



Ministry of defence –Thurso October 2007

Hello

For my part of these presentations I am going to talk about what makes for a mentally healthy workplace.

I am not an expert in this, I have been on no courses and read no books and as many of you are managers I expect you may have more knowledge about systems and procedures that make for vibrancy than I do.

However what I do have is the knowledge that I work in what, - is for me, - a delightful setting and also the experience of having what is meant to be a serious mental illness and yet still being able to maintain a full time job.

This may be my first message for you when we look at mental health in the workplace - we need to look at the mental health of everyone not just those of us that have a mental illness and this means leaving preconceptions at the door. I have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and yet I keep very well for most of the time. I am rarely off work and need few overt adaptations to allow me to do my job. If we are ill we may need people to look out for us but we may not and if we are not ill but are going through a miserable patch we may need help at work and then again that help may not be welcome. To me a healthy work environment boils down to respect for the individual and their particular situation. Perhaps not an easy task in big organisations.

My second message is to think about what keeps you healthy at work or maybe doesn't – what works for you may be what works for other people and what makes you fed up at work may make other people unhappy.

I'll describe my work and my workplace and then reflect on what it is that keeps me so happy to do the work that I do. Sometimes I think that

without the work that I do I would spend much more time being ill. For me work is my own unique therapy it keeps me motivated, occupied, engaged, and interested. It provides social networks, challenges and vibrancy. It enhances my life and helps make me flourish.

I work for Highland Community Care Forum which is a charity with about 20 staff and whose aim is to be the voice of users and carers of people using community care services. The bit that I do is to work with HUG. Which is an organisation that fits under the umbrella of HCCF and which speaks out on behalf of people with a mental health problem and seeks to eliminate the stigma of mental illness. My role is to manage Emma and Karen who are our anti stigma workers and to help find out the views of our members and with them lobby for lasting change. I also manage Christine who does the same sort of work but with people with learning disabilities. So I am a cross between a manager and a grassroots worker.

The first thing that keeps me healthy in my work is the fact that I believe in what I do. I don't know whether that applies to everyone but for me I need to believe that there is a point to my work. I am one of those people for whom a cause and a purpose can be all consuming. For me this came about as a result of being a patient in a psychiatric hospital in the '80's. For me, seeing the sheer injustice of what people had to go through when at their most desperate was a huge shock, watching grown adults scrabbling in ash trays for cigarette ends, seeing the decay of the hospital and the terror of people when nurses piled onto them to restrain them in crisis, seeing homeless shelters where the bare floorboards were the bed and dustbin bags peoples suitcases and seeing myself becoming identified with this community was a complete wake up. It made me see the world differently and made me see that here was something that I could get involved in and change and maybe make some difference in. At that point I had little self belief and sense of value but finding something like this gave me a grounding and an inspiration which 8 years later led to the sort of work that I now do. I am now 20 years on from that first revelation and in my heart I still have that burning desire to make a difference, to achieve and change and succeed. That is the core of my work - when I walk into work or meet members of hug my heart is usually filled with lightness. Now not every job has that same sense of passion but surely a healthy workplace is built on the fact that the jobs the people are doing are the jobs that they want to do.

The next ingredient that makes my life so good is my colleagues and the members of hug . I am nearly always thrilled to be around the people I work with and for. We are a team of incredible closeness and warmth, we work in a challenging environment and as such need the support we can offer each other when faced with difficult or traumatic situations. I don't really know how I can convey what it is that makes working with the people I do so good. There is humour and silliness and a combination of talents and ways of looking at the world that enhances our own individual abilities, there's Emmas flights of fancy that if we lived them would commit us all to working 24 hours a day for the next 10 years, there's her passion and enthusiasm, there's Karens fantastic commitment and warmth and ability to deal with the horrors of life calmly, there's her

technical and organisational and visionary qualities and both can be bribed with bars of chocolate when things go wrong. And of course there is our membership to whom we are accountable, they are a wonderful collection of people with histories and experiences and views and talents that need to be respected and treasured and valued. I have the privilege of touring the highlands every two months and am constantly delighted and amazed at how welcome I am made when we meet up and settle down to plan once again how we will change the world.

People make the difference don't they . Few of us live in total isolation to others and all of us are affected by the way we all act. A workplaces atmosphere and health can be gauged by how we all get on with each other. Not necessarily by measuring our emotional health but by seeing how we look out for each other. If someone is having a bad day what do we do? if someone is having a hard time at home what allowances do we make? If we have made a mistake do we apologise to the colleague or client we have offended. For me it is the values that we bring into work that are a measure of a healthy environment. Such things as respect, tolerance, support, empathy, flexibility, shared goals and visions; going that extra mile to celebrate a success or to help with an area of work we have difficulty with.

For me one of the marks of health is to see what we do if someone is off sick, whether that be physical or mental – what *do* we do? In some workplaces there may be a collective sigh of frustration as people realise that their workloads may increase, in others people rally round and take up the slack and send cards home and visit people in hospital and see what can be done to make sure that their colleague still feels supported and valued and important and that when they come back to work it is not to the glances of reproach but to a celebration and discussion as to what if anything can be done to make things better - what sounds best to you?.

For me there are a number of crucial things that make my workplace healthy .

One of these is control and autonomy. I know what I want to do and how to do it and I am given the freedom to carve my own path. Yes there are bits I have to do in my work which I don't like doing and which frustrate me but the central goal which is about helping create a strong and vibrant voice is left to me, it doesn't mean that I never discuss or consult on what we do , in fact sometimes I think we might do that too much but it does mean that people trust the quality of my work so much that they let me get on with it and just do it. I am given a degree of leadership and responsibility that I relish and which gives me freedom and enhances both my confidence and self worth.

