This was a stimulating, creative and inspiring Conference - The 3rd Conference to be held on recovery issues by SLaM, it provided a powerful voice for people with lived experience of mental health difficulties.

Attending the event as representatives from Devon’s D_RRIG, called on us to use our full resources to support each other, so that we could gain and give through this opportunity. As a group we were put in contact before the event and swapped information, about how we might share note taking and support each other, during the visit. This led to sharing travel and accommodation arrangements for some and having personal support from friends or relatives for others. Having overcome the very real challenges of booking a place to stay, getting train tickets, planning the process of getting there and catching the right train at the right time, we arrived at the venue and were met by a very informal, friendly atmosphere, sharing coffee and croissants with people who use services and health care professionals. People were relaxed and open.

The day was chaired by Gabrielle Richards in the morning and Jerome Carson in the afternoon. There was an atmosphere of acceptance, simple kindnesses, and shared humanity.

Speakers were contributors to the book, “Psychosis- Stories of Recovery and Hope”, launched at the end of the day. Proceeds from the book sale go to Charity. Many contributors shared a talent for creativity.

The most important message was that recovery is unique to each individual. This reinforced the importance of each person being treated as an individual, with individual needs and goals.

To most, recovery is not living symptom free but managing symptoms in a way that allows you to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. It is important to remember for if you are forever striving for a symptom free existence; your journey will be frustrating and disappointing. It is important to be positive but also realistic.

Other Key Messages from the Day

- People need to feel supported appropriately, to find their own ways toward recovery.
- A person in distress needs to be able to find their own voice and assert their own needs
- Importance of finding one’s own stories, considering and revising those stories, and holding on to those that are helpful
- The stories that we tell ourselves, and that others construct for or with us, have great power, both to lead us forward or to hold us back
- Creativity can assist and inspire a re-engagement with self, with hope, fulfilment and personal growth
- How do we support Family and Carers on recovery journeys? How do people who care, recover?

The speakers with lived experience were both brave and eloquent, giving a very real insight into their journeys. It was wonderful to hear how they were proud and not embarrassed or ashamed of their difficulties.

Frank Holloway- What is Psychosis, Frank shared a vignette of a person experiencing the disruptive and confusing experiences of hearing voices, withdrawal and confusion, associated with schizophrenia. He looked at diagnostic medical assessments and their role in identifying patterns of behaviour. He also noted the reactions of the public and the media to psychosis and schizophrenia.
He noted that psychosis is a complex phenomenon and that a diagnosis of schizophrenia is not based on a specific pathological mechanism. He posed the following question—“In ten years time will the diagnosis of schizophrenia be out of date?”

**Stuart Baker-Brown – Reaching Great heights of Recovery**, described his battles with illness and the impact of a mental health diagnosis. He struggled with the subsequent medication, and was shocked at the despondent attitudes he encountered. He noted “The wrong medication is like dealing with an illness in itself”. Stuart was offered a be-friender through Re-Think which was a turning point. He educated himself about the illness“ to become my own best doctor”. Despite and perhaps because of his resilience in challenging his mental health problems, Stuart undertook to climb Mount Everest as a symbolic and significant journey of recovery. He shared this journey of discovery, supported by a Nepalese Sherpa, who taught him about Buddhism. He also shared his beautiful photos of Everest in different moods:- on fire, a sleeping giant and an enduring challenge. Stuart reminded us that “Stigma, stops people like me, progressing” “I’m not willing to hide my diagnosis, I’m proud to be different” “Always believe in yourself, even when others don’t” “ Open your minds -start promoting Hope!!”

**Andrew Voyce – The Voyce of Experience**
Andrew is a digital cartoonist. He spoke of his personal struggles and the impact of a book “Sectioned - A Life Interrupted” by John Donohue 1990. More than anything he stressed the importance of a meaningful life, “I want to own and ride a bike, go to the cinema, go on holiday”.”I place narrative as central to my progress and wellbeing” “Writing is beginning to give a sense of closure” “Yes, to what we want, no, to what we don’t want “ Challenge the glass ceiling and where people with mental health problems can go.”

**Bose Dania – Life after Diagnosis**
Bose was living and working abroad. She taught dance and worked long hours in the week and at weekends. Her illness developed following working extreme hours. Bose is now a poet. She expressed her story lyrically and through poems. She described the terrible indecision that can occur with mental distress. Bose’s story showed her determination to “Find one’s own voice to become who you desire to be, through determination and self will”. “Contributing again, Becoming a poet “…Feeling that I am emerging….”

