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Madness after the war. Experiences and life stories of people who experienced distress before, during and after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Madness After the War

Experiences and life stories of people who have experienced distress before, during and after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Reima Ana Maglajlić, Halida Vejzagić, Jasmin Palata i China Mills

September 2020.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of war on mental health has been well documented, both internationally (1) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2). Such research is mainly undertaken by mental health professionals. It is only recently, and still relatively rare, that resources are available for people with lived experience of mental distress to carry out research, and for this research to be treated as valid and taken seriously. Such research is important to create knowledge about mental health which isn't based solely on the narrow, medical understanding of such experiences. Experiences of mental distress constitute professional interest and specialism for mental health professionals, but are only one, albeit influential, part of the wider life experience for people who come into contact with mental health services. Opportunities for people with lived experience of mental distress to create knowledge are important to influence and shape the attitudes of the wider society about what mental distress means and what type of support it may and may not require. Internationally, there is a growing recognition of how important such knowledge generation is. People with lived experience of mental distress are increasingly initiating and/or shaping research about mental health: as "experts by experience" within mental health who collaborate with social and medical research teams; as researchers in organisations run by people who identify as 'service users' and/or 'psychiatric survivors'; and as independent scholars in social and medical sciences themselves. A body of literature exists into mental health users participation (in policy-making, peer support, political campaigning and research), what this looks like and what it means for those involved (3).

Such developments have led to the creation of Mad Studies (4) – an interdisciplinary field of scholarship which is embedded in the experiences of people who identify with a variety of names related to mental distress and wellbeing – from "Mad" to "neuro-diverse." The emergence of Mad Studies inspired this study on "madness" after the war. The study was initiated and conducted by a research team comprised of the following members: Halida Vejzagić, who was, at the time of the study, a volunteer with lived experience in the Association for Protection of Mental Health "Menssana" in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH); Jasmin Palata, who was, at the time of the study, the Vice-President of the Association for Mutual Assistance in Mental Distress "Fenix" in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina (the only BiH initiative which is run by people with lived experience of mental distress); Dr Reima Ana Maglajlić from the University of Sussex, UK; and, Dr China Mills from City, University of London, UK.

A Brief Overview of the Study Methodology

The study aims to offer new insights into understanding and supporting people who experience mental distress during and after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). BiH is important for such a study for several reasons. Community-based mental health interventions have been identified as the most appropriate for post-conflict contexts, and are widely recommended within global mental health literature (5). BiH is one of the rare post-conflict countries which introduced a country-wide development of community-based mental health services (6). To date, there have been several assessments of the work of the Community Mental Health Centres in BiH (7). However, this study does not aim to assess the effectiveness of such services or the professional help people receive through them. Instead, it focuses on the needs and experiences of people who experience mental distress, including and beyond mental health services alone.

The research was developed and conducted, including design, analysis and dissemination, by experts by experience, using qualitative social research methods, namely narrative interviews (8). This enabled the participants to tell their life story, reflect on their experiences of distress before, during and after the war, their relationships with their families, communities and mental health services, other aspects of their lives they find important and their hopes for the future. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Sussex. Study preparation and analysis was co-produced within the research team.

All study participants were identified through collaboration with the Associations “Menssana” in Sarajevo and “Fenix” in Tuzla; have some contact with either organisation; and all live in either Sarajevo or Tuzla Canton (regional organisational unit in one of the two BiH entities, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Halida and Jasmin organised and conducted the study fieldwork in the period August-November 2019. In total, they interviewed 10 men and 10 women aged 26-70 (the average age of participants was 42 years of age). Although we wanted to interview people who live in both rural and urban areas within both cantons, only four participants who live in rural areas of either Canton agreed to take part in the study.

When reflecting on their work during the study, Halida and Jasmin concluded that it was very important that they were able to shape the study, conduct all the fieldwork, and that the study used qualitative research methods. Although they agreed it would have been easier and quicker to conduct a survey of the experiences of members in both Associations, such a study wouldn't have enabled the participants to share their stories in a way they were able to do through narrative interviews. All participants also had an opportunity to check the interview transcripts and edit them if and where necessary.

The key study limitation is that we were unable to recruit participants from rural areas in either Canton, a lack of opportunity to conduct the study in other Cantons and a lack of opportunity to include more people with lived experience of mental distress from the Republika Srpska (one of the two BiH entities and only one participant was from this entity). One of the key lessons for the BiH research team was that all future similar studies should also include a remuneration for the study participants.

Study results

Listen to my story, hear my voice

The first section of findings is divided into four key themes: the socio-economic determinants of mental distress; the importance of family and friends; positive experiences of community-based mental health services; and the importance of initiatives run by experts by experiences. The first section concludes with recommendations for the future.

Study participants valued the opportunity to tell their stories and wanted for their story to be heard both by mental health professionals and the wider community. They frequently commented that “[distress] can happen to any one of us” and that this makes their stories important. Even though they felt that they cannot exercise significant influence on their lives, they want to be heard and for their overall life experience to be valued. This is the reason why the second part of this report is presented as a collection of their (anonymised) life stories, as told during the narrative interviews.

War, Socio-economic determinants of mental distress and the role of different types of violence

People who experienced mental distress during and after the war described how the war experience led to their distress, regardless of whether they lived through it as civilians or soldiers, in BiH or abroad. Among women (for example, Asja and Ajša), mental distress was caused by violence or physical and emotional abuse. During the interviews, all of the participants described the experiences that they thought was a turning point for their overall wellbeing. Many described the fear they felt and couldn’t shake and which shaped their lives subsequently – leading to a loss of family, friends and/or their jobs. For many, the war left a ‘trace’ that shaped their experience of distress in multiple ways that were not always linear or easy to trace. Participants noted also that poverty and a lack of warm and close relationships with others were most significant in preventing their recovery. People’s narratives show many complexities in talking about social determinants (such as war and poverty) and their impact on mental health.

Importance of family, friends and community support

Stories by people who experienced mental distress also show the importance of support they received – or lacked – from their family members, friends and employers. It was both encouraging and surprising to hear accounts of support and understanding that participants received from their family and other people who are important in their lives. While many participants have family support, their experiences also show gender differences.

A few men who took part in the study were able to start their own family, while women who took part in the study mainly rely on support from their parents and siblings. For a few female participants and for Demir, who both experienced mental distress and lives with cerebral palsy, love and support from their families also indicates a form of control in the guise of care for their wellbeing. Many of those interviewed wanted to be more independent and to have opportunities to empower themselves.

Positive experiences of community-based mental health services

Without direct intent to focus on the community mental health services in BiH, the stories also show the positive experiences people have of these services. Although a few people described bad experiences they had with psychiatric hospitalisations, almost all participants noted what good experiences they have in their local Community Mental Health Centre (CMHC). Participants mainly found out about the work of the CMHCs through family members or in the community and stressed that the support they receive in their CMHCs is important for them. CMHCs are found to be accessible due to their location in the local Health Centres (primary health services) and a lack of requirement for referrals. Participants mentioned good experiences with different professionals who work in the CMHCs (social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists), while some, like Dino, noted that their psychiatrist is like a friend to them.

Importance of initiatives run by experts by experience

Participants stressed that it is important that there are organisations like “Menssana” and “Fenix” which enable them to spend time and exchange experiences with other people “like me.” Organisations run or led by people with lived experience of mental distress are especially important for people who don’t have an opportunity to work or lack support from their family and friends. For them, Associations are like a second home. Both the Associations and the CMHCs are also a constant source of support and relevant information which helps improve the quality of their lives. Although only a few people who lived in rural areas took part in the study, they stressed that they lack the means to visit the Associations as often as they would like and that they feel that, if they were able to, this would improve their quality of life.

Recommendations for the future

It is important that, alongside the CMHCs in BiH, there is also support for the initiatives and Associations that are (independently) run by people with lived experience of mental distress. It is also necessary to support people who live in rural areas to access such initiatives which are, in BiH, based in bigger towns. Spending time with people who have

similar experiences is important for people's empowerment. The research team also hopes that participant stories will lead to the future development and education of current and future professionals in mental health. Mental health services in BiH are unique and important. The warm and accessible, human, approach many experience with the local mental health professionals is important to maintain and develop. It is hoped that these stories will enable current and future professionals to develop their understanding of lived experience of distress not only through people's diagnosis, but in their own terms in relation to their own lives. That this research has been co-produced and co-authored with service users provides an example of good practice in relation to co-production and knowledge production by and with those who have lived experience.

Life stories and histories of people with lived experience of mental health services

Experiences Before the War

Ilma

I noticed the first changes while I was still a student. I saw that something was happening. My first reaction was to isolate myself. My whole family – my father, mother, brother, and sister – they all noticed that something wasn't right. They were all very understanding, so I didn't feel any prejudice about how I felt. My father insisted I contact a psychiatrist, so I did. That was my first contact with mental health services. I was studying economics at the time and I had to stop my studies and go into treatment. I realised that my problem isn't that big and that I'm not the only one to feel that way. People go to see a doctor when they are ill; I did the same, I went to see a psychiatrist. I was hospitalised, took my meds regularly, and I didn't hide anything. It was what it was – I'm not ashamed of any of it.

I always had the full support of my family and I have it now, too. After the hospitalisation I got a job in a local factory. My family wasn't too keen on that, but they've let me do it. However, because of my illness, I was given a decree that I can't work for longer than four hours and so I was fired after a while. That job required a full-time commitment.

I didn't have time to think about what was happening to me because my Dad had died very suddenly shortly after that – he had a heart attack in our garden. I was at the house when it happened, while the rest of the family was away. That was such a shock for me. Then my Mother got cancer and needed support to go to chemotherapy. My brother and sister were engaged in supporting her, but they also had their own family commitments. I was on my own, I don't have children, I never married, so I took over almost all of the care commitments for my Mum. In parallel, I took care of my own treatments; I took the medication regularly and attended all the check-ups. My Mum's death really got to me and I was hospitalised for two further months after she died. I was able to recover somewhat and continue with my life. I think that being a carer for my Mum for 4 full years made me stronger.

