

A Service User's Perspective – The Odyssey Group

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At the beginning of 2003 Dr Powell alerted me to an article in the SIG Newsletter 8, which was Jill Stevenson's description of Odyssey Groups. These are groups that Jill has been running for several years in Ely at the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust. They are designed for users to discuss their spirituality and what is, essentially, the meaning of life. I wrote to her for information and eventually obtained funding from my mental health care NHS trust to go on her group facilitators training in October 2003. The training I went on was rather tightly packed into one day. She normally runs the group for two days over two consecutive weeks. She is a mine of information on spiritual matters and one leaves the course somewhat shell-shocked.

Attending the course allows one to use the term 'Odyssey' for a group. In January 2004 I organized my first Odyssey group by devising a poster with a picture of an ancient Greek ship and distributed it round my town. I also got an article into the local paper. In addition I managed to get an additional grant from my local area partnership to fund my doing a distance-learning course on Christian Spirituality, so I was already on my own journey or Odyssey into the spiritual life. I did not get many responses from my adverts but enough to start a group of six people, (though one had to drop out).

The group now comprises three service users, one carer and two people who, though not users of mental health, responded to the advertisement and were interested in being in the group. We have two practicing Christians, one Roman Catholic and one Methodist, an atheist without any former religious affiliations and three people who have been in but have left the Christian Church. After initial meetings of potential group members we committed ourselves to a ten-week set of meetings, using Tony Buzan's 'Power of Spiritual Intelligence'. A copy of the book was given to each member from the funding.

The pilot set of meetings has been completed and everyone is keen to carry on. The discussions began with the theme of the short chapters from the book on subjects like Love, Ritual, Compassion and Life vision and Purpose. As facilitator I brought extra materials in case we ran out of things to talk about but we rarely did. The two hours flew past and the coffee break did not stop people talking. We had set some ground rules at the beginning, of confidentiality, and no interrupting, but deviating from the subject was fine and people brought up issues of concern to them sometimes sharing some quite intimate thoughts. Very occasionally we found ourselves so off the subject I intervened, but that was rare. The subject of the meaning of life is fascinating and causes people to reveal some very personal insights. For example, the subject of synchronicity versus coincidence came up, also questions like: does life have a purpose? Do we survive death? Is religion man made? Does religion cause more war than peace? What sort of a belief system is Islam or Buddhism? We have yet to look at scientific ideas about consciousness or to discuss religions other than Christianity and Buddhism, so there is plenty of scope for further sessions.

When I told a service user member of the group I was writing this report she suggested I put in a quote from a group member. This is what she said:

'The opportunity to explore spirituality in the context of mental health is something I've wanted to do for many years. The group has given me the opportunity to pull together all the experience and spirit striving of many years and has given me emotional support in doing so, which churches have failed to do. The honesty and support found from the participants in this group has enabled a scary process of development in discernment to take place. The skilled leadership of the group was

essential to the process. I am exceedingly grateful for this opportunity which my own church has failed to provide me with'.

Further planned developments are through the Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care team at the Trust. We have obtained funding for six more people to train with Jill Stevenson as facilitators, to operate around Norfolk and there is also interest for a group comprising health care professionals and another of patients in a hospital environment. I have no doubt that every group will operate very differently depending on the composition of the group. The pilot group has been well educated and informed, as it turned out. Another group might require more input. Jill recommends several books and videos on her course and suggests that a group has visits from people of different faith groups. The one proviso is that these people should be broadminded enough not to seek to evangelise us. One final thought especially remains with me from her course. 'The mind is like an umbrella. It works better open'.

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