



Speak Out

A creative writing project & collaborative book about LGBT+ identities and mental wellbeing, September 2013 – February 2014



Impact Report and Evaluation

Some key figures

5 workshops took place over **3 months**

32 people participated in the workshops, with an average attendance of 3 workshops each

22 people performed their work in public at **2 events**

36 authors are included in the book

8 creative writing facilitators attended a training session on LGBT+ and mental health accessibility and inclusion

Over 100 people attended the launch of the book

80% of workshop participants said that they **feel better about themselves** as a result of attending

94% of people who attended the launch **would recommend the book to others**

The statistics and quotes throughout this report are from feedback forms completed at the end of the workshops, and an online survey sent by email to those who attended the book launch, as well as other informal feedback.

Introduction

Speak Out was launched as part of LGBT Health and Wellbeing's Headspace mental health and wellbeing programme in September 2013. LGBT Health and Wellbeing promotes and facilitates opportunities to improve and equalise the social, emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Scotland. The project was conceived in response to service users' requests for creative writing activities, and the ongoing need to create platforms for the stories and voices of people who are marginalized by stigma and discrimination to be heard.

As a result of stigma and discrimination, research shows that LGBT people are three times more likely to experience mental ill health than the general population. This combines with discriminatory attitudes to mental ill health to create a dual stigma which has a significant negative impact on mental wellbeing.

Creative writing is a powerful tool for creating understanding and encouraging empathy via emotional insight, as well as being engaging and accessible to the general public. The book, which was created as a result of the project, illustrates some of the complex ways that stigma impacts on mental wellbeing, in a way which goes beyond statistics and case studies. As such, it tackles stigma, contributes to the understanding of experiences of recovery, and increases others' ability to support those who experience mental ill health. Writing is also a therapeutic exercise in its own right, and this project has provided an opportunity for LGBT+ people to develop these skills in a way which contributes to their own wellbeing and recovery.

The project was launched as part of Book Week Scotland in November 2013, with an introductory workshop followed by an open mic event. This was followed in early 2014 by a series of focused creative writing workshops, led by professional writers, who were offered training in working creatively with people with a diverse range of mental health issues and identities. These sessions were framed by the goal of producing an anthology of creative writing about LGBT+ identities and mental wellbeing. An open call-out was also released for submissions to the anthology; these pieces of writing were then compiled into a book, which was published in printed, ebook and web format. Participants had the opportunity to input into the production of the book in a session with the designer. The book was launched at a celebratory public event. This included contributors to the book performing their work to a warm and supportive audience, alongside accomplished feature performances from each of the workshop leaders.

"We wanted to collect together the stories in this book so that those who have different life experiences can gain an insight into what it might feel like to have a marginalised identity, and how this can interact with mental wellbeing. We also wanted to capture the triumphs and struggles and moments of beauty that go with this as a piece of art and a historical artefact."

- from the foreword of 'Naked Among Thistles'.

Ethos and approach

Ownership and participation

LGBT Health and Wellbeing's focus group research with LGBT+ people who have experience of mental ill health highlighted some recurrent themes: stereotypes, stigmatising labels, and discriminatory assumptions cause individuals' and communities' experiences to be erased or ignored. People reported feeling that their stories were not listened to, or that they were reinterpreted in ways which negate their sense of ownership of their lives. The project aimed to tackle this positively by creating an empowering space for participants to explore ways to express their narratives creatively, in a way which maintains their ownership and control over their representation, and supports their ability to continue to do so in the future. Participants were able to contribute to the creation of the book throughout the process, right up to the design and layout of the final product. Editing suggestions were discussed with the authors, with a clear message that they had the final say. This sense of ownership was key to creating an empowering and community-based process and product. The other side of this coin is the importance of people being able to participate as much or as little as they would like. Participants could come to just one workshop or all of them, and



"Thank you for creating a non-pressured environment where it is possible to attend and not feel bad for contributing or not."

