

Mental health in our meetings



Introduction

Mental health in our meetings has long been of concern to Quakers of all ages. We hope that this leaflet will help Quakers who are considering these issues.

As Quakers, we aim to welcome everyone to our meetings. We try to create and offer a spiritual community where all can belong and feel respected, valued, safe and supported. We want everyone to be able to contribute with ministry and service.

Issues related to mental health need to be considered prayerfully and with discernment. This should be done while holding everyone in the meeting in the Light, so that the healthy life and growth of the meeting may continue.

The next page of this leaflet offers some queries to reflect on. Then it takes a look at the ways in which mental distress can present itself in meetings, along with some of the specific issues and concerns that may arise. Later it considers what someone might hope for from their meeting, and what the meeting might offer them. The final section offers some guidance and suggestions in response to mental health issues. Some resources and contacts are offered at the end.

Language

Many different phrases are used in relation to mental health, including: mental well-being or ill health; mental distress; mental disturbance; mental illness; or mental disorder. Each phrase used will have a different emotional resonance for any individual and may be more – or less – meaningful.

When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to see where they have come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you.

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Queries

The following queries may help while thinking about mental health issues.

- How do we make our meeting a safe and welcoming place for all who wish to come to worship?
- “Meet together and know one another in that which is eternal” (George Fox, 1657; *Quaker faith & practice*, 2.35). Do we really seek to know one another in that which is eternal and those things which are spiritual as well as those things which are temporal? What does this mean for you and your meeting?
- Do we seek to understand each other’s needs?
- Do we value everyone, whatever their needs may be, and for whatever they can contribute to the meeting community? How do we show that we value each person?
- Do we seek the gifts that each person has and look for ways for each to serve? Are we open to the gifts of everyone in whatever form they may come?
- How can we enable everyone to participate as fully as they wish, and are able, in the life of the meeting – worship, business, social concerns, learning and social activities?
- Do we, as a worshipping community, know the expectations of the meeting community, and what boundaries may be needed? How do we discern these? Do we communicate them clearly?
- Are we able to set boundaries in a spirit of kindness, and a non-blaming way?
- Do we consider how we may be mistaken in our perception? What can we do to remedy this?
- When we feel uncertain, do we share with others in our meeting and discern a way forward together?

Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come?

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Signs of mental distress

There are many ways in which issues around mental health may present themselves in the meeting (the resource section at the end of this leaflet may help here).

It may be very clear to many in the meeting that an individual is under stress. That person may be very open about their needs, or they may show their stress or distress in less direct ways. These may include anger towards others, or to the whole meeting. Others may stay away or withdraw from meeting and not respond to contact. How can we respond?

There can be behaviour that disturbs the meeting community, either from someone with poor mental health or in the lack of a compassionate response to them. This may be a sign that someone is in need. What can be done?

When someone cannot hear and respond to the needs of the community as a whole, how do we address this?

Outwardly there may be an appearance of well-being, a personal mask that may be very important in coping with stress and/or distress. Or the person's thinking or behaviour may appear disturbed or distorted; their reality can be very different from that of others. There may or may not be some awareness of this difference.

Isolation of spirit ... comes to most – perhaps all of us – at one time or another. There are times in our lives when the tides of faith seem far out, times of dryness... At such times we may stay away from meeting feeling that it does not give us the spiritual help that we need; or it may be that we continue to go and are to outward appearance actively engaged on the meeting's life and business, while, within, we feel the agonies of isolation and the longing for light to lighten our darkness.

Edward H. Milligan, 1951
Quaker faith & practice, 21.20

Addressing mental distress

There can be a reluctance to talk to one another about mental health or mental illness, or to address issues as they arise. This may be because we do not have a shared language for addressing these issues; or we may be afraid of upsetting or making people or a situation feel worse; or we may feel inadequate, lack knowledge and so think it better left to others to deal with; or we may be afraid of how we will be seen after speaking about our own issues (or of speaking out of turn about someone else's) and fear we may be seen as a 'problem' rather than as a person.

Where there are mental health issues affecting relationships in our community, it often becomes difficult to 'know one another' in the spirit. Relationships are disrupted and reciprocity and mutual understanding can become impossible. Both parties can become puzzled and disturbed when we cannot develop the reciprocal relationships we hope for. When our 'normal' ways of relating no longer work, we no longer know what to 'expect' in response to our contact. Using some words from stories received by Quaker Life in relation to mental health, people may seem or see themselves as 'difficult', 'ungrateful', 'unaware' or 'rejected'. We may avoid or feel anxious about making contact with each other. This inability to 'know one another', to understand the other and be understood, may disturb us.

Sometimes, when people take comments personally, this causes distress. It is important we see comments in the light of a whole situation and with love for one another. The person is not the problem. Their illness or distress may be, but so also may others' attitudes to this.

