

*A participatory-photography project
conducted by Dr. Maria Quinlan and
Dr. Etáin Quigley on behalf of See Change*

LOOK BEYOND

Súil Amháin, Súil Eile





***See Change's** aim is to challenge people to **Look Beyond** the often negative labels associated with mental health difficulty so that every person in Ireland can be open and positive about their own and others mental health.*

*Our vision for **Look Beyond** is to challenge people's perceptions of mental health difficulties and to encourage positive conversation around this issue. Giving voice to people with lived experience is the guiding principle of all our work, and creative tools such as photovoice help to bring to life people's stories in an engaging and immersive way. We hope **Look Beyond** gives the viewer the opportunity to connect with people's experiences of mental health and stigma in a much richer way than traditional reports.*

*In **Look Beyond**, people with mental health difficulties were invited to speak for themselves, giving us deep insight into the often unseen reality of what it means to live with a mental health difficulty and revealing many different paths to recovery. **See Change** would like to thank the 16 participants who took part in this photovoice research project because without their dedication and input **Look Beyond** would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Dr Maria Quinlan and Dr Etd  n Quigley for their expertise, dedication and commitment in bringing **Look Beyond** to fruition. **See Change** would also like to thank you, the reader, for playing your part in ending mental health stigma by engaging with **Look Beyond**, whether through an exhibition or this associated catalogue.*

Research shows 4 in 10 people in Ireland would not want their family, friends or colleagues to know they had a mental health difficulty. Stigma is one of the main barriers preventing people from seeking the vital help they need. For this reason, it is essential **See Change** continues its work to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.*

See Change, established in 2010, is a national partnership working to change minds about mental health problems in Ireland. The **See Change** partnership is made up of over 100 organisations and 60 ambassadors. For more information about **See Change** visit www.seechange.ie

* Based on a national omnibus survey conducted by Kantar Millward Brown and funded by the National Office of Suicide Prevention, May 2017.

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Introduction

See Change's stated aim is to work to change peoples' minds about mental health problems in Ireland. Its core objective is to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems – and to specifically do this via the creation of a disruptive, community driven social movement. The aim of this project was to use a method of participatory photography known as photovoice as a way of discussing and communicating people's experience of living with mental health difficulties. Photovoice is a research and advocacy methodology which has its roots in this kind of disruptive, community driven social movement and thus provides a very good fit with **See Change's** ethos and objectives¹.

Photovoice is a qualitative methodology that fits within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) philosophy which aims to assist communities and groups in influencing positive social change. Using photographs to give voice to people, who often feel unheard and unseen in society, is a person-centred and co-created methodology that can be both a powerful and positive experience for the participants while also being an impactful way of providing deep insight into an issue for the wider society.

Photovoice has been previously used to both explore and raise awareness of the stigma associated with experiencing mental health problems². A recent review of its effectiveness in the field of mental health research found it to be a “robust method ideally suited to describing mental illness”, with the capacity to illustrate the experience of those with mental health problems, while empowering groups who are often marginalised³.

Qualitative methods such as photovoice allow for a more in-depth, nuanced exploration of a topic, and as the issue of mental health is a multilayered, complex phenomenon, we believe that it is a method ideally suited to facilitating participants to explore and represent their thoughts and feelings in this area⁴.

The aim of this project is to let people with mental health difficulties speak for themselves and by doing so to help educate the wider public on what living with mental health difficulties feels like, and how relief, recovery and resilience can be found and nurtured. Throughout this catalogue of photographs we have added our own words sparingly to guide the reader and gather the photographs into loose overall themes. In the main however we have attempted to leave the talking to the people who have taken the photographs and who have shared their journey with us.

¹ Wang, C., Burris, M. (1997) Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education Behaviour* 24: 369; <https://photovoice.org/vision-and-mission/>

² Johnson, D., Russinova, Z., Gagne, C. (2008) Using photovoice to fight the stigma of mental illness. *Recovery and Rehabilitation*, Vol 4, No. 4. Boston University Centre for Psychiatric Rehabilitation.

³ Han, C., and Oliffe, J. (2016) Photovoice in mental illness research: A review and recommendations. *Health Vol.* 20(2) 110-126 2

⁴ Dinos, S., Steven, S., Serfaty, M., Weich, S., King, M. (2004) Stigma: the feelings and experiences of 46 people with mental illness *British Journal of Psychiatry*. Vol. 184, 176-181

Project Design

This photovoice project was conducted with two discrete groups of participants, and was carried out between July and September 2017. Different methodological approaches were adopted for each group, adapting the photovoice method to accommodate the widest range of participants possible within the timeframe and budget limitations of the project. In total sixteen people participated in this project, taking over 250 photographs, and ultimately selecting almost ninety to share in this catalogue.

GROUP ONE

With the first group the project was conducted over three weekly four-hour workshops. This group was recruited by **See Change / Shine** via their network of service users. The group consisted of eight men and one woman.

In the first week the group was introduced to the aims and objectives of the overall project and to the photovoice methodology. Each member of the group was given a digital camera and instruction on how to use it – no prior photographic experience was required for participation. Based on the overall aims and objectives of the project, the group brainstormed the themes that they felt they would like to explore via photographs over the three-week project timeframe.

The two overall themes chosen by the group were as follows:

1. *What does living with mental health difficulties look like for you?*

- * Capture in a photograph what experiencing a mental health challenge has been like for you
- * If you could express your experience of living with mental health difficulties in a photograph what would that look like?

2. *Coping mechanisms*

- * Capture in a photograph the things, activities, experiences that you use to support your mental health
- * Capture in a photograph the kinds of responses you experience (or have experienced in the past) from others when you share your mental health difficulties with them
- * What responses have been a support to you?

In the second week's workshop, the participants chose a selection of the photographs from those that they had taken during the previous week to present and share with wider group if they wished.

Each participant selected a range of photographs to share and discuss with the group. The selected images were projected onto a large screen and the photographer described their photograph and the meaning behind it to the group. A group dialogue of the emerging symbols and themes was facilitated.

For the final week's workshop, participants preselected the photographs that they wished to include in the final project catalogue and exhibition. Their photographs were printed in advance of the final workshop, and in this final workshop each participant worked individually with one of the project facilitators to make their final photograph selections and to write captions for their selected photographs.

GROUP TWO

For the second group of participants, we adapted and shortened the photovoice methodology to work on-site with a group of Health Service Executive (HSE) Clubhouse members. HSE Clubhouses are within the EVE Programme⁵ and provide community based recovery-orientated programmes for adults with mental health, intellectual difficulties, and other physical and sensory disabilities. There are currently twenty-one Clubhouses across the country and they offer 'hope-inspiring' services to members. It is a service-user driven approach which empowers members in terms of self-fulfillment and wellness.

For the purposes of this project we worked with one Clubhouse. The Clubhouse provided an opportunity for anybody who is a member of the Clubhouse to attend an information session regarding this project, and to decide themselves whether they were interested in participating. Members of the Clubhouse HSE team were on site during each session. The group of participants consisted of four women and three men.