- feedback from a workshop participant.

we worked hard to ensure that while there was support for participation such as performing at the book launch, there was no pressure to do so. In the survey that we conducted at the end of the project, which included people who had participated to a variety of degrees, **94% of people said that they had felt included in the parts of the project that they had chosen to engage with.**

Safe space

Issues around identity and mental ill health can be difficult to talk about, and creative writing can sometimes bring up difficult emotions. It was therefore very important that we create a supportive space in which participants could explore these topics safely. The existing community and ethos of the organisation set a helpful foundation; we built on this by beginning and ending each session by encouraging participants to seek support from us and look after themselves if they were experiencing difficult thoughts and/or emotions.

We displayed the organisation's Safe Space Agreement in every venue, which set the tone for each session as a space in which respect and care for each other are key and reassured participants that any behavior which was discriminatory or made people feel unsafe would be challenged.

Accessibility

All events were held in wheelchair-accessible venues, and each workshop participant was asked about any access needs that they might have. We supported the workshop leaders to incorporate these needs, through individual support and a group training session. It was also made clear in publicity that no previous writing experience was required. The introduction to the book includes trigger warnings for readers who might find some of the issues upsetting, and the book launch included these same warnings verbally.

Capacity building for the future

As well as the importance of the process of making the book, we aimed to create a resource which would tackle stigma and deepen understanding around the intersection of LGBT+ identities and mental wellbeing. The book continues to be distributed to a variety of organisations across literary, LGBT+ and mental health support-related communities, as well as being used in our own capacity building work with other organisations.

"Today's workshop was wonderful. It took me away from hard things and made me feel alive and full of energy as well as useful and creative. This is definitely a very healing space and one of the only spaces I have felt safe in recently. Truly a sanctuary."

- feedback from a workshop participant.

Diversity & Demographics

We asked everyone who attended the book launch to complete a survey after the event (34 respondents). According to this:

- 85% of participants have either lived experience of mental ill health themselves, or have supported someone else with mental ill health (56% of participants have personal lived experience, while 44% have supported someone else; 15% have experience of both). 9% have not experienced mental ill health in either capacity; 6% preferred not to say.
- A particularly broad age range took part in the event – 18 to 70 years old.
- In terms of sexual orientation, there was an unusually high proportion of people who identify as bisexual or queer – 44% (24%, bisexual, 20% queer). This demographic is often under-represented, even within LGBT spaces, so this is a particularly positive finding. Making up the rest of the respondents, 18% identify as gay, 15% identify as lesbian, 6% are questioning, and 15% identify as straight/heterosexual.

- 12% of respondents have previously, or currently, identify as transgender. The ratio nationally is around 1(T):40(LGB)¹; the ratio during the project was 1(T):7(LGB), making the proportion of transgender participants around 6 times the national average. Again, transgender people are often under-represented, so this is a very positive outcome.

Partnerships & Stakeholders

A key aim of the project was to reach an audience who would not usually engage with issues around mental wellbeing, and/or discussion around LGBT+ identities. This was a great opportunity to build partnerships within the established literary and arts networks which have a strong presence in Edinburgh, and to build the capacity of those communities to support those with lived experience of mental ill health.

See Me Scotland

The project was made possible thanks to mental health anti-stigma campaign See Me, who provided funding through their local grants scheme. In addition, they provided publicity and were a supportive presence at the book launch.

Scottish Book Trust

The Scottish Book Trust run an annual 'Book Week Scotland' event series. Our first 'taster' event was scheduled as part of the week, which meant that it was included in the Book Week Scotland programme, providing an important presence within this high profile week for LGBT+ people and those who have lived experience of mental ill health. The Scottish Book Trust also provided funding for the event, which allowed us to create a higher-quality and more accessible event. This partnership also allowed us to give the Scottish Book Trust some feedback about their own LGBT+ inclusivity, to which they were extremely receptive.

Creative writing facilitators

Over the course of the project, we developed relationships with four professional writers. They ran workshops, contributed to the book, and performed at the book launch event. This provided expertise to the participants in the project; it also provided a sense of diversity and inclusion within both the book and book launch, as new writers were included alongside professionals. We also built relationships with other facilitators through a free training session.

