**Quaker Life Representative Council**

**Mental Health 11-13 October 2019, Woodbrooke**

*‘Building Inclusive Quaker Communities- Mental Health’*

The QLRC 2019 conference opened on Saturday the 12th with a plenary session shared by four Friends who each, in turn related their personal experiences on living with mental health.

First, a Friend who described how she had grown up with autism which was only diagnosed in her later life. Particularly moving, was her description of her inner turmoil fuelled by the numerous tests and observations she had to go through as a child placed behind a glass window.

She was followed by a clinical psychologist who described the impact of depression on her working life. She described how she is currently coping with the prospect of losing her job imminently and the potential challenge of finding new employment at a later stage in life.

A third and moving account came from a lady carer who has had to devote her entire time to caring for her aging mother with a bipolar condition. She related her struggles in coming to terms with her mother’s diagnosis and her mood swings between highs of hyperactivity and rudeness and lows of depression and suicidal thoughts. What was very striking was her illustration of the cascading effect her mother’s health had on the mental health of the rest of the family and how the carer and the cared-for were both in need of support.

Finally, a young lady with a schizophrenia diagnosis conducted a remarkable role-playing exercise with a volunteer, to highlight the stigma around labels, particularly ones associated with mental ill-health. She demonstrated how every single act she performed, her every preference, her every expression could be reconstrued and twisted round by her social care workers to fit her diagnosis, thereby trapping her beneath the label in perpetuity. This was very eye-opening for me as it indicated how much the humanity and dignity of mental health patients is stripped away by their diagnosis and associated labels.

Following these, we held a series of workshops. I attended two: one on anxiety and self-care and the other on diversity and exclusion within meetings. In the first, the facilitator shared tips on how he managed to get his own personal anxiety under control using techniques such as reframing, mindfulness and self-awareness. We were encouraged to share with others, whereupon a counsellor in our number offered a novel mind technique, from her ‘toolkit’, which stirred my imagination. She related how whenever she felt down and self-critical, she would imagine a character- a loving one who would feed her exactly the opposite of and counteracting those negative messages, self-created. She emphasised, that as in the arena of thought, the brain does not much discriminate between the real and the imagined, endorphins are produced occur within the brain nevertheless, serving to redress the chemical imbalance therein. I found this way of rationalising things particularly eye-opening.

In the second workshop I attended on the topic of exclusion/inclusion in meetings, our facilitator encouraged us to think of instances in our lifetimes when we felt excluded and how we dealt with them. Then drawing on those experiences, we were asked to consider how one might feel excluded, even though apparently welcome in our meeting houses. In conclusion, we learnt that though pleasantries may be exchanged on a weekly basis, there might be lurking underneath the ‘How are you?’ questions and ‘I am fine’ answers, a desire for support and reassurance from someone in adverse circumstances not immediately apparent. We learnt the value of inclusivity in meetings and events, particularly with those hard of hearing, the disabled, the technologically challenged etc. We also agreed that “Getting to know you” events periodically held in meeting houses may offer a means to break down barriers and draw members and new attenders closer together.

In our home groups, a sub-group of five of us were challenged to consider our collective approach to a real-life case study of a convicted sex-offender, seeking acceptance as well as employment in their former meeting house on release from prison. A few contrasting thoughts arose from our discussion, with three of our member emphasising the requirement to follow employment law and cater to the needs of the meeting house as a whole in terms of safeguarding, and the other two stressing the need to recognise ‘that of God’ in the candidate regardless of their past life. Eventually, we came to the conclusion, that the meeting house as an employer and a place for vulnerable people to meet, was required to follow the employment law to the letter, but could at the same time assist the candidate to find employment elsewhere, where his conviction did not constitute such a barrier.

I have in my possession, a number of resources from the workshops I attended as well links to others which I am willing to share amongst your various meetings. Please feel free to contact me at: drkc@hotmail.co.uk, if you meet with any issues on mental ill-health or well-being in your various meetings requiring extra help.

By way of conclusion, please pardon me for turning poetic at this juncture, but as I tried to summarise my thoughts and feelings in the days following the sometimes very emotionally-charged and stimulating council, poetry seemed the most suitable medium to convey them. This is what I penned:

When I meet with one, distressed

Or with a friend who's depressed;

First must I, duties fulfil,

Before reaching for a pill.

Duties, my heart does prescribe,

To others of human tribe;

For, when these are soon performed,

I may be duly informed.

I may find this all they need;

One to listen and take heed

Of their plight; their true worth feel,

Underneath the labelled peel.

I may find too, that I am

Thereby, made much more human;

My tongue then may form the word

Needful most, that strikes a chord.

I hope it adequately conveys the message and my impressions of the weekend. Thank you