Apart from my brother and my sister, I have a lot of friends in the neighbourhood. I love to spend time with them and talk to them. I am basically a cheerful and optimistic person – I love to socialise, and I am always busy with activities. I have a large family home with a garden so there are always things to do. I do all the upkeep for the house. For the past eight years, I have also attended Pilates regularly and now I visit the Association too. I love to

cook, exchange recipes, take care of the house, socialise. I like to keep that pace as I think it does me good. I am frequently asked why I buy so many groceries and why I am creating an emergency stash. The war did leave a trace, unfortunately. We were hungry and I love to have enough food in the house.

I love to exchange experiences with others who also use mental health services. I have friends of all generations and I get along with everyone. As far as my diagnosis and treatment are concerned, I am well informed. I did a bit of research myself, but I get most of my information from my doctor at the CMHC. You need to be persistent in life. After all the hospitalisations I was retired [received a disability pension]. I lived off this tiny pension for a few years without knowing that, as a mental health patient, I am also entitled to receive an additional benefit for care and support. I first heard of it from my psychiatrist at the CMHC who referred me to a social worker. The process of preparing the documentation did take a while, but I managed to get that additional benefit. My family told me to let it go, but I was persistent and managed to achieve my entitlements. There are many others who, like me, don't know their rights and entitlements. I should have been told about this when they released me from the hospital, but they didn't. I tell this to everyone, and I help out when and if necessary, because I know we all need the money. The meds I take weren't on the essential list until a while ago [a national list of medicines that don't require a patient charge for them], so I used to pay 60-70BAM pcm for them (cca 30-35EUR). All in all, I have learned how to manage my problems, I'm active, and will continue to live this way.

Visiting the Association has helped me make new friends. I go there regularly, and it makes me feel good. If there were no mental health services at some point in the future – we'd all manage, together. For example, we went on a field trip recently, everyone from the Association and the CMCT and we shared everything – the food, coffee, the lot. We socialised and it was really nice.

In the future, I'd like everything to be OK, for this period to last. We don't need to change anything; I think everything is OK as it is. I would love for young people to have a better life, as should we, the middle-aged. There are many clever and capable people among us, people who deserve a chance. Younger people need a chance, too. I do wish we had a better life across all of BiH.

The media have an important role to play when they report on mental health issues. They mainly portray a bad image of what it is to have mental health problems. They only talk about us when something bad happens, if someone kills themselves or commits a crime. They should report the positive news, too.

Armin

I first noticed changes in me in 1967. I was still in high school at the time. I used to get really painful headaches and noticed changes in my body which others couldn't notice. For example, I noticed that I don't have any kneecaps. I used to feel aches and pains all over my body. My parents would tell me that I am inventing these things. I used to feel extreme fear over these changes in my body, worrying that something in me will fall apart and what would happen to me. My parents kept telling me it was only puberty.

In 1968 I lived with my family who lived abroad. I had my first epileptic fit while staying with them. I lost consciousness. My relative took me to the local Psychiatric Clinic and I then spent 15 days there. A month later I had another seizure and wound up at the same Clinic. After that incident, my family sent me back to Yugoslavia, to my parents. In Yugoslavia I received medication for my seizures. In 1970 I was declared to be "the permanent invalid" [terminology at the time for someone thought to be disabled for life] due to my epilepsy, personality disorder and schizophrenia. My parents and my GP were of most help at the time. I also helped myself the most by agreeing to go along with this.

My illness had a major impact on my family. They were worried for me and my future. They tried to hide my illness – I said I wouldn't and didn't. The rest of the family and my parents took me to see different doctors who they thought may help me. My life changed drastically as I stopped my education. My friends abandoned me and went their own way. They didn't support me at those moments when I needed them the most. I was left on my own with my parents and doctors. I started visiting different Clinics and became part of the furniture at the local Health Centre and the Neuropsychiatric Clinic, not just in my own town, but in several places across Yugoslavia. I last spent time at the Clinic when I had the stroke in 2015.

Despite my illness I got married in 1975 and, a year later, I had a daughter. Three years later my wife left me and took our daughter with her. I was left alone in the flat which my parents left me when they died.

I first started attending the Association meetings in 2000, based on a recommendation from the CMHC staff. I have been active in the Association since then and I lead an ordinary life. There was a time when I would spend a lot of time at the Association with a few other people who use mental health services. That did help my recovery. I still visit the Association daily as it helps my everyday life. Association helps me with anything I need – conversation, drop off at the Clinic, the lot. I attend different workshops and groups organised by the Association. Members of the Association are my only friends and I always take their advice. I get advice there, as well as any information I need. Association is open to any people who use mental health services, regardless of their diagnosis, age or gender, which is excellent. It is also great that we have a space where we can spend as much time as we want, whenever we want to. The only shortcoming is that we are not funded through the local government and that we don't have enough money to do even more things for the members.

If Association wasn't there, I don't know what would happen to me. I would feel worse and

I wouldn't want that to happen. I think that we have good mental health services; I wouldn't change anything there. A story such as mine should have a positive impact on the society. We are ordinary people like everyone else. I just hope my life remains as it is. The only thing I'd change is to have a bit more money to live off and to find a Missus to live with me till death do us part.

Josip

I studied at the Faculty of Maritime Studies when the earthquake in 1969 happened. It was the beginning and the trigger for my bad condition. I noticed I lost my equilibrium and started doing things that surprised me. I wanted to change my field of study, change the town I live in, followed through on those impulses. However, a year later in the new town, I would just wonder and drink. This led to my first hospitalisation and my life took a bad turn. I was transferred to the Psychiatric Clinic in my hometown, where my family lived.

It was strange – I was hospitalised while almost unconscious. I didn't perceive anything around me, I didn't even have a perception of myself. This continued for full three months and my Mum was told that this happens and that I had a very difficult psychosis. After three months I recovered, but I was under very heavy psychiatric medication. I was stiff and slow. Before all this had happened, I didn't even know anything about psychiatry. I thought that, if you had those kinda problems you had a few pills and that was that. I didn't know what followed and how much stigma will mark my life, my youth.

After a year of regular therapy, I stopped taking any medication which made me feel worse. I was taken to another hospitalisation by the police and my doctor greeted me by saying "You have disappointed me!" I had yet another stay in the Hospital, yet another round of "guess the diagnosis" game, as well as lots of trial and error with different meds. They had placed me on a Unit which had 15-20 patients who thought someone was following them or that they were poisoned. I, too, was prey to such fiction and was labelled to be paranoid schizophrenic. At the time I didn't have any conflicts with people. I wasn't aggressive; even when at my worst I didn't hurt anyone, verbally or otherwise. This all lasted until the war, when I entered "The twilight zone" while under heavy meds. Due to fear and hunger I was hospitalised a further two times during the war and two further times I asked to stay at the Clinic because I had no will to live. I was totally down and didn't function.

Before the war, before this darkness, I did publish a book of poetry. But during the war I didn't even think of it. After the war I started writing again, but it was a disaster – bad poetry and bad prose. I did find a publisher who suggested I make something constructive of my "darkness." That is what led to my next book which was considered a cult classic and gave me back my self-confidence. After that book I wrote further ten, where I summarised all events which took place over some 10-15 years. I started to feel differently about myself and about the world around me. My writing healed me and I am a different person now.

Everyone was shocked by what had happened to me. I have a feeling that even my brother is ashamed of me and cautious around me because for him I'm a nutter and, therefore, some-

one who is inferior and to whom you can't talk with properly about anything. I was marginalised and, for him, I am just a part of our family that is labelled for life. I came to terms with this and realised that he was tragic with such an attitude, not me. I feel better now that I think of this as his problem. I am doing well now. After I wrote my books, I have found friends who never embarrassed me nor are embarrassed by me. They take me as I am. I have turned my life around. At 20 I became a victim of my own fiction. I know now that I wouldn't have been able to become a seaman with all that was in my head at the time. A ship is a kind of a "mad house" on water, a kind of reality show, which, over time, can draw out the worst in people. I probably wouldn't have functioned there. I have found myself in writing, through books. I now have my own place among the writers, but I find it difficult to call myself a writer. I don't live off it. Writers are also a funny bunch; they are very vain. If I have to say something, I put it in writing, get in touch with my publisher and no one else needs to know about it. If someone is interested in what is on my mind, they can find it in the bookshop.

I don't feel ill nor do I think of myself as mentally ill. I think we live in a catastrophic country, where you don't have any rights, and where each service costs a packet. Pensions and all income is low and you can't live off of it. There are constantly walls around anything we would like to do. People may mock others like me, whereas this can happen to any one of us. I was hospitalised with people who are highly educated, chess champions, successful, yet they had this evil happen to them. No one is to blame – it is just like someone with a tooth ache, it's just part of life.

My experiences of hospitalisation were awful. After admission, you wonder for 20 days up and down a corridor and get spoken to only when it's time for an injection. I expected conversation and support and didn't find any. It's an odd way through which modern medicine responds to the cases such as mine. I know a story which really made an impact on me. There was a psychologist in the USA who was a Doctor of Psychology, married and got a job at a psychiatric hospital. He was part of the rounds when they spoke about their patients. He mentioned that doctors should look for a root cause for any problem and address that. He was later summoned to the Director's office and told that he needs help himself. Although he agreed to such a treatment, he later opened his private clinic. In the office, he framed all the formal paperwork and diagnosis he received from his peers. He was very successful with his approach – tackling the root cause of any problems people faced.

I would actually like to write about how deviant psychiatrists are. For example, if you tell a psychiatrist that your meds aren't working for you due to the side effects, he may tell you that it's not true, while another one tells you that it is possible, but that they will change. And that is our reality. If you are under medication you are behind bars – and I am not trying to escape any more. It is the state I'm in; I get Haldol once per month and I function well on it.

All the books I have published seem to be my own thing. Psychiatry is not a place where I can talk about it; there, I am just a case. If a psychiatrist reads my books only to find new symptoms, I find that provocative. Instead of reading it as art, he looks for a new diagnosis. I once mentioned that in an interview for a magazine – I did gift a book of mine to my psychiatrist, to thank him. Having read it, he doubled my therapy. I was shocked!

I see my future through the books I'll publish. My latest novel is now with the publisher and

is due to be promoted in 3-4 months. I have another book of poetry due to be published, too. The fees I get are not much, but I am happy. I want to live, to look after my mother, who has been through a lot and was always my greatest support. I am the happiest when I see her in her rose garden, tending to her roses.