Serenity Café

We held all the workshops, as well as the 'taster' event, at the Serenity Café, a social enterprise run by Comas as part of their work in supporting people in recovery. As well as providing a fully accessible and welcoming venue, this

"Speak Out was an ideal project to be part of as a professional poet: well-organised, with clear aims, good communication and strong support, that took real care of participants and facilitators. I think this work is incredibly important and I was proud to be part of it."

"[The book launch] was one of those rare gigs I'll remember for the rest of my life. Incredible!"

- feedback from workshop leaders/feature performers.

¹ Within the general population, 0.2% of people are transgender ([GIRES](#)), while 6-10% are lesbian, gay or bisexual (Stonewall)

allowed us to create links with the recovery community. In addition, workshop participants became more aware of the recovery-based services that are available to them.

Stewed Rhubarb

Stewed Rhubarb is a local small press, which has a track record of being supportive towards LGBT+ people and maintains a participatory ethos. Our partnership with Stewed Rhubarb allowed us to produce a high-quality publication without compromising on participation, and gave us reach and legitimacy in literary communities through their reputation. The book is published on their new imprint, 'Elephant Juice', which was set up in response to this project, and which "aims to widen access to quality publishing".

Scottish Poetry Library

We originally planned to hold the book launch at the Scottish Poetry Library; however, building work made this impossible. Despite this, we formed a good relationship with the organization, and the project will be featured on their podcast series. A copy of the book is also included in the Library's collection. The Library is also keen to collaborate on future projects to increase their own inclusivity.

Scottish Storytelling Centre

We held the book launch event at this established venue, lending it legitimacy and providing a great accessible venue. They have since approached us with an offer of partnership delivery for future spoken word events.

LGBT History Month

The book launch event was listed as part of LGBT History Month, bringing the issue of mental ill health in LGBT+ communities to the fore in an established series of events, and giving us use of a network of contacts and publicity opportunities.

The Skinny

An article about the project was featured in the 'Deviance' section of free arts magazine *The Skinny*, highlighting the issues that the project addresses to a wide audience that may not have engaged with them before, and providing advertising for the electronic version of the book.

Timeline

September 2013

Funding secured

See Me Scotland confirmed an award of £4000 as part of their Local Grants Scheme, and the Scottish Book Trust offered £400 for the Book Week Scotland event. We began to make links with other partners, in particular the four professional writers who would be a part of the project throughout, to book venues, and to advertise the taster session.

Mid-November 2013

Training for creative writing facilitators

Ten creative writing facilitators attended a half-day workshop on incorporating LGBT+ identities and issues to do with mental health into workshops and events. Three of these were workshop leaders who were employed to run sessions within the project. We opened up the session to the wider literary community after identifying a general need and desire for this type of discussion. The facilitators had various levels of experience, from those beginning to run literary events to those who successfully freelance; they also had experience of workshops, open mic events, and curated events, all of which brought interesting experiences and issues to the session. Much of the discussion centred around the practicalities of creating safe spaces within literary events for LGBT+ people and those experiencing mental ill health. Facilitators shared experiences, and were able to ask questions in a supportive space to improve their own practice. This session was particularly useful in highlighting the need for projects such as *Speak Out*, whilst working to support other organisations to create more accessible and inclusive spaces.

"An excellent workshop with committed trainers who really know their topics and provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere."

- feedback from training participant

Late November 2013

Taster Session: Book Week Scotland

To get people interested in the project and to give them a chance to try out creative writing in a relaxed way, we ran a taster session, as part of Book Week Scotland, the Scottish Book Trust's event series. This included a three-hour workshop run by professional poet and performer, Harry Giles, which was attended by 16 people and included writing exercises, sharing, and some performance tips. This was followed by an open mic event in the evening, which included a feature performance from Harry alongside ten other writers, many of whom had participated in the afternoon's workshop. Two workshop participants who had not previously signed up to perform did so after the workshop. There were around thirty audience members, and a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

"It has allowed me to start writing again without feeling terrible about myself! I now feel I have another way to cope with poor mental health."