Further questions for meetings around these concerns

- How much can the meeting be involved and how much is it the responsibility of any one person? What support can be given to someone who is troubled? How can the meeting communicate, maintain boundaries and help those who have difficulties? What should be done about boundaries that are broken?
- Do we have the resources needed to manage and safely deal with whatever the situation may be? Does someone want more than the meeting can offer?
- Is professional intervention needed? If so, should meeting arrange this? How far should the meeting be involved?

Nobody wants to be tolerated. What we need is acceptance but where there are things that cannot be accepted then kindness and meaningful listening can help to shift those views.

Ministry given at Streatham & Brixton Quaker Meeting, by Chris Lofty

For each of us to consider personally

What might we hope for from our meeting, and what might a meeting offer?

Quaker meetings try to offer a safe, welcoming space where anyone can feel welcomed, respected and valued, and be offered support if needed. Quakers are encouraged to be part of the community and its worship, ministry, social activity, witness and service.

Many people experience mental health issues, stress or mental illness. These issues are often difficult to talk about and it may be difficult for you to make your needs known, or for others to become aware of them.

Everyone is different, even when they show similar signs or symptoms. You may wish to talk to someone privately; or to sit in a particular place; or not talk at all.

Whatever your needs or difficulties, as Quakers we aim to talk to everyone in a friendly manner, treating all with equal respect – to reflect the Quaker saying that everyone has ‘that of God’ or ‘Light’ or ‘good’ within them.

It can help others in your meeting to understand if you share what is on your mind or what you feel hurt about. It also helps if you are as open and honest as possible in indicating how others might help. Many people have limited experience of mental health issues and need guidance. Sometimes it can be helpful to bring someone, such as a carer or friend, who understands you well, to help us understand what could be done to help you feel welcome and included.

Or it may be that you need some time away from meeting for a while. If so, it is helpful to let us know so we can continue to support you appropriately. Sometimes people in meeting are not able to give as much support or time as you feel is needed or helpful. We may need to set limits to protect the Quaker community as a whole. In such circumstances the people in meeting who are supporting you will try to be open with you. A broken meeting community cannot help you or anyone.

Although as Quakers we try hard not to see anyone as a ‘problem’, we are human and make mistakes. In doing so, we often fail to put into practice the values to which we aspire. We are sorry when this occurs and causes hurt. Often, we do not even realise that it has happened. We hope you will feel able to speak to someone about this if it is your experience. It will help us all to learn and grow and become better able to respond and help more appropriately in the future.

If you wish to talk to someone, please ask. There is usually someone available in the meeting to listen to you, hopefully in an open and supportive manner – in particular Quakers with eldership or oversight responsibilities. Please remember that Quakers do not come to meeting in any professional role and may be under pressure

themselves or have limited time to be available. Quakers value truth and integrity highly and will do all they can to be open with you and treat you fairly.

It is sometimes helpful to remember that you may not be the only one in your meeting who has experienced hurt. We all need to give, as well as receive. Your experience may help others and so help to spread a little more of the love and support that we all need.

As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other's lives, ready to give help and to receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God's love and forgiveness.

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For meetings to consider together

There is nothing unusual about mental illness. Many people show some form of it at some time and many more may be distressed for all sorts of reasons. Earlier, we suggested some different ways in which individuals may show mental stress to a meeting, along with the issues and concerns that may arise.

It can be a challenge when someone's behaviour disturbs another, or others, or the meeting community. First, recognise and acknowledge the discomfort, note who is feeling it, and what might be triggering it. It is not a matter for blame. Discomfort may be a response to someone's behaviour, or a sign that someone is in need.

Everyone has a different level of acceptance of behaviours that may disturb the well-being of the meeting as a whole. There are limits to the behaviours that can be accepted in a meeting community and these will vary from meeting to meeting. In order to feel safe we all need situations to remain within predictable limits. This is why setting behavioural 'boundaries' is essential.

A key part of the process of maintaining boundaries, while offering support, is the clarity with which the situation is discussed. We can try to be too 'nice', hoping that, by being 'nice', conflict will be avoided and the problem will go away. It will not. Clear boundaries are needed for everyone. However, within the boundaries, flexibility is possible and often helpful, enabling the meeting to attend to the needs of an individual within the group.

Examples of ways of helping people with meetings for worship include: talking to the individual before or after meeting for worship; being flexible about the length of time for which a person joins the silence; sitting with someone and offering quiet support; or holding a special meeting for worship with its own structure and boundaries.

It is very important to clarify what someone who may be unwell can cope with; for instance, not expecting too much and not being too intrusive. This needs clear-headed discernment, respect and a willingness to listen to each other.