Džana

I was 19 when all the changes happened. After high school I started working as a cashier. After a few months, a colleague came to my office and asked me to pay out 12,000BAM (cca 6000EUR) to him as he needed to buy a car. Our boss approved this and he was due to return the money before the year was out. He didn't do it and, when the inspection visited, they established that we were short. I had a breakdown and wound up at the Clinic for the next six months. All that happened at work was such a shock for me and the doctors told me that my psyche couldn't take it. They gave me some medication which made me stiff and I think that made me feel even more depressed. I got better only some three years later. The man who took the money from the company did settle his debt, but my health was irreparably damaged.

I got married around the same time and had a daughter. I had another shock when I was giving birth to her. I was in the birthing room for two days and two nights. The doctors wouldn't perform the C section as you'd have to pay extra. My biggest shock came when they were stitching me up from a really bad birth. The medical staff were talking about a "retarded baby" and I thought they were talking about my kid. They didn't bring her to me for two days so I didn't know how she was. However, she was in an incubator because she was really tired. After two days I was allowed to see her – she was a big and healthy baby!

All this had an impact on me and I had a postnatal depression. I wound up at the Clinic for full two months. While I was there, my sister took care of my baby. I am not sure how much my family understood how I felt and all that happened to me. My brothers and sisters would regularly come and visit. My husband would come rarely; he mainly visited the pubs. He drank a lot. He used to do it before, but I didn't notice it as much as he was always very polite and hid his drinking from me.

Those experiences led me to use mental health services. I used the meds until the war started, but kept on working. My colleagues were understanding, especially after my divorce. My husband divorced me as he didn't want to have an ill wife. He also won custody over our daughter. The expert witness for the court did say that I should get custody as I worked, while my husband didn't. However, the judge was on his side and decided I need to pay him alimony, too. I wound up in the hospital again. When I came out of the hospital, I was transferred to another position. My life changed 100%. I used to be ambitious. I used to study as well as work. I was a good student and had good grades. I funded all of it myself. However, I had a lot of work commitments and my private life was in chaos so I didn't finish my studies.

Today, my faith and my friends help me the most. When I was younger, I lived much like other young people. However, after I got married, ill and divorced, I started becoming more

religious – especially in the war when I ran out of meds. I worked all the time on food delivery. I functioned well, although I didn't take any meds. In between different commitments, I started studying Kur'an and told my professor that I'd like to cover up [wear a hijab]. He said it is a serious decision, but that it may help me become bolder in my faith. That was a crucial moment for me. Up until then, I used to wear jeans, always looked after myself. The advice of my professor, who was also a Hafiz, helped me to accept my faith and follow the rules of Islam. My faith helped me to heal and to get all the "soul food" I need. It helps me to cope with life's challenges.

During the war, my husband and my daughter became refugees abroad. While abroad, he re-married which was a shock for my daughter. This all happened during the war. My faith kept me going. When the war finished, my daughter returned to me. She was nearing the end of elementary school and decided that she wanted to live with me. My husband and his new wife had their own children and she was a surplus. At the beginning we had a rough time. We didn't know each other. She was in puberty. My mother and I were internally displaced in our own town as our house was demolished and my father was killed. The three of us managed to organise our lives. I worked, my daughter went to school and this continued until she finished high school.

This led to a new shock, possibly the most difficult one. My daughter frequently changed jobs, as she mainly provided cover for other people's positions. She then found a job in a betting shop. While working there she started to gamble herself and once gambled away the entire daily income – several thousand marks. She then tried to take her own life. She was saved, but we both wound up in hospital. I was at the Clinic and she was recovering from physical complications from her attempted suicide. When she recovered she went to stay with her father. I had to find ways to pay off her debt. At the time, I was saving up for a Hajj. However, I had to use those savings to pay off my daughter's debt. I also had to borrow some money from my brother and a friend of mine to pay it all off. I used to work at my brother's grocery shop at the time, our wages were small. I still would like to go to a Hajj and I hope that the right time will come for that, God willing. All that happens is such a great trial, but, thanks to God, my daughter is now well, she is married, has a daughter of her own and a good husband with whom she lives abroad. Most importantly, she is healthy and her suicide attempt didn't leave any health consequences.

It is important to be financially safe. When I didn't have enough money to pay the bills and buy basic necessities – that was rough. Poverty has made so many people ill. It is especially hard for parents who are trying to put their kids through school. Everything is so expensive and we have more and more inequalities. That is so sad.

Nowadays, I attend lectures at the local Madrasa, where I also learn additional things about my religion. I am also active in a Muslim women's organisation. They organise all kinds of activities to help women become educated and prepared for independent life. They offer all kinds of free courses to women, regardless of their religion or nationality – informatics, foreign languages, practical activities preparing women for work, and such.

I just hope that the worst is behind me. I now try to give my life meaning and not to wind up

in hospital ever again. I have a good relationship with my daughter, son-in-law and my granddaughter. If I were ever to wind up in hospital again, I think that would feel like a defeat. The worst thing is that they don't allow me to keep my hijab in hospital, saying that I may hang or strangle myself with it. That is such a humiliation. Apart from that, I had good experiences with the doctors. I had a female doctor who, like me, was divorced. She was always very encouraging and helped me a lot with her advice. She later moved to another job, but was really helpful while she was my psychiatrist. Since then, a lot of time has passed and I hope that I never go back to the hospital. I have sorted my life out, I have a solid job, a good relationship with the rest of my family and I hope that my future is better than my past.

Kerim

I noticed first changes in 1987. It happened when I was at the University in another town. I was under a lot of pressure with my studies and started to drink a lot. That was a long time ago and I don't remember it well, but I remember feeling very fearful, frequently feeling chest pains and having pressure to finish my studies which were funded by my parents. I was once drinking so much I passed out. I woke up at the Psychiatric Clinic, not remembering what had happened. At the Clinic they labelled me with "psychosis" and I stayed there for six days. I was supposed to stay for two months, but didn't want to. When I left the Clinic I went straight home, to my parents. My doctor recommended I get in touch with the local Clinic and continued to seek treatment there. They continued to give me the therapy I was prescribed at the town where I used to study.

My parents were surprised by all that had happened and tried to figure out how to help me. I had to leave my studies to continue my treatment. A few of my friends took this all really well, others didn't. Some helped me out and encouraged me, saying that it will all pass.

I am doing well now, but I am grieving. In a very short period of time I have lost my father, mother, and my brother. I am finding it difficult to recover from so much loss. I am also unemployed, so I do find it difficult because I don't make new friends easily. I share it all with my sister and with my friends at the Association. In parallel to the CMHC, people and activities I take part in in the Association help me the most – the self-help groups, English workshops, road trips and travel. I now also have a specialist team in the CMHC – they have a psychiatrist and a social worker who are always there to help out and super nice to us. Having an Association that is a gathering place for people from all over the Canton who are like me is a big advantage. I don't see any disadvantages, apart from the fact that we have limited resources and funding for our activities. I hope that will change in the future, too.

Visiting the Association and taking part in all the activities helps me out. I am not alone, I feel a valuable member of my community. I don't get any financial help from either the state or anyone else. I only get that kind of support from my family. My sister lives with me in our family home and helps me out financially and in any other way I need.

If there were no services, I don't know what would happen. I think I would struggle without

the meds and without my biggest support, my sister. I also would find it rough if the Association wasn't there. I got used to spending my time there, with my friends. I don't know what I would do without the Association.

I am not the right person to talk to about mental health services. I think they are good, but I don't know what, if anything, needs to change. We should all have some more support from the state, to be able to live like other human beings. I hope that I will continue to live as I do now, coping with my illness the best way I can. I also would like to marry someday.

Vedad

I first noticed my illness before the war. It happened when I lost my wife in a car accident. I then began to feel a big fear, tremor, sweat, stiffening of my whole body. It was all new to me and I didn't know what was happening. My family used to take me to see an Imam, not to the Clinic or my GP. They did that because we were all lost and didn't know what was happening to me. After a few failed visits to different Imams I went to see a neuropsychiatrist. After three days and nights without sleep, I took the sleeping pills I had with alcohol. I then wound up at the Neuro-Psychiatric Clinic. I was unconscious and can't remember who brought me there. After that, I used to spend 30-odd days at the Clinic every three months or so. I now have an injection every month and am doing OK.

My family rejected me at the time. None of them wanted to help me. I was left to my own devices. I had lost my job and all my income I had as an entrepreneur. Many friends rejected me, too. It took me 28 years to recover. This illness changed my life. I had no one and was left on my own. From the beginning of 1991 to the start of the war in 1992 I was in a Psychiatric Hospital. They kept me there in solitary for six months. They didn't let me out of the building and kept injecting me to keep me sleepy. In 1992 they transferred me to another hospital in Serbia. I stayed there until 1993 when I returned to BiH. I was first in house arrest under Serbian Army and then they exchanged me and I returned home.

I now cope well with life due to the friends I made after the war. They are mainly people I met through the Association as we share a similar destiny. I have two kids also who are there if I need them. I also have my wonderful grandson. I find peace in the work of the Association as it gives me a chance to do what I love to do best – drawing and painting. I share all my joys and sorrows with my friends in the Association. I also get financial benefits via the Centre for Social Work. I don't have any other income. In general, I have varied experiences with doctors and social workers. It really depends on the state I'm in. All in all, the services aren't that bad, but could be better. Staff could be kinder to us. That would make a world of difference.

I get all my information from the doctors at the CMHC and at the Association. And it is at the Association I feel the most at home. I can always count on them. They are my brothers and sisters. If Association weren't there, that would be a drastic change in my life. I would prob-

ably go back to the beginning of my illness. The key thing that should change going forward is to listen to the people who use services a bit more. Stories like mine should shape how professionals understand us. I just hope to keep on living and to feel as well as I do now.

Experiences During the War

Šejla

I noticed the illness in 1992, when leaving my birth town. I noticed I had a different relationship with myself and others around me – my family, friends, neighbours... It was something I wasn't familiar with. I felt fear, suffocation, malaise, sweating... I used to tremble as if I was hit by lightning. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was lost and absent minded. All that was happening to me was a complete unknown. It all happened while I was exiled from our family home. As it happened, I felt indescribable fear, something I never felt before. I was lost in my pain and fear – what will I do? Where will I go? I wondered, "God, what is happening to my body? What is happening to me?"

