



Diverse Perspectives on Mental Health

Expertise through Experience

Narrator:

The Orphans of Beulah, a theatre group consisting of mental health users and survivors, see themselves, and other service users, as having a kind of expertise, which they've gained through their experience. They believe this expertise could be valuable to wider society.

Terry:

One of the things I've noticed about myself is that I'm quite good at dealing with people who are in a crisis. Um, I've just got a kind of intuition about, what needs to be said or what needs to be done to either calm people down or reassure people or just to deal with it really because I've been in that situation myself. If you put me in a dinner party, um, I don't know how to behave but if you give me somebody who's like really upset and I seem to be able to handle it quite well, so, so I think that it's very helpful to have been through um experiences of either being too high or too low. Er I think it does give you an intuition, or it can do, about what, what people need.

Andrea:

The main thing for myself that helps me and helps me perhaps to um be of assistance to others is insight into um my own illness, um, and that has enabled me to work er voluntarily on a crisis help line er and I think it really is valued that people who, to some extent, have been there and experienced something similar, or even just the fact that they will listen and do have some kind of empathy with people's experience. People don't feel as though they are pushed out, ignored, and sometimes, in a situation which is horrendous, just somebody being there to listen is all that it takes, and by empowering myself and learning the things that I am doing and using the skills that I'm gathering as I go along, I believe that, you know, that I can put something back, because I do think I've been very very well-supported, sorry about this, which is why that hopefully I'll always be able to do this when I am able to, to help give some of that back to other people.

Chris:

There is still among people the idea that there are the normal people and there are the loonies and, you know, I'm not one of those, sort of thing, whereas the reality is, a large percentage of the population experience some form of mental distress at some point in their lives, um, so if people could share those experiences and be more open about things, be more publicised widely then people would be less inclined to look down on people or to ostracise people and to realise that we're all susceptible to some sort of mental distress.

Andrea:

Well whether we are mad or not I think we've done some pretty exciting, challenging, creative things with poetry groups, writing, artwork. I think it shows that we have a creative nature and do things to try and help other people.

Chris:

It's the thing of someone who's been through that experience um you know naturally has a real empathy towards someone else going through a similar experience and so can offer advice, emotionally I think is the main thing, an emotional support, but also practical things as well. On the other hand, I might say 'look you do actually need to see a doctor', but perhaps if I said that they might be more likely to do that than if they were forced to see a doctor.

Miranda:

The expertise that I've gained through my personal experience in mental health problems is one of being able to understand people better and empathise with people. I think that having worked with CPNs and psychiatrists you learn how to make people trust you more because a

lot of the time I don't feel like I can trust the person who's, I'm working with, like a CPN or psychiatrist.

Terry:

Well I think it can be seen as a process of change and a process of transformation and that someone's moving on and with help they can have a more integrated life than they, they could have had before. I mean, I think we're just at the beginning of exploring it to be honest and I recently was listening to a, a woman who was saying that after her experience of being in hospital she got interested in shamanism and believed that, that the experience of say hearing voices, um, she could see that that that might actually be seen as a sign of sensitivity and and welcomed by the wider society rather than seen as something that's very frightening. She traced it back, that said that before the middle ages it would have been a normal experience; we'd all hear voices, but it was something about, you know, they kind of killed all the witches and suddenly these experiences of being sensitive to things like that actually are frowned upon since then.

Narrator:

So far, the orphans have argued that survivors of mental illness can have their own kind of expertise. But how does their expertise compare to the professionals' expertise?

Chris:

I think er practically the idea of peer support as in someone who's experienced mental distress being able to support someone else going through a similar situation can be very beneficial. Someone going through or feel like they might be having symptoms which may lead to some sort of mental distress is likely to feel more comfortable talking to a colleague who's, or a friend who's been through that, than a professional who may not be, or who may be just looking at things purely from a medical perspective.

Miranda:

If you've been through a mental health problem then you're a lot more likely to be able to help someone who's going through mental help problems because you just have a greater understanding of what it's like rather than someone sitting down and reading from a text book what people are like and a certain person with schizophrenia will be this and a certain person with depression will have these symptoms because everybody is individual and like, not everyone with schizophrenia will have the same symptoms.

Terry:

I think professional training has its place. I think it's a different kind of knowledge really. Its more um intellectual, er more abstract. I think when you're in a, an extreme state of mind its very important how people react to you personally and whether or not people are open to you.

Miranda:

I think it's impossible to label anyone with any mental illness because all the symptoms of every illness overlap. For example I was told all the time that I had anorexia nervosa whereas I see that as a symptom of depression, so they were trying to treat weight gain whereas they should have been trying to treat the underlying problem which was I was really depressed which is why I was doing that form of self-harm.

Chris:

The professional expertise is, I would guess, still mostly medical model in that it's, it's all to do with chemicals in the brain and how can this be controlled which I believe has its place and is, is valuable as one way of looking at things, but the expertise that perhaps someone like myself could give is more holistic if you like in that it's first hand experience of how lives are affected.