

Notes from LEIBRICH, J. (1999) A gift of stories. New Zealand: University of Otago Press.

Personal stories which tell us about individual experience make ideas real and fill them with meaning. They show how a person tries to make sense of their world and offer their truth. Stories give us far more than information or knowledge – they offer the opportunity to understand something, to understand it from within.

Telling one's own story is standing up for one's own meanings and is a powerful challenge to stigmatising prejudices that create a dampening, shaming silence. It is in the nature of severe illnesses to create a silence, but in naming the silence and speaking through it so it is dispelled (Hauwernas)

Whole range of diagnoses from personality disorder, through eating disorders and addictions to major psychosis, but stories as told by patients, are both unique to them, rather than distinguished by their diagnosis and have commonalities derived from shared identity of emotional suffering. Humanistic accounts centre on uniqueness and commonality, separate from diagnostic formulations.

WHAT HAS HELPED

1. Whenever I'm going psychotic I see a psychiatrist – its been a battle ... but I have access to him now. This is the only service I use. Time out, meditation, retreat, gardening and resting. Not seeing anyone – I avoid people. I'm very disciplined – clear routines for getting up, eating – going through the motions of living even if my mind is not engaged with it. I get dulled and need intellectual stimulation – need to learn new things – join a new group 'my mind will be saying I hate it I hate it , don't go, people are horrible, and I'll go. There's something in the essence of communication that is very vital. The psychiatrist did what I asked – I had a breakthrough with him in the sense that I found a person within the system who respected my point of view – that was a breakthrough, that's very rare. Also found a gentle loving man, and has father near by – my warriors.
2. The turning point was accepting that I needed counselling – and especially a realisation that for it to work I had to co-operate – the turning point was in being willing to talk it over, and get to the stuff I had never talked about before, consultant – I stuck with him for 6 years [relationship consistency – someone who believed in you] – right medication – reasonably stable. People with depression need to find a doctor they can stick with, because you don't know the signs yourself and you need someone else to point them out. Keep yourself safe. Try to eat well and keep working, got a puppy – good for self-esteem and makes me exercise. Gardening's great too, you don't have

to talk to any one, you don't have to concentrate, and you can take out any anger you feel on the weeds – you've done something creative, you've been close to nature. Working matters, independence matters, it's about being real – to keep well need to be really honest about the depression – its just part of life. It's the little problems that make you human. 'I've gained more confidence. I know myself a lot better now than I ever used to and ever would have if I hadn't got the depression ... it's taught me a lot about life and other people ... having suffering in your life I how you learn compassion.' (p23).

3. finding out that many others in my family had the same mental illness made me happy, thinking I'm not the only one in my family [issues of alienation, guilt and responsibility – acceptance and self-acceptance] medication has made a big difference – I think clozapine is a miracle drug – I take my medication now – I used to flush the others down the toilet – but this one I take. I come to the Tamarangi Group, which is about family and means Children of God – it's a good place if you want to get together with family – we sing and do arts and crafts – its sociable, if we have a problem we all talk about it – doing a course – I'm being helped to find employment for people with disabilities. My mother used to go to schizophrenia seminars with me – its good to have her around – love can heal schizophrenia.
4. continuing to see a therapist – ashburn hall never gave up on me – recovery came out of having enough awareness to make choices for myself – most important thing is consistency of relationship [c.f. new emphasis in assertive outreach and early intervention on persistence, consistency, dedication, and not giving up or letting go] my moods don't swing so much and I've learned to control them – recognising the relationship with stress. Development of spirituality. The psychotherapy helped me develop my self-awareness and allowed me to make choices, but the spiritual awareness has developed a softness in me. Recovery is ongoing.
5. if I want to have a relationship with my daughter I have to be medicated. I liked supported housing as all my needs were taken care of. Friends stood by me. Rediscovering independence, being a free person surrounded by my own things is just brilliant – I'm made to feel I belong here. I really good doctor who was able to get my confidence and assure me. I've learned to listen to the professionals who I always thought were working against me – I've come to realise that they have my best interests at heart. I've got my medication to the point where I can live with it – it's a two way thing with my doctor – I actually feel I have some control over it – that's made the difference. – eventually I became part of my family again.
6. Reluctant to take medication – felt ashamed, of having a mental illness – should be able to deal with problems by counselling. Medication was