Group two was conducted over three weekly two-hour workshops. Week one was an introductory session and the research team attended the Clubhouse to meet with those interested in participating. During the information session participants were introduced to the aims and objectives of the project and to the photovoice methodology.

Week two consisted of a workshop whereby each member of the group was given a digital camera and instruction on how to use it – no prior photographic experience was required for participation. Participants were also provided with the following set of suggested themes based on the overall objectives of the project, to use as prompts for their photographs.

- * A photo that tells us something about you
- * A photo that describes how you see yourself
- * A photo that describes how you think other people see you
- * A photo that describes how it feels to live with mental health difficulties
- * Optional: another theme of your choice

They then spent a short period of time (approximately one hour) taking photographs which represented issues they wished to express about their mental health difficulties. Following the initial workshop the research team printed the photographs for the participants to take home and reflect upon. Participants were asked to consider what photographs they would like to exhibit as part of the project prior to the final session.

In week three the participants presented their selected photographs to the group on a large screen and were invited to discuss the meaning behind them. This discussion was recorded and formed the basis of the captions.

The photos and captions were then reviewed and validated by the participants.

⁵ <http://www.eve.ie/>

Ethics and safety

Participants' safety and emotional wellbeing is the number one consideration of this project. Throughout each stage of the project participants were given the option of sharing their photographs, thoughts, experiences or of choosing not to. The primary aim of this project was to create a safe space where people who have experienced mental health difficulties could express themselves via photography to the degree that they wished to do so, without any requirement to share that with the other members of the group, the project facilitators or ultimately with the wider public via this catalogue and the associated exhibitions.

Both Dr. Quinlan and Dr. Quigley have received specialist training in the photovoice methodology from the PhotoVoice Organisation and adhered to the organisations statement of ethical practice⁶. Informed written consent was achieved over a phased basis to ensure that participants had clarity regarding what they were being asked to consent to, how their information would be used and what participating in this exhibition and catalogue would involve.

Acknowledgments

We would like to firstly thank the sixteen men and women who participated in this project. This project is fundamentally their work and would not have been possible without their generosity of time and spirit. It was a pleasure to work alongside of them on this project. We feel blessed by their openness, honesty and vulnerability and thank them for sharing their wisdom regarding what it feels like to go through a mental health crisis, how to navigate it and come out the other side.

We would secondly like to thank **See Change**, and particularly Celine Moran for her vision in understanding how the photovoice methodology could be used to help support people experiencing mental health difficulties, while at the same time being used as a tool for raising awareness regarding the complexity and nuances of living with mental health difficulties.

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⁶ <https://photovoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Ethical-Statement.pdf>

Group One

1. Picturing Mental Health Difficulty

In the first week of the project the group chose to take photographs on the broad theme of ‘*what does living with mental health difficulties look like for you?*’ The aim being to express or capture the experience of living with mental health difficulties in a photograph. The following twenty six photographs were taken, selected and captioned by the participants in this project.

DISTORTION, EXHAUSTION AND ISOLATION

A consistent set of themes emerge in how participants describe their experience of acute episodes of mental ill-health. Experiencing acute mental health difficulty distorts reality; exhausts you mentally and physically and isolates you from those around you.

Mental health difficulty **squashes** you, makes you **redundant**, and keeps you **in the dark**. It leaves you behind, **fatigued**, feeling like **rubbish**, a shell of your former self, **isolated**. As one participant puts it “*I just wasn’t there*”. Minds race, reality is distorted. Mental health difficulty grips you and entraps you. It keeps you from connecting with others, and fear and anxiety drive a sense of personal isolation.

Depression distorts real life. (GERRY)

Participants liken acute periods of mental health difficulty to being like a ‘blur’, real life goes ‘out of focus’ as a person is gripped by fear, anxiety and other symptoms of mental illness. The world is turned upside down, and there is a feeling of being out of control, of riding out a storm.

I was exhausted, beaten... worn. (KELDERS)

Participants describe the physical and mental exhaustion which has been a feature of their mental health difficulty. A racing mind is wearing and drains a person of their life force, vitality and creativity. There is the feeling of losing yourself, of losing years, losing track of time. Of others moving ahead with life, while you are left behind.

I knew the beauty was out there, I just couldn’t get to it. (GERRY)

Participants describe an inability to reach the ‘light’ – closed in by the safety, but also the isolation, of their homes and safe spaces. They describe seeing the light and beauty outside, but being unable to grasp it and thus remaining in darkness.

I don’t want to be known. I don’t want to be seen. (DÁIRE)

Participants consistently used symbols of doors, cages, grates, shuttered windows and walls as symbols of how their mental health difficulty has caused them to go inward for protection. The sense of not wanting to be seen or to engage with others is expressed by participants – as is the sense of being alone and isolated as a result of this need to withdraw.

Like an egg you can be “cracked very easily, opened-up”. (MICHAEL)

The sense of having an outer shell which can be cracked easily is a symbol used by participants to describe the fragility of mental health. There can often be a fine and delicate line between wellness and illness.

Even the thought of nothingness was better than what was. (RICK)

In describing their suicidal thoughts and experiences, participants illuminate the feelings of despair, desperation, tiredness, and hopelessness which led them to contemplate taking their own life.

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE....



GERRY

This shows the anxiety, fear and entrapment I felt during my mental health crisis. I was gripped with fear and felt unable to move forward. I was so frightened, not understanding what was happening.

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE....



MICHAEL

Gripped by depression. Its hold can feel like a vice grip, paralysing you both mentally and physically.

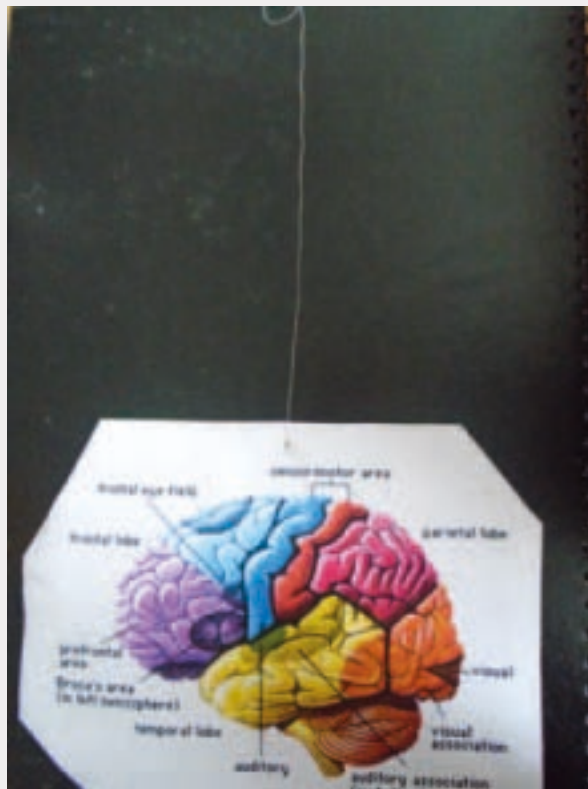
When you suffer from depression, it is as though your world has been turned upside down, spinning out of control.



MICHAEL

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE...

Sometimes it can be a fine line between being mentally well and unwell. Literally it can seem as though you are hanging on by a thread.