- feedback from Taster Session participant

January – February 2014

Workshops: Short fiction, poetry, scriptwriting and performance

Four workshops were held over the course of two months: experienced practitioners Kirsty Logan, Sophia Walker, Jo Clifford and Harry Giles ran workshops on short fiction, poetry, scriptwriting and performance respectively, with support from LGBT Health staff. The sessions were designed to give participants skills in a variety of writing styles, plus performance skills to support them to participate in live readings. The sessions included a variety of writing exercises, as well as opportunities to share work with the group. The workshops went above and beyond our expectations; the sessions became increasingly honest and supportive as the group got to know each other, and they became spaces to share and explore in a group which was full of kindness and respect.

Mid- February 2014

Deadline for book submissions & editing

As well as encouraging workshop participants to submit work for inclusion in the book, a general call out was circulated to LGBT+, mental health support-related, and literary communities. The call out included detailed submission guidelines to support writers to send us their work, and to ensure that the work we got would be appropriate for the book. We received a high number of submissions, including poetry, scripts, prose, lyrics and visual art. We aimed to be as inclusive as possible whilst making the book readable and engaging; to do this, we supported those whose work was appropriate and meaningful, but less polished, to work on it before publishing. We also gained permission to include a poem by the late Edwin Morgan, a former Scottish Makar, written to celebrate the opening of the Glasgow Gay and Lesbian Centre.

"The work in this book was selected for its ability to capture a moment or experience in a way which makes it feel real for the reader – whether in the polished lines of an experienced writer, or the raw, honest words of someone who is just starting to put themselves onto paper."

- from the foreword of 'Naked Among Thistles'.

Mid- February 2014

Book design session

Three people who had taken part in the workshops joined James T. Harding, co-founder and designer of Elephant Juice, to put the book together. They chose the cover, layout, and size of the book, and sent the designer off with plenty of steers and ideas. They also named the book: **"Naked Among Thistles."** All the authors were sent the proof for approval before the book went to print.

Late February 2014

Book launch

The book was launched at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Over 100 people attended, forming a warm and supportive audience for 18 contributors who read their work from the book, alongside the workshop leaders who performed feature sets of their own work. Music from Shaz & Jules, singer/songwriters from the community, created a relaxed atmosphere during the breaks.

One key aim of the project was to showcase the writing to a wide audience. The launch event

attracted people from a variety of literary, mental health, and LGBT+ communities and organisations; many took copies of the book to distribute to colleagues, service users and community members.

Many people performed on stage for the first time. For those were less confident but still wanted to be involved, we offered alternatives to performing their own work, such as a facilitator reading it on their behalf. In the end, the one person who took up this offer decided on the night to perform the piece themselves, and said afterwards: **“you made me feel really comfortable to perform... I feel empowered!”**

We asked those who attended the event how safe they felt during the evening; **100% of those who answered said that they felt ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ safe.**

The launch was a joyful rounding-off of a project which a diverse range of people had been deeply engaged with. There was a strong sense of community and celebration, which participants highlighted as a key aspect of its success.

March 2014 onwards

Distribution

600 books, each 67 pages long, were printed; an online version and an ebook were also produced. Many of the printed copies were distributed at the book launch, with representatives from various relevant organisations taking a number of books to distribute and use within their own work. We continue to promote the book to other organisations, which is facilitated by the online version being so easy to pass on, regardless of geographical distance. We also created a bookmark (below) as a way of advertising the digital version of the book.

Feedback: Book launch

“This was a wonderful event. I found the environment very supportive and encouraging. Although I wasn't performing or part of the writing workshops, I was deeply moved by the stories that were shared and really appreciated being able to share in those moments in such a lovely, caring, environment.”

“A wonderful celebration of literature and life. Great to see so many people able to express themselves in a welcoming atmosphere.”

“It showed that it is not just me who has struggled.”

“Tears of laughter, joy and pride in my eyes... What a brave, beautiful, talented community we are!”

“I really loved the mix of styles as well as the honesty of the writing. It was a very moving evening for me.”