**The Recovery Film Directed by Michelle McNary**
One highlight of the day was the Recovery Film. This film was honest, informative and jovial in places. An honest and true reflection of lived experience. “ The more hope I have, the more it helps my recovery - they go together, there is no separating them.””“My current dream is to inspire people that recovery can be done!”

The Amazing Fanon Choir with Carol Thompson had us on our feet and singing in the aisles!! Wonderful! Singing together was uplifting and actually made us feel that we could sing! This was a great example of how therapeutic these activities can be, especially as clients and professionals came together as equals.

- **Augusto De Mello - Wellbeing and Recovery Toolbox** Augusto’s toolbox includes the following:-
  “Partnership, with our loved ones, and our professional support. Being aware of feedback and not dismissing it, especially when it’s uncomfortable”.
  “Acceptance “of what mental health problems take from us and seeking new ways to live in order to move on “We have to shed the old skin – like a snake” “What can I do in the here and now with what I have today,”
  **Self Knowledge** “ For most this is a luxury for us, it is a must” Need to be self aware to identify early signs of becoming unwell. Seeking self knowledge we have to search by opening doors, crossing rooms and opening more doors, to fulfil our potential- He has set up a website being.plus.co.uk.
The Power of Slow – A ‘golden tool’, because it works whether you are high or low. Even with racing thoughts, by taking control of your body, you gain control. Mindful attention to the present to observation, to walking slowly, seeing a tree, washing the dishes, breathing slowly, makes you aware of where you are and by doing something small, you begin to feel better.

Awe being able to appreciate the wonder in the ordinary, and in our own existence and to be open to learning. You are responsible for your own destiny. “Life is a climb- But the view from the top is great! “

The Story of SLaM. Gabrielle Richards Tony Holmes
An evolving story - The current five year strategy

- Embedding social inclusion, recovery and wellbeing into SlaM’s strategic aims
- Recognising the importance of recovery focussed services
- Five Implementation Workstreams
  o Fostering relationships
  o Promoting Wellbeing
  o Offering treatments- Clinical experiences to be available “on tap not on top”
  o Improving Social Inclusion
  o Outcomes- How do we measure and achieve outcomes?


The Importance of Personal Narratives for (R) recovery - Glenn Roberts
Glenn Roberts spoke from the perspective of a psychiatrist, and talked about The Importance of Personal Narratives for the Story of Recovery, emphasising the significance of stories in personal recovery. Essentially, stories are valued because they make it possible for us to know what it is to be human. He referred to published studies based around narrative including that of ‘Narrative Based Medicine’ edited by Trisha Greenalgh, and ‘Healing Stories: Narrative in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy’ edited by Glenn Roberts and Jeremy Holmes referring as well to the work of Rufus May and Priscilla Ridgway in the field of recovery and different kinds of stories.

Glenn discussed what we learn and gain from stories and the story making process, namely a re-awakening of hope, a breaking away from denial and active coping. He emphasised how a person’s biography should be better integrated into part of his or her care; by taking into account a person’s narrative, the possibility to de-humanise a person is derailed. Glenn referred to the account of father and son, Henry’s Demons by Patrick and Henry Cockburn as a particularly good narrative example or recovery and hope.

Other books that act as guides include - ‘A Gift of Stories’ ed Julie Leibrich; ‘Beyond the Storms’ - ed Laurie Davidson and Linden Lynn; ‘The Illness Narratives’, Arthur Klinemann; ‘The Quiet Room’, Lori Schill; ‘Welcome Silence’, Carol North; ‘Life after Darkness,’ Cathy Weild. Each adds to our understanding of the bigger picture and the belief that recovery is indeed possible.

Glenn finished by describing how we find stories to live by through peer support, companionship and fellow travelling and how through story making we are enabled to move from becoming victim to victor.

It was an honour and a privilege to have the opportunity of attending this conference. We left drained but inspired! We have gone on to read the rest of the individual stories from the book. We hope that people who use services, supporters, carers and healthcare professionals will use this book as an invaluable tool in understanding recovery and refining work practice. As people speak up, others find hope. Hope is the most important part of recovery!

Further information can be read at http://www.recoverydevon.co.uk/