



**PENUMBRA
Annual conference
Crief hydro
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WHY WORK IN MENTAL HEALTH? WHAT DO WE NEED FROM YOU?

Hello, thank you for inviting me to talk to you today. It is great to have this opportunity.

My name is Graham Morgan and I work for the Highland Users Group. Our wish is to change the world, to make it a better, happier, more contented place, to reduce suffering and despair and loneliness and isolation.

We want the life of people with a mental illness to glow that bit brighter, we want the disabling effects of illness and lack of confidence and self worth to shrink so that people can have fairer lives, experience more joy and less of the enervation that shrinks a day to the grey four walls of a shabby room.

We have this optimistic dream of really changing the world, this vision of justice and equality, but we don't really know exactly what it is that would stop the cloying despair and confusion so many of us face. We expect the world to change, we stamp our feet and devote years and years of our lives to achieving this change but it doesn't seem to be changing very fast or, if it is, it is in tiny little steps that sometimes we don't notice.

That takes me to the subject of my talk, which is all about what helps us carry on doing what we do.

In Hug we have the collective vision of a better world but, I expect, as workers, you all have your own individual visions of what helps the people you work with, and have your own mechanisms that keep you doing what you do in a world where the work you do is not often celebrated or rewarded for the vitally important task it is by the society we live and on whose behalf you do what you do.



**HUG at
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

When I speak to you today, I will have just spent a day waiting to appear in court to give evidence about the death of one of our members.

Marcia died about 6 years ago: she was a wonderful, vibrant person, filled with warmth and character, she was always teasing us, making fun of our English accents and our inability to understand her Doric poetry. She had a zest for life and a huge desire to contribute and be needed and valued and loved and yet she faced the burden of schizophrenia and struggled with life and existence and moved between residential place to residential place and hospital ward to respite centre. She sometimes entered a twilight zone of sadness and hopelessness but then she would shake off her sadness and come and see us and tell us off for not finding enough for her to do.

Then she moved into her own house. For a time it was good then it was bad and then it was good again and then she was raped and couldn't cope. Her foundations collapsed around her, and she was admitted to hospital where not everyone believed her story.

Whilst she was in hospital she hanged herself. I was working for the government, at the time, and was with a user group the other side of the country when her funeral was held. I chose not to go because I thought she would have preferred me to work with the users rather than shed tears. I think the court hearing is because her family do not believe that a person who is admitted under a section should be able to kill themselves in such a way on the very ward she is meant to be helped in.

I don't know what I think, I am so sad that such a young and vibrant person could I have died so needlessly and her family must still ache with grief for her.

For this talk I will draw out a number of points,

What we all need
The reality of illness
Our wish to take risks
What we expect from those that help us
What we should give to those that we help
The possibility of hope and recovery

I will have some thoughts and ideas, but just because I am standing on a stage saying them in public, don't think that they are right, feel free to challenge them and disagree and have your own beliefs, these ideas are just the musings of a person typing away in his

sitting room, whilst listening to music and looking forward to a cup of coffee with friends. They are not the result of years of study or the intimate knowledge of models of living, they are the reflections of a human just like you.

Well as I said, I am off to meet friends for coffee, after I have written for another half hour. My friends are wonderful, they have helped me through the bitter debris of a marriage that has broken up after 18 years of togetherness, they invite me into their houses, they feed me, talk to me, joke with me. They listen to me meandering about my life and continually getting it wrong, they put up with my drunkenness and allow me to cook for them, take their dogs for walks and play with their children and when I am lonely or just away off home they give me great big hugs to say goodbye.

That is a basic need so many of us have; the sacred bond of friendship, to be able to pick up the phone, walk around the corner, to know that there are people who will share your hopes and dreams, who will listen to you and laugh with you when you are sad and when you are full of the joy of living. To have someone, who when you are consumed with loneliness, or are just being you, will reach out and touch your arm or wrap their arms around you and hold you close. That is such a basic, basic need for the majority of us.

The bond of closeness, and yet when I look at many of my friends they are lonely and tired, days echo with the absence of conversation, of the blankness of no one to talk to or share a meal with.

