

# Barnet Depression Alliance: 19<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024 @ 19:30 at meeting venue

**Our 27<sup>th</sup> Year 1997-2024**

## Group Report for Oct 2023- Oct 2024

After a challenging year last year, this one has been a bit more settled and we are gradually seeing an increase in group numbers, though we are still down from our pre-pandemic numbers and are actively seeking to publicise the group more widely within Barnet. We need to do this with care because we are still short on our committee so we must be mindful of taking on too much. We have enough committee members to run three concurrent check-in groups -- we would be harder pressed if we needed four. We are also constrained by the fact that we would need to pay extra to use an additional meeting room for check-in if we needed four groups. Nevertheless, the need out there is great: staff and cash-strapped mental health services are struggling to meet increasing needs which we think are still primarily the result of the damage wrought by the Covid lockdowns. There has been a huge increase in social isolation among vulnerable alienated younger people and an increasingly lonely aging population. Our group has no easy or magic answers – but we have found over our 27 years of existence, that the understanding and support of others who have firsthand experience of depression, does help to reduce the sense of isolation depression brings. We have also found that in helping each other, we also benefit from feeling useful, valued and needed. This can help us to recover some meaning and purpose in life.

### FACE TO FACE MEETINGS: NOVEMBER 2023 – OCTOBER 2024

We started the New Year with music – and enjoyed another session of group members sharing their **desert island discs**. We enjoyed listening to the beautiful and plaintive soundtrack to *Gabriel's Oboe*, the nostalgic Harry Chapman's *The cat's in the cradle*, Paul Simon's *Hearts and bones* and some beautiful Hungarian folk music – and many others. We reflected on how music is a language which can be used to express emotions which we find difficult to put into words, and one member shared a piece of music one of her sons had written as a tribute to his brother who had suffered a life-changing stroke.

In February we had a **books evening** – and members shared books which they have found helpful. Some inspiring books shared included *The Life Cycle* -- the amazing story of a middle-aged woman who decided to cycle 8,000 miles in the Andes on a bamboo bicycle. We discussed extracts from the iconic *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran – and another member shared out some of her favourite illustrations from the beautiful hand drawn wisdom of Charlie Macksey's *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*.

In March we had a discussion about **our heroes** – people who have inspired us and why. This was a fascinating evening as we learned about people we had never come across before – like the Russian mountaineer Anatoli Boukreev who climbed Everest without supplemental oxygen and showed extraordinary courage in rescuing people in the Everest disaster in 1996. Other heroes included Vincent Van Gogh who despite being an artistic genius suffered from depression; Eckhart Tolle the author of the bestselling *The Power of Now*; and the great JRR Tolkien. We also heard about inspiring people in members' lives – one member spoke about a headmistress who had been very supportive.

Our final session of the spring term was a well-attended **creative writing workshop** in April, run by Jon Attril. Jon explained a bit about creative writing as therapy, read some of his own work and then did a couple of practical free writing exercises with the group. Members were invited to share what they had written. Our first exercise involved free writing with the starter line: *I could feel*. Members wrote about varied and memorable experiences including witnessing a solar eclipse, a recent bereavement, and the experience of depression itself. The second exercise encouraged us to write about what animal we identified with and why. The exercises brought the group together as we realised that writing could be

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therapeutic – cathartic as well as creative – and that it was sometimes easier to share our feelings through writing them down, than in direct conversation. We also shared a book *Writing through the darkness: easing your depression with paper and pen* – and we discussed whether we could benefit from having further creative writing sessions like this.

We began our summer sessions in May with a session led by a member, S, who endeavoured to answer the question: **is there ever a positive side to depression?** She spoke about what she has learned from her 40 years of suffering depression. For most of us, depression is very likely the worst life experience we have had to deal with, and few of us can imagine that there could possibly be anything positive to come out of it. However, S described how her depression influenced her decision to become a nurse and how it helped her to connect with and support vulnerable patients. She described this as a privilege. She also explained how depression made her more appreciative of good times free of depression, how humour helped her to cope, and how mindful activities like pottery have also helped. We then reflected on how caring for others is worthwhile, meaningful and rewarding and how being a member of the group gives all of us the opportunity to do this for each other.



In June, another member, D, led us in a most enjoyable **art workshop**. D described how he had never really painted for pleasure until the Covid lockdown period where he was stuck at home with little to do. He discovered he had a real talent for painting and since then has produced many beautiful pieces some of which he brought along to share with us. We reflected on how art is a mindful activity and can help us cope with stress and depression. D then led us in a practical painting exercise and we reflected on the experience. We did still life drawing – and you can see an example of one of the paintings – a cheerful jar of marmalade!