like coming out of a tunnel into the sunshine – the difference was incredible. I believe my experiences have enhanced my life and given me an understanding of mental illness. So now I can relate to people with mental illness in a more positive way, with understanding and empathy rather than fear. ... I do have a mental illness – it took a while to accept that. For the last 8 years I've been helping Patrice, the essence that is me, to come out. Off and on I did intensive healing work, on my own, and sometimes with the help of people who had the skills to help [the issue of staff with skills and experts by experience] – I have more strategies, being open about what's wrong with me rather than trying to hide it – its hard not to withdraw, but I've got to make the effort to talk. Good friends and a dog, it's a whole thing, a life-style ... balance, in touch with my spiritual side as well ... I have my own beliefs which are very basic. When you are wrong promptly admit it, I like to make amends with people – not letting things go on and on – it takes a lot of the stress of life away.

7. It was so wrong to look at myself as weak and blame myself [reduction of self-stigmatising attitudes / self-blaming / punishment] the value of the understanding of those who one is attached to – facilitate a healthy introject – [hence carer education and support]. Going through this illness has been an acceptance and a growing process of learning to like myself as I am [survivor vs victim] ... its been a very, very long process – years [realism]. Helpful book [guides and models]. With anxiety you hyperventilate – best way is to suck a lolly, sucking regulates breathing and it also wets my mouth – I feel that a sucking action is a comfort. [finding your own best way – individualised coping strategies eg humming in the who text book vs. hallucinations]. With anxiety – safety is of the utmost importance – going for counselling was the best thing I ever did, I just talked and talked – it was like a cleansing. Steady support of a district nurse – she was always there, understanding. Facing all the issues that were with me. Cats, garden, sister and children – after being in hospital cannot face going home so go to sister, children give confidence. Major thing in keeping well is support. Really important to have something to love and to love me, when I have a panic attack – my cat is a comfort to me – takes my mind off me. Big garden, I've created myself, whenever I feel bad walk in the garden ... so busy thinking of bloody weeds it takes my mind off me. Conscious decision NOT to keep in touch with anyone met at the hospital. Anxiety is with me for my life, I can't take it off and throw it away, I'm very intelligent, I want myself as I am, accept myself. I like myself now. I like my honest, my truthfulness, the fact that I can keep secrets
8. I've realised that the thoughts I'm having are not normal. It's a slow realisation, but I may realise – once you get into that world you become part of it and its real hard to break away. When your in the world of fantasy you become part of that world. That's the trouble

with it. Lucky to be in a small town where people know I am a psychiatric patient ... so when things are a bit strange they can tell my nurse. I cannot see how you can recover from a mental illness ... I know I'm going to have an episode in the future, and there's not much I can do about it. Its just living with it – coping up to a level where you have a good enough existence of life. ... when you have an episode, try to keep it compact, and keep the damaged area closed in, control the illness, don't let the illness control you. Rest is important – its easier to combat your illness when your nice and rested than when your exhausted.

I went to the interview with my father. He was my support. The interview was choice. We were sitting there and dad gave me fantastic support.

I'm chairman of the consumer group we're trying to start up here – working as a mental health working is a positive experience for me. I've been able to turn a negative into a positive [valued role / identity / purposeful work] a lot of things have helped – like carving – I was someone who could do something [creativity] – playing sport helped a lot too, their fun and the more fun things you can do, the more enjoyable life is. Then you have a reason for being around.

If you are going to move on you have to forgive, if you keep going back into the past ... there's going to be no positive outcome.

[Attitudes / values and a personal philosophy of illness.]

