MEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

May 2008

Hello

As has been said my name is Graham Morgan and I have been asked to talk about Men and Mental Health at this conference. When I was first asked I thought to myself that this would just be so easy, after all I am a man and I have experienced varying levels of mental health all my life and symptoms of mental illness all my adult life. Ha, an instant expert!.

And then I got thinking and the more I thought about it the less I realised I knew and, now that I come to write, I worry that I am entering an arena where all of you will know the correct ways of thinking and discussing these sort of gender issues. So If I say stuff that went out of fashion in the seventies, or just don't really get what I am meant to be talking about I do apologise.

What I am going to talk about is the musing that I have had since being asked to speak and my personal experience of mental illness.

I suppose that it is sort of old fashioned to say that the role of men is very poorly defined nowadays that we live in some sort of limbo but let me talk of some of the men who influence me.

First of all there is my Dad, he was a squadron leader and a jet fighter pilot, and he was a leading ocean racing sailor and then a successful businessman. He was and still is admired by many women, he drives fast cars, knows what wine to order in a restaurant, met and mixed with the powerful if not always the very good. When I was little I worshipped everything he did, I wanted a uniform like his, I wanted to have shoes that squeaked and to smack my lips in the way he did when he ate . I wanted to be big and brave and daring.

Then there is Adrian , who I have only recently met, a skier and a sailor and a windsurfer, in fact an almost anything outdoorsy type person. He is big and muscley and fit and strong; his children admire him and do what he tells them, his wife loves him, he takes control of situations when he needs to and on top of it all he's really funny, brilliant at conversation and has a great sense of morality and justice.

Lastly there's Martin who works in a garage and knows all about cars. He's warm and ever so quiet, he's known by everyone but has no airs and graces he treats everyone with courtesy and does a great job and whilst not spending all his time in the garage he's busy as a volunteer in a dangerous area of work.

Its not that I want to be like these people, in fact I often feel profoundly awkward and intimidated in their company but, when I think of them there is some hazy bit in my mind that says that is what I think men are meant to be . So anyway, at last there's me.

I have a mental illness known as schizophrenia, I drink as much alcohol as I can get away with without going over the limit the next morning, I have no

inkling of how to achieve a work/life balance – I can't do small talk even when I'm drunk, I don't have a memory for faces, in fact I even walked past my wife once without recognising her! I am frightened of heights and T bar ski tows, I worry about everything and build up grudges of the most awful type when musing over the world in bed at night. I am unfit and overweight and take stattins for my cholesterol. I avoid conflict like the plague and often do exactly what I am told to do by a host of different people

So that's a good start isn't it? Women are meant to be slim, beautiful and sexy and you know; mothers, lovers, workers, organisers, talkers and all the other things that I don't want to risk trying to describe here and men are meant to be well what are men meant to be? Whatever it is they are meant to be I am sure that it's not me.

And that gets me really cross because I would much prefer not to be an action man of the new century . I quite like the life I've got and see most of my friends who are men as similar to me, mainly gentle, often bewildered, rarely scaling cliffs but commonly seen in the pubs and in front of the television.

It's this wish to be so much more than we are isn't it ? I think that it corrupts my happiness and peace of mind. Yes it would be nice to be rich and famous and the darling of the cleverest and most attractive of people but actually I much prefer giggling in the office amongst a group of people that I trust and love and sending off comments on this and that policy that we wish would, but know won't, change the world.

My sense of manhood has never been very strong and I think that it was this ambivalence about ever wanting to or having the capabilities of being strong and charming and outgoing that contributed to my cracking up in my early twenties. In those days I was very angst ridden full of existentialism and nihilism, desperately wanting to be attractive and interesting but so frightened of women that I blushed and looked at the floor well into my twenties and so frightened of being adult that I used a pair of scissors to shave instead of buying a razor, as the thought of asking for one made me awkward in the extreme. Dancing, nope, asking a girl out, no way, drinking yes I could do that , arguing with born again Christians about the futility of life yes lead me to them, being social, excuse me but the bare walls of my room are much more appealing. Buying clothes; how on earth do you do that? What suits and what doesn't ? How do you work out your size? Make a statement with your dress sense, much better to grow holes and wait for birthdays and Christmases.

Really I have set the scene for what is almost inevitable, where life implodes and you sink into a stagnant life because all your uncertainties and the ambitions of others build and build and the loneliness grows and the colour becomes as grey as my name and in the prison of lost emotion everything loses its brightness and purpose and the days pile up in visions of failure and lost hours staring at nothing and it all spills into suicide attempts and self harm and months of treatment and in this my life changes and there is nothing whatsoever to look forward to, no joy, no hope, no motivation.

