



## **The science of the mind: investigating mental health**

*Exploring the issues*

### **Dr Claire Rostron**

I think one of the most important issues in mental health that's revealed really in the content of this album is how important the perspective that you take in understanding and investigating mental health can be, and the difference that that will make to treatment outcome so, for example, the main issue that emerges is how important an integrated perspective really is – what we would call a biopsychosocial perspective. And what that really means is drawing together the importance of perhaps the underlying biological basis of a mental condition, also drawing together the knowledge that we gain by understanding the psychological processing that's going on in that mental health condition, and also understanding the key role that social factors play in the development, in the maintenance and in the recovery from various mental health conditions.

We chose Blackthorn Garden as an illustrative means of helping people with mental health conditions to cope with those conditions and to integrate themselves back into society because what Blackthorn really illustrates is the importance of social factors, but also the importance of biological factors in the sense that GPs themselves would refer their patients to Blackthorn, in an attempt to spread the recovery process between the administration of therapeutic drugs, for example, which only of course address the biological basis of the entire mental health condition, and in referring their patients to Blackthorn GPs are clearly recognising the importance that social factors can clearly play in the recovery process.

I think what Blackthorn really illustrates that's particularly exciting is the importance of the social interaction that goes on in this organisation, and how it becomes incredibly difficult to distinguish really who are the people who are, in a sense, giving the therapy and who are the people receiving that therapy, and the extent of the camaraderie that that is evident in the footage is really quite astounding, and I think that the audio interviews that the co-workers give really highlights the importance of that camaraderie in their recovery, and I think that that really offers a lot to individuals who might be listening to the album, perhaps who knows someone who suffers from a mental health condition, perhaps a loved one, or who suffers from a mental health condition themselves, and it really shows in a sense what you can do for yourself or what you can do to help your loved one, and the importance of the social support that you can provide.

I think Neil Frude's audios are particularly important in the album for understanding mental health because they're very focused on the process of diagnosis, so Neil Frude is a clinical psychologist and what he explains is how important diagnosis can be, not only for individuals perhaps researching mental health conditions, but also for those who receive the diagnosis, and how in a sense this may be negative, but how it may also be positive. And really what Neil offers us is an understanding of how this process of diagnosis is absolutely critical in our understanding of mental health conditions because really what diagnosis does is to define a mental health condition and almost in a sense to pigeonhole it into a category that perhaps is very, very restricted, and Neil talks about improving the reliability and, and the validity of these neat little categories, and I think that often there's a lot of debate about how well we as clinical scientists may have defined these categories, and I think anybody listening to Neil's audios will really understand the debate that surrounds this process of diagnosis.

It's vitally important to include the perspective of the General Practitioner as well on mental health, as the General Practitioner is quite often the first person who will be visited and who will have the chance to assess really the extent of the condition and to engage in this process of definition of the mental health condition, this process of diagnosis and, unfortunately, GPs

really have very, very limited time in which to do this, and so I think it's vitally important that we hear how difficult this process is, but also how they try to take into account in that very, very short space of time this integrated biopsychosocial perspective, all of these factors which may be important in the development of a particular mental health condition.

You might be surprised to find an interview about addiction in the field of mental health but of course this is a big debate as to whether one can consider addiction to be a mental health condition at all. Emily Finch's interview is particularly fascinating, in a sense because again it draws out this biopsychosocial perspective on the treatment of mental health conditions, and it's really enlightening in understanding how pharmacological treatments for addiction really are only a part of the picture.

Of course what Emily illustrates in her interview is the significant impact that addiction can have on the lifestyle of a particular individual, on their social interactions, on the level of crime that they may engage in, on the loss of housing, for example, but also in the extent of comorbidity that sometimes exists between addiction and other mental health conditions. So, for example, Emily talks about individuals with heroin addiction who may also have depression, who also may have anxiety disorders, for example they may have been abused as children, so I think what Emily's interview really illustrates is that addiction really can be considered to be a mental health condition.

We've included a track about Alzheimer's drug research on this album really because it highlights what the future might hold for the biological basis on, and drug research into, Alzheimer's dementia, and in mental health as a whole.

Of course understanding Alzheimer's dementia is one of the key issues in mental health because it's a condition that has increasing prevalence as more of us survive into old age, so many of us are likely to either experience this condition ourselves or to know someone who experiences the condition.

Martin Rossor's interview was really very focused on the biological aspects of Alzheimer's dementia and Martin was really talking about the future of dementia drug development, and highlights the complicated process that this can be, and really the way that the research has slowly progressed from focusing on the brain basis of dementia, the neural processing and the dysfunctional neuronal communication, to really moving beyond that and focusing on the degeneration of the brain that we know now occurs in Alzheimer's dementia. And Martin talks about targeting research now towards that aspect of neuro-degeneration, and he talks also about the tremendous difficulties that really exist in developing a biological treatment for dementia, and I think that really this is something that's very often misunderstood in the field of mental health. I think many people ask well why do we not have drug treatments that are very effective, why have we not made a cure for dementia, and I think when you listen to Martin's interview in particular you will understand really that the process sadly is not as simple as that, and that there really are problems which need to be overcome, but the process of drug development is indeed very lengthy.

I hope very much that what people will take away after interacting with this album is the complexity of mental health, and the reality of the conditions for those who experience them, and I hope very much that if you came to this album with a particular perspective on mental health that after engaging with it you go away perhaps with a different perspective.