



Diverse Perspectives on Mental Health

Finding new perspectives

Jonathan Leach:

One of the points we wanted to explore in the course was to ask a question really of people who'd experienced some quite severe mental distress, and an analysis can anything positive come out of that, is it sometimes the story that you pick up in the media is either of tragedy, of blighted lives, or of dangerousness and disaster, and risk, but that didn't really fit with my own experience of having worked with people who'd been through difficulties but come through that experience and learnt things from it and were enjoying many aspects of their lives, and perhaps leading different lives, and so that was a question we wanted to put in developing this course to people who had been through those experiences, so we took the opportunity to interview four members of the cast of the Orphans of Beulah about their experiences of mental distress and how that had changed their lives, and asking a question which I think is often not asked which is, what was positive about it? That might sound quite strange in a way – what was positive about having a bad experience?

So we asked this group of service users and survivors, and all of them on reflection said although it had been very hard at the time, they did feel they were positive experiences, and that was largely through giving them a new perspective on life and knowing that they could survive something that is quite difficult, and perhaps reappraising their lives, working out what was important, and that almost without exception what was important was other people and relationships, and the sense that they could also give something back, that they had learnt from the experience themselves, and they then knew that you can survive these difficult experiences, and are then very well placed to talk to other people who are going through something similar, and perhaps that knowledge and that support coming from somebody who's been there themselves is quite powerful, and perhaps more easy to accept than receiving advice from a mental health professional who might be seen as somebody who's advising from the point of view of knowledge that's been gained from study and from professional experience, but not from a lived experience of having been through it and coming out the other side.

And Chris, one of the interviewees, I think he came out with something which I thought was quite interesting and quite surprising, and he was comparing himself to somebody who'd broadened their mind by travelling around the world and come back with a new perspective, he described it as his experience of breakdown as travelling in his mind, and that having come back from that he was richer for the experience and had learnt things from it, and now saw things in a different perspective. And I think the other thing that people said was that they perhaps came out of it with a sense that, particularly when they had had a bad experience in the system, they wanted to do something about it and it gave them quite a sense of purpose in life, and Terry in the interview talks about that his being his spur for writing plays and writing poetry, that he'd had particularly negative experiences of being treated against his will, was left feeling quite rightly angry about that, but he then wanted to go on and do something about that and to meet with other people, and found that a very empowering experience finding there are other people with similar experiences and they could get together, they could enjoy each other's company, they could put a message across that things could be different and that they had a voice.