MICHAEL

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE...

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE....



KELDERS

Trying to stay connected

Two sockets. One is connected, one disconnected. I have days when I'm connected to society, and others where I'm totally detached. Lost, alone. I fight to stay connected, I want to, now, stay connected. That is why the connected plug is first. This was not always the way.

WHAT 'IT' FEELS LIKE....



DÁIRE

This is a cracked egg – it's like your outer persona can get a little bit fragile, damaged.

Stance in the Fire – shadows of my mind, wondering, lost and tirelessly seeking the fires of my desires and hiding from the flames of my despair. This photo represents how I walk in darkness around the flames that are my emotions at times. That there are things inside of us that can get out of control unless we confront them. It shows the pain that can be hidden inside, a battle that is continuous. I think it's important for other people to understand that even though this emotion is inside of us there are others around us sometimes seeing it but more often than not, in total darkness about its true depths. Trying to keep this representation of my emotions under control has been hard, and futile in my darker moments.



RICK

This picture shows how my depression distorts real life and how I saw things in the darkest days. I knew the beauty was out there but I just couldn't get to it. The rope, it brought to me thoughts of suicide but also brought thoughts of the support I received in recovery.



GERRY

DISTORTION



DÁIRE

This one is looking out – your image can be slightly distorted when you're experiencing a moment of unwellness, you can't see the full picture.

EXHAUSTION



MICHAEL

This is a ceramic flower which normally would be bright and vibrant and you would be attracted to it. This image represents my depression. Feeling drained, flat and low in energy. The depression is very visible.

I see water as a life-force, without it we wouldn't be alive. So this fella (pictured) is squeezing this cloth and he's squeezing the life out of it. That's what I interpret as depression, it really does, it puts a big squeeze on you.



MICHAEL

EXHAUSTION

'Battered' - I was exhausted, beaten constantly, worn, I couldn't take anymore, it was constant. It felt like going ten rounds with Mike Tyson.



KELDERS

EXHAUSTION

EXHAUSTION

MICHAEL



I remember feeling like this for a long time. I'm a fairly creative type of person but nothing was happening, it was just a blank page in front of me and there's no creativity. The mind was just racing and you're just sort of out of it.

EXHAUSTION



GERRY

This photo sums up my depression. I was running on fumes, I couldn't eat, couldn't drink, couldn't sleep and I didn't want to be with anybody. You could probably put a big X through that sign, that was me.

I am the one who built my own walls and only I can demolish them brick by brick.



PAUL

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

This is how I felt in the dark days of depression completely alone and isolated.



GERRY

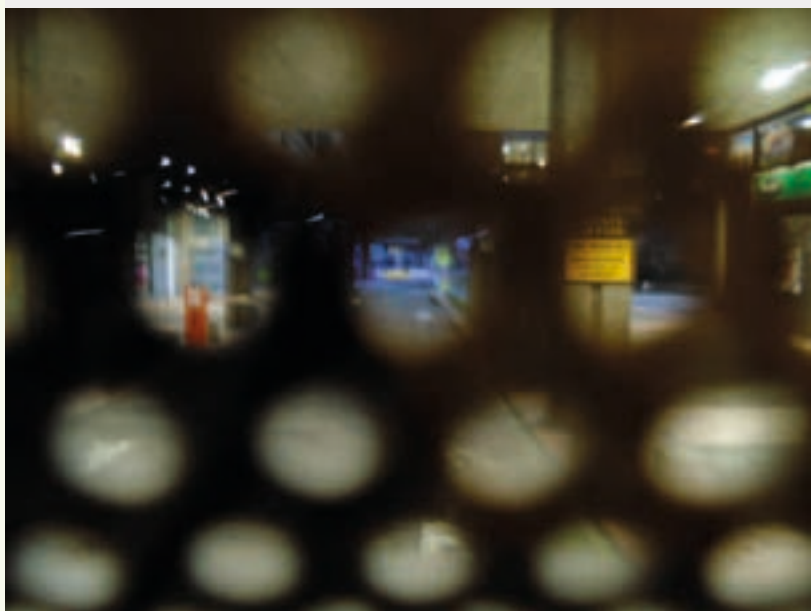
ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

KELDERS



Alone

I felt alone, even though I have many good and close people in my life, I'm alone, lost. Such an empty feeling. I don't belong here.



KELDERS

Hidden

You want to hide from the world. I have done this in my bedroom, under my bedcovers, headphones on, for days on end. I have walked Dublin city by side streets only to escape the masses. I feel safer here, hidden away.

When I got my illness I became pretty much a recluse. This is looking out my gate at home, it's kind of very blurry. When I first got the illness that I have – I had a breakdown when I was about 23 – I'm 34 now so I can't believe it's been 11 years – well I recovered so thank god for that. I used to go right at the gate rather than going through the village and do my business or work or whatever. I wasn't even working at the time, I couldn't work or hold down a job at the time... but I was very much a recluse, so I wouldn't go out in the village or anything like that. I'd just be afraid people knowing my business and everything. It's kind of blurry as well, time goes by so quickly.



ANDREW

This is a picture of only one part of me. I don't want to be known. I don't want to be seen in the photograph. When you have the illness... you don't want people to know everything about you. You don't want people to know about your illness.



DÁIRE

DÁIRE



The door – sometimes if you're very very ill you feel afraid to go through the door. You're afraid to go outside. During the illness you feel safe behind closed doors, even though it looks lovely outside, you don't want to go.

RICK



The Door

The door that is both my protector and jailor. It has kept away all that could harm me but in better moments it has blocked me from moving forward even though through its cracks I can see the brightness that could be. This represents all the doors closed to me because of my mental health, from family to friends, work and opportunities. It represents for me the frustrations that I feel not being able to open them. This photo aims to say that though doors are there, they can be open and that on the other side there can be brightness, good things waiting to happen. I want to share this photo because it is a feeling that has always been a part of my experiences with mental health. You have the ability to choose which doors in life you wish to remain closed or those in which you want to walk through. I have seen and confronted pain and disappointments, but I try my best to see beyond the barriers placed in front of me.

There's a whole world
outside...

*Don't allow yourself to be or feel
trapped... look outside the box
and one's comfort zone.*



PAT

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Not for me

*I always believed this life was
not for me, I didn't know what
my point was. Yet at times I
could see the beauty, but daily
I wanted to escape, to die and
there was no long lasting future.*



KELDERS

SUICIDE



KELDERS

No More

I just wanted it all to stop, I was tired. I wanted to go towards the light, the light of death. It was time to go towards death, only then would I have peace.



RICK

The Building

In my youth a leap in despair was meant to be my end but through chance or by design a new beginning of self-discovery in trial and error has created a road to recovery well into my old age. This photo represents the end of my beginning. This literally represents the first time I tried to kill myself. This photo aims to say that even if you think the end is near, that Life, God, divine intervention or just plain luck will make the final decision on life or death. This building, whether in good or bad times, is a symbol of my darkness. This symbol now only holds a memory, it no longer has a hold on me. It represents the idea that the desperation of a 15 year old boy to leave behind his pain was so great, that even the thought of nothingness was better than what was.