“[My favourite things were] the diversity of writers/performers, styles and subject matter. And the friendly and supportive atmosphere generated by the organisers, compere, choice of venue, participants and audience members.”

“Lovely evening – very supportive audience – a joy to be a part of the whole project.”



Case Study: Lucy²

Lucy took part in most aspects of the project, attending all but one workshop and performing at both the Book Week Scotland event and the book launch, despite never having written or performed her own work before. A poem of hers is included in the book. This was one of the first LGBT-specific activities she accessed, and the project has had tangible benefits for her, including increased confidence and mental wellbeing, and overcoming isolation by making new friends; her poem contributes a strong voice to the book which vividly evokes the experience and possibility of recovery. She continues to write and is now performing her work at other literary events.

Lucy originally heard about the Speak Out project via the LGBT Health e-bulletin, Village Voices:
I used to like writing when I was in school, but because I'm dyslexic, that kind of put me off doing stuff, unless I have to! And I just thought, it's free, I can't go too far wrong, and I'll see what happens...

The first event Lucy attended was the Book Week Scotland event in November 2013, where she participated in the writing workshop and performed at the evening open mic event:

I wasn't planning on doing the open mic at all – it was the last thing I thought I would do! I really enjoyed the workshop, and I found it quite easy to write, which I was kind of surprised about – I don't really do that much writing at all, so it was really cool to just be able to write in a creative way. I remember thinking that would be cool if I had the courage and confidence [to perform]. Because a few people [from the workshop] were going to do it as well – I really felt like, OK, now or never! And one of the facilitators read an inspirational poem which helped. It felt like a safe place, definitely, to mess up possibly on stage! And I didn't mess up so it was grand. It was pretty nerve-wracking, but it also felt like I'd achieved something that I didn't think I was able to do, to overcome a bit of my fear. It was good to start that ball rolling, because I've kept it going.

After enjoying the taster event, Lucy went on to participate in most of the workshops in January and February 2014:

I really enjoyed the workshops. Everyone was really friendly, and the facilitators were really good at making it a welcoming, safe space, and explaining things. It was really nice to hear other people's creative sides, and their stories, and how people write differently. I think about the different exercises we did – I've used a few of them in the poems that I've written since, and they're skills that I wouldn't have known. And also Sophia [one of the workshop leaders] said to send her some stuff, so I did, and she gave me some feedback, so that was really helpful. She really inspired me. And I wrote the poem for the book on my phone on the way home from that workshop, I couldn't wait! I just keep writing and writing – I think I've written about 50 poems since December.

² Name has been changed

A part of one of the workshops was emotionally difficult for Lucy. She was able to speak to the facilitators afterwards, and as well as giving her some support in the moment, her feedback was passed on to the workshop leader:

It helped being able to speak to you guys before I left, just to be able to say, 'that was crap' and leave it there. I felt very clear that if I needed to say anything that you guys would have listened, so that was nice to know.

Although Lucy wasn't able to participate in the design of the book, she still felt a sense of ownership over the process as a whole as a result of being invited to be a part of it:

I thought that was a really good idea, because I felt like it was our book, rather than someone's just gone and made it for us. So although I wasn't involved in it, I know that people who were involved in the workshops or were involved in the book did do that – you feel like you own it more.

She performed for the second time at the launch of the book, in front of over 100 people:

It was set up really well, and it was nice that there were so many contributors that read as well as the people that are maybe more well-known. It made me feel more comfortable that there was lots of people there that it was their first time, or that they had not done a huge amount of performing, so I felt I'm not the only person in this room feeling like this. It felt really welcoming and really relaxed, and just a like a bunch of people getting together and having a nice time, it felt like a celebration of the book, which was really nice. And it was good to see some of the people from the group and catch up with them.

This experience of performing has had some real benefits for Lucy's self-esteem and confidence:

I think it has helped my confidence with public speaking. It's still scary, but it's one thing that I've wanted to overcome since I was young, because I remember being in school, having to be up on stage and speak, and being so nervous. I feel like it's helping me to think of it as a now thing, and try and forget that that happened. So it's a different experience, and it's something that I'm choosing to do.