In the years of my loneliness, it was the silence of the world that could only be broken by the alien conversation of the radio that broke me to small pieces. It is a fact that so many people with a mental illness live alone and dread the weekend. A weekend for, most people, is a well earned break and a time to relax and celebrate. But for too many of my friends; it is a desert of blankness and sadness that needs endured till the workers are on duty again or the drop in centre opens or all the other routines of the weekday start again that can involve them in their community.

We talk of friendship and its absence, for people, but what of intimacy? After 23 years living with the same person, my body recoils with the fear of being so close to another person, of being vulnerable and loving and tender. It seems as remote and frightening as anything I can imagine, but at night, when I lie on my single mattress on the floor, I can feel lonely and yearn for the wonderful joy of cuddles and arms that hold another person and

warm skin and sweet breath. I can yearn for the ordinary company where life with another person is as routine and expected as waking up or eating tea.

To be in a stable relationship can be as encouraging and invigorating and fulfilling as any walk on the mountains or break besides a mountain stream, in fact, where better to be with a partner than walking besides the trickle of water. And, as we all know there are so many people with mental health problems who do not have any sort of relationship like this and who are so far, far away from it as to be lost in isolation.

This evening I will visit one of my friends and her daughter will come up for a big cuddle and I will hold her baby for a short time, tomorrow, another friends daughter will come home and as she is slightly older she will slink into my house and be cool for a while before going back to her mum.

For me, the joy of our children is immeasurable, I have a son who is now grown up who I love more than anything, but, for the moment, we are estranged. I meet too many of my friends who have either lost their children or have children that are bitter towards them. In my mind one of the greatest tragedies a parent can go through, however ill they are, is to lose their children.

When I walk into work, I find occupation and activity and something to believe in and consume me. I find company and conversation and support and reflection and laughter. I do a job that is stressful and which has an impossible goal and yet I get constant praise and I walk in there and feel that people are glad to see me. I do a task and find that it was worthwhile, I drive home in the evening and feel that I have spent another day where I am valued and needed, where there is worth and point to my life. And yet I meet far too many people who say that they have nothing to do, nothing to give, that their views are pointless and will never be listened to anyway.

Why do I go about myself for so long? What Marcia sometimes lacked, I often have, what I have is what so many people accept as a right and so many other people yearn for. We need friendship, we need relationships, stable families, things to do, something to believe in, a chance to feel important and useful, a chance for a cuddle as a natural part of our lives, a chance to laugh and talk, a chance to make mistakes and get drunk and still be supported by those that love us.

Marcia had Schizophrenia and is now dead, she was such a vibrant, wonderful, person I cannot understand why she didn't have the

wonderful life that I do. I have schizophrenia too, I have been sectioned four times and also attempted suicide but sometimes, nowadays, I dare to think that I might one day look forward to a life that is filled with the vigour of everyday life. And you who are listening, I don't know whether you agree with what I say or whether you have any of these things in your own lives too, I don't know whether your jobs are secure, if you feel value in what you do, if you feel needed and useful and important and confident, but, I am pretty certain that many of the people that you work with don't have many of these things at all.

It seems so basic: friendship, love, conversation, someone to rely on when we are down, someone to give us a cuddle, a hug, someone to believe in us, someone to value us and want us to do well, the basic elements that make us all feel good about each other. I don't understand why my friends do not have this, surely in this diverse society, this rich society, this society that bubbles with wealth and opportunity there must be a place where my friends could fit in and find value and self belief and surely as workers we can all help in these simple areas of life.

Sometimes, I think it is a class thing, a background sort of thing, Marcia was solidly working class and got sucked into a system where people didn't believe in her or expect anything of her, she by her illness, and the perception people had of background was defined as a failure and on the margins, she was seen as someone to be looked after and helped and protected and was in turn encouraged to see herself in that way. She was, it could be said, sucked into a system that helped her to shake off her self belief, her confidence, her vigour, and zest for being her. I, as you might guess, by my accent, have had a privileged upbringing and, much as I hate to admit it, by being sent away to public school in my childhood I was put into a system that constantly reaffirmed my worth, people like me, through no merit, were constantly told that they were the crème de la crème, the leaders and the achievers, well I didn't achieve but I was left a legacy that helped me believe in myself despite a wealth of evidence that told me that I shouldn't.