2. Moving Through and Moving Past

In the second week of the project the group chose to take photographs on the broad theme of ‘the things, activities, experiences that you use to support your mental health’. The aim of this second week was to express or capture what has helped people to cope and survive mental difficulties, along with those tools used to help people recover and thrive following a period of being unwell. The following forty nine photographs were taken, selected and captioned by the participants in this project.

COPING, HOPING AND CONNECTING

There’s always hope. The way is not always clear but there is a way out of despair and loneliness. (PAT)

Themes of hope, resilience and acceptance of oneself emerge from the photographs taken and selected by participants. Hope of recovery and a deep sense of their own resilience and ability to come through bouts of mental health difficulty is expressed throughout the participants’ photographs. As one participant says “*It’s a lonely place but we’re still here to tell the tale*” (Rick)

Where mental health difficulty blurs and distorts - acceptance of the flow of life, of your place in it, and of your own uniqueness helps to bring clarity, reality and perspective. Reaching beyond your current circumstances to see the light at the end of the tunnel is seen as key.

Having faced dark times and having emerged on the other side has given participants a sense of their own strength and ability to withstand the storms associated with mental health difficulty. As one participant puts it; “*life can be found beyond the damage... I’ve been through shit and have survived*” (Rick)

Despite all of the difficulties faced **hope** was discussed as a core driver for achieving wellness. An **independent journey** was travelled which tapped into and harnessed hope as a means of gathering the required strength to recover. The travelling of a path and **finding the person** they were before their illness, whilst embracing their experiences as a means self-development, resulted in a fight against internal stigma. This was discussed as key to self-empowerment. **Hope for the future** provided the bases for wellness.

My eyes may be dull but are still open during the darkest days. (PAUL)

Even though recovery brought empowerment it also brought a hesitancy about **being yourself**. Being confident in one’s own skin was a strong driver to recovery and yet there was sometimes a **reluctance about revealing mental health difficulties** to others for fear of judgment.

HOPE



ANDREW

This is a picture of the Liffey. The Liffey runs through the back of my house where I live. When I first got ill, even lately, I used to get very bad thoughts, even suicidal. But at the same time it's kind of hope as well – you have to focus, things (problems) are on the left and right hand side and you have to keep straight. It can also represent the flow of life.

HOPE



ANDREW

This is a wishing seat, and going on my walks I always sit on this wishing seat and it represents hope for the future.

For me goals are key to my recovery which included going back to college and getting a degree. A key for getting my life back together. The goals further represent future aspirations and hopes which also include career, my own house and family.



ANDREW

HOPE

The bridge to recovery was not always straight with twists and turns along the way but I am hopeful of making it to other side.



GERRY

HOPE

HOPE



DÁIRE

I was kind of thinking past, present, future – they can be the same. You can recover and get back to the same person you were before the onset of your illness.

HOPE

DÁIRE



Going through the illness, it's uphill but there's light at the end.

Recovery is realising that we are a very small but important part of an interdependent life journey.



PAUL

HOPE

*The sun will shine
I find optimism is the best medicine. Otherwise looking or asking for help is too difficult... and accepting or following through on advice is rather too impossible.*



PAT

HOPE

HOPE

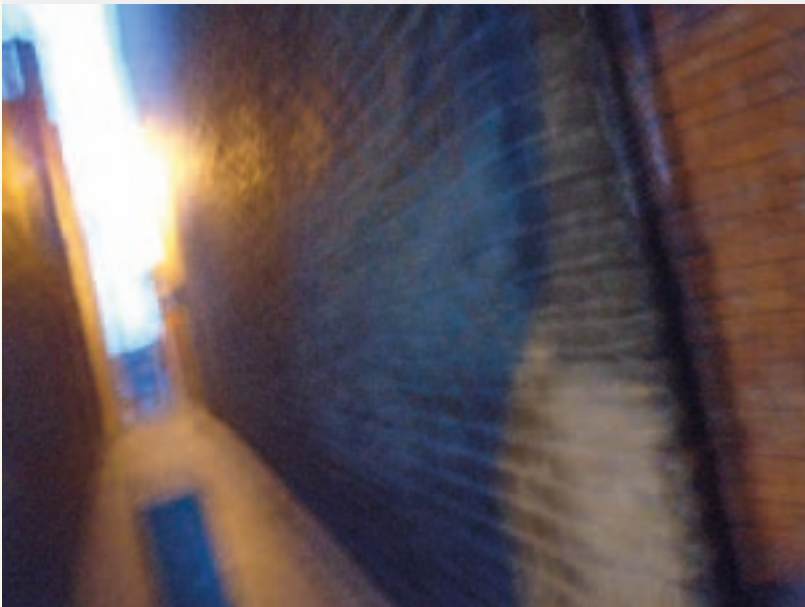


PAT

Hope and Despair

*Where one person sees gloom
others see room to grow and
continue on. Life is to be enjoyed
not endured.*

HOPE



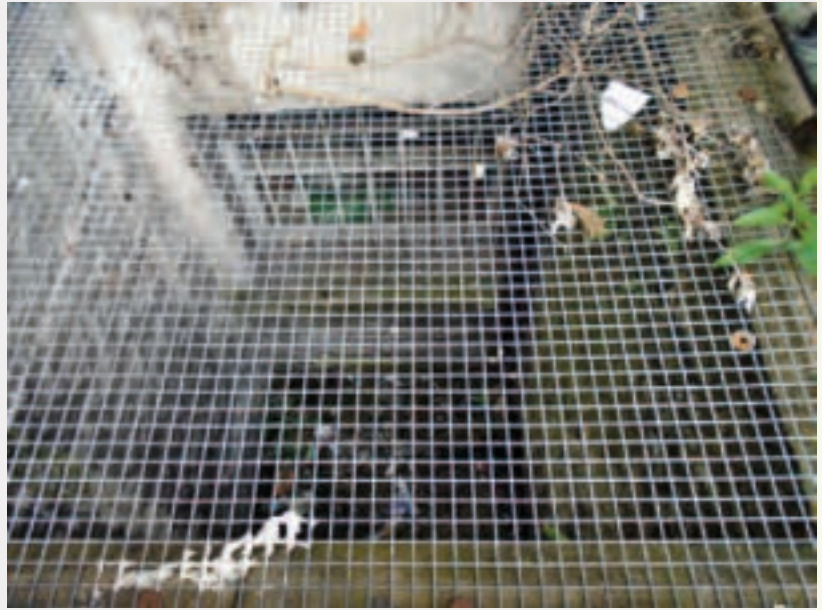
PAT

There's always hope

*The way is not always clear but
there is a way out of despair
and loneliness.*

Not forgotten

*The cage hides a room below.
There is always room, if
not from the clearest view
point initially.*



PAT

HOPE

*Sometimes all we might need is
just a moment to see our own
unique reality.*



PAUL

ACCEPTANCE OF YOURSELF

ACCEPTANCE OF YOURSELF

DAVID



Feel free to be yourself.