Since the end of the project, she has performed at a couple of open mic nights within the wider Edinburgh literary scene, and also recently been asked to perform as an invited poet at another local night:

It was actually harder doing it [elsewhere], because it was totally different people, different atmosphere, Because I was really nervous, and I felt like, oh I don't know if that was good so I appreciated it more – the supportiveness and the feeling like it doesn't matter here. [At the Speak Out performances] I felt the nerves still, and the adrenaline, but I felt glad for doing it. I need to keep doing it, and get used to it!

Lucy benefitted from being able to develop her writing in a safe, LGBT+ affirmative space:

It was somewhere that I felt like belonged, and I felt like my differences weren't a problem, I was just Lucy, and it didn't matter whatever labels people put on you – it just was like, I'm here to do this poetry thing, and we're all having a nice time, and I just was relaxed. It seemed like everyone in the group



had an open mind, and it felt like people were very comfortable just to speak about how they felt. You could see that coming across in their poems. It was really nice to hear other people's stories, and other people's vulnerabilities, because it makes you feel more connected with people. And I made some friends from the group which is really nice as well, it's good to make new friends!

This social and community aspect of the project was important to Lucy:

Having it in a place [Serenity Café] where there was the option to stay afterwards was good – to have it somewhere where it was sociable after as well. And you can then chat about how the group was, and if anyone wanted to share what they were writing, or speak about stuff. It made it easier to make friends.

Lucy also describes writing as something which is therapeutic for her:

I found it was really beneficial. I went home and wrote loads of poems – it felt really therapeutic in some ways, just getting stuff out of your head. Whether it's positive or negative or indifferent it just felt really good just to get it on paper. It sometimes stops it going around in your head, so I think that's really positive. It feels like you're processing your thoughts and your feelings when you write it down – it helps you think differently, or go to the next step. I've written some poems about some stuff going on with my family at home that's just been wrecking my head – writing stuff about it has really helped.

She also benefited from hearing other people's stories about mental wellbeing, and telling her own:

It was quite comforting to hear other people's battles with mental health, because I have battled with depression in my past. It's nice that other people shared that part of them as well. My poem [in the book] is to do with mental health – it shows that you can get better, and you can fight, and you can stand up and be you and be happy. It's emphasised that for me – I've come so far, and I'm so much

happier than I was, and it's nice to recognise that, and to celebrate it as well, and I feel like that's been part of it. There's not many places to do that – you say stuff to your friends, but it was nice just to have it as an experience, and share it with other people. I know I'm not the only one, but it was helpful to experience that as well, and see what other people have survived too, or they're still battling and they're holding on and not giving up.

Lucy was involved from start to finish, experiencing a range of aspects of writing and publishing. She says:

It's nice that you go home at the end and that you've actually got a book, and you're published. It felt like a full pathway, going from how to write a poem, performing, and you had the opportunity to be involved in the publishing, and then the book launch was kind of like a nice rounding off party, and celebrating all the work that everyone's done and the enjoyment that we've had.

“My poem [in the book] is to do with mental health – it shows that you can get better, and you can fight, and you can stand up and be you and be happy.”

NAKED
AMONG
THISTLES

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,
TRANSGENDER &
RELATED IDENTITIES
AND MENTAL WELLBEING



Outcomes

Increased mental wellbeing, skills and creativity

The project has had significant impact on the mental wellbeing of the participants. The feedback to the right details some of the benefits in participants' own words. We received 44 feedback forms over the course of the workshops, which asked about the impact of the sessions. As a result of the workshops:

- 80% of participants said that they feel better about themselves
- 48% said that they felt less lonely
- 36% said that they felt more aware of things that affect their mental health
- 34% said that they feel more able to support others with their mental health
- 25% said that they feel more able to cope with their day-to-day lives
- 11% said that they feel less likely to have thoughts of suicide
- 11% said that they feel more aware of other mental health services that might be able to support them
- 50% detailed other benefits, including increased confidence, creativity, feeling safe and supported, feeling valued, and feeling part of a community.