I first looked for help later the same year at the country where I became a refugee. I wouldn't have known to ask for help, but I fainted once. I came around at a Clinic and I was asked to say what has happened to me. I told them everything and they told me I should visit the Psychiatric Clinic. They even took me there. It was the first time I've ever learned of such services. So, the people who helped me first were the medical staff at the Clinic. My family couldn't help me. My kids were little and they were spending time with my sister-in-law who was a refugee in the same town. My husband stayed in Bosnia. I was left to my own devices with two small children. The best thing to happen to me was that I stayed in the hospital during that first crisis. Everything was so new to me, I was far away from home, and far away from my husband who was my everything up to that point. My only salvation at that point was to stay at the Hospital. There was no other way – nor was I told about anything else in that foreign place.

After a while I went back to Bosnia, still feeling the same way. I was offered alternative accommodation in another town in Bosnia, as an internally displaced person. I got in touch with a local psychiatrist with the referral papers I got abroad. I connected with my husband and my family was together again. My family found it difficult to reconcile with how I was. I was a different person. I had trouble sleeping; I would sleep-walk looking for someone. I heard voices. In that town – everything was new and alien to me. I didn't have friends, and, because of the war, I had no job either. After a few years, I recovered, got a job and my life started to improve. I didn't have any problems with my colleagues at my new job. They accepted me and my illness, but I was more or less recovered. I could function and communicate with people. I continued my treatment, took my meds and followed my

doctor's advice. I also would keep myself busy with the place we lived – in the house, in the garden, at the Association and in the CMHC. There were different workshops there, a self-help group. It all helped me to recover.

My life changed completely due to what had happened during the war – I became displaced, I have lost my loved ones. That is what made me mentally ill. I didn't care for anything, I even didn't care about my own life at times. I have stayed alive for my children. I kept thinking about the end and I didn't see a way out – but they would come into my mind when I felt at my lowest and kept me alive.

I cope with life now the best I can. Any problems or trouble I experience, anything happening with my illness – I share it all with my children and my husband. With everything that happened with my illness, they kept supporting me and loving me. I don't have many friends, but those that I do have are people who have similar experiences to me. I have mainly met them through our CMHC.

Spending time at the CMHC and in both Associations I'm a member of helps me the most. I also love spending time in my garden and with handicraft – I make clothes, knit, do needlework. I even manage to sell some of it and help with our house budget. It all helps me feel fulfilled and keeps me going, as I am helping my family. As I no longer work, I have lots of time to spend in the CMHC and at the two Associations. I feel good there as it's a place where I meet people like me, people who have similar problems. I feel better there than anywhere else. My psychiatrist recommended I get involved in the two Associations and it helps.

I don't receive any benefits, neither from the state or from any organisation. If I need any advice or help to manage my illness, I ask my doctor at the CMHC and in the two Associations I'm involved in. I also get help from my children and my husband. We all live off my husband's pension. The only drawback is that I can't take part in all activities that are organised through the Associations as we have to contribute to the transport and food costs for some of them. Neither the Associations nor I can cover those expenses.

I really hope that I will continue to feel as well as I do now. I just hope that my family and I become more financially stable and secure. It would also be good for the mental health services to listen more to the people who use services, rather than their family members who accompany them. That happens sometimes. Stories like mine should be heard and listened to, so that people can see that we can live a fulfilled life with mental illness.

Bilal

The first time I noticed changes was when I was 15. I noticed I had trouble fitting in even before, but it didn't have an impact when I was smaller. The first symptoms showed during the war, in 1993. I felt great fear, I felt dirty, lost in time and space. I saw that something wasn't right, so I went to see a doctor. People around me told me that there is a [Psychiatric]

Clinic and that I should ask them to help me. My Doctor suggested I stay at the hospital for 15 days. After that, I was hospitalised for further 90 days and that is when they diagnosed me. It all happened abroad, where I was a refugee, on my own and without my family. After the treatment at the Clinic, I was offered an opportunity to live in a therapeutic apartment and have constant consultations with my doctor at the time. I came back to BiH in 1999 and got in touch with the local doctor with my referral papers from abroad. That led to me staying at the hospital for a further 21 days. After I got out, I continued taking meds and seeing my psychiatrist. I still see him and use the services at the same Clinic.

All of this didn't really have an impact on my family. I was unemployed and didn't have friends in the country I lived in. When I came back to BiH, all my friends forgot about me or avoided me. I wasn't sure whether that happened because of my illness or because I went abroad during the war. I still don't know what did it, but it really doesn't matter. My life changed completely because I was ill and no longer the same person. I reached rock-bottom and was left to my own devices and to Doctor's help. I don't know what else to tell you about it.

Nowadays, I cope well with everything life chucks my way. I got married and have three kids who I adore. I have immense support from my family in every possible way. I have friends who respect me, but those are my new friends who I met as I struggled to recover. All in all, I am far better now and cope with life far better than before.

My family is my main source of support. I get a disability pension, so I don't have any work colleagues. I also attend a self-help group at the Psychiatric Clinic, as well as socialise in the Association. Talking and exchanging experiences with others helps me a lot. I have the love and understanding of my family – that means the world to me. I have good experiences with all medical services, too. Whenever I needed support, they never treated me as a patient, they always treated me nicely, like any other citizen.

All the information I need, I find it with the doctor and other service users. I like that the Associations are now led by people who use services themselves. I like also that the Association is open to everyone – people who use services, professionals, volunteers, supporters, the lot. There are different workshops which help us to recover, from gardening and knitting to learning languages. I also find it so beneficial to exchange experiences with other people. It really helps me cope with any problems. I also find out any information I need through the social media and online. I have also turned to religion; it helps me and fulfils my soul. I hope that I will continue to feel as well as I do now, as I am truly content.

Dragana

My first crisis happened in 1992, while I was a refugee. At the time I lived in a Refugee Centre with my twelve-year-old daughter. The Centre was located in a township. I was very scared, alone and lost. Everything was new to me – living in a small town among strangers who had very different life habits to my own. I did manage to find a job in a small private company. I hoped that this would help me, but I still felt fear, hopelessness and uncertainty.

I constantly wondered how I would organise our lives, how to offer guidance to my daughter who was about to become a teenager? That township didn't have well-developed health care; there was no psychiatrist or psychologist there. I went to a neighbouring town where I had a chat with a Doctor, got therapy which didn't help me, but life rolled on. I coped with it all the best I could. I had a lot of work commitments, school commitments with my daughter – and all of it was constantly enveloped in fear.

My parents stayed in BiH. I had a friend at the township where we were offered refugee accommodation. It turned out that she was a psychologist. However, she didn't recognise the problems I faced. She didn't have time to, as she herself was a refugee with two children – but she coped so much better with the whole situation. My daughter noticed that something was happening, too. She was also constantly scared and sad, but she was a child and quickly bounced back when she gained a new circle of friends. She got on with them and that helped me, too. At least she was able to overcome it all and to live like all other children.

The only thing that really helped me were the daily walks by the river. I liked the cold and the winds, because I couldn't identify with our new surroundings. My job helped keep me busy, but the work conditions were bad and all the workers were exploited. We were a predominantly female staff team and our boss was ruthless. My child and those walks kept me alive. I had a need to run away, change something, but all bigger towns and embassies were far away. If I were to leave and go somewhere, I needed time off on a workday and money – both were non-existent. We were stuck where we were! My daughter also made friends and, regardless of everything the job kept me going. So we stayed. And yet, I was fully aware of it all, the phases of depression and euphoria which swapped at regular intervals. I first didn't associate that with bipolar disorder. I have a naturally sunny disposition, so I understood the depression to be just the side-effect of our situation. It was only when we came back to BiH, where I got a job in my own profession when I realised that something really wasn't right. The mood swings just continued, regardless.

I functioned well at work, despite working with people who had very different mentality and questionable qualifications for the jobs they had. I managed to secure that good job based on my knowledge and experience. The rest were employed through nepotism and political affiliations, so I didn't have good collegial relationships with them. I was qualified for the job and did it well. I witnessed questionable actions while at work. Because I wouldn't partake in it, I was transferred to work as a librarian for half the salary. While I worked there, I really hoped that there would be an inspection, a financial control of some sort and that they would all get arrested. I really couldn't understand how such corruption can remain unpunished. But inspections never came. My new library job wasn't well-paid and I had a lot of expenses. This caused me to react very emotionally and I wound up on the Psychiatric Ward. My daughter visited me every day. She once pointed out another patient to me who was a judge. She, like me, blew the whistle and wound up on a Psych Ward. That helped me to realise that everyone who points out such corruption and speaks truth to power is declared insane for speaking up. After that hospitalisation I got my final diagnosis of bipolar disorder. My daughter sought a second opinion and it corroborated such a diagnosis. When

I am euphoric, I would feel great. During depressions, I would isolate myself and wait for it to pass. My psychiatrist gave me an excellent therapy which I use to this very day. I feel good and safe.

I now live in another small town where, unfortunately, I don't have any opportunities for additional activities. I suggested to my Doctor that we should do something, but she isn't interested in anything that is beyond her basic day job. It helped me that I became aware of what my problem is, that I'm able to cope with it and that I am able to organise my time accordingly. I have founded a Women's Association where I live. We hang out, have lunch and coffees together – we even have summer holidays together! We don't have a regular space to meet, but the Local Council gives us a space once per week to hold our meetings. Women who are members are mainly single mothers who also have additional health issues. We find it easier to share experiences. In parallel to this I also attend a painting school, which I truly love.

All in all, people who use mental health services are left to their own devices. You can notice it clearly when you visit a Health Centre. There is no one in the waiting room, and yet they keep you waiting or even ask you to attend some other time. They are simply not doing their jobs! Incompetence is a big problem. I also think that people still have prejudices which lead to stigmatisation. See, even in town, there are so many people who use services and yet there is only one single Association. And it all exists only because there is foreign aid to fund such work. Once that stops there is no way we can get local council funding! That would require the leadership of the Association to be associated with the right political party, so I don't see a bright future there. I can only have an impact through things I can do myself and I don't touch anything else. Nonetheless, we should be persistent and ask. There are certain individuals who are active in politics and who do understand our woes as they have family members who are similarly afflicted.

