



**Thank you for taking the time to answer the feature questions below.**



**For the readers; please introduce yourself with a short biography:**

Hi, I'm Carolyn Barber. I am 58 years old, a registered social worker, researcher and consultant in social care, self employed for the last 8 years, social entrepreneur, author and local radio



broadcaster. I am a founder of the Good Mental Health Cooperative, an award winning social enterprise which helps community groups and micro-enterprises to collaborate and innovate on projects which promote good mental health and wellbeing and challenge stigma.

**Would you please share how and why you got involved in mental health?**

In 2010 I had to close down my first independent social enterprise, a training and wellbeing centre in Portsmouth. I had opened it 3 years earlier, a month before the 'credit crunch' was announced, and financially I couldn't afford to continue. This was a very challenging time for me, devastating my self confidence. I was very aware of needing to take care of my mental health during this period as 20 years earlier I'd experienced a mental breakdown and was diagnosed with clinical depression and severe anxiety disorder. At that time I lost my job in social work and subsequently became involved in the early mental health service user movement for a while. However I found then, that if I wanted to get back into some kind of career in social care I needed to stop talking about my experience of mental ill-health because of the stigma and discrimination. In 2010 I realised how much I had internalised the shame associated with mental ill-health, and I also decided that based on how much I'd actually learned over the years I could work out a strategy for looking after myself. So I did two things, first I 'came out' about my earlier experiences of mental ill-health, and second I began to talk about and share my framework for good mental health which I called the 5 Cs – Challenge, Character, Composure, Connection and Creativity. More recently I've added a 6<sup>th</sup> C – Compassion, which I think we can apply to all the other Cs. Out of this process evolved a new social enterprise which I've set up with other colleagues – the Good Mental Health Cooperative which is now going from strength to strength.



**What are the different projects/organisations that you are involved with; and what is it that you do with each?**

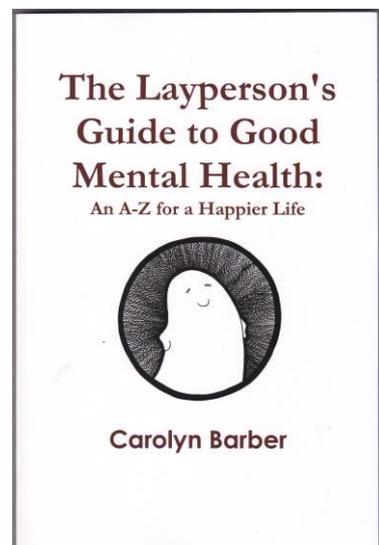


The Good Mental Health Cooperative has initiated various projects over the past two years. We run a Human Library, recruiting volunteers who talk about their experiences of stigma and discrimination, and setting up public events where people choose a Human Book and 'reading' is a one to one conversation. We've delivered training on mental health awareness, mindfulness, understanding self harm, sometimes funded, and also for staff in health and

social care organisations. This year we've organised a Hampshire Festival of the Mind to highlight the work of community groups and enterprises promoting good mental health and wellbeing in various ways. And we've just launched a new project to train people in recovery from mental or physical ill-health as social entrepreneurs, called Strong Minds. I am the main project coordinator for the Cooperative, and different members and volunteers are involved depending on their area of expertise and interest.

**Please tell us a bit more about your book – "The Layperson's Guide to Good Mental Health" and your journey in writing it?**

I really enjoy writing and at the start of 2013 I began blogging an A-Z guide to good mental health, doing a letter a day. I believe that in mental health services, too much attention is paid to symptoms and diagnosis, trying to fit people into boxes – and not enough attention is paid to what helps people recover and re-engage with their lives after a mental health crisis. Also there are lots of therapies and approaches out there which can help but people don't necessarily understand what they mean or how they aim to help. So some examples from my book would be A for ACT, Affirmations, Appreciation and Art Therapies, or E for EFT, EMDR, EQ and Exercise. The hardest letter for me was J. In the end I went for June as the month with the most daylight, and looked at the impact sunlight and Vitamin D appears to have on mental health.



In the second part of the book I explore the 5 Cs frameworks and suggest ways in which this can help people work out a self help strategy for themselves.



The hardest part of writing the book was when I'd finished the text and then gradually realised how much more work was needed to get it into a form ready for self-publication. I'm very proud of seeing it in print now, and have plans for two more books in the near future.

**Do you have 'coping strategies' that you use on a daily basis or in your life at all?**

Yes. Not surprisingly I use the 5 Cs frameworks as a guide. My strengths are around Challenge, always setting myself new ones; Character, I've developed a much clearer sense of the values that are really important to me, and know my strengths, skills and resources; and Connection, I'm good at having a network of friends I can draw on for all kinds of different support, and over the years I've learned some valuable social skills to help me in situations where I feel less comfortable. The areas I need to keep working on are Composure and Creativity. To help with Composure (the ability to create distance between yourself and your thoughts/feelings) I practiced yoga for many years and now regularly practice exercises linked to mindfulness, using guided meditations, making sure I have quiet time, and trying to become a more noticing person particularly around what's going on in my body. I tend to spend too much time 'in my head' so these exercises are really important for my sense of wellbeing. Although I'm creative in my work in the sense of thinking outside the box and being innovative, another aspect of Creativity is having fun. I do tend to take myself too seriously at times, and I try to follow the advice in *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron which is to book myself an appointment in my diary once a week for two hours to have fun, to play at something, or try something completely new. You can imagine how many excuses I dream up to avoid doing this! I also belong to a Laughter Club – there's a Yiddish proverb which says *'What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul.'*

**May I ask what are your personal beliefs surrounding the explanation of mental health experiences?**

What a big question? I believe that the efforts of western psychiatry to categorise mental disorders as specific illnesses is very unhelpful and counterproductive. Also the term mental illness covers a huge range of experiences which are different for every individual, but somehow is lumped together. It would be nonsense to simply ask how physical ill health can be dealt with because there are so many different forms this takes, and so many reasons behind physical illnesses. I believe that for many people their experience is one of extreme emotional distress which can take a variety of forms. I also believe that the human brain is capable of generating many experiences which we don't know how to explain and which in other cultures and in ancient times might have had very different explanations, particularly spiritual. I think the fear and ignorance around unusual mental phenomena generates its own extreme emotional distress, and the stigma around mental illness makes this much worse. A great deal more is being discovered about neuroscience and how our brains



function, and I'm convinced that in 100 years time people will look back at how mental health experiences were explained rather like we look back on the use of leeches and letting blood to cure all kinds of physical ailments. In the meantime I believe mental health services need to focus more on support for recovery rather than 'treatment', helping people to feel more in control of their own lives and their own mental health.

### **What does the future hold for you?**

Right now I'm launching a new project called Strong Minds – a training programme for social entrepreneurs recovering from serious health challenges, mental or physical. The course combines experiential learning about enterprise skills with attention to self management and taking care of yourself in self-employment or setting up a business. I hope that the future holds more opportunities like this to be involved in innovative projects, and that my social enterprise, the Good Mental Health Cooperative goes from strength to strength.

### **Favourite Quote?**

*"...That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way..."*

- Doris Lessing

### **Web link**

<https://goodmentalhealth.org.uk/>

### **Web link – Book 'The Layperson's Guide to Good Mental Health'**

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/carolyn-barber/the-laypersons-guide-to-good-mental-health-an-a-z-for-a-happier-life/paperback/product-21710448.html>

### **Social Media links**

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