RESILIENCE



RICK

Decaying of time

My ship that has weathered my storms of darkness lays battered & broken, decaying in time and yet, life still breaks through my weakened mind. Basically this represents the strong ship my mind once was, but due to the storms that I faced I became defeated. Washed upon the shore my once strong ship decayed over time to a breaking point. This photo aims to say that no matter how strong we think we are that there are moments of weakness. That no matter how strong we seemed to be by others, that we all can have that moment or moments when we feel like all is lost. I always likened my darkness to riding out a storm... I was at this breaking point, I was defeated but that is just one part of my story.

My broken bridge of will & strength still finds a way to bring me back into life. No matter the hardships I will find my way back to what it means to be me, to find my dignity. This photo represents the idea that life can be found beyond the damage. That even though the structure that we built which is our mind can feel like it's breaking apart that there is life to be found, wanting, rebuilding and moving forward. This photo aims to say that living a life is parallel to the good and the bad or that one can find life beyond the pain. I feel it to be a great visual towards my thoughts on getting through a hard day. Life is not always going to be about great days, sometimes we need to just get through a day. Even though I see the bad, I try to find the good on any given day.



RICK

My Road

The journey more often travelled with the cracks of life we can all fall through upon this rough and rocky road with a bend into the unknown. This photo represents the cracks of life. This represents the road I was on, the life where I fell through all the cracks in the road that seemed near endless at so many moments in my life. This photo aims to say that the hardships are our own creations at times, or they are things that happen over time and out of our control. It's exactly how I see the way my road in life was. Even though the cracks in my life can be seen, there is a bend in the road that goes off into a place not yet seen by me, a bend that can bring me onto a better path in life. This photo represents that I've been through shit and have survived.



RICK

CONNECTION

I feel the connection with people over a simple cup of coffee is a very powerful tool in recovering. The connection with people helped me feel less isolated and gave me a sense of belonging to the group. (GERRY)

Simple connection with other people is a dominant theme within the group's discussion of recovery. Whether through a simple cup of tea with a friend; feeling supported by being checked-in on by a neighbour; through to the more formal role of support groups – connecting and feeling supported by others was identified as a vital tool in recovery. Simple **kind actions from others**, sometimes provided unknowingly, offered **compassion** and **care** which supported inner wellness.

Connection was also found with animals, which were highlighted for their therapeutic qualities. Horses and cats in particular were identified by participants for their role in helping them to move forward with life.

Connecting with others was not without its difficulty however, and participants draw attention to the kinds of responses from others which can be less helpful. As one participant highlights there have been times when “...people have either held me back or pushed me away because of ignorance or misunderstanding” (Rick). Another participant provides further insight into how people can offer support in ways which are overwhelming and serve to infantilise a person; “they baby you, take over, it is too much” (Kelders). There is an understanding that some people can walk the journey of mental health difficulty with you, while others cannot.

Maybe all we might need today is to give and receive a smile.



PAUL

CONNECTION

I feel the connection with people over a simple cup of coffee is a very powerful tool in recovering. The connection with people helped me feel less isolated and gave me a sense of belonging to the group. This photo brought to mind the support I had received, and was so grateful for. That was a big thing for me – helping me recover, people, just talking to people. More so than the medication, having the support from other people, people are there and they don't want anything from you, they just want to support you. I had support at a centre which I could just walk in and great support through therapeutic massage. Having another person interact with me like that, that touch which is lost with depression was unbelievable.



GERRY

CONNECTION

CONNECTION



PAUL

The power of connection is in the interdependence, inter-supportive role of each person.

CONNECTION



PAT

Still receiving

The photo helps me to remember that first impressions count. I believe being and having been open to optimistic interactions is so very important.

Support

I was reluctant to share my heavy load. After twenty one years I did. Some, especially family, want to help you soooo much, they baby you, take over, it is too much. They believe they are helping, instead they can heighten the situation and render you totally powerless. Less can be more.



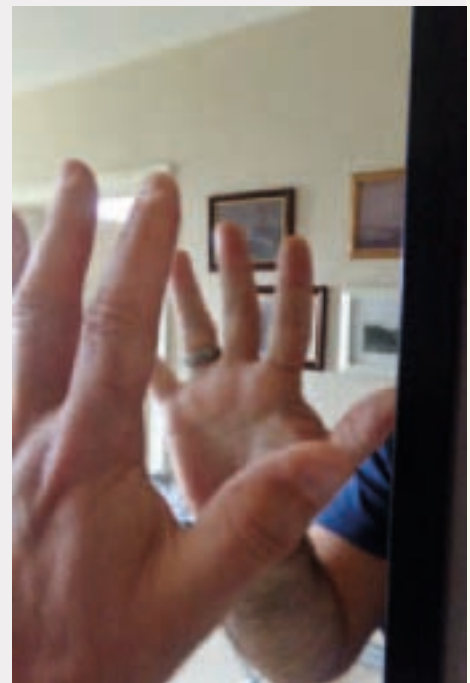
KELDERS

CONNECTION

Reflection

My mirrored reflection holds me back and bars me from moving ahead. Interrupting the stigma that can be found no matter where I go or with whom I meet.

This photo represents people pushing away my wants and needs. All the times people have either held me back or pushed me away because of ignorance or misunderstanding. This photo aims to say that we need to recognize for ourselves that not everyone will or can understand our difficulties. It took a long time for me to come to terms with people's responses and reactions to my disorders and that they weren't always out of malice or with intention to hurt me. Sometimes the greatest pushback or negative response to our conditions can come from us. The struggle I had in coming to terms with this aspect of my mental health was a long road to navigate, and I will continue to do so.



RICK

CONNECTION

CONNECTION



DÁIRE

This image of a bus represents illness as a journey. Different people are with you at different stages of your journey. Some people are with you for your whole journey and some are not.

CONNECTION



DÁIRE

This is my cat, Luna. She has really helped my mental health recovery. Caring for her is a great feeling and her companionship is cool! In terms of what helps you through your illness, I was thinking that pets are very therapeutic. The whole thing of minding a cat, and petting a cat, looking after her, she's been a great help to me.

ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES

Recovery was a recurring theme during our group discussions and something that participants have worked hard to achieve and continually incorporate into their daily lives. Specific **activities** and **experiences** were discussed as assisting with achieving and maintaining recovery. Moreover, subjectively special **things** were identified by participants as having therapeutic impact upon their lives and wellbeing, and these were often simple yet cherished.

Strength was found in different aspects of life - **hobbies**, **nature** and **connections** with other people - and these played a huge roll in self-fulfilment and inner contentment. Engagement with these provided space for self-care and a feeling of connectedness with the world.

HOBBIES

Learn to be present, here and now and then learn to take one step at a time. (KELDERS)

The recovery pathway was discussed as being supported through activity and enjoyment with external stimuli. Numerous hobbies were discussed and these often had outdoor aspects, such as gardening, walking and horse riding. Engaging with these activities is a method of maintaining recovery and supporting their own personal wellbeing. They also provided a space to escape and become distracted from the difficulties of everyday living, thus reducing the prospect of becoming overwhelmed.

