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The Support Group

by Ivor John

It was not a welcoming place. A small meeting room in the health centre. It was cold, you could smell the polish which had been used to clean the linoleum flooring. Along one side were stacked chairs. On a folding table a thermos flask of hot water, sachets of instant coffee for during the break. Also two large glass jugs of water and a bottle of Sainsbury own brand orange juice. More folding tables, had been pushed to the sides but nobody had bothered to fold them down. About half a dozen group members and taken chairs from the stacks and put them, roughly in a circle randomly, between the pushed aside tables.

Maybe half a dozen people were there already. Mostly women, girls, in their early twenties. They all wore jeans, baggy T shirts DMs or training shoe every one of them, her included. Apart from 'excuse me' as they moved a chair in front. Or 'Is anyone sitting here?' nobody spoke. Some held their mobile phones, occupied themselves scrolling through screens. A few more people came, two or three. An two older women, and a man. Overweight the polo shirt he wore perhaps fitted a while ago, but now emphasised his weight. She could see that the collar and cuffs were frayed. He took a chair from and placed it a few feet away.

She was starting to feel anxious, that feeling, which started in her tummy. She could feel herself breathing faster and her thoughts harder to control. She could smell body odour, not hers, the man who had sat near to her. Swallowing, she caught the breath in her throat. Concentrating, hard, to slow her breathing. This, she had learned, would slow her heart rate as well.

This group would help her with her anxiety, Ian, her keyworker had told her. Her studio flat was cramped and she had frequent arguments with the neighbours who came and went from the other rooms. Few stayed long at Halcyon Court. The kitchen was shared and often cluttered with unwashed pots and pans. Apart from that, she didn't like it if another resident came in while she was cooking. Instead she used the small microwave oven in her tiny room. It was against the rules and made the room damp with steam, but meant she could keep herself to herself. She couldn't explain why she felt so isolated, she didn't like to be alone, even more she didn't like being with people.

It hadn't always been this way. She could remember when she was young. Very young, eight or nine. She had enjoyed school, she loved playing and had friends. This was before her father had left, suddenly. Her mother's friend had moved in to the flat, she hadn't liked him. She spent a while with her gran, but had been very unhappy there. She went to a foster carer but was never happy and had run away several times before she went to the care home.

A woman came into the room and shut the door behind her. She was carrying a bundle of photocopied papers. 'Shall we get started?' she said loudly, and passed the papers out. Eight or nine pages stapled together. On the front, a cartoon drawing of a young woman, apparently screaming, her hands held each side of her head. Each person took a set and passed the bundle on to the next person. Shuffling their chairs to maintain the optimum distance from the person next to them. She was still struggling to control her breath. She knew that she could lead to a panic attack. She had propranolol tablets in her bag which she could take, and this reassured her.

The woman had sat on one the tables to the side of the group and was speaking again.

"Has everyone taken a set of papers? We will go through them together later. There are a couple of newcomers to the group, so shall we introduce ourselves. Just your name and anything you want to say about why you have come."

She saw that the fat man in the polo shirt was looking at her, but looked away when she turned her head.