Fortunately, I know my phases. I even have a calendar which helps me understand them! The episodes are now very frequent. After my mother committed suicide, my phases swap almost monthly. My Mum didn't get help on time; no one understood that she has bipolar disorder, too. Her suicide was to be expected, but no one paid any attention to it. I am struggling to cope with it all.

Going forward, I will continue to paint and to spend time with my friends. Many of them don't know my true diagnosis, but I don't care. I shouldn't need to prove anything or seek their understanding. My daughter supports me. As she is now pregnant, I asked her to do all possible tests. We hope for the best.

Asja

I wanted to take part in this study to tell you my story as much as I have strength to share it. I want other people to hear it and see it. Approximately in 1995, the war was still raging and I was a 7th grade pupil. I noticed something was happening to me. I became forgetful, I felt like killing myself; I had a great fear of continuing to stay alive. I was miserable. This was

caused by abuse I experienced in every possible way since my early childhood. I was raped three times in a month by two grown men and a boy. On top of that, my Nan abused me mentally, locking me up at home and beating me. She banned me from playing with other children. My peers at school also bullied me as I was fat. No one wanted to spend time with me. It all caused me to feel as I did.

When I felt these changes, I didn't know what was happening to me. I probably looked bad, as my uncle and his wife took me to visit a Doctor at the Clinic in the neighbouring town. My mother wasn't at home, only my Nan. They say that I would sit in the middle of the room and stare at a single point in space, pouring water over my head. I was a child and I didn't know where to get help. No one in my family knew anything about mental health services. They only knew about [name of the local psychiatric clinic]. My uncle and his wife were the only ones to help me. My mother told me it's all nothing and that I should go and see an Imam.

All which I'm telling you now is not something I know from memory. I don't remember any of it, it's all as my Uncle told me. It helped me to understand what was happening at the time. It's all as he told me, explaining that they helped me at the time. It all had a major impact on my family. My Mum got worried and started to pay attention to me. My other family started to notice me, too. They would help me if I needed anything. I didn't have any friends, though.

My life changed for the worst due to illness. At the beginning I was a child and I didn't pay any attention to my life as I had no will to live. I was first hospitalised at the Psychiatric Clinic when I was 18 years old. I was there for approximately 30 days – I honestly can't remember how long the stay was exactly. When I left the hospital, the doctors gave me advice what to do and which medication to take. I followed their advice until 2003, when I stopped it all as I was ashamed of my illness and didn't want to accept it.

Two years later I experienced another trauma. My mother was murdered in front of me by a man who she no longer wanted to live with. Once she died, I stayed to live at the same house and got so much worse. I didn't ask anyone to help me. I didn't visit any doctors for the next six years. Once I did, I started taking medication again and do so now, but I don't think they really help me, to be honest. I function the best I can, but I can feel the limits to what I can do. I can't quite explain it, but I feel that I'm not quite myself. I currently visit the local CMHC, have regular check ups with my doctor and occasionally I pop by at the Association in town. I spend time with other members or attend their training programmes.

I think I'm coping with life now the best I can. Life continues and I have to fight on as I have no one to help me but my uncle. I can share everything with him. Apart from him, there's only people at the Association, as a few of them have stories similar to my own.

In everyday life, animals help me the most. I love animals and that keeps me going. I don't have free time activities, apart from spending time with my cats and dogs. I decided that animals are better than people. I am unable to work and am currently registered at the Unemployment Centre. I wasn't offered any other support. The CMHC suggested I visit the Association in town. As the town is far away and I have no money to visit the town daily, I only

visit the Association if they can pay for my transport or if someone gives me a lift. I would love to attend more regularly, but neither I nor the Association can afford it. I get benefits and that doesn't even cover my basic life expenses. I use the soup kitchen to survive. When they can, Association gives me a food parcel, too. I have a good relationship with the doctors and with the staff at the Centre for Social Work. They are always here and happy to help as much as they can, much like the Association. When I visit the Association, I feel better. I become calmer and I like to spend time with people who have had similar experiences like me. Everyone at the Association wants to help me and see me get better. If I had a regular income, I'd go there every day. I'd like to see that happen in the future. If the services weren't there, I'd get so much worse. My life would fall apart, I think.

No one manipulates me now. The only people who did are the neighbours who started a collection to help fix my roof. In the end, none of it happened. The person who was collecting the money died and the money just disappeared. That was the only time someone manipulated my condition. In the future, I hope I will recover and live like everyone else.

Experiences After the War

Amar

I first visited a psychiatrist 13 years ago. She gave me meds and told me to take them to avoid something more serious. She told me it would help me relax and to sleep better. Actually, the meds were a form of prevention. I visited her as I was unable to work. I used to work as a Security Guard, but I left that job one month after starting it. I also didn't get on with my parents. My Mum has a big influence on me. I should have probably stopped taking those meds after a few months; instead, I have been taking them for 13 years. My Mum oversees this and is adamant I should take them. The only good thing is that I have held a steady job for the past 10 years. Psychiatrist did tell me that the meds will work and, there you go, I've been working for all these years non-stop.

I work at a place where I meet people from all parts of town and surrounding areas, from both [BiH] entities. There are three bosses; one for the Bosniaks who work there, one for the Serbs and one for the Croats, but there are also many employees who are none of the above. They can go to any boss. I know about the case of a Serb who was employed by a Bosniak woman. There are all kinds of things happening, like, "You WILL employ this person for me, won't you?" but there are nice people there, too. My job isn't easy, far from it. How have I found this job? Well, my Mum told me to go and see a man and ask him for a job, and so I got it. I have been there for 10 years now and have all the employee benefits paid for me. They pay my national insurance contributions, my pay, additional benefits [free work-time meal benefit]. My boss knows about my health issues and that is why I no longer work in night shifts. He doesn't give me grief about my health as I have a Ruling from the Institute for Pen-

sion and Disability Insurance which says that I have limited work capacity. That is why I only do day shifts. I used to work nights, but I have found it unbearable. I was all alone in the shift and there's no one you meet when working nights.

War had a massive impact on me. The town itself and all that had happened. I don't know how to define it, the impact of war. There are two entities now, Federation and Republic of Srpska, but we move everywhere, across entity borders. My problem is that I don't know whom to spend time with, whom to talk to, who can be my mate. That is what I think about. I have lost trust, but I also forgave some people because war made them ill, too. As much as I notice all the changes, they are happening over time which is rushing past. As time rushes on, the problems change, too.

For the past 4-5 years I've been attending check-ups at the CMHC. Before that, I had treatments at the Day [psychiatric] Hospital. That helped me to calm down and sleep better. My GP explained to me what my diagnosis means, that I am unstable. I didn't research it or anything, but my doctor told me what it means. My biggest problem is my age. I am too alone and still live with my ageing parents. Many of my acquaintances weren't pleased with their jobs and moved abroad. Most of the contacts I now have is through work. I have a few mates I spend time with. I also had a girlfriend, but we didn't really get on. During weekends, I mainly rest. I try to leave town and go into nature. I occasionally get a day off during the week, too, if I work a 12-hour shift. I reward myself by going out of town. I also have hobbies; I ride my bike, read books, learn languages, listen to music, play games and the like. These hobbies help me. I also carry my foreign language handbook with me to work – you never know when someone is going to ask you something!

Should any of my services cease to exist, I am ready. I have created a stash of meds to last me half a year! I was in awe of the story you told at the Association, about gradual decrease of meds and self-empowerment. I was so happy to hear that! Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against the meds, but I'd like to stop using them. I'd like to have a better social life. I still have a few elementary school mates I spend time with. I also had that girlfriend, but she didn't really like to spend time with me. There are many women at work, but they see me as someone beneath them due to the job I have. There is a difference between the regular and the support staff.

Ajša

About a year ago I isolated myself and didn't leave the house. I was very nervous, had heart palpitations, I wanted to wash my hands all the time, and my skin was constantly itchy. My aunt is a medical worker and took me to have a series of tests. Physically, everything was OK, so she took me to see a psychiatrist. I felt that this feeling of unrest and nerves will pass if I wash my hands constantly. And it would feel better for a short while, but then I'd feel the same again. I had wounds all over my hands and my body from constant scrubbing and scratching. I am better now; I have settled down and the symptoms are not that frequent. I feel better since I started leaving the house again.

This all started after I was attacked by a man. He followed me, abused me verbally and, finally, he physically attacked me. This is why I have spent six months locked up in my house. I felt I shouldn't go out and had all the symptoms that I mentioned earlier. I have lost my job, too, all because I wouldn't leave the house. My Mum and Dad would accompany me whenever I needed to do something – although the only thing I'd do is go to see my doctor. I started my treatment at the CMHC. Nowadays, I no longer fear that guy, I feel safer. He did try to attack me one more time. He had cut me off on my way home, but I managed to defend myself. I was afraid, but I also felt strong and I didn't let him see that I was afraid of him.

In parallel, I don't like how my father is. Together with the attack I survived, my father's passivity is about 30% of what had happened to my mind. He just lays in bed; he's a hypochondriac and is constantly afraid of everything. I can't rely on him! When I'm in danger, I don't know if I would defend him or vice versa. My Mum is brave; she works – she's working herself into the ground – and she had cancer, too, all the radiation and chemotherapy. My Dad has PTSD. He couldn't find a job after the war. Before the war, both my Mum and Dad had good and stable jobs. My Mum has accepted the new reality and now works several jobs. She is a carer for older people and a cleaner, while my Dad just lays about the house and moans.

Nonetheless, when I locked myself in the house, I was surprised how understanding everyone was, my whole family, but my Mum especially. She follows me about and is constantly there for me. My Dad visited my psychiatrist this morning. She told him that there's still work to do, but that I'm progressing really well. I was always withdrawn, but that became much more pronounced after the attack. Still, I am doing better now and I could work. I could really do with a job. I am testing myself at the moment; I volunteer a lot at the Association. I accepted recently to co-ordinate a cinema trip for a few members and I handled it OK. I love to try out new things and new jobs, to learn and to see if I can do something. I mainly handle things OK, and, if I don't know something, I ask for help. I love to learn and nothing is an issue for me. I am also able to take criticism and suggestions when it comes to work.

