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INVERNESS COMMUNITY CARE FORUM **CELEBRATING 'OLDER PERSONS' SERVICES**

May 25th Isolation; recovery

Hello. I'm Chris. Graham has already introduced me. I've been a HUG member for over 12 years. My personal experience of mental illness spans 24 years. Until a couple of years ago my diagnosis was depression, but my psychiatrist reviewed my history and I now am diagnosed with bipolar (manic depression). That makes a lot more sense to me as I can see elements of that from childhood.

For over 20 years I have lived on Ardnamurchan. There is an element of physical isolation and remoteness that makes the area so attractive to many who usually have a hectic life. Apart from the rain and the midges it's a very beautiful place. Crossing on the Corran Ferry makes it even more special. But it can also be so isolating.

"Local" services may in fact not be very local – Fort William for me is 25miles + the ferry – and I live relatively close compared to many on Ardnamurchan.

Small communities may be supportive, but they do not allow privacy or anonymity. It may also depend on the person's perceived problem or issue.

I have been very fortunate that locally my episodes of mental ill-health have been generally tolerated even if not understood. This may have something to do with me working in my community before I first become ill in Highland. By that time, despite being an incomer I had been reasonably accepted. However, when I have been severely depressed I would not go outside my door. Would not go to the Gp as I couldn't sit in the waiting room. Would not go for a walk as I might meet someone I knew and I had nothing to say. I hated not being at work as I felt a

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the voice of users and carers

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failure. So I excluded myself from my community. I also excluded myself from HUG. Sometimes Graham would not hear from me for months at a time. He would know that I was ill. I knew he would understand but I felt so guilty. The sense of failure that accompanies mental illness is huge (for me at least).

One or two friends did still visit despite my “unsocialness”...I found that really difficult but know they were trying to help. The only friend I would visit lives in Fort William but it would sometimes take me weeks to pluck up the courage to go. Even then it mattered that I would only see this one friend and hopefully not bump into anyone else. If I went on the bus it was scary – I would drive if I could as then I didn't have to speak to anyone else.

So you could say that the isolation is self-inflicted. Apart from the hugely damaging effect on personal relationships, there are practical implications. When I was too ill to work, I was probably entitled to benefits, but I could not even contact the CAB for assistance to apply. The loss of income over a number of years has been an additional strain. Being a person who can be articulate when well it can be hard for others to understand how I couldn't open the post, wouldn't answer the phone, wouldn't seek help. No-one took on this role for me as they couldn't believe I was unable to do it for myself.

The occasional invitation to something social was a nightmare. I couldn't engage in any of my hobbies including sailing.

So what changes when I recover?

I suddenly find myself looking forward to that invitation to go out for a meal. I feel that I have something to say (probably too much!). I become interested in all that is happening in the world. I want to re-engage with HUG – something I feel passionate about. I cook properly; care about my appearance etc. I can go out for a walk and not worry about who I may see. I can contribute to society and feel I have a place. I may even believe I can be useful – and I feel I can support others which gives enormous positive feedback. I can laugh and cry – with genuine emotion, not the “black dog” of depression. I can even tolerate the rain – but I still curse the midges!

Thank you