I suppose there is that evidence that we forget about, when we get absorbed in our common humanity, in social models of disability, in recovery, in the blind hope we need to place in each precious individual for their progression to somewhere better. We sometimes forget why so many of us end up in the situation that we do. And that of course, is because we are ill, Marcia's life was blighted by exclusion but it was also blighted by illness and maybe one of the sad inescapable facts is that her illness was so bad and so terrible that ultimately it destroyed her.

You all work in mental health, so you know what I am talking about, but sometimes we go through so much, and get so used to it, that we forget what we are talking about.

When I talk about Marcia I should also talk about:

Graham, Michael, Ken, Miss b, Peter, Karl, Suzie Fiona Quentin and the other Quentin Fiona, Sheila and the others I know who I have already forgotten that have killed themselves

because mental illness is one of the most wretched and miserable experiences anyone can go through. You will all find self harm, and attempted suicide routine now, you will all know friends and people that you work with, who have not survived.

And sadly, people like me become used to it and forget what it means but on occasion we remember and we think of the people around us.

We see the beauty of the world, the soft skin of our friends and lovers, we see laughter and tenderness, we see a wee child skipping, an old couple cuddling. We see the blue sky and the silver sea, the flowers that grow every year, the trees that last for decades. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we see a world that is so incredibly beautiful and so vibrant and so exciting, we see millions and billions of lives that are so terribly, terribly precious and important and in these times of reflection we realise the absolute bliss of being able to spend a few short decades on this world. And then we look at our friends, who are nowhere near that world, those who have chosen the blunt, thankless option of death over beauty because their life had none of those echoes in it. And we see every day, friends who struggle out of bed, whose breath is the ash of the hopelessness of despair, whose vigour rests in spending a day deciding whether to make a cup of tea for themselves, whose hold on joy is so fragile that the very concept echoes with disgust at the hope it may inspire, and that of course, is the world of mental illness and mental distress and it is not pretty and there are no instant cures and even the most loving partner, the greatest friend the most fantastic worker sometimes cannot penetrate or walk the bridge to the lonely place their friends live in.

All we can do is travel the journey with our friends; be there again and again, keep our faith in them alive in our hearts, when their hope left their souls months or years ago.

That is the reality of illness it is a terrible, terrible thing to experience and witness; it destroys lives and blights families and even the workers who are there to help and all we can do is hope, one day, for the tools that help us adapt to the harsh conditions it thrusts us all in. Or even to have, dare I say it, the medication, psychological intervention or other therapy that lifts us out and gives us back the opportunities for an everyday if not ordinary life we thought we had lost.

Someone, somewhere, may have felt that Marcia had a right to take risks with her life and, of course, with risks come mistakes and consequences that may be awful. I don't know what I think about risk. It seems to me that I want to be able to take the risks that I have an inclination to take but being forced into a world where I feel unsafe and unlooked after, where I feel that the tightrope I have been walking along so precariously, may be cut at its destination, to leave me to plummet to the depths of my soul, then maybe that is not what I would want to happen, however optimistic my helpers feel about giving me back these stock phrases of 'responsibility and hope and normality'. Sometimes I am vulnerable, and like the rest of the interconnected tangle of humanity need to step back for a time, months, days or years and be looked after and kept and warm.

And yet, when I was in hospital last time and on a section and busy wanting to kill myself, the psychiatrist took risks with my security that resulted in me being given freedoms earlier than most people thought I should have it. To my surprise it was easier to keep safe when given personal responsibility for being safe than when I was being guarded and yet at other times he insisted that I stay surrounded by nurses. And that being looked after, kept me safe too. I suppose I am just glad that I don't make those sorts of decisions.

And for people like you, who are there to help people like me. What is it that I expect from you? I have met many, many workers of one sort or another over the years. Some stand out as great and others as not so good.

The ones who weren't good. It is easy for me to remember them. They were remote, clinical, they believed they knew best and doubted my version of events.

When a worker appears in my living room and asks me to tell them intimate details of my life but they remain a stranger to me; giving nothing of themselves, not showing an interest in me, being such a vague presence that I wonder whether they are thinking about what

to have for tea when I talk of despair. When they are a professional cipher, who smiles in the right places, asks the right questions and shows no vibrancy then I feel insulted and sick to have them in my home and co operate as little as I can and say as little as I can.