Visiting the Association helps me the most. I am active in several sections, including sports, day trips and socialising. I think we can do anything if we organise and help each other! In general, I never had a bad experience when it comes to my health. It is all OK so far, especially with the health services.

The guy who attacked me tried to do it again recently. He knows what he has done, so he thinks he can do it again. But when I defended and resisted last time he tried, he then gave up. If he tried to do it again some six months ago, I would probably go into a shock and let him do what he wants with me. He took two and a half years of my life, but I defended myself the last time and how he has given up. He is from my neighbourhood and has been following me for years. He thought that my kindness to all my neighbours gives him a right to abuse me.

I am very careful after all that had happened to me, especially when it comes to other people. I know that not everyone is the same, but I am still careful! I have support from my family, people at the Association and at the CMHC. I socialise with a few other members outside of

the Association, too. We have a mutual support group through Viber and we meet in town. I tell them things that even my parents don't know. I had to do a pap test recently as I have gynaecological problems. I'm still waiting for results. As my Mum had cancer and still has many health issues, I didn't want to worry her. I hope the test will be OK, but my mates from the Association supported me throughout.

I take one day at a time. Slowly, I have conquered fear, started going out, I want to find a job... I don't hope for much, because I can't! I still have periods where I wash my hands and scratch myself, but that is mainly when I'm home, over the weekend. During the workdays I spend time at the Association. I have a walk with my Mum on a Saturday and on Sundays I go to visit my Nan, so that prevents me from just locking myself indoors over the weekend. I also have a lot of support from the CMHC. I was sceptical about them at the start, as I didn't know much about mental health at the time. I think I was lucky not to have been hospitalised. I am glad that I just go and visit my local CMHC.

Still, there is so much prejudice in our society. There should be more information about mental health available to the public, as I think that many have this problem. The media love sensations and to exaggerate and, when people read their reports on mental health, they start thinking we're all dangerous. I recently attended a Symposium on mental health in primary health care. More people who use services should have attended it, as well as the general public; they all could have learned so much from it. There should be more space to explore differences of opinion between the professionals and people who use services, to widen our horizons and to see we are not all a big problem at all.

Kenan

I have experienced first symptoms in early 2000s. I noticed something wasn't right. I had nightmares which were all the same and took place during the war. Those war-related nightmares, isolation and fear had led me to seek help from my local CMCH. I got in touch with them and started a treatment with a psychologist and a psychiatrist. They recognised that it's PTSD. Afterwards, I made many mistakes during my treatment. I started drinking alcohol while taking meds and just got worse and worse. This led to family problems and my divorce from my first wife. We have a son together who is now 18 years old. My family thought that all my problems and behaviours are related to alcohol misuse. None of them understood or supported me. They didn't understand I actually had PTSD.

I had treatment for alcohol abuse on three occasions, but none of them work. I only stopped drinking some 5-6 years ago. Even those doctors didn't recognise I have PTSD, so the actual mental health problems remained. After the last treatment I transferred to the CMHC where I am still in treatment today. No one at my job noticed that anything is happening with me as everyone does their job and doesn't care much for anything else. My family thought that I'm an alcoholic and that this was what caused all my problems. I don't really have friends, bar a few people who have the same problems as me. I can talk to them.

I think we all have our own way of dealing with things. I used to work at the same company for years and it was all fine until my problems with alcohol started. After my alcohol treatment, I was transferred to a lower paid job. There was an incident where I completely dismantled the office. I realised that they were ignoring me when I was transferred to the lower paid post. I was also insulted by a colleague who also worked there. She lives in the other BiH Entity. Her husband was a member of their armed forces during the war, while the other colleague was abroad during the war – and they tell us what to do now! They provoked me during a lunch break. One told me that she doesn't like me smoking in there and if I could go outside to do it, while the other was loudly talking about preparing a pork dinner at home. One thing led to another and it came to insults and an argument. Such situations make me nervous and really enrage me, too. After the incident I agreed to a dismissal and then signed on to continue to receive my health care benefit. I am trying to sort out a pension now.

My relationship with my ex-wife and my son are far better. She understands now that alcohol wasn't the main issue, so we now have a friendly relationship because of our son. I am most proud that he and I have a good relationship. He often asks me to tell him about the war. He knows a lot about it, but there are also things I don't want to tell him about. He needs to live his life and get an education. He is really good at sports – he even won some prizes – and he has a girlfriend. I want him to grow up unburdened by the past. My ex-wife and I have an arrangement about all commitments to do with my boy. I attend the parent-teacher meetings and he spends the weekends with me.

I had a second marriage, but it didn't last long. She and I are no longer in touch, nor do I wish to be in touch with her. I think she just used me to get a job with a friend of mine who has a job in the local council. She still works there, but I'm glad not to be with her anymore. Since my first divorce, I have moved seven times, but I never had problems with the neighbours. I think that everyone thinks that I am a quiet and withdrawn man. As I don't have any income, I am forced to visit my Mum to eat whatever she is able to prepare from her pension. I wanted to get benefits and visited the Centre for Social Work, but I am not eligible to receive them if I have a car. That car got stolen, but, as I am still listed as it's owner, I can't get any benefits. I am in the process of sorting out my pension, so I am visiting a lot of places to gather all the relevant documents. I asked one doctor, whose assessment is important for my application, what he'd write in it if I were his son? He said that he would pronounce me 100% disabled and that I'd get my pension without any problems. I thanked him for his honesty. My papers actually state that I am 20% disabled because I was "only" wounded in my arm. No one cares that my soul is wounded, too. I am not hoping for a positive outcome. It's a long process for many, while others get it overnight, without any trouble. I think that there is a lot of inequality in our society when it comes to ensuring people's rights are honoured. The only thing that counts is if you have a good connection or if you have money to pay them.

We, former soldiers, we're regularly misused before each election. Each Party promises that they will do something for the war veterans. Many Parties have called me, but none of them managed to get me. For a while, I supported a [names a local Party]. They had a manifesto which was closest to my own views. However, after the election, all these Parties

form coalitions to get into power and then forget about their promises. I am not a member of any Party anymore.

Society perceives us like nutters. PTSD is a dangerous illness and it is omnipresent. Many people don't know they have it. I would love for the mental health services to cease to exist and for people not to have access to their meds. Then we'd see how many of us have PTSD, including those in power who secretly take their meds! Our society doesn't pay enough attention to us, but I have managed to establish order in my life. I have a regular pattern – I clean the house, walk, I am active on social media. I regularly visit my CMHC and take my meds.

Mental health should be more present in the media, particularly people who use services. We should talk about our experiences and decrease the stigma which people have. People should work and spend time doing things they find meaningful. I could really do with a job or some sort of engagement in an NGO. But I don't really have any hopes for the future; there is so much injustice! I am most angered by those who didn't spend the war here, but today have everything. I am afraid of what I'd like to do and what impact that would have on my child. I am still scared of my thoughts.

Lamija

I first noticed the changes in 2012 – fear, sleeplessness, feeling lost and unable to function in everyday tasks. I lived abroad at the time and had a really difficult time. I was unemployed for two years and felt depressed because of it. I was afraid because I couldn't understand what was happening to me. In those moments, I was afraid of people around me, too. I got help from my neighbour, my boyfriend at the time, and my friends. My neighbour noticed that my behaviour had changed and called an ambulance. The ambulance took me to a psychiatric clinic where I had spent two weeks until I stabilised. After I left the hospital, I stopped taking the meds; I just didn't want to accept that I was ill. This all had a negative impact on my surroundings, on my family and friends. My family was far away, in BiH, and they were worried about me. My friends couldn't believe what was happening, they were in shock. I went home for the holidays, but when my family saw the state I was in, they begged me not to go back abroad. I knew I was in a bad way, so I decided to stay.

I'm OK with everything at the moment and I function really well, spending time with my friends. I receive a disability benefit from the Centre for Social Work. The rest of my support comes from family and friends, especially those I know from the Association. They provide me with advice and all other help that they can. As far as my family is concerned, I now live alone. My Mum died recently, and my brother and I only had occasional contact anyway.

All my woes and sorrows, all my happiness, anything that is important for my health – I can share it all with the other Association members. I go there every day and spend time with people like me. That helps me the most, spending time with people like me. I don't have a job, so I can go there daily. I stay there for several hours, socialising and talking. I chose to

spend my days this way, after my psychiatrist persuaded me to visit.

I had good experiences with the doctors. After I came back from living abroad, I sought help at the Psychiatric Clinic and was hospitalised there twice over the last few years. Both hospitalisations lasted three weeks each. I have subsequently started to notice my illness and started taking the meds regularly. I have a good relationship with the Centre for Social Work, because they sort out my disability benefit. I get all relevant information and advice from my friends, family and the doctors – but I get the best advice through talking to other members of the Association, from my psychologist and my social worker. They mainly provide me with information about how to handle my illness at the moment and going forward.

I don't really hope for a better tomorrow here. I just hope that I continue to be as I am now, feeling better. From where I stand, people who use mental health services are OK, although we could do better, but it's not us who decide about such things, it's the Ministry for Health. It would be nice to for the Psychiatric Clinic to be better equipped, to have better bedrooms and food, as well as a better space for different activities. People should realise that we are the same – what happened to me can happen to anyone.

Demir

I primarily have cerebral palsy, but I also had mental health problems as a result. I have been visiting the CMHC for the past two years. I can't work, so I live from my disability benefit. My sister helps me out as I couldn't live solely off my benefits. Once I pay all the bills and pay my support worker who visits me every other day, I don't have enough to live off. The only thing I can do is to visit the shop and get the few groceries I am able to carry and that's that. I can heat the food up, but I cannot cook, so either my carer or my sister do that for me.

Visits to the CMHC helped me because I spent more time with people now. I love to joke, but only with people I get on with. I noticed some people don't like that kind of communication. When that happens, I withdraw and don't try any more. I mainly spend time on the internet, playing chess and watching TV – I love sport! I don't have many friends. My generation is scattered all over the world, while some died during the war. I had friends while my parents were alive. I don't have friends since, as I am not as well off now as I was then. When you don't have the means, people leave you. My Mum died in 1990, and my Dad in 1993, during the war. He needed to have dialysis, but it was difficult to organise during the war. He couldn't go to the hospital, as his legs gave in, so he died.