Most people found painting relaxing and cathartic – and it was fun sharing our creations and how painting made us feel.

For our July meeting, a member, G, shared with the group **the story of her recovery** from about three years of severe depression which began with the isolation of the Covid lockdown and continued with the death of a friend and her father. She described how going on holiday in Scotland last year, bonding with nature and with a relative who helped to affirm her worth as a person – helped to trigger the beginnings of a recovery.



G shared some beautiful photographs she took on holiday which captured the beauty of our landscapes and the healing power of nature. This meeting was very encouraging for all of us because it was a reminder that recovery is possible, even after many months or in this case, years of darkness and despair. We look forward to seeing more of G's photographs and videos in the future.

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In September we discussed **films that inspired us**. This led to an interesting discussion on a wide variety of films and how we respond to them. One member enjoyed classic British comedies like *Blackadder*, *Fawlty Towers* and *Dear John* (about self-help groups like ours) – and we reflected on how humour and laughter are so good for depression. We looked at escapist fantasies like the *Harry Potter* series as well as classic dramas like *The Godfather*. We also discussed inspirational true stories of human endurance and triumph like *The mountain within me* which is a story about a young man who overcame physical disabilities to follow his dream of climbing mountains. The session led to us sending out a list of the recommended films to all group members.

For our October meeting we discussed **coping with depression at work**. Members shared their difficulties of coping with challenging work situations at the same time as dealing with depression and anxiety. We discussed dealing with bullying, difficult and incompetent bosses, and unreasonable workloads. We looked at the long-term effect of the Covid lockdown and how so many of us now are still struggling with the loneliness and social isolation of working online from home. We looked at strategies for dealing with these issues and shared with each other how we coped. This was a useful session as even those of us who were not working were able to draw on past experience and hopefully those who are struggling currently were helped by realising that they are not alone in dealing with difficult work situations. We also reflected on the value of finding the right job and how working can help give structure and meaning to our lives.

## ONLINE MEETINGS NOVEMBER 2023 TO OCTOBER 2024

Monthly online meetings have continued to be hosted over Zoom. We normally have between six and ten members joining, so we no longer split into small groups for check-in. We have noticed that the online groups cater for a different section of the group to the face-to-face meetings although some people do attend both. People who find it hard to come out at night or who live far away or who are unwell, tend to choose the online meetings. We keep these meetings reasonably short (about 1 ½ hours) and there is an option for people to leave early during the comfort break. Two members of the committee are always present at an online meeting. While there are certainly drawbacks to meeting virtually, we do feel that online meetings provide a valuable means of contact for people unable to attend in person.

## SOCIALS AND OUTDOOR MEET UPS

We have continued to pursue a more varied and frequent social programme as this was something many members have requested. We are very grateful to members who have opened their homes to group members for coffee afternoons, or arranged meet ups in parks, cinemas or other events. We endeavour to support anyone who wants to arrange a meeting by publicising it, and by providing at least one committee member to share the hosting of the event. While many members do make friends and meet up one-to-one, we always recommend that any event advertised to group members be hosted by at least two people.

This year we had two planned socials which were advertised in our newsletter, plus two film outings, one outing to a play, two coffee-afternoons and one park outing. Please note that the socials referred to only include those advertised to the group. Other socials take place which are organised by members independently.

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We kicked off the New Year with lunch at the iconic gastro pub, *The Bohemia*, in North Finchley where 9 members and one dog enjoyed a leisurely meal.

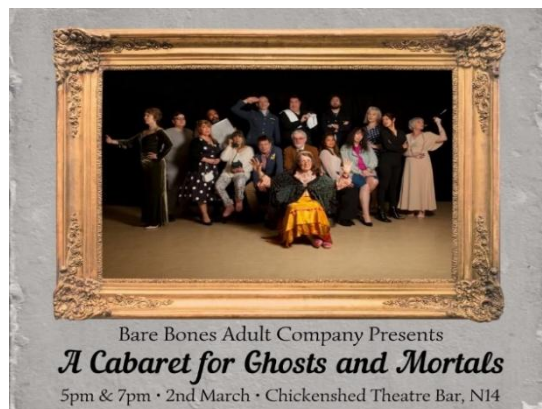
*The Bohemia*



*The healing power of nature – August flowers at group outing to Broomfield Park*