Hobbies such as art, photography, reading, walking, caring for animals, practicing mindfulness and various forms of exercise are identified as an important part of the recovery process. They allow people to move out of their heads and connect with themselves on a deeper level, providing distraction from the never-ending racing thoughts. Mindfulness and being present in the moment reduced the impact of negative external stimuli.

HOBBIES

KELDERS



Back to Basics

Exercise and keeping all things simple (water) is key to me managing my depression. The days I don't I can feel the onset of a bout of depression or anxiety. Even though I know this, I have to remind myself and motivate myself daily.

HOBBIES



This is a picture of stables where I hunt from. For me horses are therapeutic and it means meeting new people as well as keeping fit. Horses played a big role in me feeling well. I was riding since I was a child but had a gap of a few years before I returned to the sport.

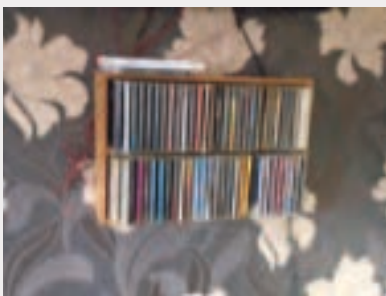
ANDREW

*Art is so therapeutic for me.
I love painting. It takes my mind
off negative or unwell feelings.*



DÁIRE

*Music, reading with the Kindle
and communicating with people
via your computer are things
that helped me through.
It's great to have hobbies.*



DÁIRE

MINDFULNESS

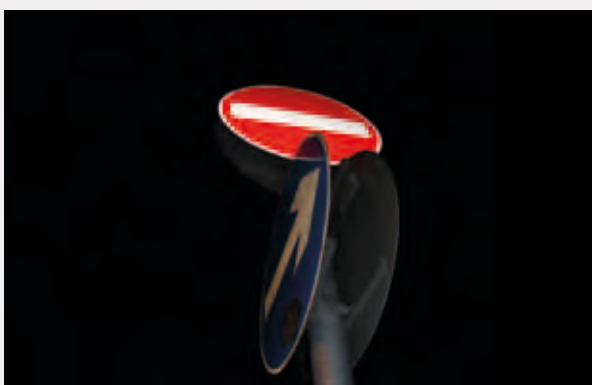
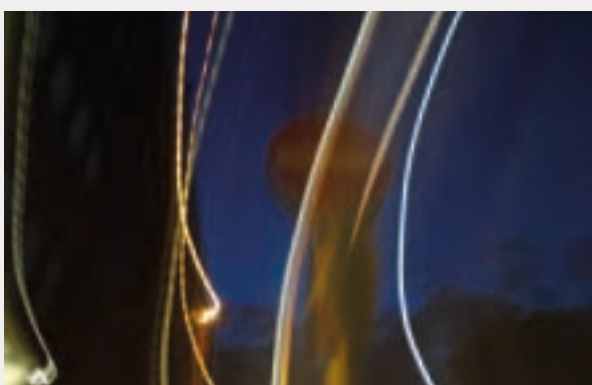
GERRY



Meditation for me is a very powerful helping aid to mental health recovery.

MINDFULNESS

KELDERS



Never ending thoughts

This (photo on the top) is inside my head. Rapid, negative thoughts, which overwhelm me, caused great anxiety and severe lows. Sleepless nights were many. The red sign (photo on the right) symbolises a coping mechanism I introduced and that was to just stop. Learn to be present, here and now and then learn to take one step at a time.

Meditation is a big, big help for mental health recovery and it is made easier in a group. Meditation is unappreciated as a recovery tool for mental health issues. I hadn't slept properly in a year and that changed when I started meditating and acupuncture.



GERRY

This picture represents the apartment I live in. Getting this new place to live really helped my mental health. It has been an amazing experience to have my own place.



DÁIRE



DÁIRE

The saying “there’s no place like home” represents how great it is to have a place to call your own. My self-esteem and confidence soared when I got my independence.

HELPING YOURSELF

Thinking outside of the box, looking for support internally or externally and trying new things to help cope and recover was a theme expressed by several participants. Going outside of your comfort zone and not standing in the way of receiving help was seen as important in terms of recovery.



PAUL

Maybe sometimes we might need to use the unusual as a support.

*If what is inside the box is not working then it is time to start thinking outside of the box.
“Think for Yourself”.*



PAUL

*Taking the rough with the smooth
Do not block up ideas or fresh air entering yourself.*



PAT



PAT

Splashing out

The writing on the wall is not clear to everyone at first. I feel one has to not be afraid to make mistakes and share one's opinion. Going outside one's safety/comfort zone.

NATURE

The beauty of nature is identified by many participants as a key therapeutic tool.

Nature is identified as important on several levels – tending to a garden and seeing it blossom provides a sense of accomplishment while also being a therapeutic activity in and of itself. Nature connects us to a power larger than ourselves and provides perspective on our place in the world, as one participant outlines “no matter how bad things have been or are at any given moment, (the beauty of nature) makes me appreciate the better things in life”. (Rick)

Being out in nature was discussed as providing peace and serenity. As with hobbies, nature allowed for distraction and escapism. It also provided a space for self-reflection and positive thinking.

Nature is a powerful tool in the road to recovery. It lightens your mood with its beauty. I went out walking an awful lot – it was all part of the recovery.

You were getting exercise which was helpful and the beauty, the beauty was there but I couldn't see it before. Walking distracted the depression as you were concentrating on your surroundings. Even when I was walking I was trying to be mindful. Being in the moment is a big help.



GERRY

Blackberries symbolise the good foods that nature provides that aid in the recovery in mental health issues.



GERRY



This is the view from my balcony. It is full of flowers. It makes me happy to tend to them and then see them blossom.

DÁIRE



RICK

Natural

Trying to see the true beauty in life was at first a battle, something that I found near impossible, but now it has become natural to want to see the good in all that happens.

I love taking pictures, but most of all I love taking pictures of natural beauty. Too often we overlook what is there in front of us. This photo aims to say that something can be right under our noses but until we really look, we will never appreciate the splendour that was always there. I want to share this photo because I just feel that people should always see the beautiful things in life. Both as motivation and as a reminder that not everything is bleak or harmful. That the simple things can bring you a smile or a new thought. No matter how bad things have been or are at any given moment, something can come along to make me appreciate the better things in life.

New growth

New ideas need to be and feel nurtured to grow, take root and flower.



PAT

NATURE

MEDICATION

You'd try anything just to get better. (GERRY)

Medication was touched on by several participants as a vital tool in helping their recovery. While the 'medication diet', as one participant calls it, is not necessarily a cherished tool of recovery, it has a key place in the stories of many of the participants in this project.

The medication diet.