9. [there are many associations in common between people who are on the recovery path – more is held in common between people than corresponds to what has helped someone with a particular diagnosis]
10. own room, like living there, can move around a lot, own money in the bank, freedom of access – an opportunity to grow up, someone to look out for me – someone to tell me I'm a good man and can do a good job – try to take care of myself, medication, I love my job, I like to sing, I'm good at painting – I'm learning to write properly on a course
11. try to compensate for emotional instability – have way of talking to oneself that puts things in order – 'what your looking at here is a very very emotionally 'young' journey in an older physical frame.' The discovery that there is a whole group of ordinary people like me – I wanted to consider it as an educational challenge rather than an illness – my experiences were in a way validated, they were valuable. – need to sustain a kind of optimism a kind of sense that it is all meaningful – for me personal development is all about developing a personal spirituality. You need courage to cope with mental illness

One of my recovery messages to myself is that if you do get there again you mustn't punish yourself. There are no good things about being there but it's a real thing and it's me, it's part of who I am. [self acceptance] – multiple strategies, visualisation – escape strategies, your imagination can help you untangle yourself – the realisation that others have been there to, and that depression gives you access to sensitivity. Enjoy little things, enjoy your senses, consciously savour them. Blaming doesn't help – it's not why I'm depressed that's important, it's how I deal with it. Recovery is ongoing, I'm going to be depressed again and again and again, it's ok to feel depressed – I need people to accept it as a reality in my life – that's who I am.

ONE

Own room

Own money

Try to take care of myself – I'm a good man and can do a good job

I like to sing, I'm good at painting

I'm learning to write properly

TWO

I've realised that my thoughts are not normal

I cannot see how you can recover from a psychiatric illness

Lucky to live in a small town so when things are a bit strange they can call the nurse

It's about living with it to have a good enough existence of life

When you have an episode try and keep it compact

Control the illness don't let the illness control you

Rest – it's easier to cope when you are not exhausted

Chairman of the consumer group – I've been able to turn a negative into a positive

Carving – I was someone who could do something – the more you can do the more reason you have for being around

If you are going to move on you have to forgive

THREE

I felt ashamed of taking medication – but it was like coming out of a tunnel into the sunshine

Believing that my experienced have enhanced my life – understanding

Intensive healing work on my own – sometimes with people who had skills

Developing more strategies

Trying not to withdraw – being open about what is wrong with me

Good friends and a dog – it's a whole life style thing

When you are wrong promptly admit it – it takes a lot of stress away to make amends

Be in touch with my spiritual side

FOUR

If I want a relationship with my daughter I have to be medicated

Supported housing

Rediscovering independence

Being a free person – surrounded by my own things is just brilliant

I've come to realise that the professionals have my best interests at heart

It's a two-way thing with my doctor – I feel I have some control over it

Eventually I became part of my family again

FIVE

Continuing to see a therapist

Recovery came out of having enough awareness to make choices for myself

Most important thing is consistency in relationships

I've learned to see the relationship between my moods and stress

Developing my spirituality

Psychotherapy developed awareness but spirituality developed softness

Recovery is ongoing

SIX

Finding out about my family

Finding that I'm not the only one

Medication – clozapine is a miracle drug

Singing – arts and crafts

Helping others

My mother – she used to go to schizophrenia seminars with me

Love can heal schizophrenia

SEVEN

Acceptance of mental health needs

Cooperation with those seeking to help

Consistent relationship with consultant

Someone who believed in me

Stabilising medication

Eat well

Keep working

Gardening

Puppy

WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON ?

Steady consistent and trusting relationships

A manageable relationship with the illness

Someone to believe in the (well) person

Acceptance and self-acceptance

Creativity

Spirituality

Play

Purposefulness and belonging

Independence and self-control (freedom)

Understanding of experiences and situation

A rationale for recovery

Nature – animals and gardens

Personal solutions: finding / working out your own unique combinations