The next bit is safety . Just being amongst other like minded people keeps me reassured and safe. Knowing that there are people who can provide support or advice if I get stuck or into areas that I feel out of my depth in is great. My bosses door is always open or at least ajar and if I need to discuss an area that is risky or may have bad repercussions if it goes wrong is really good. So although I have room to be my own person I also

have the sure knowledge that I can turn to other people when I worry about what I do. It is not always my boss that I would go to, it can be Emma or Karen or a Hug member.

In all areas of work we can build up warehouses of resentment, something hasn't gone right, a piece of work hasn't been delivered on time, you think a fellow worker is cross with you, your boss is making unreasonable demands, the whole ethos of your parent organisation is wrong. I can spend the early hours of the night winding myself up to pitches of anxiety and rage that completely dwarf the reality (if there was any) of the original problem. And, as we all know that is a fine ingredient for disharmony

When we give vent to these feelings we have the potential to implode amongst ourselves. For me one of my vents to frustration is the hastily written e.mail that at the time seems like a polite way of disagreeing with something and which in retrospect seems like a venomous hate mail. My boss has grown used to these and so when she gets such a thing lets it ride in a way I sometimes don't deserve. With anxiety comes lack of confidence and Karen and Emma as well as our hug members are well used to my not so obvious expeditions to gain compliments about what I do which serve to reassure and make me believe that what I do do is good and helpful.

And that is crucial isn't it. Part of the reason I cracked up in my late twenties was because I had no idea whether I was doing a good job or not . People seemed to assume that I would know but I had no idea. Nowadays I get lots of feedback and praise and that makes me feel great. It reinforces all the good things and renews my enthusiasm.

What else – flexibility. I am good at some things and bad at others. I can give a personal speech in front of 200 people with only a few ripples of anxiety and yet set me in front of a spread sheet and my eyes glaze over and all my thoughts start wandering in their own directions. However Mary, Emma, Karen and Sheena gloss over it and set all the inadequacies right. Put me in charge of an action plan or business plan and I become twitchy and yet Karen and Emma will rescue me without the slightest reproach. We do need to do the jobs we are paid to do but equally it is good to build on the skills that other people have and to adapt to those things we're not good at.

Decision making and leadership can be vital. I remember when I was a yacht skipper in the far east and we were sailing in fifty knot winds between oil rigs and coral reefs and the sabah mainland with no engine and the owner of the yacht panicked and said that we were in imminent danger and needed to send out a mayday . In those circumstances I needed to take control and tell him quite forcibly that we wouldn't summon help and, sometimes at work here, there is a need for a quick and decisive response but on other occasions there is the need to make sure that what we do and how we do it is owned by all of us instead of imposed by the authority of someone's standing or salary. Leaders do not necessarily gain those skills through promotion or rank and sometimes we all get along much better if we acknowledge this. A fine example is that

these sessions are usually led by Emma and I do what she expects of me instead of acting as her boss even more of an example this time is that I am now running this because emmas work is, at the moment more busy and important than mine. To acknowledge that many of us have skills and qualities that are not reflected in job descriptions is important, I would say that we need to earn our status and respect the qualities and skills that we see in our colleagues whether they are our superiors or we manage them.

I'm running out of things to say about how I blossom from having working conditions that suit me.

What remains. Variety is important to me – it keeps things buzzing. In one day I can be sitting in a members house hearing a powerful story, holding a meeting about faith and mental health, sitting in a committee meeting and dealing with letters and e-mails. The variety keeps me filled with energy which sometimes flops out of me when I get home in the evening. For me that is another element – I don't see a rigid distinction between home and work and will share stories from both parts of my life; to me that is a natural thing to do.

Everyone works in challenging environments in one way or another and of course in hug where we deal with the world of mental illness some of the things we witness are unpleasant. In the last three days I have met three Hug members who I know well who either have well developed plans about how to kill themselves or who see their lives as beings so awful that death would be a kind release. On Monday Tuesday and Wednesday i have heard Hug members talking about being beaten up by the police and heard Hug members talking about their stories being ignored and dismissed. Sometimes your voice is all the power you have and when even that is dismissed you have nothing left. In Hug we need the tight and supportive team that we do have because without the support and the silliness and the passion, the sadness could sometimes be overwhelming.

I think I'll begin to finish here . Those were my reflections on what keeps me healthy at work. You will have your own ideas about what keeps you healthy and so will your workforce. It is that deep personal knowledge of what works that makes a difference and maybe if we draw on the experiences of the individuals we spend our working lives with then we have the ingredients of a positive place to work in. Yes we need our policies and our supervision and our health and safety and our development plans but if you want to know what keeps the workplace healthy for me it is Emma and Karen, Debbie, Marianne, Kaye, Kier, Pauline, Aileen, Susan, Sheena, Tabitha and Isla and Marina and many others. In other words the people that I'm around.

A last word – you wanted to know about stopping stigma and preventing absence. Having a healthy work place keeps me well and prevents my absence, when I have become ill in the past there was no shame and I was visited all the time I was in hospital. I live in a workplace where it is completely natural for me to talk openly about having a diagnosis of

Schizophrenia. There is no shame and no intrusion into my story. I know of others in hccf who have experience of mental illness who choose not to discuss it openly and that is fine but, for me, knowing that that label is not a problem is one of the litmus tests to use to see if the work environment is an emotionally healthy one. Having that keeps me healthy, knowing that others can also have this openness if they wish means that we have good foundations to build and develop a mentally healthy working environment.

I don't know how you turn the individual experience into the collective and am sure that you could find other people in hccf who have completely different perceptions about our workplace. But I would say look at what keeps you and your fellow workers healthy as the odds are that what works for you may also work for others. Coming into work shouldn't stunt or diminish our individuality or shared humanity –to me it should be a place that celebrates our talents and diversity.

Thanks