*Broomfield Park Greenhouse*



*Theatre outing (a group member was performing)*



*Meeting an equine therapist on the Totteridge Green Walk & group lunch August 2024*

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## COMMITTEE UPDATE

The committee continues to meet regularly to plan meetings, draw up a rota to facilitate both the face-to-face and online meetings, and review group administration e.g., managing referrals, managing the phone, dealing with complaints etc. There are five members on the committee, but we are always looking for additional members. If the group increases in number as we hope it will do, then additional committee members will be needed to facilitate additional check-in groups at both face-to-face and Zoom meetings. The reason for the difficulty in attracting new committee members is that a large number of members are struggling with high levels of depression and anxiety and many people just do not feel well enough to take on additional responsibilities. This is not surprising, of course. This is why people attend the group! But we do believe that mental health has declined in recent years partly because of the Covid lockdowns and also due to the deterioration of mental health services which are struggling to meet demand.

## REFERRALS AND MEMBERSHIP

Please see Appendix I for current membership and referral statistics. Referrals are beginning to increase which is good. We have left in the 2019 figures so you can see how recovery has now begun since the downturn of the two Covid years – 2020 and 2021. Please note, 2023 is an aberration as we were unable to run all our online meetings due to circumstances beyond our control. We continue to find that we have more referrals than new attendees – in other words, people enquire about coming to the group but never make it to a meeting. This has always been the case, and is likely due to the fact that depression and anxiety inhibit motivation.

## PUBLICITY

We have been putting posters up in a variety of venues such as doctors' surgeries, and we advertise fortnightly through Barnet Voice. We continue to advertise through the Hub of Hope and other local forums. We are considering publicising the group even more vigorously through local papers such as N20 and possibly through community forums like Nextdoor.

Website statistics are good: we had a total of 822 page views for 2023. In 2023-2024 we had between 22 and 72 site visitors per month who made between 56- and 102-page views per month. Most of our referrals now come to us through the website.

## GROUP SURVEY

We have followed up from the 2022 and 2023 survey and implemented quite a few of the suggestions for meetings which were made then: for example, members wanted another music session, another art session and more socials and we have addressed all of these.

### *Ideas for future meetings and socials*

In our last survey, members' requests for future meetings included having some Tai Chi, Yoga and Mindfulness sessions; others suggested inviting a psychiatrist or pharmacist to speak to the group about current treatments and to answer questions. Additionally, members suggested focussing on support activities available in Barnet and nearby, and many wanted more day trips to museums, galleries and more coffee meet-ups.

### *Anything you dislike about meetings?*

Some members said that they would like more activities on weekends and that weekday evenings were difficult due to work commitments; others said that they found we needed more time for check-in and would prefer check-in to always be in small groups. Others said they preferred the larger group so clearly, we are not able to please everyone. Another member who is deaf found it difficult to follow check-in when there were several groups talking in the room at the same time.

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The committee has now agreed to speak to the venue about using a second room just for check in when our numbers are large.

## COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

Please see Appendix 2 for groups survey 2023 feedback for Q5 *How has the group helped you in the past year?* We have also listed some of the compliments received in the past year. Please note, we record only written compliments which are normally received by text or email. We do also receive many compliments verbally as well! We have had no formal complaints this year.

## FINANCIAL REPORT

We are grateful to our member, Ian, who is an accountant and has assisted us with the accounts. Once again you will see from the figures in Appendix 3 that we continue to carry forward a deficit. Our income from the Barnet Grant and member subscriptions is not enough to cover even the room rental and Zoom annual charges – let alone all our other expenses: website, phone, stationery, printing, speaker charges, postage, refreshments etc. We have therefore had to be very careful about incurring additional expenses e.g. buying library books, paying speakers etc as can be seen from our expenses on the accounts. Bank charges will also be another unforeseen expense. About a year ago we moved our bank account to Lloyds to benefit from free banking as HSBC has begun to charge us. We have just been informed that Lloyds will be levying a charge on our account from January 2025 which will further increase our expenses. We will therefore soon be applying for an increase in the annual grant.

