Drama and discussions with people who have suffered."

"Discussions, drama and meeting people who are ill to see what is different about the illnesses."

"I thought discussing it in a group was helpful and the drama was a good idea as well."

8. WHAT SORT OF THINGS WOULD HELP YOU GET THROUGH STRESSFUL OR UPSETTING TIMES?

Talking to someone I trust (including friends and family) **70%**

Support from friends and family	**48%**
Professional support (GP, counsellor, hospital)	**4%**

9. 'WHAT ISSUES WOULD BE IMPORTANT TO YOU TO TALK OR LEARN ABOUT?'

Stress and suicide were clearly issues of vital importance to the young people and a number of the pupils explained that these were realities in their lives. The wish for information and a chance to discuss youth suicide was particularly evident at Mallaig High School, with just over 40% of the pupils specifying this on their evaluation forms.

Below are the main issues the pupils wished to talk about or learn more about:

Stress	**38%**
Suicide	**27%**
Major illnesses	**23%**
Depression	**22%**
Anxiety	**11%**
Schizophrenia	**9½%**
Eating disorders	**1%**

"Stress and also suicide would be important to talk about because I feel these are issues young people are faced with."

"I think the issues of suicide especially among young men would be important as well as stress and pressure."

"I think any issue of mental illness would be interesting ….possibly if you know enough about it you might recognise symptoms in friends and help them."

"Anxiety, major illnesses e.g. schizophrenia - these I don't know much about."

This type of tangible, current information is vital to any future work HUG does with young people in the Highlands.

H. What Did the Teachers Think?

The teachers at the four high schools were very supportive and appreciated the benefit of bringing mental health issues to the forefront. Below are some comments from the teachers:

"Because mental illness is such a taboo subject in day-to-day conversations, I thought the way it was done was brilliant. I thought the pupils gained a great deal from the frank and open answers of the HUG members. The play gave them some information and by breaking down into smaller groups they gained the confidence to ask the questions."

"I thought it was done very well indeed. The school will follow up on it after the holidays…keep up the good work."

"…we need to be educated about the improvements in life for mental illness to help our acceptance and understanding."

I. Lessons Learnt

The findings in this section are based on feedback from the people who took part in the workshops i.e. HUG members and staff from the community mental health teams.

The main lessons learnt during the week were:

- *School pupils* do *want to explore the issues of mental health and mental illness. One HUG member said,* 'I was surprised how easy the young people were to talk to … I can see how helpful it may be now or even in the future of these young people's lives'.

- *Young people hold very misinformed and inaccurate images of mental illness (based, it would appear, on mass media portrayals), but are extremely receptive to this type of direct work. The performance and workshops promoted a major shift in attitude.* 'I was impressed by the kids' *was a comment heard time and time again from HUG members.*

- *Progression was made during the week as HUG members, workers and the Live Wire actors became more comfortable with the format and the school pupils.*
- *Hearing directly from people who have experienced mental illness made a great impact on the pupils. As one HUG member said from her contact with the pupils,* 'I

was quite nervous, but when the kids asked more questions it made me realise they wanted to know more …. they do not want to be ignorant'.

- *We as users, working with schools, pupils and professionals, can make a difference. HUG members were able to see directly the impact of their involvement in this type of educational work.*

- *We would all have been more comfortable and 'safe' in smaller groups, as this would be the most effective method of communicating; the large groups inhibit discussion (which could be very personal).*

- *It might be relatively easy to go back to the schools, once contact has been made and rapport has been established with the pupils and teachers and we all know what to expect.*

- *The young folk found the medium of drama and contact with people who have experienced mental illness very powerful and believe this an extremely effective way of exploring the issues.*

- *Suicide is a major concern for young people across the Highlands and stress is a reality of their lives.*

J. The Way Forward: Recommendations and Future Plans

These productions will hopefully provide a starting point for HUG to work with teachers, school pupils and young people throughout the Highlands. HUG believes this work to be of vital importance in order to ensure the mental wellbeing of young people and to raise awareness of the causes and impact of mental illnesses, and so reduce the shame and stigma very often associated with mental ill health.

We also hope to develop future partnerships between HUG, statutory agencies and schools across Highland. Current ideas to take this work forward are:

- Consulting directly with young people across the Highlands to find out how they want to explore mental health issues. Four pupils from Millburn Academy have expressed an interest in being an advisory or consultation group for HUG's future educational work with young people.

- Further strengthening our contacts with Health Promotions to develop a Highland-wide approach to the promotion of mental wellbeing.

- Training for teachers on mental health issues during in-service training days. The first scheduled date is for February 2001.

- Sustaining and expanding the links we have made with high schools, by raising mental health issues with pupils in their Personal Social Development classes.

- With the support of the Royal College of Psychiatrist, piloting a board game, which is a 'tool' for exploring mental health with teenagers.

- Develop closer links to the Social Inclusion Partnership teams to reduce the incidence of social exclusion as a result of mental illness.

K. Final Thoughts and Conclusions

Our experience, in the space of a very hectic and emotionally draining Scottish Mental Health Week, is that the pupils and their teachers welcomed the opportunity to learn about and discuss issues of such relevance to young people. There was almost a feeling of 'relief' that such a traditionally 'taboo' area was being explored in such an open, non-judgmental way.

The young people themselves found the medium of drama and discussion with users a very good way of exploring mental health issues. In two of the schools HUG members did follow-up work in the pupils' Personal Social Development classes. These sessions were very successful as the issues were now familiar to the youngsters and they had had 'breathing space' to talk to one another or read the information leaflets.

A special thanks must go to the HUG members, staff at the drop-in centres in Caithness and members of the community mental health teams who provided invaluable support and input during the week.

HUG would also like to thank the Highland Primary Care NHS Trust's Endowments Fund, the Health Education Board for Scotland, Highland Council Social Inclusion Partnership, Highland Health Board Health Promotion Department and Moray Firth Radio for their invaluable financial support for this project.
This report will be sent to key people in the Primary Care Trust, Highland Health Board and Social Work Services, as well as to mental health organisations and high school

teachers across the Highlands.

L. Appendices

i. Copy Of Blank Evaluation Form

ii. Newspaper Extract from the Inverness Courier on HUG's Work during Mental Heath Week