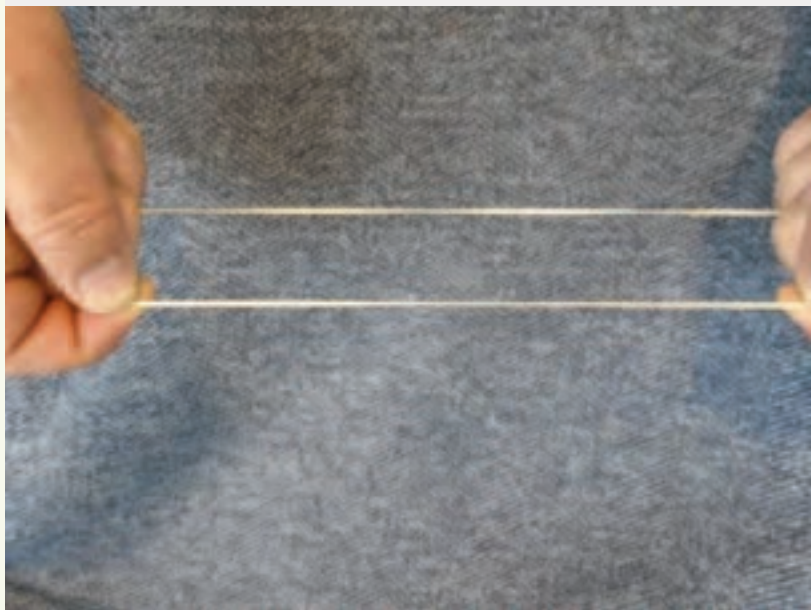


MICHAEL

MEDICATION

LOOK BEYOND

MEDICATION



MICHAEL

When you are depressed and waiting for the medication to kick in, it can seem like an eternity. As the weeks go by, the elastic band is being stretched to breaking point. Then one morning you wake up and all is calm, so calm, the band hasn't snapped and neither have you.

MEDICATION



ANDREW

I need drugs to live and have good mental health and a normal life.

Group Two

As outlined in the introductory section of this catalogue, the Clubhouse group participated in a shorter adapted form of the participatory photography project and took pictures related to the more general theme of their mental health and wellbeing. The aim was to give people an opportunity to use photography as a means of discussing and expressing their journey through mental health challenges. The following fourteen photographs were taken and selected by members of one HSE Clubhouse who participated in this project. The captioning process differed somewhat from the method used with the first group – the captions were taken verbatim from the transcripts of the group discussion, where each participant shared and explained their photographs with the group. Each caption was reviewed by and agreed with the participant prior to publication.

The photographs are again loosely divided into the themes of picturing mental ill-health and picturing recovery.

ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES

When talking about what it feels like to live with mental health difficulties most participants referred to being excluded from ‘normal’ life and being excluded from typical life trajectories. This was felt most during periods of acute episodes of mental health difficulty but often remained during the journey to recovery.

Participants discussed feeling worthless, feeling like nothing or a ‘nobody’ and like ‘rubbish’. This negative self-perception was very difficult to move beyond and required strength and resilience to overcome. Moreover, not drifting back to a negative mental state of mind was discussed as requiring regular self-care and reflective insight.

In the darkest period of illness many photographers discussed isolation and a feeling of having nobody to support them.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is again outlined as key to wellness. Participants discussed resilience in various forms, with a common theme of inner strength being referred to throughout the project. Inner strength is gathered from a variety of things in peoples’ lives and is something which brings self-confidence and self-compassion. In this respect resilience is a developed inner character that emerges as a personality trait due to difficult life experiences which have been overcome successfully. All participants highlight their resilience as a key component of their inner being which they nurture and cherish.

NATURE AND SPIRITUALITY

Nature and spirituality were discussed as being a framework that supports the resilient strength experienced by many participants.

Moreover, spirituality was discussed as helping to find a pathway forward and providing inner peace. Resilience and wellness in this respect is evident in peoples' ambition to find a pathway to wellness. This is perceived as an uphill climb at times but certainly not unachievable.

Not only is the achievement of wellness evident in an upward journey, it is also discussed as a complex journey which had many roads to choose from, sometimes under difficult circumstances.

Coming out of the darkness and harnessing resilience triggered self-reflection and an acceptance that we, as human beings, are 'under construction' and are dynamic and fluid beings who always change and grow. Recovery provides a space to explore the construction process and accept the difficult processes and messiness that life can throw up.

Thus, accepting the changing directions of life and accepting the inner self was discussed as key to recovery and keeping well. To 'keep going' regardless of what life throws at you and what direction you take is outlined as a challenging but necessary process.

CONNECTIONS

Supports, found in various and subjective forms/beings, is referred to as an essential ingredient to wellness. This was discussed in terms of compassion and kindness. Being seen and cared for by others provides a feeling of self-worth and fulfilment. Simple engagement with others or animals was discussed as providing a feeling of wellness and safety, even during periods of darkness.

Having a safe place to go where people understand and don't judge, and will offer support, was discussed as essential to wellness and developing resilience during a period of darkness. Simple recognition of when someone is in 'bad form' or feeling 'off' provides a safe space where people can be themselves and still be accepted. The benefit of a non-judgmental space and a supportive personal touch was valued by participants.

As a corollary, a lack of support and understanding is described as impacting the recovery process. It was suggested that knowledge and education of those around a person who is experiencing mental health difficulties may assist with recovery and reduce periods of darkness. Trusting people and developing relations can prove difficult thus others response and support, and the genuine nature of these interactions is important when people feel vulnerable.

1. Picturing Mental Health Difficulty



MARION

This was my first (photo) that I picked because that reminded me of myself. Because when I was in my 40s I was told that I was adopted and I never knew growing up and then to find out that your parents were not your parents, your whole culture, your background, everything was gone and I just felt like I was nothing. I was just like rubbish. So I found that out in my 40s and that brought me down a slippery slope of depression. Both of (my photos) are linked that's the before one and the other is the after.

I had to deal with it on my own, I had no support... and of course my parents has died, or else I would never have been told (about my adoption). So I had to deal with it really totally on my own. I flipped in the beginning and I thought if I'm not this person I always thought I was - who am I? Where do I come from? Who is my mother? And all these type of things. I flipped and ended up running around all the adoption agencies and orphanages saying does anyone know anything about me.

I ended up into Barnardos one day, in a dreadful state, I don't know how I got into them and a very good social worker there brought me into the office and told me you are not ready to trace your family you're in a very bad state, you need counselling... So I did that for 12 months and then I started tracing. So that was a big help. It's like relief.

I found that when I was very, very, very low, God was just there and really supporting me and helping to lift me up, and my Christian family were there. It's very hard to know what type of a feeling you have but I flipped from being a person who I thought I knew to being someone I didn't know, who I was, where I'd come from and totally lost in the wilderness because I think... when you're adopted, its ok for people who adopt children because people have sympathy for them and support for them but adult adoptees don't get the same support. I felt I was in a waste land it was... like jumping into the bin and living in there... I want to highlight the pain that adult adoptees go through when they lose their identity because no one ever recognises that.



TONY

I love bright colours and I have a garden myself. I love going to different gardens and tours and all that. Colour will brighten you even if you're sad ...it couldn't but brighten you up. I very seldom wear gloves, I love getting my hands dirty, I love picking berries and blackcurrants. It makes me feel great and I think people sometimes, that don't do gardening, you mow the lawn and then sit down most of the time and they forget that you have to prune stuff. I think it helps me a lot.

