



MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

HEALTHY WORKING LIVES SEPT AND OCT 2010

Hello, thank you for letting me speak to you.

My name is Graham Morgan and I am going to talk about mental health in the workplace from the perspective of someone with a mental illness.

Although I hope you find what I say interesting, I strongly recommend that you visit our website: hug.uk.net where you can find various reports on employment and mental health. Our most recent report is entitled 'A mentally healthy workplace' and condenses the views of 98 people who have experience of mental illness into their views of what they think would make the workplace a healthy place for all of us.

However for the next 20 minutes I am going to talk about me! At the time of writing this; it is a muggy day, early in the morning and, after catching the sleeper to London, it is not a thing I particularly relish. I am tired, hot and groggy I have a headache and at the moment I am wondering why on earth I work at all.

Work, at the moment, is just something I do, I've worked full time for the last 21 years and I am so used to it that I hardly question it. I struggle to get up every morning, I realise that I am getting old when I find it hard to balance on one foot to put on my socks, I make coffee, consider toast and usually reject it, listen to the news on radio four and get dejected and then hope its not raining when I walk to the bus stop to go to work.

Then I spend the day writing, talking, sometimes travelling, I attend meetings, I reply to e-mails. I write reports, give the occasional talk get harassed by admin for my chaotic approach to life and work in particular and then I either get a lift or I catch the bus home again where I ponder walking along the beach before making tea and opening the whisky and wondering what's on t.v.. At some stage I realise it's time to sleep and whilst I read before putting out the



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Registered Office: MacLeod and MacCallum, 28 Queensgate, Inverness. IV1 1YN



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

light I hope that I will sleep through the night and then its time for work again.

Eventually I find Saturday has arrived and I breathe a sigh of relief and look forward to lying in bed doing nothing for as long as I can before going to the café to meet my friends.

It is a very routine life which I have carried out in some sort of fashion for the last 15 years here. But then, no life is routine and even if some of you find a twitch of recognition at it or alternatively a touch of envy because, for you, mornings are often about organising everyone else or weekends are times to be up early and transporting children around, you will know that, behind all the routine and the drudge and the familiarity, lie people with stories and hopes and beliefs and interests that are crying out to be told and every job, however boring and routine it might appear to be, has its ups and downs and tales that must be told and at the heart of it all is that unpredictable, irritating mass of humanity amongst which most of us rely on for our happiness contentment and security.

So let me turn around and give a wee bit of light to this story. I have had a mental illness since I was 21.

In the first few years of this I had a diagnosis of personality disorder and my inner landscape and lifestyle meant that work was inaccessible to me. Then, through a combination of nepotism and good luck, I spent a couple of years as the skipper of an ocean going yacht in the Far East.

From the age of 28 I have worked in mental health as a collective advocacy worker and manager.

I now have a diagnosis of schizophrenia, depression and alcohol abuse. I am being compulsorily treated under a community treatment order and spent the first three months of this year in New Craigs psychiatric hospital under a section.

I also have an m.b.e. for services to mental health, for the work that I do, so, someone, somewhere, believes that the work that I do is of a very high standard.

But when you look at all those labels I would not seem like an ideal choice to many employers and the people who did originally employ me took what might have seemed to them to be a big gamble which I hope has paid off well.

Before I go any further, my story is not one of those motivational stories of someone who has triumphed over huge odds. I am just an ordinary person who loves his job and who despite having a serious and frightening, so called illness, spends most of his time extremely well and with little that stops him working.

I am extremely fortunate and very lucky unlike many of the people I work for.

But let me tell you about my experience and then about my work.

In my early twenties my life was hard. I had failed at university, I had no qualifications, my outlook on life was dark, I didn't see any light around me, I lived in what seemed like a dark prison where death was the most attractive solution and where the only thing that prevented it was my own cowardice. I had few friends, I slept most of the day. My motivation was almost zero and work. Work was a meaningless concept. I no more thought of working than I thought of flying to the moon.

And yet that changed; I know the causes and they were so simple. After a spell in an old dump of a psychiatric hospital, I suddenly found something to believe in. I saw how my friends and acquaintances were dealt with by a very uncaring world and wanted to change it.

The first step was becoming a volunteer, I looked after young people with a mental illness, although, when I say I looked after them, in reality they looked after me and by giving me the privilege of feeling that I was useful and valuable, my outlook changed, I found friends, mainly volunteers I associated with and to my surprise found that life could be good: staying up till four in the morning frantically searching for cigarette papers and solving the problems of the world between slugs of beer changed my life, gave me self belief, gave me energy, gave me the wish to contribute, gave me a wish just to be and to do and to get on with things.

