

**London ‘First Steps’ Practitioners responding to
‘Lived wisdom on panic, worry and isolation: stories to support the
community amid the COVID-19 crisis, from mental health service
users, survivors and ex-patients.’**

Dear Mental Health CSX Community in Australia

We are sending you this response in appreciation of your document ‘Lived wisdom on panic, worry and isolation: stories to support the community amid the COVID-19 crisis, from mental health service users, survivors and ex-patients’ that we received on 1st April when we met for our Narrative supervision group in London UK.

There were 9 of us present – all connecting on Zoom from our personal homes, since we have been in ‘lockdown’ here in the UK – isolated from the people we work with, our family and friends. We are a group of public health service practitioners, including clinical psychologists and nursing, who work in Hackney London with culturally and ethnically diverse communities of children and families affected by social, emotional and relationship challenges. We are women of different races, cultures and religions. Now some of us are working from home, meeting remotely on telephone or screens with the children and families we work with; some of us travel in to the work place.

We bring many different voices to our response to you. Some of us bring our voices as daughters, mothers and sisters who are living away from our families and are socially isolated; some of us talk from our experiences of having our own health conditions and living with others who have serious health conditions, so feeling scared for ourselves and for our loved ones. Some of us talk with our voices of mothers working from home for the first time, trying to juggle professional duties and child care under one roof. And we all reflect the voices of the children and families with whom we work.

Many of us have encountered challenges like those you describe in your eloquent document and so we came away feeling affirmed, less isolated and with a sense of hope.

We are different and we can connect

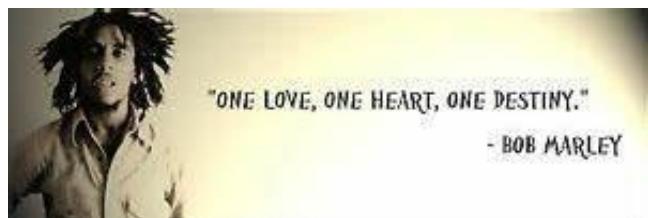
Your pointing out that your experiences were different from ours resonated for a lot of us as we are keenly aware of how different everyone’s experience is with the COVID-19 situation right now.

While some of our friends are sharing stories of using their ‘free time’ in ‘lockdown’ to learn a musical instrument or a new language, many of us still have to go to work and most of us find our day-to-day work has increased. Some of us feel jealous we are missing out when everyone next door seems to be doing great stuff. While lots of self-help resources can make us feel guilty that we are not doing more – your

document felt more authentic, spoke to our reality and left us feeling OK when we stare out of a window - rather than feel we are not doing enough.



We particularly appreciate how your document captures, describes and acknowledges all of our different experiences. That helps us think that even when our experience is different, we all are touched by the worry and the fear and “they want what I want, and I want what they want – so how can we connect?”



Your document brought out the ‘togetherness of people. One of us offered the Bob Marley Song ‘One Love One Heart’.

And we hold the hope that as, on a day-to-day basis, more of the world

goes through these experiences of panic and isolation, there will be more understanding and respect for those experiencing challenges to mental health.

Riding the spinning as a wave

The experiences you shared on “what ‘Panic and Worry’ and ‘Isolation’ can invite into our lives” brought so many images to our minds. Your images of vortexes sucking us in, snowballs turning into avalanches as we get caught up in “but if I can’t do this, I can’t do that and then I can’t do that either” and people fighting in panic buying, really struck a chord with our own experiences. We found ourselves revisiting and sharing our feelings of loss, heaviness, low mood and being ‘sucked into inactivity’ and ‘feeling brain-dead’. One of us saw dissociated people stuck in the vortex and some of us shared fears that austerity will be worse when the virus goes.

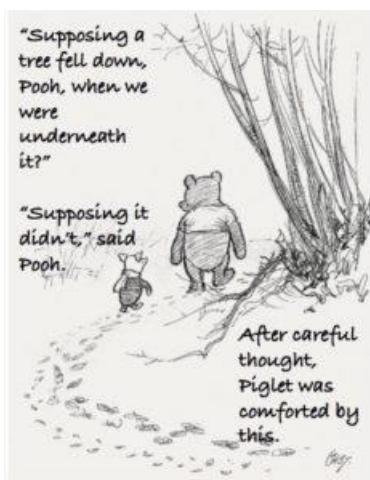
One of us described how she oscillates between feeling inside the snowball and then seeing opportunity to connect with family and nature in different ways and shared two songs that she moves between: ‘Where is my Mind’ (by Pixies) and ‘Perfect Day’ (by Lou Reed).

New images came to us like riding a rollercoaster and spinning in a washing machine - our minds going round and round and our bodies feeling dissociated.

Your image of riding the wave opened up possibilities and new connections for many of us. As we held on to the picture of waves coming and going; one of us offered the image of riding the spinning as we ride a wave.



As well as the struggles, your words also conveyed strong images of hope and possibilities. Some of us held on to the phrase “suspend sense making for affect regulating” which opened the windows and doors to other possibilities.



Grounding with our roots while we swing in the breeze

Some of us saw images of trees, grounded by strong roots while the trunks and branches were swinging in the wind. We can't control where we are going but our roots hold us firm.



Your reminder about closeness with pets, connection with nature and looking at clouds made us feel hopeful and for some of us this opened our hearts to less fortunate people in the world who have it far worse, a value we learned from family that helps to ground us.

For many of us staying connected with our values grounds us so we can go on.

However, many of us have found ourselves pulled away from our strong values of working collaboratively

with children and families. In panic mode and with pressures of working over the phone rather than face-to-face, we have slipped into asking ourselves “*what can I do?*” and away from listening for “*what do you want*” and “*what are you already doing or thinking that helps?*” We have found ourselves thinking about what people need and drawn into didactic and instructive positions, giving advice; rather than thinking together about how they can make use of their skills and experiences.

So now we will try to think of our values and how to maintain them when we’re on the rollercoaster; as our values are our roots that help us plant our feet on the ground; keep us upright and feeling safe.

Slowing down, cherishing the simple things of life and moving with purpose

Your phrase ‘moving with purpose’ struck a chord for all of us and we want to try and take this onto our work with others.

One of us was reminded of a precious moment with her 2-year-old daughter who likes collecting stones and putting them in a bucket. Previously finding this activity boring, she now appreciates the purposefulness of this activity, as she sees it through her little one’s eyes.

In our work this helps us appreciate ourselves - that we may not be able to do so much, but we can try to do it with purpose and bring quality to the work. Slowing down; checking with people, “is this OK”; holding on to kindness without the need to offer something clever or fancy, and being open to noticing the opportunities that are growing out of this crisis.

In this document we have tried to share some of the ways we have been inspired by your document. You have helped us to value what we have and to sustain ourselves in our work and hold on to our commitments.

We will remind ourselves:

- We are different **and** we can connect
- Riding the spinning as a wave
- Grounding with our roots while we swing in the breeze
- Slowing down, cherishing the simple things of life and moving with purpose

We are grateful for the new directions in which your document has pointed us.

8th April 2020