

## A TALK ON CRISIS SERVICES

### LABOUR PARTY FRINGE MEETING

*Hello* – it is great to have a chance to talk to you.

My name is Graham Morgan. I am employed by highland community care forum and work with the Highland Users Group, which is a network of people who have experience of mental health problems.

HUG exists to speak out and improve the lives of people with a mental illness in the Highlands. We do this by giving voice to our members' experiences and hope that this expression of what we go through and of the solutions we think might assist will influence those who are trying to help us.

We also spend a great deal of time trying to educate the public and professionals about our life in order to reduce the stigma of mental illness and to promote a fairer and more tolerant society for all of us to live in.

To find out more about us, to learn more about our views visit our website at **[hug.uk .net](http://hug.uk.net)** and it will tell you more than I can in this short time.

I am going to speak of my own feelings about needing help in crisis and the thoughts and experiences my friends and acquaintances have on the subject.

I have at various times needed help quickly and have had different responses at these times.

When I first became deeply unhappy, many years ago, I was in my early twenties. It was a time when I had entered a grey and sad world, I had lost belief in myself and in the world I am privileged to live in. Over a number of months I withdrew from my studies and from contact with the few friends I had at that time.

In some ways I was quite laughable - I was so keen to prove that there was no meaning to life that I sought out Evangelical Christians to try to convert them to my vision of the emptiness of life.

I was very young and convinced that I had seen the horror and tragedy of living and that I was wise and weary beyond my years. In fact I was so shy that walking across a crowded café was a frightening and traumatic experience.

Unfortunately the laughter and teasing that I feel might have been my due flowed out of my life when the musings on suicide that had been preoccupying me took on a harsh reality and my struggle to continue coping tumbled away from around me.

Over a drunken weekend the feelings about ending everything took on a brutal meaning and I found all of a sudden that I no longer had the resources or the will to manage any longer. I did not contemplate getting help; instead I made many cuts on my arms with a razor blade. I will never fully be able to describe the white terrified shiver inside my body when I saw what I had done and the disgust I felt when I finally realised that I did not even have the courage to kill myself properly.

I was so frightened and so alone, I felt there was no one who would understand. I knew I had to get help but was too frightened to seek it. I worried that I would be judged and condemned. I worried that I would be laughed at, I worried that I might be locked up and I worried that my mind and my private thoughts would no longer belong to me.

It was only the help of a friend in my house who gave me the courage to seek help and it was only the quick and sensitive response of the doctors and receptionists when I managed to walk through the door of the surgery that meant that I got the support I needed.

Over the next few months self harm became a daily reality. I was alone in a world that professionals and friends could not enter; the world was washed pale with sadness and unhappiness and bewilderment. There was nothing to grasp to pull me out, so little to seize on that it seemed I would forever be locked in there.

It was only after an overdose, a spell in hospital and a gradual refocusing of my life on voluntary work and meeting people in a similar situation to me, that helped me regain an interest in living.

In the end it was meeting someone who I loved and who loved me in turn which broke me out of the cycle of self contempt that I had become familiar with. It is very hard to take a blade to your body when the world has turned rosy and everything you do seems to be appreciated and celebrated.

That happened years ago, but I meet people daily who talk about the need for help in crisis and the experiences I had then and at later stages in my life still hold true.

We can slow down so much our bodies can even take on the lethargy and emptiness of our emotions. We can feel worthless and useless and this

feeling can stretch on indefinitely – sadly some of us do not come out of this world and there is no release except a bitter death.

It makes it especially poignant that when we are in this state it can be very hard to even think of seeking help, and that the majority of the services in the community are only available between 9 and 5 Monday to Friday : not necessarily the time when we will have the courage to pick up the phone to ask for assistance.

Sometimes the effort to get help is too much, sometimes there is no help, sometimes the professionals do not recognise the degree of distress we experience, sometimes we are too frightened or wary or just simply uninformed about the help we can access .

People may wonder why we think specialist crisis and out of hours services are so important to us.

Let us remember that many mental illnesses are fatal. More than 1 in ten people with Manic Depression and schizophrenia die as a result of it, around 20% of people with anorexia die. When we get into trouble the help that we need can be a matter of life and death and yet few people know what to do when confronted with people like myself in crisis.

Mental illness is so confusing; here are some examples of the needs we have and the situations we get into:

Whether we like it or not there is a huge stigma to mental illness. Many of us, when we are first getting ill are too ashamed to ask for help, we cannot accept it ourselves and do not want to have to contemplate all that seems to be associated with mental illness.

