

Beating the drum for positive mental health



The late Donal Walsh's message is one we must never grow weary of repeating.

A few months ago, a bright and talented young man I've come to know and respect over the past two years admitted publicly that he suffers from depression.

At any stage of life, to make such an admission can be a difficult and brave declaration, but to do so in your late teens, at a time in your life when change is utterly rampant, be it bodily, emotionally or academically, is a monumental step to take.

To tell your friends and peers that what you've got is more than just a dose of the blues, that you're living with the "black dog" which Winston Churchill famously referred to, is a huge personal issue to broadcast to the wider world.

Whether we like it or not, despite the welcome increase in awareness when it comes to the mental health debate, to tell the world you have depression, to admit to suffering from mental illness, can still cause unease.

There is still a certain constituency, albeit a dwindling number, who believe it's just a case of snapping out of it, the "sure there's nothing wrong with you" brigade.

Unless there's limb missing or blood seeping from a raw and open wound, this constituency doesn't see the illness that bedevils many, creating a fog which sadly engulfs and ruins lives.

"I never know there was anything up with him/her" is a phrase more than a few of us have uttered at a graveside of a person whose mind, as opposed to the body, broke down to the point where existing seemed futile.

In my estimation, teenagers growing up today have a more difficult task today than previous generations of adolescents, due almost entirely to the omnipresence of social media.

While Facebook and Twitter can be enormously informative and entertaining - I rarely go a day without interacting on either - such media has provided a new platform for the cruel, nasty put-downs which bullies specialise in.

The benefit of age and the advantage of ageing is that the other experiences of life - the loved ones we bury, the loves we lose in break-ups, as well as the professional failures we're all destined to endure - give us reference points to draw from.

We've known bad days, but we've also lived through great days - seeing our siblings become outstanding men and women, appreciating your parents in a way you can't when you're younger, the joy of parenthood, the fun of being an uncle/aunt, etc.

We know more about absorbing the 'sticks and stones' stuff as adults that we just couldn't have been as readily conscious of as teenagers simply by living, by enduring and by coming out the other side of such dark times.

We know that, as my grandmother told me after a less than wonderful day back in my own teenagehood, that "the sun will shine again", and my goodness it did.

Topics come and go in 'Newspaperland', it's the nature of news, it's the spice of life after all, but there are some issues which should never be too far from a newsroom's collective conscience - and mental health is one of them.

When I was a student, cutting my reporting heels, I can't say I spent hour upon hour in the DIT library ruminating over depression. But the longer I've worked, the more I've read and the longer I've lived, mental health is an issue I've repeatedly written about, and with good reason.

People I've known from a remove, people I've known very well and people I was only too happy to drink some and laugh a lot more with, have taken their lives.

More die by suicide in Ireland each year than they do via road traffic accidents, but the media as a whole invests a lot more time reporting on road deaths.

Perhaps this is due to how we report on suicide as a topic; after all, a coroner, and not a reporter, is the ultimate arbiter in declaring the nature of a death. That's how it should be.

I for one don't champion the kind of journalism that augments a bereaved family's misery on its front page, making reference to a son (and it's mainly a male phenomenon) who "died tragically" just days previously. But that doesn't mean we should shy away from writing about suicide, writing about mental illness and, just as significantly, writing about mental health. I believe we've a duty to do so, at least that what my moral compass suggests to me.

A few months ago, I'd the honour of sharing a platform with Fionnbar Walsh, son of the late, inspirational Donal Walsh at the 'Light The Way' event organised by the Transition Year students of Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir.

Donal's message: to embrace life, was passionately re-iterated that night by Fionnbar, and his late son's own words, as

published on the HSE's Suicide Prevention Website, truly represent words we should all live by.

"I remember when I feel that there are no windows or doors - just black. Take time and a door will open. Someone will be at that door. And you will go to the door as well.

"Anyone can find a window. But they first have to ask and it takes a lot of courage, as well, to ask - and to search for that door."

That young man I referred to in opening this column has asked for help; he sought out that very door - and that particular door must remain open. And we can all do our bit to keep it that way by talking, discussing and writing about it. We must keep the way lit.