When I was 16 I had an accident, and you hear people saying "look at that freak". I have a lot of scars on my face... I used to hear people say "look at that", but over the years you'd get hardened. People would be talking - when I was on the bus people would be looking and staring and they thought I'd be embarrassed, but I got over being embarrassed. I'd raise conversation then and say, "oh, I know someone that's a relation" and ...we'd start a conversation. I didn't get any counselling at that time (of the accident). A few years ago I got a panic attack I was so uptight, I was at a restaurant, I just left. But now I don't care, well I do care but... There was no counselling years ago - you just had to get on with it.



DAVE

I basically chose that because I regard myself as being under construction, with my mental health and you know therapy, it's kind of an on-going process. I was badly depressed back in the 90s - that was a dangerous period for me. I couldn't get up in the mornings and my head was wrecked and I was really depressed. But thankfully I spent a month in hospital and since then the depression has completely gone.

I'm very cheerful now and in good humour and have a much brighter perspective about life now. So that's really what the photo suggests, people who suffer mental health issues are kind of under construction I suppose. We're always trying to improve ourselves, a little bit every day and make improvements, a little bit every day. We try to feel better all the time, you know.

There is a certain amount of stigma I suppose with mental health, I won't say you are regarded as a nobody but you are regarded as low down in life, in comparison to say very successful business men or whatever, who have no problem at all. Maybe they're married with children and all that. I suppose there is a certain amount of stigma but most people are trying to get rid of that. Now stigma wouldn't affect me now but it would when I first got sick, the initial period. People would have really looked down on me. I suppose I felt like a nothing, a bit of a nobody, a bit of a nothing. I went to college and for the first couple of years before I got sick they were all very impressed with me and they thought I was really good and then I got sick and their attitude towards me completely went the opposite direction. They were hyper critical and thought there was something missing and I was crap and that was the stigma kicking in.



SIMON

It's very hard to explain. Basically, life seems to be, sometimes a simple idea you see can be enough to help you on your way. Life is many different things. I think too much a lot of the time and this is maybe the simplicity of it. It's all contrast, contrasting. I kind of feel my life, I have had something in me that has kept me together, regardless of how bad things get I have found some way of holding myself together and believe there is a reason for being here.

Whether it's simple or not so simple, I keep going. Everything there, there is a way of keeping it together. (the reflection of the lamp) is like an arrow but I suppose you can say it changes direction, so when life it changing, it's changing all the time. I'm kind of lost a lot of the time and I feel that, even though I'm together myself and in my environment, a lot of the time I'm a fish out of water. I'm ok in myself but where I'm going or how I'm getting there ...I'm unsure. I'm very determined.

2. Picturing Recovery

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

Imagery of darkness and brightness are again used by this group to describe their experiences of living with mental health difficulties. Hope and resilience emerge once more as key elements of the recovery journey.



MARION

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

This was the after depression and I picked that because I loved the engraving. It reminded me of angel wings. It's just very uplifting. It's supposed to symbolise coming out of depression and coming out into the light, and just the feeling that you're a bit lighter and things are not as dark as they were and that sort of thing. There were times when I didn't feel like that. My image of myself was - I felt that I was nothing and that I didn't exist and for a long time I just felt people didn't want to be with me or didn't like me or anything like that. And then I just, I suppose I gradually came out. I just felt confident and that and went to support groups and that. I have a great belief in God and that helped me very much, and just gradually came out of the darkness. It was an awful, awful darkness that I couldn't get out of.

This represents walking from that dark place and into the light. From a spiritual place - the glass design are like angels. It represents life after depression and the picture reminds me of angel wings - it's light and it's peace.



TONY

What attracted me to this was the darkness and the brightness and the sun coming through the trees. You feel lost but you see a brightness coming through. Each road you take in life, I've always wondered if I'd walked - you come to a road and what's around the corners? It spurs you on a bit, to see what's around the corner, I have to go that far, even though I may have to go over a mountain. You think it's hard at the start but then you're over the mountain. If you're talking (with another person), in a few minutes you're over the hill. You forget that you are walking and you know you have to get there. You put down in your mind that you have to get there. I push myself, I don't believe in sitting around.

There is one road – one road you take, you'll end up somewhere.



DAVE

I think this symbolises for me ambition - climbing the ladder, not necessarily success, well success in the sense of well-being. I kind of call it the stairway to heaven because I'm quite spiritual really and that would be like living your life and climbing the steps every day and suffering on earth a bit but hopefully get to heaven at the end of it.

CONNECTIONS AND SUPPORT

The impact of having a safe non-judgmental space such as the Clubhouse to go to was highlighted by participants as an important tool in their recovery process. Having a place to go, a place to be, and activities such as cooking, gardening and so forth to keep you occupied are identified as key to participants.

CONNECTIONS AND SUPPORT



I've always worked in the kitchen, it can be stressful but at the end of the day there was always good fun in the kitchen. Coming up to Christmas and events, we had our laughs and our giggles. It was a supportive environment, she'd (the supervisor) always know when you are in bad form and she'd say 'take it out on the dishes but don't smash anything'. It was an outlet but supportive.

CATHERINE

CONNECTIONS AND SUPPORT



I came off my tablets and I came back to (the Clubhouse). I couldn't think of anywhere else to go and the Clubhouse felt good – coming through there. It was like the darkness and then seeing the light. I was going somewhere safe. That's the way I walk there. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

PAULINE

*I love gardening basically;
I'd go to a garden once a week.
I've planted a lot of vegetables,
last week we harvested spinach
and we brought it back to eat it.
I find gardening therapeutic,
you can take your anger out on
the vegetables! It helps, when
you're in the garden you can lose
yourself, it's distracting.
It's a distraction from life.*



AMY

*Sometimes when you look beyond what is in front of us,
we see the next part of our path clearly. You have the
beautiful flowers and then look between the two trees and
see the rest. You see, you meet people and I try to give
them the benefit of the doubt but sometimes you think you
understand what they're about but you don't.
People have layers so you can't always tell, you need to be
with people through a number of situations to even have a
basic understanding of them.*

*I've found support in some places. I feel good here (at
the Clubhouse), I feel like I'm here for a reason. This is
like, I'm in a fish tank and I've been in nicer places and
I've been in worse places and I'm OK here... I'm going
somewhere, I'm not just hanging around so I'm doing
something and when I have a plan to do something, and
when I do it, I feel like I'm getting through.*



SIMON



PAULINE

The sun coming out and the fresh air and the sun. I love flowers, I love to see a lovely garden. Recovery, it takes me a hell of a long time to come out of it but I had no one, I had no one to understand and nobody knew anything about depression.

ANIMALS & PETS

The unconditional love of animals provided a human-free therapeutic space whereby participants could engage with another without judgment or having to explain their sense of being and current state of emotion.

Basically I've grown up around dogs, since a small child, there's always been dogs around. I've always had dogs licking my face and that made me feel good. They are always, they're supportive, they know how you feel, they're just supportive.



AMY

This reminded me of my dog that I had since he was a two year old. He was just always there, he was a mad little thing. He was always the one that would let you give him a cuddle, he was one of the loyalist dogs going, he made me happier. He helped my through difficult times.



CATHERINE

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Handwriting practice lines on a dark background.

Corresponding author

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