In addition, some participants have continued to develop their skills after the project has ended; Lucy, whose case study included, continues to perform at local spoken word nights, and another participant got in touch six weeks after the end of the project to say: "I wanted to thank your project for giving me the impetus to submit a second poem to a journal, which was accepted... Thanks again for making a difference."

Feedback: Workshops

"Oh wow!! It reminded me of how amazing it feels when you face your fears and vulnerability...but just put it out there anyway...and people just respect it...Thank you."

"Very good creative session. Given lot of encouragement, energy and optimism."

"A wonderful morale boost to feel some connection with people (I live so much alone). Their honesty and genuineness is reassuring in what seems a very dishonest world."

"It has made me feel more positive and confident. I feel like I could achieve something more."

"Enjoyed being in a safe environment, and having the time to be creative."

"I haven't written anything in years, but I came away feeling the urge to write again. People can be put off writing, thinking it has all been said before, but we are all unique so maybe we all have something unique to say."

Increased understanding

Some striking themes emerged across the writing:

- **Love and community:** the importance of connection with other people to sense of self, wellbeing, recovery, and the ability to be safe and happy.
- **Loneliness and isolation:** in particular, the pain caused by being unable to make connections, or to be open about the connections that you do have, for fear of stigma, discrimination, or the threat of violence.
- **Labels:** the desire to have control over the definitions of yourself. Many pieces speak about the way that labels can help people define who they are; many others speak about the way that labels can be misapplied, or weighed down with stigma. The overwhelming message of these stories is the importance of self-identification – whether that involves owning a label or refusing to be defined by one.
- **Resistance:** many pieces are statements of refusal to be told who you are or to yield to expectations, whether in relation to mental health, gender identity, or who you want to have sex or fall in love with.

These themes are key to understanding the dual stigma that LGBT+ people who have lived experience of mental ill health face; the book presents and illustrates them in an accessible way which encourages empathy and engagement.

The introduction to the book includes a section on using the book as a learning resource, which gives a set of suggested pieces to use when exploring a variety of topics. The book will be used as a resource in our own capacity building work with mainstream organisations; in addition, organisations are already independently circulating the book, including NHS Lothian and LGBT Youth. It is also being used in the “Mad People’s History” course at Queen Margaret University.

88% of those who attended the book launch said that it **increased their understanding** of LGBT+ identities and experiences of mental ill health. They said:

“The number of diverse voices reading was a very powerful tool for increasing understanding. In particular I learnt more about the experience of transgender people. Together, all the voices were so rich in communicating human experience.”

“I heard different perspectives from the ones I have grown used to.”

“A great insight into the complexity of interwoven identities, situations and states of well being when it comes to LGBT+ folk.”

“Hearing the poetry, the personal thoughts and experiences of participants made me think about issues of mental health I hadn’t before.”

“All the pieces performed on the night enhanced my awareness and gave me a deeper feeling of empathy.”

“Seeing the expressions through the writing of the contributors helped to personalise the experience for me.”

Challenging stigma and discrimination

Increasing understanding challenges stigma and discrimination by changing individuals' attitudes; we also asked book launch attendees how they might use the book to further challenge stigma and discrimination in their communities:

"If I encountered discrimination in a particular context I might 'plant' the book where people could pick it up and read it."

"We are displaying the book in our office, where we have people coming and going, we hope a range of people will pick them up and take them with them. We will promote the book at any opportunity, especially at events and during the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival. I think everyone should read this book! I also think more performances would really do a lot to challenge stigma and discrimination. The book is a real force for change!"

"Would recommend them to read it or passages from it to gain more insight - use it more as an olive branch to bridge gaps of misunderstanding or myths."

"The stories are a very personal, telling of an individual's experiences and yet telling a story of something that could happen to anyone, which in my eyes makes it send the fact that this is how it affects people and it needs to stop"

"Its simple honesty and humanity would help challenge discrimination, unless the perpetrator were completely beyond reach."

"With broader knowledge base which this adds to, I can see it increasing awareness and I can always refer to passages or entire works as opportunity arises."

