No Health Without Mental Health

Since October now, I’ve been on placement at a mental health centre. I’ve never worked in this area before, and it was something I was very nervous about. I didn’t like it to begin with. It honestly sounds ridiculous now, but when I started, I met with people who were very poorly, very different and I’m ashamed to say that I felt really uncomfortable. Six months on, my feelings couldn’t be more different, but as I look back, I realise that my thoughts and feelings (while kept hidden), were what these people probably had to deal with from others on a daily basis. It is perhaps not surprising that mental health, an area that has always been systematically stigmatised has suffered from discriminatory language. Generations of people have grown up in societies that found terms like “psycho”, “schizo”, “loony” and “crazy” perfectly acceptable. Some people think there is a link between mental health problems and being a danger to others. This is an idea that is reinforced by sensationalised stories in the media. However, the most common mental health problems have no significant link to violent behaviour. As I've been on placement, I've met some truly amazing people. People who are funny, kind, caring, who have simply had a rubbish start to life. I've enjoyed getting to know service users in the centre who are passionate about music, art, science, films and some who love Jesus! Hoorah! I've found it truly wonderful to be able to share my faith with service users in the centre, - it’s led to some really interesting discussions and lots and lots of questions! One service user said to me, “My diagnosis means that people think I’m violent and dangerous. I’m not – and I hate to think people think that about me. I am caring and hardworking and would do anything for the people I love.” I'm more conscious now about the language I use, and challenge others when I hear them using terms that just aren’t acceptable. I believe that education is the key to reducing stigma, and while the area of mental health is coming more into the spotlight, there is more work to be done to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination. A group called ‘Stamp it out’ meet in the centre and solely concentrate on reducing stigma in the County Durham area. During one of the meetings that I attended; they gave us all some recent statistics. Although 40% of people said they would be comfortable talking to their employer about their mental health problems, nearly half (48%) said they would feel uncomfortable. When asked about how to describe someone who has a mental illness, nearly 40% agreed that they are prone to violence, when in reality, they are far more likely to be the victim rather than the perpetrator. I'm working on a spirituality project in the centre, we've had three focus groups for interested service users where we’ve discussed what spirituality is and how it can help with our mental health. This has been really well received, and we’re now looking forward to an Alpha Course in September, a singing group, mindfulness and meditation sessions, and an ‘open’ house where we
can chat, drink tea and chat all things spiritual. The French philosopher ‘Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’ said that ‘We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.’ To be a human is to be spiritual, in some form. We all explore these feelings of ‘something more’ at some point in our lives and I think that something in us knows, deep in the gut or the heart, perhaps at an unconscious level, that we are made of more than just the sum total of our thoughts, feelings and the life situation that we are living at the moment. Spirituality is about exploring what this ‘more’ is for us. One of the key contributions of spirituality in the lives of these service users, may be the power it offers to restore meaning, purpose and hope to their lives. I’ve found that lots of service users see themselves as the diagnosis rather than the person, I think that by introducing spirituality and spiritual practices into the centre, gives them a chance to develop the better parts of ourselves. They help us to become more creative, patient, persistent, honest, kind, compassionate, wise, calm, hopeful and joyful. These are all part of the best health care.

I absolutely love my placement now, I love being able to sit and listen, to help, to chat and to see people change and feel more confident before my very eyes. Surely, this is what community development is all about. 😊

Fliss x