

# **An accompaniment to** *Encounters with mental distress: Quaker stories*

Some ideas for using the book to explore issues  
relating to mental illness in Quaker meetings



## Introduction

Quakers are being encouraged to use the book *Encounters with mental distress: Quaker stories* as a way to open up the subject of mental illness. One helpful way to do this could be to use the stories in the book as a safe introduction to discussions on the topic. This brief resource has been developed to suggest some ways that meetings might do that.

## Starting out

It would be helpful to begin with some activities that bring the group together, through worship, with some kind of sharing, whether or not your group know each other well. Develop a 'working agreement' together – this will help to ground the group and will start to create a 'safe space' for you all to work in.

Use worship sharing and invite people to reveal something new about themselves by answering a particular question. An example is: Can you say something of your journey in Quakerism?

It is really important that group members feel trust for each other before embarking on deep sharing. There are suggestions on the next page for ways that you might use the book to deepen your experience once you have gathered.

## Ideas for discussing mental health in meetings

When using any of these suggestions it is helpful to think about them from each of these three perspectives:

- individual
- meeting
- carer.

Thinking from these perspectives will help you to understand how you might respond to situations that arise in your meeting. Try to imagine how it might make you feel to receive that response from another Friend.

- Explore one or more of the stories in detail as a whole group or in small groups. Try to understand the issues from each of the perspectives.
- Read the book and select a few stories that have different themes. Print them and spread them around the room. Ask people to read each of them

and gather around one that they are drawn to. Discuss in the small groups that are gathered around each story.

- Ask Friends to choose stories on a theme and, as a group, explore the issues that arise around that theme, for example, bipolar conditions.

If the people in your group feel that they might be willing to share their own stories:

- Choose a story that in some way reflects some of your own experience. Read and explore the story with others and share what it is about that story that you feel part of, and why.
- Use personal stories. Invite people to share their own story. If people are willing, ask if their story can be opened up as a discussion, or if they will take questions on their experience.
- Invite two or three people to share their own story or journey. It is a good idea to try to cover the range of perspectives, as above, or have people speak about different aspects of mental illness.

### Suggested activity: using stories

This activity involves selecting stories from the booklet to use as material. Use conversation to share and understand the issues behind the stories in a safe way. You can do this activity on its own if time is limited. If you have longer and would like to go deeper into the stories, it is good to begin the session by using a grounding activity such as the *Starting out* activity on the facing page.

To prepare for the activity print out a few stories, or extracts from the stories, and place them around the room. Then:

- Open with a few minutes of worship (5–15 minutes).
- Give a brief introduction to what the activity is (5 minutes).
- Construct a group working agreement. This will guide the group in its expectations and create a safe space for sharing confidentially (5 minutes).
- Invite the group to move around the room, reading all the stories. Let people choose one they are drawn to (for any reason) and stand next to it (10 minutes).
- Try to get the participants into groups of 3–6 around the stories and then

encourage them to talk about the story they have chosen. You might suggest they say: why they chose this story; whether they have personal experience of the issue; and whether their meeting has responded to a similar situation. Be careful about naming individuals (15–20 minutes).

- Come back together as a whole group and invite the smaller groups to share a brief summary of what they discussed (15–20 minutes).

If you would like to go further in the same small groups you could talk about how your meeting might respond to the particular theme that was discussed. You could also describe your personal experience of this, or another, situation.

## Remember

As a facilitator you are inviting people to take part; it is not obligatory. Make sure that participants know that they can share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with.

The timings given are approximate and will depend on the size of your group.

Try to include everyone and encourage those who speak less freely. Be careful not to allow a few voices to dominate.

## Resources and acknowledgments

In 2015 the Mental Health in Meetings Cluster of the Quaker Life Network published a book, *Encounters with mental distress: Quaker stories*. This resource is an accompaniment to that book. With gratitude this resource draws on ideas from Quaker Life's *Sharing our meetings' stories* and Quaker Quest.

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