

Things like this are much less 'scary' if one can talk about them!

It is important to us 'mental' Friends (horrid word!) to be accepted and supported by our local meetings. We don't bite! It may take a little courage, but all that is needed is a friendly enquiry about our general 'health', much as one would enquire about someone's recent operation or troublesome cough. A little sincere appreciation of some unusual ministry helps self-confidence considerably – treat the patient as a normal person (as indeed we are), and be solicitous without being condescending. I once related what I considered to be a very valuable 'hallucination' that I had experienced, and then only realised that I had given away the fact of my state of mental health. No one said anything.

If you're feeling brave, invite people to tea! I remember being very much cheered by some excellent scones made by an elderly and sympathetic Friend. I don't remember any words of wisdom but I always went home with my depression considerably lightened.

At the moment I'm trying to come to terms with a terminal prognosis. I'm not at all bothered by the news – I'm 80 and have had a very full life, but it really upsets me that Friends in my local meeting won't (or can't) talk to me about death, or even let me talk to them about it. Perhaps I'm being unreasonable, but I did expect some support from local Quakers. Things like this are much less 'scary' if one can talk about them!

They trusted in me...

I had a major breakdown while on a psychiatric social work course when I was 23 – before I became a Quaker. My employers were not always sympathetic. I am bipolar. I can cope with the depressive elements, but need short hospital admissions when I go high. I have had excellent psychotherapy and my condition, with the help of medication, has remained stable for more than 20 years. The acceptance of Friends has been important and has meant a lot to me. They trusted in me, even when I had difficulty in trusting myself.

I was asking far too much of myself, too soon

Statistically, 'mental illness' is so widespread that it is certain that many in our meetings will have been affected at one time or another, and may be "suffering in silence".

Some years ago, I was a Member of a meeting. My husband used to say that he couldn't possibly sit still for an hour, and would much rather be doing an hour's gardening or 'something useful'! He became ill and died. After his death I plunged into a deep depression, coupled with anxiety, on top of the grief. My GP referred me to the psychiatrist, and I was greatly helped by therapy and medication.

During this period I returned to meeting. Friends were sympathetic to my loss, of course, but as the months passed, the meeting continued 'as normal', but for me things never reverted to 'normal'. I found that the silence, in particular, was unbearable at this time. Silence, in fact, was associated in my mind with a deep existential fear and dread, which exhibited itself as a permanent 'silent scream' inside my head, which made it impossible to use the Quakerly silence in any constructive way. I realise now that I was asking far too much of myself, too soon...

Learning to be with a Friend who has Dementia

A woman had worn out her welcome at other local churches and for months she disrupted worship and business with long tirades about social issues of the past which still preoccupied her. Elders visited to discuss. Initially we were kind and polite and got nowhere. Then we tried speaking as though to a child: simply, bluntly and firmly, telling her that she must listen in Meeting for Worship and not speak every time. At the same time we encouraged her to talk endlessly and repetitively afterwards with a few patient Friends and we set up a 'discussion group' to enable her to feel heard. She has become considerably calmer, rarely speaks inappropriately and, equally important, her elderly husband is grateful for our acceptance and seems to value the hours' respite on Sunday mornings. And the discussion group continues and serves a different purpose.

Peace was restored

Some years ago there was a young man who unexpectedly began to be very disruptive in our Quaker Meeting. He had come to Quakers several years before from a strict, biblical and evangelical sect.

His disruptive behaviour took the form of haranguing us, especially with biblical texts during Meeting for Worship, arguing with our processes within meeting and especially in Meeting for Business. He disputed the accuracy of minutes of meetings he had not attended and if he was at Meeting for Business he was negative and argumentative. The meeting was very troubled. Various members tried reasoning with him by talking and in writing. Eventually and with much concern he was asked not to come to Meeting for Business. A friend sat outside with him. We did have a contingency plan if he was disruptive and the meeting was very relieved that we did not have to use it.

One Sunday during Meeting for Worship he harangued us at length quoting biblical passages that 'proved our sinfulness' and finished by calling us Fascists. In the ensuing silence one of our Young Friends, a young woman of 13 or 14, stood and with tears in her eyes said 'I don't know what a fascist is but I know I am not one' and sat down. Our disturbed Friend walked across the room, hugged her and returned to his seat.

Peace was restored.

Some weeks later a friend happened to see him at the hospital in the waiting room of the Mental Health Unit. We did not really realise that he had mental health issues at the time of all the disturbance until being seen there.

He came back to Meeting and was part of it.

At another meeting we have had a similar occurrence though not quite as disruptive and again we did not realise that there were mental health issues until the disturbance was 'resolved', this time by the person (and spouse) asking to be removed from membership and all other contact with Quakers.

It seems to me from these two encounters that we may miss the fact that there are mental health issues and interpret the problems to a person just being difficult.

I needed support

I was living in a new place where I knew no-one and my husband was starting a new demanding job. My son was born and welcomed by the overseers at the meeting to which I had just transferred my membership. I succumbed to acute post-natal depression necessitating hospitalisation. Friends in the meeting were at a loss. The meeting offered to pick me up from the hospital for Meeting for Worship but this was too much of an ordeal. I only went once. I must have seemed difficult and ungrateful but what I really needed was the constant, undemanding support of an individual.

The local vicar's wife took in my husband and son and brought the baby to visit me regularly. Her kindness stays with me and motivated me to work with mentally distressed people.

Eventually I came through and resumed going to meeting. But Friends did not refer to the reason for my long absence. I think they were embarrassed. I could have done with a sympathetic ear.