

“Building Inclusive Quaker Communities – Mental health: Embracing the elephant in the room”

The introductory letter began:

“Over the past year we have been exploring how we might become more inclusive and diverse Quaker communities. Our focus last October was being all age communities and in April we started to look at how to speak to people whatever their race, gender or background. Continuing this theme of diversity and inclusion, Quaker Life Representative Council will look at how we might offer a welcome that is open to those with mental health difficulties. How do we care for people when difficult and complex emotions arise and how do we deal with the stigma of living with mental distress?”

Woodbrooke was as usual full to capacity, and as usual this was a wonderful opportunity to meet and share experiences, and worship with Friends from all parts of England, Scotland, Wales, and a wide variety of Meetings – urban, rural, large, small.

The topic was a difficult and sensitive one, but well presented and handled. Four Friends gave personal accounts of growing up with and living with autism, caring for a bipolar mother, living with schizophrenia, and personal experience of depression. There were workshops to choose from, and we were divided into “home groups” where there was sharing of personal experience.

We explored boundaries, and discovered that these will inevitably be “fuzzy”. There is no one size fits all. We have, however, to be flexible, and recognise that in the same way we can accept children and allow for their idiosyncrasies worship does not necessarily need to be disrupted by unusual behaviour. As with physical illness, it is not our place to offer solutions. It is understandable that we may feel strongly the urge to “cheer someone up”, but this is not always helpful and simple acceptance may be what is needed from Friends. One Friend suggested that the greatest gift we can offer is “loving kindness”. Although no one wants to turn or be turned away, there may occasionally be times when Meeting for Worship is just not the right place to be at that time and this may be difficult for all concerned. How it is handled is crucial and advice is available. It is to be expected that someone suffering mental distress may be exploring spirituality in a search for answers, and may look to Quakers.

We heard about “The Retreat” in York, where Friends have a long history of innovative care for people with mental illness, and the Retreat Benevolent Fund of which there is information online. mhdo@retreatyorkbfund.com At Friends House, Bev Smith is “Mental Health Empowering Meetings Project Officer” and can be contacted at beverleys@quaker.org.uk . There is lots of useful information available from Friends House. A little booklet “*Mental Health Conversations*” published by The Retreat Benevolent Fund and available from Friends House is a useful introduction. Copies will be available at our next meeting.

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