Some queries to help meetings reflect further

- Do we, as a community, have clear guidance and boundaries? How do we set these boundaries? Are we able to set them in a non-blaming way and in a spirit of kindness?
- What are we doing to make sure that the whole community is aware of these boundaries?
- How do we support both individuals and the meeting in managing these boundaries?
- If someone finds it difficult to stay within the agreed boundaries, what will we do about this? How much can the meeting as a whole help and how much is it the responsibility of any one person?
- What support can we give to people who are troubled?

In working with, and responding to, these questions, it is important to remember that someone who is unwell may need help to maintain boundaries, not to be too intrusive and not to expect too much. We could end up aggravating a situation and making someone feel worse.

Whatever happens, Friends need to be encouraged not to take comments personally but to see them in the light of the situation as a whole.

Real difficulties arise when the needs of the community are not heard by someone and they are unable to respond in a way that helps all involved; or when the community cannot find a way to respond to a person's needs. This is when it is particularly important to set and maintain clear boundaries while offering what support is reasonable. Do not expect too much from those who need or offer support. Ideally, we wish everyone to be part of the meeting community, but we can only offer anything so far as our health allows us. We need to find ways of being clear about what we are not able to do without causing undue and damaging stress.

Using our discernment process to find, agree and set boundaries can give confidence to all involved.

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Addressing any discomfort or disturbance in the meeting is not a matter for blame.

When a person's distress may be reaching a point where it is not contained, discuss the situation with them and discern what steps might be taken, including taking professional advice or engaging with formal processes.

Where someone withdraws from the meeting, or does not respond to contact, it is important to reflect on what might be causing this situation. Is it because someone is finding the meeting difficult to be in because of another person's behaviour, or is it because someone is finding the meeting difficult to be in because of their own mental health condition? If you suspect that the person might be ill, try to remain in touch with them but without putting pressure on them to meet, come back to the meeting or do anything that might be too burdensome for them. Show that you are concerned and care but that you do not expect a response. Remember that even sending a card saying that someone is being thought of or 'held in the Light' can mean a lot.

In offering support, our role is to help, not to try to 'fix'. A solution may not actually be what is needed. Offering support involves:

- listening attentively without preconceptions and in a spirit that allows another's voice to be heard
- building and maintaining connections
- being alongside, accompanying a person (or group).

Some suggestions for having a conversation with someone who appears distressed

- Choose the communicator carefully. Do what you can to enable yourself to truly hear what is being said – by putting your own immediate concerns to one side – and be spiritually prepared to listen in the stillness that will allow another’s voice to be heard. Hold all in the Light.
- Establish that there is no intention to hurt.
- Let go of any preconceptions you may have and take time to learn about each other’s experience.
- Be aware that the person you are conversing with may not perceive that their behaviour is causing discomfort to the meeting. They may see things the other way round and there may be justification for this.
- Avoid making comparisons. These can be hurtful and are rarely useful.
- The speaker may use language that is strange to you. Try to find out why it is significant to them. When speaking or responding, do so from your heart.
- A solution may not be what is needed. Open-minded and open-hearted listening often are.

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When help is offered it can be beneficial in some situations for this to be acknowledged or ‘owned’ by the wider meeting community in some way. This helps prevent inappropriate demands, or people becoming overwhelmed or overloaded. It may involve sharing what support is given to an individual, or how someone accompanying and supporting another person is being sustained.

In considering who is responsible for holding and responding to mental health issues in a meeting, begin by looking at what types of issues there are. It is also helpful to reflect on the gifts or strengths in the meeting community and how these might be made available in different situations. For those needing further support, this could be available in the local meeting, the area meeting, through those with responsibility for eldership and oversight, or by contacting Quaker Life. They are all there to be used or contacted, and issues and situations will be explored in confidence.

Although we are all involved in upholding the meeting, it may be that the wise course is for one or two people to consider the matter themselves. We also need to recognise that, primarily, we are a worshipping community; while mindful of one another and caring for each other, we are not a social care agency.

It is important to remember that an individual is not a problem. Someone's behaviour, distress or illness may be tricky to deal with – but so can other people's attitudes to it. We are asked to listen – to accompany. To this end trust and love are needed – even tough love at times, but still love.

The quotes below illustrate how someone can feel valued, belong and give service in a meeting despite suffering mental distress.


Quakers have really valued me when no one else in the world did ...
accepting that I am a worthwhile member of my meeting and my
community even when I am a bit of a mess. I am not broken and worthless
because I hear voices ... there's recognition that even when I am fairly poorly
there are things which I can do and that I am not just hopelessly receiving help.

Ceri Owen, *Quaker Voices*, September 2014

At meeting I could simply be me.

Encounters with mental distress: Quaker stories

For more information about how Quaker Life can help your meeting deal with the issues around mental health, contact Oliver Waterhouse on 020 7663 1007 or oliverw@quaker.org.uk.



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