While my parents were alive, they looked after me, but they also spoilt me. I wish they hadn't done that, as I'd be stronger now. Their attention prevented me from becoming independent. They were scared for me. My sister has her own life and her own family. She is 11 years older and she looks after me as if she's my Mum. I have a good relationship with her family. Her oldest son is married and has a baby. He calls me up regularly to spend time with his family. I am also a member of the Mountaineering Club. We take weekend trips to one of the neigh-

bouring mountains. I love doing that as I get on with them well. I don't like it when I notice that people pity me. The mountaineers make me feel well as they treat me as their equal. They include me in their activities and I help out as much as I can.

I am not working, because any job you want to go for requires you to have at least secondary school, which I didn't complete. I had a bad experience with a professor at school. I was scared of her as she always told me I won't be able to do anything in life, so I left the school. She constantly insulted and humiliated me. She made me fearful and gave me nightmares, so my parents no longer insisted I go to school. Now I'm sorry I left; I wish I'd finished something, at least night school. I didn't ask around if I could do it now, and no one ever suggested anything. I just get my check up when I visit the CMHC, rather than get any information like that. The Association doesn't really have that kind of information.

In health and social care everyone sees me as a person who is mentally and physically disabled, although I don't think that describes me at all. I know how to read and write, I take care of myself as much as I can, and I wish people would talk to my face about anything concerning my life, rather than behind my back. I find it difficult when someone says that I waffle and stutter, that I am worth less than them, when I notice they underestimate me. I care what other people think. When I notice they look at me differently, I lose my self-confidence and it all becomes a barrier for further communication.

My life would be very different if I had a job. I would feel so much better. I never had a chance to do anything as my parents were fearful what would happen and then they died when I needed them the most. It's been years now, so I think it's too late to start working or to start a relationship. I'd love to live with someone, not to be alone, to find a life partner. I am afraid of negative reactions, so I withdraw. My physical disability holds me back in everything.

For people who live on their own, life is difficult in every possible way, particularly financially. I would love to be able to help people in a similar situation, who are alone and have nothing. I know people who can't even afford food or have basic amenities. They can't wash themselves to at least feel clean. There are many who are abandoned by their families; their children live abroad and don't care about them.

I don't have any plans for the future. I am disappointed by life which only brought on stress and insults. I live in a house which my cousin co-owns with me. He insulted me and called me all kinds of names. He, too, now needs support. It is really uncomfortable to share a house with someone you are afraid of and whom you don't like, but I have no other choice. I was braver and more active during the war. I used to carry water, I played chess with other people who lived in the same building. We have spent more time together. People were more humane; people were better. We are all alienated now.

Esma

I was very young when I started using mental health services. It happened after my Mum died – I was only 9 years old. My doctors told me I am genetically predisposed, as my father's family also had similar cases. My first symptoms showed after my Mum died, and they got very intense when I was at the University. I felt fearful of other people and wouldn't leave the house for six months. I didn't manage to finish my studies. I had four exams left, so I plan to continue my studies next year if I can.

I have now started visiting the Association. I spend time with other people and take part in activities. It has all helped me to conquer my fears. I am in regular contact with people who have the same or similar problems and I talk to mental health professionals. Life also keeps teaching me all kinds of lessons. My friends and family are very understanding, but I feel that the way I am impacts their mood, too. My father is very understanding as his family has had similar cases. I try not to show that I am ill. I try to function as normally as I can within the home and outside. I look after our household, cook and clean, look after myself. When I feel bad, my Dad and my auntie (my Mum's sister) help me the most. However, the diagnosis I have impacts my everyday life. I can't find a job as my health certificate specifies my diagnosis and I want to work with children and youth. This upsets me a lot.

I have a best friend since elementary school. We used to share a bench for 8 years [in BiH, children sit in their classroom in pairs]. I can tell her everything and she knows all my moods. I can show her all my emotions – she gets it. My aunt and dad are my great friends, too. They are occasionally mad at me because of some of my habits and actions. They all try not to hurt me and to give me time and space to see my mistakes. It mainly concerns my compulsive need to constantly buy new clothes, no matter how many I already have. I have my own income as I inherited my Mum's pension and I get an additional support benefit. Some families have similar incomes these days, and yet when I go short, I fall into depression. I think that everyone feels that way when they are skint; money does impact your mental health.

At my previous job, I was bullied by my boss. She told me that I was ugly and that I scare people. That broke me and led me not to leave the house for a few months. I thought about it a lot. I thought it was important to be nice and well-mannered when working with people, not the way you look. But, it was a posh place for posh kids. I worked there for three years.

Nowadays, I am looked after by my CMHC and the Association. I am part of the co-ordinated care programme, so I get regular visits from my doctor and my social worker. They really look after me well! I have also realised how important the Associations are for the quality of life of mental health service users. It is just important to take them seriously and realise how important they are. I realised I can function in a team. I first got involved in the cookery section and made a meal with another member for everyone there. I occasionally feel like becoming more withdrawn and that I don't belong somewhere. That is probably a side effect of my boss treating me so badly. But that hasn't happened at the Association, ever. If I can't go, I get in touch with others and they support me nonetheless. A few other Association members and I also have a Viber group chat.

It is important to feel supported. If services were not available, the only way we'd survive is if we have full and unconditional support from our loved ones. My dad and my auntie are like that, always by my side. People who don't have that would find it difficult with no support. We can't fight alone. I occasionally can't recognise that I am getting worse. My family notice it first and tell me to get in touch with my doctor. But I also have regular check-ups every 2-3 months, sometimes every 6 months. I can always talk to the Co-ordinated Care Team. I think that the mental health services are working really well. I now want to finish my studies and get a job in my profession, as I love working with children and young people, helping people. I see myself working for an organisation that works with people who have problems similar to my own. Association has helped me identify many of my interests and I now want to help others.

Tarik

One summer evening 20 years ago I was in my part of a family home I shared with my parents. My wife was at work. All over sudden, I started to suffocate and felt chest pains, sweat and my whole body shook. I felt panicked and fearful. I worried I would die from a lack of air. I ran outside the house and called for help. My Mum and Dad showed up immediately and asked me what was happening. I said to them "I have died, Mum" and started to cry with fear. They helped me to wash my face and my Mum gave me some water and that calmed me down a bit. My father called an ambulance and they took me to the Emergency services. When I told the doctor there what had happened, they referred me to the Psychiatric Clinic straight away. At the Clinic, I spoke to another doctor. I told them I was afraid about what will happen to me and if I'd die. He said, "No, you won't die, but you will stay here at the Hospital for a while and it will be fine, God willing."

I have never visited a Psychiatric Clinic prior to that day. I stayed for 90 days. I got a big therapy with lots of meds. New details of my illness emerged during my stay. I heard voices of my war buddies, dreamt of different things that happened during the war, good and bad – but more bad than good. That is when they diagnosed me with PTSD resulting from a catastrophic event, F-62.0 [a diagnostic code from the International Classification of Diseases, ICD]. I was fearful of everything – noise, shouting, people.

My family and the doctors helped me the most. This all made an impact on my family; I'm an only child, you see. I have survived the war as an underage soldier in the BiH Army and, thank God, I was never wounded. And yet, all that time later, this happened to me and my family. My father, mother and my wife were worried about my future, as was I. I had a job but took sick leave. My work colleagues visited me and supported me to get better – "Tare [nickname] don't worry, it will pass, it's just a detail which will disappear over time." My friends were sorry for me. They said, "Why did this have to happen to you?" They were really supportive of me and helped me to overcome how I felt at the time.

Did my life change as a result? Of course it did, in every way. I was not the same person I once was. I avoided talking about the war, socialising. I withdrew into myself, thinking there's no way to help me and that this will be the end of my life. I had heavy headaches and insomnia. I couldn't sleep at all. I heard the voices of my war buddies who died in the war more and more frequently. They were calling me to join them in the other world. I frequently thought

about killing myself, to be with them, there. I lost any will to live, work or do anything I cared about. I lost my job and that crushed me even more. I lived in my own world. I have had several hospitalisations and had lots of meds. Every aspect of my life had changed.

It is all different now. My family and I are doing really well. They support and help me in every way. In the meantime, during my treatments, I became a father, too. My son is at school at the moment, he is 17 years old. He is my guiding star and the aim that keeps me going towards recovery. When it comes to my mates, we still spend time together and they still support me. I can share everything with my family, friends and a close relative who had a similar illness. He even experienced similar symptoms.

I love working around the house, gardening, taking care of the fruit plants and all the flowers. I find it really fulfilling and I feel better when I'm active. I no longer use any other services, bar my GP and my psychiatrist. I see them once per month for a check-up and to get my therapy. I sometimes visit the Association. A friend of mine visits the Association, too, so I visit them when there's a gathering. All I do is what I choose and enjoy doing. No one forces me to do anything.

Talking with my friends and family helps me the most. I also have coffees and go fishing with my mates. It helps me to relax and stop thinking about my illness. I just focus on catching a fish. I don't have any benefits. My wife and I live off her income. I mainly do house maintenance and gardening. Occasionally, that helps me to earn a few bob.

I have had really good experiences with the doctors. They helped me to be here and be able to do this interview with you. They helped me to recover. We have good mental health services here. I get the therapy I need and that is all that matters to me. We don't get to decide about it all anyway, it's all something which doctors and politicians know better than we do.

I don't have any experiences with social workers as I have never used their services. I get all the information and advice from my friends and my family. They support and understand me. I also find information online, on social networks or via my GP and my psychiatrist. I have found out about the Association online, too. I am not a regular member, but I still visit occasionally, to spend time with people. It is good that people with mental health problems have a space where they can meet. I just wish that I could have a job through the Association, but they only offer socialising or offer volunteering opportunities. I understand they are a non-profit and that they are not on the budget, so count on the volunteers. It's OK to visit occasionally, but my finances prevent me from doing so regularly.

I still hope that I'll get a job and keep feeling well – but I also don't know what can happen tonight, never mind tomorrow, in a month, or a year from now. I hope that my story will be heard by people who need help, to know that it is possible to recover if you get professional help and support from your family and friends. Listen to your doctors and fight on! If you don't help yourselves, no one can help you. Thank you for an opportunity to share all this with you.

