

# The THRIVE Approach to Mental Wellness

## Marion Aslan and Mike Smith



Many people experience mental distress at some point in their life, and it can be totally devastating. Quite apart from the distress it causes to the individual and their loved ones, some people report feeling misunderstood and even frightened by a society which often focuses on illness, deficits, losses and stigmatisation. Myths and misconceptions still abound regarding mental ill-health – not only those held by the general public, but ironically sometimes by those working within mental health systems themselves. Often the emphasis is on illness rather than wellness, problems rather than skills, symptoms rather than resilience and, despite the concept of recovery being recognised, helping agencies remain predominantly medical in approach, and more target-driven than people-oriented.

Crazydiamond is a mental health organisation with a very different message to the one often propounded in psychiatric circles (where mental illness is regarded as a biochemical disorder treatable by medication).

Founded in 2006 by Mike Smith and Marion Aslan in the UK and their colleague, Olga Runciman in Denmark, Crazydiamond is a small collective of individuals who have worked within mental health systems and have become disillusioned with the ineffectiveness of what the psychiatric system offers patients in terms of recovery. Interest-

Time  
Healing  
Resilience  
Interdependence  
Vivacity  
Emancipation

ingly, it includes a number of people who have had first-hand experience of mental health problems and have gone on to fully recover and reclaim their lives.

With a combined knowledge and experience of more than 50 years working in mental health, the UK Directors, Mike and

Marion have gained an international reputation for their innovative work on recovery.

‘We have learned that mental distress is often the messenger of a problem rather than the problem itself. This is a mistake often made within psychiatry where the consequences of a life trauma are interpreted as symptoms of a disorder, despite there being little or no scientific evidence to that claim. Unresolved trauma and distress can lead to what doctors call “severe and enduring mental illness”, but this is not a helpful response as it strips responsibility and the opportunity to make sense of the past. Emotional problems are often a result of childhood or past trauma, and there may be specific issues that are causing distress. Often, the medical system ignores these issues, concentrating instead on ways of coping and naming the symptoms of an illness, for example self-harm. Yet we know, statistically, that many people self harm because of abuse suffered. Thus society becomes complicit in perpetuating the abuse – seeing the victim as mad rather than seeing the experience the individual suffered as being the problem.

At Crazydiamond we prefer to use the terminology “psychic distress”, i.e. distress relating to the mind. These psychic experiences need to be seen as what they are: not symptoms, but consequences of events and experiences. By helping the person to make sense of their distress (self harm, voice hearing, psychotic experiences or depression) and to understand these difficulties within the context of their life experiences, they are able to unravel the layers and ultimately move on in their recovery.

All too often, medication masks this process and hinders growth. We know many people for whom psychiatric medication has been more problematic than helpful, and with this in mind we developed the self-help book *The THRIVE Approach to Wellness* which enables the individual to take a more assertive stance in their recovery, move beyond the medical dictates of diagnosis and learn to thrive. We have drawn on our experiences of what keeps people maintained within the system and what works in the moving-on process, whereby people thrive and find their future. The THRIVE approach firmly believes that the individual is the expert of his or her own experiences, and within every person lies the necessary resources to facilitate reclamation of their life.’

The THRIVE approach has attracted the

support of many progressive psychiatrists around the world. Professor Marius Romme, an eminent Dutch psychiatrist well known for his pioneering work and research on voice hearing says, 'This book fills a gap, where psychiatry more and more fails to see that mental health problems are a reaction to problems in life, and not only, if at all, symptoms of an illness.'

The concept of Thriving is to go beyond mere recovery. Recovery may take you back to where you were, but to thrive means so much more. This is the place you should have got to had you never been distressed. Many people speak of becoming 'Weller than well' after coming through adversity, having grown and learned from the experience – and this is what we mean by Thriving.

The six underpinning factors of recovery/survival and mental wellness which we consider in THRIVE are: Time, Healing, Resilience, Interdependence, Vivacity and Emancipation. We have devoted chapters to each theme with ideas for reflection, self-support and moving on. We've also included some of our own thoughts and experiences, exercises to do – and help gauge where you are in your recovery, positive words of encouragement, and some relevant poetry and song lyrics. Although primarily aimed at those experiencing psychic distress this book gives useful advice to anyone who believes that people can ultimately overcome adversity and reclaim their lives.

Mike and Marion have just returned from Australia where they ran masterclasses on the THRIVE approach at the Richmond Fellowship Western Australia Recovery Conference. Earlier this year they delivered training in Denver and Wisconsin, USA. With their colleague, Olga Runciman they regularly work in mental health teams in

Copenhagen, Denmark using the THRIVE process, and their books have been translated into Danish. Next year their work will take them to Italy, India, America and Ireland, and also to Japan where their books are currently being translated in readiness to work closely with leading psychiatrist Tsuyoshi Matsuo who is promoting the approach.

Dr Mike Smith is a mental health professional with 24 years' international experience. He has developed many alternative approaches to understanding and helping mental distress, has written numerous books and publications on these subjects, and is a former UK Nurse of The Year for his work on and research into developing new practical approaches to self-harm, voice hearing and psychic distress.

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Marion Aslan worked in Warwickshire for many years in the learning disabilities sector as a teacher, then in the mental health field in a variety of roles, and most recently as a voices and self-harm consultant, working directly with individuals and their key workers, planning pathways to recovery. Marion has also spent time in Italy and Germany developing international mental health courses for nursing students.

Olga Runciman holds a BSc in Psychol-

**Testimonials**

Diane Scott-Fowler attended the THRIVE course at The Wellbeing Centre, Stockport in November and December 2008.

*How did you find the Thrive Approach to Wellness useful?*

'It's helpful to individuals whatever the problem is, or whatever stage of recovery the person has reached. It's user friendly, and the exercises in the book can be used as starting points.'

*What is different about this approach?*

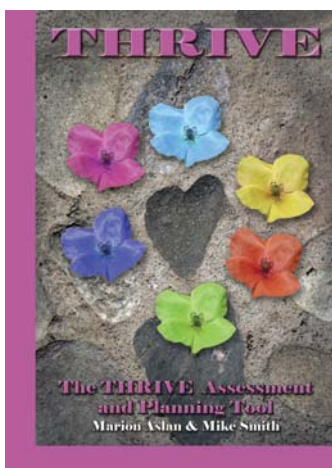
'Honest and holistic, it goes beyond the normal thinking sustained in mental health services. It's an inspirational and forward way of thinking, enabling people to take responsibility in their own lives.'

*Diane started Casu (Cirtel alcohol service user group) in 2006. Now a registered charity, it's run completely by service users. For further details contact Diane at Casu by email at 222@fastmail.fm or by phone on 07547 476251.*

ogy and is a qualified psychiatric nurse, with many years' experience working in the Danish mental health system.

In addition to training and consultancy work, Mike, Marion and their associates from all parts of the UK help with setting up self-help groups, peer support, crisis services and organisational development. They can be contacted on: mikesvoice@aol.com or marionaslan@aol.com, or via their website at [www.crazydiamond.org.uk](http://www.crazydiamond.org.uk)

The THRIVE Approach to Wellness can be bought at Waterstones or via the Crazydiamond website, price: £19.99.



Olga Runciman



Marion Aslan and Dr Mike Smith