But what really changed it all was meeting my future wife on an epic transatlantic yacht delivery: to be loved, to have someone that wants to touch you, that thinks you're wonderful, who wants you to think they are wonderful, who you go walking with and skiing with, make meals with and travel around the world with. It was as though light was showering in to my mind. I felt filled with joy and self belief.

I found that my personal life had become rich and vibrant. I was so lucky to have found steps out of my personal darkness and with that luck came a huge confidence.

This led to me becoming a yacht skipper as I said and then, somehow or other, in my late twenties, I was able to argue that experience as a yacht skipper was the ideal training to have to start

in a well paid job as a community development worker. To this day I don't know how I did it as I am still slightly confused about what community development is.

Now two decades on, with a failed marriage, a son who won't talk to me and 17 years of a psychotic illness, I am still working and loving almost every minute.

I want to talk about what it is that keeps me working and keeps me loving my work but I had better talk about what my illness is, as although you will all have heard of schizophrenia I would expect that some of the experience is alien to some of you.

I play lip service to my diagnosis, it used to be a convenient way of explaining unsavoury aspects of my life but I have never felt ill. I have never in my life woken up and thought I'm feeling mentally ill today; I'm just me, but for the sake of explanation, when I am ill I believe that I am evil, I think that I am possessed by bad spirits or have been taken over by a devil. Sometimes I think my existence is poisoning all those I love. I can think that my thoughts are being warped and altered by spirits in the air around me. Sometimes I hear voices. I can get very low so that the world is a grey place and I lose confidence in myself and I frequently try to blot all this out and find ways of sleeping by drinking lots of alcohol.

When these terrible times happen I am inevitably hospitalised and usually sectioned and followed round the hospital ward by nurses who spend their time trying to stop me harming myself. It is a lonely, frightening, humiliating experience that I find shattering and which damages those that are close to me but, when I leave hospital, my world usually picks up a step again and I regain my appreciation of the wonderful beauty of the world we are in and the incredible good fortune I have to have a crowd of friends around me who brighten my life daily, both in and out of work.

I do not subscribe to the belief that work is always good for your mental health, I think some of us will never be able to work, that many of us can and do contribute in a myriad of ways that do not come under the category of paid work and that this way of living and contributing should be recognised and respected and validated. I also know that some workplaces are in themselves intrinsically unhealthy, they damage people cause them stress and unhappiness, anxiety and fear. They can be put under unfair pressure, exploited and harassed. These are not the sorts of places I would like government policy to pile with already damaged and vulnerable people.

However for some of us, work is good for us and I believe that usually applies to me. The work I do allows me to be paid for acting on one of the central preoccupations of my life. I can't believe that I am paid well to do something I used to do for nothing. It is wonderful.

But getting back to the basics, why do I work and what do I get out of work? What function do I see it playing?

First of all work is just what I was brought up to expect, we will all remember the times as young children when we were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up and it always involved a statement about occupation.

Work was what school and the world taught me to aspire to; it is where I find identity and status and the tasks that fill the routine of a day.

Work is what my parents pressed home to me in those years that I found I couldn't work.

But work is more personal, it is a place where I meet people, where I learn, where I feel useful and needed, where I feel important and valued. Where I find that I can give and be respected and do little things that make the world around me, better for me and those that I care about.

Work is where I get paid, so that I can afford a mortgage and a car and food and a tv license.

Work gives me status so that I don't have to justify my existence and explain myself every day to people.

Just as an aside; 85% of people with a serious mental illness are unemployed, unlike me they cannot guarantee acceptance or thanks for the ways that they contribute to society, they are not only seen as lacking in value they are the subject of opprobrium from society. 38% of incapacity benefit claimants claim it because of mental ill health and the government and the media portrays these people as the frauds and the scroungers that cost this country so much.

I don't understand this. The people I know, blossom with daily gifts to each other, with the struggle to manage in some way in relative poverty. They are wonderful people who I have immense respect for.

Most of them couldn't work. They are not being lazy or anything like that they have illnesses that cause all sorts of problems from getting out of bed in the morning to finding motivation, self belief or

that semblance of control that so many of us rely on to keep us going in company.

But for those of us who do work or may get into work what are the barriers and the solutions?

The first of course is that many people who develop a mental illness do so in their late teens and early twenties, just when they should be getting the qualifications and skills that will get them into employment. That was me but I was lucky enough to find alternative ways in to work and a work environment that was accepting of a variable work record and of the value of experience that is not always attached to bits of paper.

The second is stigma. I forget the number of people who say that they have experienced harassment or discrimination at work but it is high. A friend of mine is struggling at the moment with her decision not to declare her mental illness at a time when her health is fragile. But she dare not be open about it for fear of what her employers and fellow employees will do.