"I think it would be a useful conversation starter with people who are prejudiced, as something that they can look at in their own time (i.e. so they can be 'challenged but not alienated' so may continue to listen) but then also hopefully lead to more in depth discussions!"

Increased capacity to support others

The project has increased the capacity of literary communities who engaged in the project to support LGBT+ people and people who have lived experience of mental ill health: the facilitator training allowed a number of those who run events in the community to engage meaningfully with the issues, as well as further engagement via the book launch, a podcast interview with the Scottish Poetry Library (forthcoming), an article in arts magazine *The Skinny*, and a 'Saturday Poem' with a link to the book in *The Scotsman* newspaper. Using an artistic medium that positions the project within the artistic communities is a powerful way of reaching a demographic who may not otherwise encounter this type of discussion.

It also increased individuals' ability to support people they know:

"I am going to share this book with friends and family who are struggling with their mental health wellbeing. I am excited about sharing this - and hope that it will be a useful way to build support and a sense of solidarity."

"[I would use this book to support others] by sharing parts and stories that I think they can relate to and by telling them of the places to contact should they need help."

"I think I could show people that they are not alone and that others have shared their experience."

"By sharing my poetry and talking about my own experiences I hope to encourage others to be open up and feel less isolated and a wee bit more supported about their situation. The poems are a great way of opening a conversation about everything from relationships to feelings of safety or loss."

Feedback: Practitioner Training

"Learned a lot... really useful for the future. Also great to know that other workshop facilitators share my concerns and anxieties. Both staff members were friendly & helpful, & very knowledgeable."

"Great workshop, thank you. A sensitive, confident and entertaining facilitator. Could have talked all day! Very useful to share real life experiences."

"Great resources; friendly space; I feel like there's a real wealth of knowledge I can access."

"Very interesting & comprehensive ideas & discussion in workshop."

Speak Out
A CREATIVE WRITING PROJECT
ABOUT LGBT IDENTITIES
AND MENTAL WELLBEING

LGBT Health and Wellbeing invites you to a
FREE TRAINING SESSION
for creative writing facilitators

Friday 15th November

A fun and interactive workshop on incorporating LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) identities and issues relating to mental health and wellbeing into creative writing and spoken word workshops. A relaxed opportunity to fill in any gaps in your knowledge, and share experiences with others.

Informal networking lunch 12.30pm
Workshop & discussion 1.05pm
Tea, coffee & lunch provided close 4.30pm

• Creative writing tutors & group leaders
• Spoken word promoters
• Established and developing facilitators welcome

at LGBT Health and Wellbeing,
9 Howe Street, Edinburgh, EH3 6TS

Booking essential
by 12th Nov

To book a place, or for more info,
email katherined@lgbthealth.org.uk or
call 0131 652 3284.

see me

Next steps

The project has been very well-received by participants, audience members, the wider community, and other organisations. We intend to build on this success in a number of ways:

- Continue to use the book in delivering anti-stigma based LGBT+ awareness and mental health training and capacity building work in other organisations.
- Continue to publicise the electronic and ebook versions of the book to individuals, and literary, LGBT+ and mental health organisations and communities.
- Use the format of the project to develop other arts projects which include a strong element of community involvement and creative expression alongside producing resources for awareness-raising work.
- Develop the relationships with literary communities and organisations to further increase their capacity to support LGBT+ people and those with lived experience of mental ill health.

"The 'Naked Among Thistles' publication is a totally exquisite thing and wonderfully has an online version for us distant folk. I think I've never read anything before I have felt is a more direct gift from an author to me. Or a gift from a community to itself, and to others. A fricken joy."

- feedback on the online version of the book.

Further information & resources

For further information, please contact the project co-ordinator, Katherine McMahon, at

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www.lgbthealth.org.uk



Naked Among Thistles is available online at
<http://tinyurl.com/nakedamongthistles>

Read the feature article about the project in *The Skinny* at
<http://tinyurl.com/NATskinny>

Listen to the Scottish Poetry Library podcast about the project at
<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/connect/podcast> (forthcoming)

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