

‘People that we know and love are suffering’



Written by: Dermot Keyes - A Doctor's view

Imagine if every person living in Tramore today was suffering from depression?

Sadly, in reality, that's approximately the number of people right across Waterford city and county who have been either diagnosed with the illness or are suffering in silence.

Nationally, one in 4 people are experiencing depression which "takes many guises and it happens to people we know and love", those who attended a 'Lean On Me' seminar in Ferrycarrig were told last week.

Mental illness largely remains a taboo subject not only in the media discourse both locally and nationally, but as a topic that people, especially those suffering from depression, feel free to openly discuss.

“It’s much more common and widespread than many of us realise,” said GP Dr David Curtis. “The World Health Organisation reckons that by 2012 it will be the leading cause of illness in Europe.

“The big problem with depression is that people look very well, but in fact they’re quite unwell beneath the surface. They carry on working and doing things well on a superficial level but the problem is, that underneath it all, many people are very unwell.”

Depression, in Dr Curtis’s view is “much worse than a broken leg or even heart disease”. He continued: “There’s also a big problem among younger people where depression can be present for much longer than we actually realised.”

Mental health, being difficult to define, makes the issue much more testing to tackle than the aforementioned leg break or cardiac episode.

“One in four people will have a mental health problem at some stage during their lives and one in five of the population will have depression,” said Dr Curtis.

“And of those one in five, one in 20 will go on to develop a depression so severe that it will affect their health and their life. So roughly a quarter of all those who have mental health problems will develop a serious mental health problem and in one 200 will require specialist treatment.”

Depression, said Dr Curtis, “doesn’t really exist by itself” and is regularly linked to phobias, panic attacks and post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety to name but four. “Depression often comes in on top of everything else,” he added.

Depression has a lifetime prevalence of 13 to 17 per cent among the population, with 20 to 25 per cent of women and seven to 12 per cent of men estimated to suffer from the illness.

Said Dr Curtis: “Ten to fifteen per cent of my workload is now composed of patients with a problem with depression.

“What’s also really interesting and reflects on my profession is the fact that an estimated 20 to 25 per cent of GPs have actually worked in a training hospital. Thankfully, I worked in Saint Patrick’s (Mental Health) Hospital - otherwise I’d be ignoring that fact.”

“Symptoms of depression (in most people diagnosed with the illness) usually have symptoms lasting from anything between three to 10 years.

“And if you go and study that further, 75 per cent of patients who are diagnosed with mental illness have symptoms that started before the age of 25...they start early in life and become part of your normal life.”

Depression across Europe in terms of lost work hours is currently estimated at €250 million per annum and this doesn't include the cost of treatment. “Not much money is spent on treatment, regrettably,” said Dr Curtis.

“The problem is that the scale is so great that it is very hard to meet the needs of those people who have depression. What we need is a campaign on mental health similar to those which have been successfully mounted in the areas of road safety and heart health.

“We need to see such a campaign rolled out...we need to stop the one in five who have problems from becoming part of the one in 20 and this would form a vital part in where we need to go in terms of addressing this issue.”

A holistic approach to dealing with depression is also a vital element of the future campaign, in Dr Curtis's view.

“This doesn't mean just going to your doctor,” he added. “If you have problems in your personal life, when it comes to your finances, your relationship, attempting to deal with them earlier, rather than letting one problem pile itself on top of the other, is very, very important...”

“With depression, the longer it remains untreated, it can lead to further health problems – your body ends up like a car that you drive too fast, it actually wears out more because of the levels of cortisol, which is a steroid in your body. So if you actually can treat the stress, the depression, your body in turns becomes healthier.”

Significant triggers for depression include trauma and the loss of a loved one. “If you go through a major trauma in your life, you are six times more likely to develop a depressive episode in the six months after one of those events,” he continued.

Depression among young men “is a major problem, all the more so since so many young men don't talk about it,” while children who are abused or bullied are also prone to develop the illness. The economic downturn has also become a significant catalyst for depression, sadly leading some to take their lives.

“Suicide is the biggest killer in Ireland for men under 40 and you’ve got to go a long way back to testicular cancer, which comes in second on that list,” said Dr Curtis. “Sadly, it remains a major problem...so we need to let people that we’re worried about know that we are worried.”

A new generation of anti-depressant drugs known as SSRIs, introduced in the mid-1990s, became a vital weapon in countering the illness. However, Dr Curtis suggested that “we were using them, probably too much”.

He added: “Now there has been a swing back, not against them, but more towards their use in the right place. We need to look more at lifestyle choices and healthier ways of living as opposed to automatically reaching for medication...to get positive feedback back into peoples’ lives.”

Declaring that “there is no quick fix solution,” Dr Curtis reminded the gathering that most people diagnosed with depression do get better.

“Seventy per cent of people who are sick in hospital (due to depression) will get better within a year...

“The treatment needs to continue for at least six months and the whole idea now is that the treatment must be close to home, which goes against the grain of the development of centres of excellence for other illnesses, but at local level, this approach is already bearing fruit.”

As for what we should say to those we love with depression? “We need to let them know that depression is common, that it’s treatable, that treatment does work, albeit in many cases it’s something that takes time, that you must continue the treatment, that you must stick at it.”

Depression has the ability to break a person to such a degree that they may feel unable to stick all those broken pieces back together. But treatment, as David Curtis pointed out, can allow the light to return and for the clouds to clear. And in so many guises, and one cannot stress it enough, hope remains.