The actual services that help us sometimes have a poor image; some of us are too suspicious of them to ask for help and we worry about how we will be seen or treated and what the consequences will be for us if we seek help.

Some of us do not accept the perception that professionals have of us. Our world may be strange and alien to those around us, but to us it is real and meaningful. Sometimes the clash in the ways in which we perceive each other means that we avoid help and in fact see it as an intrusion on our privacy and dignity.

I have been psychotic on occasion and have found it very hard to accept the interpretation other people have about my behaviour. I have certainly witnessed friends who have entered a world where the reality they are in is bizarre and on occasion frightening, and yet it is almost impossible to

get them to admit that they may be ill. In fact they may find such suggestions highly offensive and resist any offer of help until they are truly desperate and services intervene anyway whether they like it or not.

Some of us get lost in our worlds. The effort of presenting a mask of normality to everyone becomes a burden that is too hard to cope with; the effort of the false smile to well meaning enquiries becomes too painful. We may need to withdraw from people away into the privacy and safety of our rooms and homes and after a time these rooms can become self imposed prisons that we cannot break out of.

And yet for many of us there are none of these difficulties. We are just faced with a basic lack of help. We may have been getting worse and worse all week, life has become a fragile act and the skills we have to cope with it may be slipping away from us. Through the week we have been getting help from professionals and yet as we approach the Friday evening we all know that our helpers are about to have their weekend off, and that we will have to cope alone through a weekend that seems endless.

We need so many things when we are in crisis:

For some of us it is very basic. We need somewhere to go out of hours and at the weekend. The simple fact that a drop in centre is open 7 days a week can be very reassuring, as can the fact that there are mental health professionals available in emergency at these times - at present this is not a reality for many areas.

For a few of us a helpline would be great, because all many of us need in the dark hours of the morning, is a friendly reassuringly warm voice. A helpline would have to be staffed by people familiar with mental illness and ideally people we can quickly trust or even better, know already, and who we know we can confide in.

There will always be a need for hospital and a need for us to be admitted when in crisis which should not be determined by the availability of beds. To some of us the need for access to the sanctuary and treatment such a place can offer, is very important and yet the fact that we may have to struggle and fight, through the fog of our distress in order to convince people of our need for this, is deeply disturbing.

Some of us cannot get to services; it is just far more than we can manage. We need professionals to come out to us to deal with us on our terms and without automatically reverting to the use of medication to dull the pain we are in. Ideally we need to see professionals that we know and trust.

Some of us may not wish for help and on these occasions when it is obvious to everyone else that we do need help, we need people to come out to us even when we have not requested this - but they need to come to us with sensitivity and with respect for the worlds we are in and the beliefs that we hold.

Some of us completely lose it; life just becomes insurmountable and unmanageable and in these situations we sometimes need intervention that will keep us safe, even if we do not initially agree to it. In rural areas the facilities to provide this safely are not always available.

Some of us just need the public to be aware of what to do in crisis – for example imagine one of us were to have a panic attack in a supermarket; a simple crisis card could do wonders or having access to a member of the public who has the basic skills in mental health first aid could also help.

We really need a place we can go to where we feel safe and secure. Where we know we will be respected and listened to and supported in the world we find our selves. Somewhere we can calm down and find peace and where we can be among our own in a pleasant environment away from the pressures of a frantic world. Whether we call this place a crisis centre or a safe house or even a respite centre is irrelevant. What matters above all is that when we are in these most distressing worlds we have somewhere where we can go to on our own terms, with people who understand us and help us through the journey that will lead back to the life we have had to escape from. This sort of facility has been an aim that many user groups have campaigned for, so far unsuccessfully for many years.

Finally, I have been talking about the services needed by those of us with a diagnosis of mental illness, but let us not forget that many of us, maybe all of us, experience distress naturally as a result of all the harshness that ordinary life can consist of. We may not be ill but we may however need somewhere or someone to turn to when life has become hard to bear; somewhere and someone we can turn to when our own resources are becoming strained with the burden of trying to continue as “normal”. Simple acts of kindness and help can stop the sadness of life becoming unbearable. In fact for all of us whether we are mentally ill or not, the earlier we can get help and support the more that can be done to prevent distress becoming disabling or from forcing us into a system which can be hard to get away from, the better.

Alongside crisis services, which are so essential for our safety and wellbeing ,we also need services that will help to prevent illness and

distress from reaching such a dangerous level that we end up in need of intervention as a matter of urgency; services that prevent crisis in the first place. In other words pro-action is always more effective than reaction.

Thank you