

Editorial for A Life in the Day 8.2

A few weeks ago I asked a group of mental health staff two questions: ‘Who counts friendship as an important part of your life?’ and ‘Who has ever attended any training on friendship?’ As you might have guessed, all hands went up in answer to the first question and not even one hand was raised in response to the second. How does this vast gulf appear between our personal experience and the way we run services?

One viewpoint is that friendship is part of our private lives and is therefore not the business of mental health services. But, to my mind, this is rather like suggesting that thoughts are part of our private lives and therefore off limits for a mental health service. Friendship makes a huge contribution to our self-esteem, our sense of identity, and our reason for living that we are foolish to ignore it.

Perhaps we are too embarrassed to ask other people about their friendships, too afraid of the yawning emptiness and silence we may find. Or perhaps it is too sensitive for us, as we live with a nagging fear that everyone *except me* has a load of bosom pals constantly dropping round. Perhaps overwork has robbed us of some of our most treasured possessions. Finally, the question might be poorly phrased, and in fact we constantly discuss friendship, but have never thought of receiving training on something so simple and ordinary.

Traditionally, mental health services have responded to social isolation by creating new spaces where people using services can make friends with one another. For some people this has been a lifeline, but it repeats the same old exclusion argument that has been played out in sheltered workshops. If job retention is too difficult, obtaining open employment is beyond reach and the outside world seems hostile, then let’s create a replica within the mental health community. An inclusive approach is to help people retain the friendships that they have with citizens outside the mental health community, build new ones where necessary and meet a hostile world head-on with the ‘right hand of friendship’.

A Life in the Day is about positive social roles – about people with mental health issues doing the same kind of activities that everyone else in society wants to do. Many of us use these activities as a pathway into friendship. Whether we sit in the pub or the church, go to bingo or college, it is the friends that we make there that make all the difference. So we must address the Cadbury Crème Egg question: ‘How do you do yours?’

Unless we examine friendship, we are constantly in danger of expecting other people to conduct their friendships the way that we do ours. I don’t know whether there is any truth in the idea that men do their friendships differently from women, or whether there is something we might call Black friendship, or Squash-players friendship, or Southerners friendship, and all these seem large generalisations to me. I have been told, to my astonishment, that ‘real friendships’ can only exist between people who share similar life experiences, IQ and interests – as if people were socks and had to go

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in matched pairs. All I know is that the dance of friendship between two unique individuals is always original and sometimes beautiful. How do you do yours?

It is easier to help people register for a college class or join a gym than to support someone to make friends in one of those places. Dave Buckle's paper in this issue highlights the impact that work has on friendships both within and beyond the job. Last year I spoke to a group of people who each had their own voluntary job alongside the general public, but only one person claimed to have found friends in that setting. The others were hopeful that friendship would eventually grow. So it is with all of us, we live amongst the memories of past friendships, the hope of new ones and sometimes share joy and grief with current friends.

Sadly, some of us are employed in organisations that are not 'friendship-friendly' while others can count many years since we last made a new friend. Some of us just cannot see how the people we are paid to support could be anyone's friend, and this may be the biggest betrayal of all. So how skilled are you as a friendship guide? Like gardeners, we cannot force people into friendships, but we can help to create environments where they might take root and grow.