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Isolation and Loneliness a response for the Scottish Parliament Equalities committee.

HUG (action for mental health) acts as a voice for people with a mental illness in the Highlands

SPEAK this is me is a project of HUG and is a voice for young people in the Highlands about mental health.

THE VIEWS OF THE HUG THURSDAY THINK IN

Isolation

We think this is a major issue for people with mental health problems. We have just run a recent round of HUG meetings looking at the support needs of our friends and relatives and at each of the 12 meetings held so far a substantial number of the participants (at least half of whom were over 50) said that they did not have any relatives or friends with whom they were in meaningful contact.

We discussed the issue in a Thursday think in; involving 8 people of whom 6 were over 50.

We came up with the following thoughts.

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IS A FEATURE OF MANY OF OUR LIVES BECAUSE:

geography

Many of us live a long way away from our families – some of us have our nearest family members up to 400 miles from us.

Many of us have moved to the area and find ourselves lonely and isolated because it takes a long time to set up support networks and meet friends, this is especially difficult if we are also struggling with mental illness.

attitudes

Some of us suffer exclusion because of:

- The stigma of mental illness
- Our own self stigma
- Our behaviour

HUG (Action for Mental Health) is part of SPIRIT* Advocacy

***Strengthening People In Raising Issues Together**

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(The fact that in small communities people may remember actions and behaviours that stretch back many years and were caused by mental illness that have been neither forgotten nor forgiven.)

This can all serve to increase our isolation and loneliness

We often feel that stigma is even more prevalent in rural areas where we are unable to keep our lives private

illness itself

Because our illness is debilitating and hard for other people we can be very wary of burdening other people and therefore do not reach out to make friends

It can also be hard to get out to meet people, we may find that we lack energy, motivation and confidence as a result of mental illness.

Some of us are paranoid about other people and find it extremely hard to trust and make links with people.

We often struggle to communicate effectively and engagingly.

Mental illness may lead to self-neglect which can cause people to avoid us.

benefits

Many of us are on benefits and cannot afford to meet people outside of the home: we cannot afford transport, meals, drinks, cinema etc.

Transport

This is often inaccessible and therefore we cannot meet people.

It is inaccessible because:

- It is limited in rural areas
- It is not available at night time when we may want to visit a city or town
- It is too expensive if we do not have bus passes
- Some of us cannot use it because we cannot face being in the close company of other people especially strangers
- We often cannot afford cars or cannot drive cars because of illness or restrictions to our licences

communication

Many of us find it:

- difficult to talk to people
- hard to socialise
- struggle to go to a group situation

meeting people/reliability

We can struggle to make appointments whether of a social nature or for our health and wellbeing because our health is so unpredictable – as a result we avoid doing so to avoid letting ourselves or others down.

New places

We can find it hard to go into new buildings
Not knowing what is happening in new places is hard so we avoid these situations

Other disabilities

Some of us have other disabilities which make mixing harder.

Lonely in crowd

We are often isolated because although we are with people we cannot communicate about key aspects of our lives. Talking about mental health and our own mental illness is not encouraged and can be frowned upon.

Not being able to talk about this isolates us and feeling that our friends and family do not understand us and do not wish to understand us makes us even more lonely

People never ask about our mental health and if they ask how we are they usually do not really want an answer.

Sometimes we put on an act to appear confident and charming because we cannot or dare not show anything else – this can isolate us within ourselves

Culture

Those of us who are much older – many of us don't speak about these things we don't want to burden others. We have to appear to be independent

Power imbalances

We can feel controlled by our relatives and friends and therefore very lonely

Adaptations

Some of us our physically challenged – we can't really be solve isolation until we have a flexible and adapted transport system in Highland

Not fitting in

We are often single and without family –and can therefore feel very isolated when mixing with couples and families.

Young people

Conversation with SPEAK members- (a young peoples' voice on mental health in the Highlands)

Speak member B (19 Years old)

"In Rural areas travel is even harder for young people most of whom do not have access to anything other than public transport or their parents cars

Mental illness is still taboo and not understood well by other young people

We have less life experience and knowledge of relationships, we have less life skills less self management ability which increases our isolation.

We are more exposed to social media showing people having a good time while we are alone at home.

It is definitely harder to establish friendships; we think no one will understand us: there is so much pressure to be friends even if they don't treat you right.

In school if you are open about it you can be excluded
Often we are quiet and can't make friends

If we are anxious and in school, we may not be able to go to groups or stay in the canteen

If your friends are hard on you, you can take it more personally and blame yourself

We are often self conscious , anxious, isolated and shy.”

Story from a pupil (L) on his experience of loneliness and isolation

“This is my story on loneliness:

Isolated is how I would describe most of my life. I was always avoided for being different in my earlier years because I didn't know what I did wasn't "normal". I was always talking to myself because I would always get a reply. I only had one real friend at the time and he was never in school.

Back then it didn't bother me because I didn't understand what was going on. Then I got older and the bullying kicked in, literally. I was getting attacked almost every second day - physically and verbally. My friend ditched me for someone else. I realised there was something different about me so I withdrew into myself. I became detached from people and avoided them whenever possible. I genuinely thought I was a monster, evil on the inside, I still do. I rarely spoke to my family or anyone for that matter and I repressed everything.

Things went from bad to worse as the voice started repeating everything the bullies said. Freak. Looney. Worthless. I started to believe the things it was telling me. Every night the voice reinforced the negativity, fuelling the self hatred, causing me to spiral downwards. I self-stigmatised so much that I didn't speak to anyone for the best part of 1st year. I spent all my intervals and lunch times hidden away in the stairwell.

Today, I don't self-stigmatise as much as I used to, but I still avoid most people. I still don't speak to my family much either. SPEAK is helping me hugely, it gives me a sense of purpose and belonging but I'm still isolated. I'm really lucky to have the support of all the incredible people at SPEAK and my amazing girlfriend which is something that others in situations like this are going without.”

Story from another young person;

“My experience of depression was extremely isolating and debilitating. I often felt that I was alone in how I felt and in my day to day struggles. As a society we put a huge amount of pressure on having everything 'together': having the perfect job, the perfect body, the perfect relationships and the perfect life plan. Feeling inadequate in the face of these expectations and isolated from the world around me only exacerbated the imprisonment I felt and the distorted view I held of the outside world, a world which I felt unable to participate in. Only with the support of others and the realisation that these expectations of

us are false and unrealistic could I slowly take apart the walls that depression had built up around me. The most important lesson I learned through experiencing depression was to accept and celebrate that we are all perfectly imperfect and that a smile from a stranger or a friend holding your hand can make the biggest difference in the world.”

Ms L

Statement from a 24 year old

“Growing up with a mental illness made me feel like I wasn't normal, like no-body understood me. I couldn't tell anyone how I felt because I wanted to fit in with all of my friends.”

Ms JL

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS FROM HUG

From a HUG member

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“This is such an important subject. My initial thought is that a person can be lonely even when surrounded by family and friends. It is not enough to be with other people. We each need to feel valued, understood and accepted for who we are. Sometimes it can even lonelier with the 'wrong' people for us, than alone.”

From a HUG member

L

“Feeling lonely isn't always about being physically alone. The greatest loneliness I have suffered has been as a result of feeling socially excluded, marginalised or misunderstood. These days I find more comfort walking alone in the woods than I do in a room full of people who don't understand. This is the burden of carrying a secret, of trying to escape stigma or avoid being judged by people who just don't 'get it'. It's a rare and precious commodity when someone enters our room, just to be together, as we are. This is what I crave.”