I have experienced little stigma, at the beginning of my job there was a small group of people who would not invite me to their meetings because I had a mental illness, there were people who were patronising so that you had to bite your lip, but then being praised for the smallest things is not that hard a thing to put up with, there were people who did not know I had a mental illness and who talked about the strength I must have to work with people like 'them' but above all there was the self stigma. The shame, the anxiety and the lack of confidence.

In the early days I had a huge need to prove myself, to show that someone like me could work and could work well. This meant that I worked all the hours I could. I didn't relax until the stress of my own demands on myself and the pressure of my personal life meant that I ended up in psychosis and in hospital.

There was also my pride and self consciousness. I did not want to hide my illness and I did not know why no one mentioned it. So I do remember a very embarrassing staff meeting where I didn't so much come out as mentally ill as leap down everyone's throats as mentally ill. Luckily for me I was surrounded by tolerant and understanding people.

What are the ingredients that keep me working? The things that help me are individual, there is no set menu of what to do with someone who is mentally ill but for me some things rest in my mind that helped me and kept me working.

It is those aspects of common humanity and the acceptance of difference. I am not a very conventional person and I remember early on in this job I was having a trying and testing day, so trying that at some point in the afternoon I curled up in the corner of my room and shut my eyes to blot the world out and at some stage a fellow worker noticed me in my lonely corner, came in draped a blanket over me and left me there. I stayed there for a wee while and then got up and went back to work. I suppose it must have appeared a bit odd to people but with a minimum of fuss a problem was averted, I was invigorated and life was back on track.

For me, there is a need to be in control of what I do, it is incredibly important to me that I have the freedom to take my own initiative, to press forward without being told what to do all the time, without my authority being challenged at every instance. I am lucky that I work in an organisation where this quality is celebrated but with enough structure through our action plans and contact with our members to ensure we stay on the right track.

I have all sorts of needs, sometimes life is not caught in rigid boundaries and I need to confide in other people about things that may on the surface seem irrelevant to work, but having the opportunity to speak to my boss, a colleague or a HUG member can quickly ease my mind and help me focus again on the task in hand. Equally, most of the people I know suffer periodic times of anxiety. I get in to places where I doubt the value of my work and doubt myself and the occasional drip of positive feedback reassures me and keeps me motivated and energised.

I don't know about you, but sometimes we can get angry at life, work and everything and at those times we may blame those around us. I have learnt not to pour anger on all the people I imagine are responsible for my so called injustices and usually know the boundaries that I need to tread. But I do know, that in the past, I could e.mail my boss when I felt aggrieved and her tolerance of these outbursts stopped me from building up imaginary wars in my head.

Whilst I feel the need for autonomy and try to give it to those that I manage. I also have a need to be protected. The fact that people look out for each other and rally round when things are difficult is hugely reassuring.

I like to feel secure in myself as an individual but equally I love the feeling of being a part of a team, a network of banter and concern

and affection and mutual commitment. The faith we have in each other serves to add to the work we do alone.

For a time recently I was going through all the heightened emotion, the sleepless nights and the anger of a brutal separation. It was inevitable that that would affect my work life, for me it meant that I worked and worked, that my emotions were erratic and my judgement, at times poor, I was lucky that this was accepted at work, that people understood but equally that at times where my emotion spilled damagingly into work that people tactfully helped me see that I was, on occasion, overstepping the mark of what is acceptable.

And then of course, there is the painful reality of illness, I have been in hospital three times in the last four years and this has been adapted to by my fellow workers; they have covered the work that I couldn't do and explained to our funders where there have been shortfalls. They have visited me in hospital with gifts and the huge gift of their continued respect and friendship. They have usually kept me informed of what is happening in my absence, which for me is terribly important and have created opportunities for me to do the small bits of work that keep me going when ill that help me retain a sense of self worth. I have had time off work, I have been able to come back to work at my own speed, I have been able to take time for my numerous medical appointments and I have been free of the terrible burden of explaining myself. There has been complete openness that has stopped me having to justify, explain away or pretend that what I go through is anything other than what it is and when I walk back in to the building I am met with smiles and warmth.

Lastly my work is, for me, unique; it allows me to work with a community of people to whom I feel I belong, it is not just where I turn up bleary eyed in the morning, it is where I gain purpose, friendship, meaning value and self confidence.

I am very lucky, I hope you are all similarly lucky and that the people you work with are too. What helps me and makes my work great doesn't necessarily help you or other people. I suppose when I think of employment and mental health I think of people and adapting to the huge variety of needs we have as individuals and recognising that if we can adapt positively to the idiosyncrasies we all exhibit in sometimes immovable jobs and tasks we can make the workplace human and a venue where we prize wellbeing, and by doing this, promote the ability for us to all achieve and contribute in the huge variety of ways we are all capable of.