On the other hand I have had professionals who feel like a prized uncle having a conversation, or who glow, who have an energy, who give of themselves and of their skills and their ideas, who are interested in me and my friends, who remember details of my life, my son's name, my friends opinions. They make me feel so good and so protected and so willing to look that bit further, think that bit more, engage with whatever ideas we have for my recovery. They are people I feel willing to speak with, not willing, I look forward to seeing them, I don't feel guilty about asking for their help. I think; you are trying to understand me, you are not judging me, you have made a connection, maybe you're not a friend but you are a valued presence in my life.

When I have had professionals like this in my life, I can feel my prospects and my care and my desire to keep well transformed, they invigorate, I feel believed in, I think they will go a wee bit further for me, put just that scrap extra in that gives me the motivation to move forward, move along and believe in myself again.

It distils itself down to those workers who dare to be human with me, when they are both human and respectful I couldn't care less whether they challenge me, get cross with me or joke with me in fact that makes me flourish. Some of the most politically incorrect workers have been the people who have helped me transform my life and those that live rigidly by standards and the hands off professional boundary approach ,where a robot properly programmed would probably be more effective, of which I have met too many, are those that I wish never to see in my life, who make my life miserable and my feelings resentful.

There are of course some that are plain wrong, they get facts wrong, they remember incorrectly and yet they insist they are right, they don't listen to me and they don't try to consider my perspective and, to be honest, I would be quite happy if they were put on permanent pay in isolation as long as they didn't intrude into my life.

When I think of what I should give to those that I help and forget that I am a user. I think to myself I should have dropped everything and gone to Marcia's funeral. She was a dear friend, a client, if you

like that word, but a special person in my life. The latest policy, the latest demand of the work place, seems now to be trivial, when you are working with a real person, with real feelings and their own unspoken desires and dreams and wishes that often involve the assistance of the workers who are in their life.

What I should give is my commitment to the lives of those that I work with, my belief in them, my common bond as a fellow human, my hope for their recovery, my belief in them, my desire to travel on their journey in some fashion or other, to share that journey at the level they want or need to see the wonder that is given to us when we are given the unimaginable privilege of working with the feelings and dreams of another human being who for a brief while puts their trust in our faith in them and our ability to assist them in their fragile visions.

And last of all recovery, we are such a diverse collection of people in this room. We all have our own different dreams and half grasped visions of what we want. For each of us to dare to dream for a state of wellbeing of contentment, of the very journey of our life, to travel its own rickety route, is our own personal recovery plan.

What we hold dear, in all our idiosyncrasy, is where we want to go but we can't get there on our own. No one is an island alone, no one totally independent, even if we hold our dreams tight to our chests we need people to help us on that journey because every single one of us depends in some way or another on another person or aspect of society to travel forward.

But a personal dream is just that, our goals and our visions remain special to us. No one can decide what those are for us. I can't walk up to anyone in this room and tell them "what you need in your life is this, this and this" just as none of you can walk up to a person with mental health problems and take them on their recovery journey. No one can do recovery to another person. It's as stupid as, it's as stupid as, I don't know what; we can't live other peoples lives, we can't decide what is best for other people. But what we can do is use our skills as workers to help people find their own place and vision of recovery, we can accompany, we can support and we can give people, through our own faith in them, the faith that they may have stopped daring to believe in.

I have used Marcia as a tragedy in this story and compared her with all the privileges I have that keep me well but actually it seems to me that Marcia's spirit was all about recovery, she lived a life aimed at the goal of finding a place of sustained contentment and acceptance. She had a hugely complicated route to run but she had

energy and determination and vigour and humour, she had a vibrancy and wonder about life and she also had an illness and it was this blip in her illness and the terrible things that people can do to each other that caused her journey to finish early.

When I think of Marcia I think I have so much to learn from her, she was the embodiment of the determination to live a life as best we can. All journeys end, some tragically early, but we can all learn from Marcia or similar people that you have met in your lives, and in that hope, we can look to the future, look to a vision of a better world, that will be strewn with dangers and pitfalls but one, which is worth so much to all of us to strive for.

Thank you.