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## APPENDIX I: MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS

	2019 Before Covid	2020 Covid year lockdown	2021 Covid year lockdown	2022 Slow recovery	2023 Fewer meetings due to special circumstances	2024 Jan - Oct 2024
Total referrals	32	10	9	25	20	24
Total membership (end of year)	62	39	28	32	29	32
New attendees (first meeting)	9	5	4	8	5	3
Meeting attendance max and (min)	21 (5)	13 (7)	13(5)	16 (5)	14 (5)	13(5)
Meeting attendance total excluding socials	201	302	232	191	116	132
Meeting attendance total including socials	247	329	237	213	129	172
Meeting attendance average (excluding socials)	11	10	9	9	8	8
Socials attendance average	9	9	5	11	9	6
Meeting attendance average Main meetings (excl Zoom)	13	11	N/A	9	9	9
Meeting attendance average Thursday meetings (excl Zoom)	7	8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total number of Zoom meetings		29	25	13	4	8
Zoom meeting total attendance		254	232	114	28	52
Zoom meeting average attendance		9	9	9	7	7
Meeting number	20	35	25	22	14	24
Socials number	3	3	1	2	2	7
Committee meetings	3	7	2	3	2	3
Total events excluding committee meetings	20	38	26	24	16	24
Total events	23	45	28	27	18	27

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## APPENDIX 2: 2023 GROUP SURVEY FEEDBACK

*Attending the group is of great value to me because however I feel I am somewhere where I feel understood, not judged, and genuinely supported. Through the group I have made friends, feel less isolated and [feel] that I can make a contribution to society.*

*I have been coming to this group for many years and have been supported and befriended by all the members. It is such a valuable resource for people suffering from depression and anxiety.*

*The group has been part of my life for a long time and friends I have made there are important to me. The group provides much personal support and useful information.*

*Last year I needed support with applying for Employment Support Allowance. I would not have been able to do it without the support of the [group facilitator] and the group.*

*The group was particularly important while I was waiting for individual counselling. I was able to share how I was feeling, and I felt supported. The group is very well run, and I am delighted it has continued, notwithstanding Covid and the personal issues around the main organiser.*

*DA has helped me for years to feel connected to a group that I can bring the very worst and sometimes the best of how I feel. Sometimes the very fact of it being available keeps me from the worst despair. The group operates within loose but important rules, offering advice and listening acceptance and nonjudgmental support. After moving out of area I have been able to keep involved in this wonderful group through the advent of the Zoom monthly meetings.*

*The group has saved my life! The support from individual members as well as the meetings are a huge support to me. I would hate to think how I would cope with life if this group did not exist.*

*The group is very welcoming and kind and caring. The committee works extremely hard and their work I very much appreciated always.*

*Group has helped me to have a space to share when others don't have time to listen, even family.*

*[On social activities] Some of us do not necessarily have friends who are available to go out with so this would be great. I am sure I would get out more if I had likeminded people to go out with. Recently some of the group went to the cinema (twice) when I wasn't feeling well and this helped me immensely.*

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## APPENDIX 3: ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2023/2024

### Barnet Depression Alliance: Accounts for Year Ending 31st March 2024

<u>Income</u>	2023-24	2022-23	<u>Cashflow Statement</u>	2023-24	2022-23
Subscription from members	£157.81	£125.92	Cash balance at start of Year	£1,784.08	£1,837.75
Grant from London Borough of Barnet	£454.00	£454.00	Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year	£162.29	£53.67
Donations	£0.00	£0.00	<b>Cash balance at end of Year</b>	<b>£1,621.79</b>	<b>£1,784.08</b>
Fundraising	£0.00	£0.00			
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>£611.81</b>	<b>£579.92</b>	<u>Balance sheet</u>		
<u>Expenditure</u>			Library books & equipment	£50.00	£50.00
Meeting room rental /Zoom charges*	£694.38	£539.38	Cash at Bank	£1,428.39	£1,735.51
Meeting refreshments	£48.27	£30.81	Cash in hand	£193.40	£48.57
Social events	£6.25	£28.00	<b>Total cash</b>	<b>£1,621.79</b>	<b>£1,784.08</b>
Speakers	£0.00	£0.00			
Library	£0.00	£0.00	<b>Total assets</b>	<b>£1,671.79</b>	<b>£1,834.08</b>
Transport	£0.00	£0.00			
Administration (postage, website, phone)	£25.20	£35.40	<b>Represented by Accumulated Fund</b>		
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>£774.10</b>	<b>£633.59</b>	Balance at start of Year	£1,834.08	£1,887.75
			Movement in Year	£162.29	£53.67
<b>Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year</b>	<b>£162.29</b>	<b>£53.67</b>	<b>Balance at end of Year</b>	<b>£1,671.79</b>	<b>£1,834.08</b>

\* Zoom charges now shown with Meeting room rental for both 2023/24 and 2022/23