Sandra

I first noticed things I didn't know from before – fear, feeling like someone will attack me any minute now, hearing voices, suffocating, feeling nervous, and sweating. I didn't trust

others and feared everyone around me. Other people bothered me; I felt that they all conspired against me. That all happened 10 years ago. I was bitterly disappointed in people that year, people who were close to me. My best friend disappointed and hurt me, she slept with my boyfriend.

After that happened, everyone noticed that something happened to me, so my family was advised to take me to see a doctor. My family took me to see a psychiatrist. My brother had found out about mental health services from his friends. My entire family supported me, as did my friends and their friends across our village. It all had an impact on my surroundings, too. I used to feel withdrawn and calm. My family was worried for me, as were my friends. They were surprised by what had happened to me. They supported and looked after me.

My life changed completely because there were unusual things happening. I lost any interest in my life. I withdrew into my own world. I have spent time in a hospital, where I had bad experiences. Staff used to tie me to my bed despite the fact that I was calm, I wasn't aggressive at all. When they tied me down, they would give me an injection which all made me feel even worse and scared for my life. I didn't complain to anyone about this because I felt scared. I felt really bad – no one ever explained to me why they treated me this way?

I now feel better about my life, my family and my surroundings. I have my family and a few friends with whom I can share all my joys and sorrows. My immediate family helps me the most, as do my friends and my wider family. I also find the activities in the municipal CMHC helpful. There are also two Associations I visit regularly [names a local Women's Association and the Association of people with lived experience]. They are really important for my recovery. My psychiatrist told me about both of them. Financially, I get benefits from the Centre for Social Work and the rest of it is all organised by my family, especially my brother. My family supports all that I do. They give me love, grant me any wishes I have and keep me happy.

In terms of services I've been in touch with, I had positive experiences with everyone – apart from the Hospital. I love going to the Association because there are different workshops, socialising opportunities and day trips. Also, I try to stay educated through the social networks, although I get most of my information and training through the Association. I try to take on board any advice which helps me live a better life, both in my family and in my community. I love the fact that the Association is run by people who have used mental health services themselves, and that we're always ready to support one another. The other [Women's] Association offers knitting and sewing workshops and helps me learn these new skills. I am learning, empowering and helping myself. I also take courses on communication. I heard about all of this from my doctor at the CMHC, my friends and online. The only drawback is that we don't have enough funds. Both I and other members have to pay for transport to visit the Association in town and that is really expensive. However, if I don't visit regularly, I'd go back to how I was before, when I didn't have such services and support in place. It would be far better for there to be similar Associations across BiH and to make them accessible to everyone.

I think it is good to talk about my illness. I shouldn't be ashamed of it – you are what you are.

Other members in the Association always help me out – they tell me about their experiences and that helps me to understand my illness and helps me fight stigma and self-stigma. I feel it's a right path to recovery. That is why I'm not ashamed of my illness or have any problems with self-stigma. I just want to fight for a better life, maintain relationships I find important and get to know other people who are similar to them. I hope that my story helps others in society see that we are people, not nutters and that we are not dangerous.

Dino

After the war I went to live abroad. While living there, I felt nervous, my body stiffening up, I had bad dreams and felt lonely. I dreamt of things that happened during the war and felt so fearful of it all. I had a job and was married at the time. I also became a parent – my boy was born. All that was happening to me was an unknown and I got worried. I lived abroad and I had no one to confide in apart from my wife. She, too, was an immigrant, but not from BiH. I had no one from my country and I was far away from my parents, my brothers and my friends. It all made me so scared and I wondered, "Good God, what do I do now? Where do I go?"

Finally, I told my wife what was happening to me. She persuaded me to go see a psychiatrist and get help. He told me that my problems and all that was happening to me was called PTSD. He gave me meds to take, but he also added another diagnosis two months later, bipolar disorder. After a while I returned to BiH and continued my treatment here. When I got back, I started experiencing other problems – I couldn't sleep, I felt chest pains, I started talking to myself, and hearing voices. My brother and stepbrother took me to a Psychiatric Clinic where I then spent some 29 days, as far as I remember – it could have been more, but I don't remember. I was at the acute ward at first and then transferred to another ward for more recovered patients. They gave me therapy which I use today, too and then referred me to a war veterans group which met regularly, once per week.

See, all of this made me lose my job and divorce my wife. We had different religions and we came from different countries. Once I divorced, I came back to my own country. All in all, this illness completely changed my life, in a bad way. I have lost my family, my wife and my son, and experienced a culture shock. In BiH I was given yet another diagnosis, permanent personality disorder. That really removed the ground from under me; I felt all alone in this world.

I used to live with my Mum, but she died recently, so I now only have my brother helping me out. I cope with life the best I can. My brother helps me the most, as he understands me and what is happening to me. My psychiatrist helps me, too. I see him once per week at the group for war veterans. I occasionally visit the Association. I can share everything with my brother and my psychiatrist who became like a brother and a friend to me. I can also share everything with the members of the Association. I find my faith helps me, too, when I pray. From time to time, I also go for a walk around town and find somewhere quiet to have a coffee. I am not working, as I managed to get a disability pension due to my illness.

I have good experiences with doctors, and I am pleased with how they treat me. I have a good relationship with the social worker at the CMHC; he gives me advice on anything I need. He helped me sort out the disability pension. I also get advice and information from my psychiatrist at the Clinic, my brother, on social networks and, occasionally, at the Association. It is mainly information on how to deal with my illness and, for example, if I have any doubts about, for example, social skills – what to cook, how to do it, how to wash my clothes, and the like. I have only recently learned of the Association so I go there when I can. It is good to be able to exchange experiences with people who had experiences similar to my own. I feel free and worthwhile when I am there, and friendly, too. That is all great. As far as mental health services, I wouldn't change a thing; it's all good as it is.

In the future, I hope to reconnect with my son. He is all I have in this world, but I haven't seen him since I moved back home.

Nejla

I was 29 when the war started. I met my husband around the same time. He was in town by accident and, when the war started, he couldn't go back to his township, so we stayed to live here. Changes in how I felt were initially all tied in with winter depression. I didn't really take the war seriously. I used to just do basic things. I didn't feel like doing anything else, nor did I feel anything. That continued for 10 years, these periods of depression and periods without it. I used to feel lonely and isolated. My husband worked while I was on my own. When I was depressed, I wouldn't tend to my personal hygiene. I think that lack of care from my husband and overall isolation made me feel so depressed.

At my husband's initiative, I got in touch with a psychiatrist and was hospitalised. My first hospitalisation lasted two and a half months, and, since then, I was hospitalised eight times, each lasting two and a half months. However, after all eight of them, I didn't notice any improvements, at least as far as hospital treatments are concerned. It was always the same – they would discharge me as "partially recovered." I was never brave enough to do anything about it, but I took care of my kids throughout all of this.

No one ever gave me any grief about it, not my family nor anyone in my surroundings -but I do feel that no one takes me seriously anymore. I wasn't even upset about that. I tried to talk to my family about it, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. I don't have understanding from them. I think my husband understands what happened to me, but he stopped loving me. He did his duties, but there is no love in our relationship.

We now live apart, he lives abroad. I think all of this had a negative impact on him. He started to gamble and get into more and more debt. We had to exchange our flat for a smaller one – but then he gambled away the difference, too. Then we had to sell the smaller flat, too, so we are now renting. That is where we had our second baby. My husband used to work in the army at the time, but he got fired due to loan sharks tracking him down at work. Although we no longer live together, he still supports us financially.

All of this changed my life. I had phases of functioning well and hospitalisations. Every two to three months I would wind up in a hospital. My daughter left our family home early and started to live with her boyfriend. They are still together. My son, who is my eldest, lives in constant tension, observing my behaviour. Any change he notices he wants to take me to the hospital. That all started happening because he accompanies me to my check-ups at the hospital. Whenever we're there, the doctor only talks to my son, not to me. Everyone ignores me and no one takes me seriously. After a while I started to accept such a situation. I realised I cannot change it, as no one is listening. Everything is decided without me – even where and when I spend my time, going back and forth between home and the hospital. Hospitalisations are always the same - meds, food, sleep. There were times when I tried to rebel, but the doctors just ignore me and give me stronger meds. I was never brave enough to change that.

The only thing that helps me is to spend time at the Association. I have found out about it at my local CMHC. I was referred to the CMHC from the hospital. I am at the Association from the start and I think that all the activities there help me to cope with my life. There are different activities, we spend time together, talk and I feel so much better when I have a reason to leave home. I get ready and I go to the Association! I have found people who have similar problems and who understand me. My family still supports me financially – my kids, my in-laws, my husband. But they don't take me seriously. I noticed that other health services treat me and other mental health service users really badly. I think they don't take us or our problems seriously. They really need to be educated to understand our situation. They need to understand what mental health means.

I would love for my son to no longer live in constant tension, watching my behaviour and thinking, each time there is a change in my behaviour, good or bad, that he has to take me to the Hospital! I think that the psychiatrists made him paranoid that he has a duty to hospitalise me every few months. I feel so much better since I've been at the Association. I feel good and I am doing all I need to do – but he still thinks that I should go into the Hospital if anything changes. So he observes me constantly and it really bugs me. I find talking to other people who have similar experiences the most helpful. There are many people in our country who don't admit that they have mental health problems. That is why it is good to have Associations, where we can be who we are without being judged.

I really feel good now and I don't see a reason why I should go into the Hospital again. I don't like going into the hospital towards the end of summer and in early autumn. I have a garden where I grow vegetables for my family. If I go into the hospital for two months, all the vegetables spoil. It only creates a damage to me. I would like to avoid my next, ninth, hospitalisation and for my son not to look at me as if he'll have to take me there any minute now! Someone will have to talk to him; I hope someone will help me do that.

I think we live in a sick society, a society which is sick in different ways. After the war, most people didn't get their dues from different politicians who promised all sorts of things. There is a lot of poverty and unemployment, which impacts our mental health. People are moving

abroad. Whoever can and has a chance to go, does so to ensure a better future for themselves and their families. I think the only thing that will help us to be taken seriously is education, both for general public and for professionals in different sectors, but especially in health care. I think we should be empowered through socialising and exchanging experiences - but the best thing would be for me to find a job and start earning my own living.

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