So what gets me out of it? I suppose it is reassessing and rejecting the expectations of others; redefining my life so that my social circles are now people with similar views and experiences to me. The vision of career success was replaced by the friendship of people that my family would have rejected and worried about. People who were wonderful to be with but lacking any of those conventional measures by which we measure success. A group of new friends who had been through horrible things and found companionship together and shared purpose and joy even if it mainly centered on how to keep in enough tobacco every week whilst living on income support. I found a new me less determined by gender roles than changes in social status and on my admission to hospital found that my key nurse was to become my girlfriend - her ambition was to steal a policeman's helmet on a demonstration; mine was just to bask in the joy of being able to hold someone.

Life changed and moved on and altered completely and when I met the person who became my wife it just became completely impossible to see sadness when all around me there was joy and vigour and purpose. Life in its new form became rosy indeed.

I lived in an age where us men had had to apologise so much for our existence and the past exploitation of women that I found it quite frightening to come to terms with the fact that in my late twenties I was to be a father.

In my heart I had my personal vision of what I wanted to be for my son, I wanted to be lean and rugged, I wanted to be silent but funny, I wanted to be a modern day hero but with all the touchy bits, you know warm caring sharing, empathetic, sensitive, perceptive and yet strong too. And of course I would job share to bring up my son, change the nappies, calm him down with cuddles at night time, take my share of the feeds with the expressed milk at two in the morning and still remain funny and loving and energetic.

Well I did some of it but my main memory is of working too hard and getting too tired and too confused and muddled up with different realities so that five months after my son was born I was busy being kept within arms reach of a nurse every hour of the day, wrapping jumpers round my head to keep the devils at bay

The bluntness of this, the sad reality, which has now become a part of my everyday life, is that when your experience becomes set many miles away from the role models of your youth, you lose confidence and that sense of ease that can be so necessary for the well-being we all look for.

Like many children my son used the words of the school playground when he was growing up, words of abuse and exclusion such as 'mental' and 'schizo' and 'psycho' were routine in his language and, of course they were innocently and comically used but, crowding in the back of my mind when I heard these carefree words was the fact that they were about people like me and that

alters your own self perception and your own feelings about the value of your identity.

My son is almost grown now, I am more proud of him than anyone else I have ever known and wish that I could say that I helped him in that journey, maybe I did a little but most of the good is down to my wife and a lot of the sadness he witnessed is unfortunately down to me.

And why do I say this?, I ask myself what is it to be a man? What is it to be a father or a boss or a friend? I do not know what we are meant to be, there is nowhere to turn to with confidence to peg your identity and your self on.
I feel like saying, "This is so sad , we need these stereotypes in order to know where we sit in society, it helps us to function and measure who we are". But in my next breath I reject this, because all my life I have wished to be successful, to achieve things, to be liked and even loved, to work and work and demonstrate through constant success. It is really important to me to be good at the things that I set myself to do. It is a part of my upbringing and in many ways a measure of me as a successful man.

Now there is a bit of me that says that is laudable but the other bit says this is a very materialistic way of looking at who we are. The continual task of growing and succeeding in the eyes of your companions and family and society, it never ceases, with each bit of praise comes the need for another, insecurity is never vanquished because you are never good enough, there is never an end to the need to be liked and loved and valued and the statements that you are, are never fully believed and, as I speak I suppose that I near the end of my musings.

I would love to be an eco warrior, our growing awareness of the need for a sustainable world is almost completely accepted nowadays and the same could be applied to my need for a role model, the one I use was out of date generations ago, I don't think my need to grow and achieve year on year is at all healthy, it sort of, but doesn't really give me a sense of well being, for me, I need a role model that allows me to accept me for who I am, that allows me to believe in myself and the love of my friends and family, that allows me to love my work without making myself totally responsible for changing the world. My role model shouldn't be some impossible goal but a sense of being content to be me with all my imperfections, strengths and failings.

With acceptance comes some peace and with that my mental health has a greater likelihood of staying stable and my sense of well-being is given a hugely enhanced space to settle and grow.

Any last musings? Mental illness is not good for your well-being however settled you are and us men are often really bad at dealing with it. A diagnosis is not just about an illness its about a huge raft of usually negative perceptions, myths and values.

Whether we like it or not. Many of us are stuck in the world where status is hugely important. When we become mentally ill, we do more than lose status,

we can become outcast, we can lose all those things that make us feel valued. We can end up feeling like failures and a burden not only to society but all those people we hold dear.

The solution? In HUG where I work we are actually, in little ways, changing the world with our growing voice, our awareness raising and attempts to challenge the stigma of mental illness. That is one way, a rights based, value driven approach to improve the world of people with a mental illness. But the other way is not about illness, it is about well-being and emotional literacy and the need for all of us, whether we be men or women to realise that we have a responsibility to care for our mental health just as much as we need to care for our physical health. How we do it I don't know but I do know we do need to do it.

Thank you.