

Minding our mental health



Cllr Liam Brazil speaking at the Mental Health & Suicide Awareness conference in 2012.

A MAJOR conference will take place in Dungarvan at the end of the month aimed at addressing mental health and suicide.

The Mental Health & Suicide Awareness conference will take place at The Park Hotel, Dungarvan on Friday January 31st and Saturday February 1st.

Fine Gael County Councillor Liam Brazil is coordinating the two day event.

Cllr Brazil has personal experience of suicide as his brother James took his own life some years ago.

It was his experiences of dealing with this which led him to organise the first such conference which took place in 2012 and proved to be a huge success.

He explained how he was entering unknown territory with the first conference in February 2012.

"I didn't know what I was getting into. I was going into the unknown. At the time, a lot of people said to me: 'Don't bother with it. Leave it on the shelf. It's too much of a complicated issue.' But we put a programme together and it worked brilliantly," he said.

"The feedback from the conference was fantastic. I got calls from all over Waterford, Kilkenny, Tipperary and Cork from people saying they got so much help from it and they asked me to do it again."

Since that conference, significant progress has been made in addressing mental health issues in the locality.

Waterford County Comhairle na nÓg's 'Mind Matters' project included the release of a YouTube video which has been viewed almost 7,000 times.

The Comhairle have been invited to speak at many conferences, sports clubs, youth groups and community groups about mental health.

A wide range of topics relating to mental health and suicide will be discussed at the upcoming conference including the experiences of relatives bereaved by suicide; the importance of positive mental health among young people; the need to remove the stigma surrounding mental health in Ireland; as well as advice on dealing with friends or relatives who may be suffering from mental health issues or feeling suicidal.

Speakers will include Sr Gertrude Howley (GROW); Dr. John Connolly, (Irish Association of Suicidology); Conor Cusack, (Cork hurler); Daryl Barry, (Waterford Marine Search and Rescue); Chris Shields, (Queen's University, Belfast); Ann Barron, (Samaritans); April Duff, (Comhairle na nÓg); Nikki Hayes, (Spin 1038); Sean McCarthy, (Resource Officer Suicide Prevention, HSE South); Kevin Collins, (AWARE); and a Pieta House representative.

"People can come and sit, listen or talk," said Cllr Brazil.

"I hope that those in attendance are not just those affected by mental health or suicide, but others also as you never know when the hour may come that someone may need help."

He explained why he decided to embark on organising another conference.

"I wanted something different. I felt the last time there were things that could have been done better. We had nobody to talk about people who are bereaved by suicide. That's why I went to a conference in Derry two months ago to find Chris Shields. Somebody had told me he speaks about people who are bereaved by suicide. I went to see him and he was fantastic," said Cllr Brazil.

"He spoke about mothers being bereaved by suicide. He spoke about all the things we hadn't when James took his own life. He spoke about why people couldn't talk about it; why people wouldn't come into the house; why people couldn't mention the person's name. He ticked all the boxes for me. After the conference I asked him if he would he come to Dungarvan and he said he would think about it. He rang me a week later and said he'd come down. I'm really delighted to get him."

Cllr Brazil aims to encourage more people to speak openly about mental health issues and suicide.

"It's all about people talking, but people are afraid to talk. For a lot of people, all they want is someone to listen," he said.

"For years, people were told not to speak about suicide, and that things were better off left unsaid. My mother always said that when my brother died nobody ever spoke about it. People were afraid to talk because they didn't know what to say. She was always baffled by how nobody would speak about it. She always felt that after James died nobody spoke his name and she felt hurt by that. Before she died she asked me to do all in my power to ensure people didn't have to go through what she went through."

He believes organisations such as the GAA have a key role to play in addressing mental health and suicide in Ireland.

He also believes there is a huge amount of loneliness and isolation prevalent throughout the country.

"There is a lot of isolation in places of County Waterford. But somebody in a terraced house in Waterford City could be isolated. They may feel they're a nuisance or a burden to society and feel they're not wanted," he said.

"Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. People need to seek help. If you get a cut on your finger, you'll go to the first aid box. Why not do the same thing with mental illness? Mental health is not a sin. It can be discussed out in the open."