

# Controlling life's bigger picture

*Sports psychologist calls for a change in the national mindset*



Lean On Me ambassadors Caroline Currid and Alan Quinlan, who spoke about positive mental health at Ferrycarrig last week.

Written by: Dermot Keyes

Sligo-born sports psychologist Caroline Currid has clearly got the winning formula. Her work as a performance coach evidently did the trick with both the Tipperary hurlers in 2010 and the Dublin footballers this season given their respective All-Ireland victories.

“Some people don’t buy into what I do, and that’s fine,” she said of her work, which has included one-to-one sessions with Munster rugby captain Paul O’Connell.

But there are a lot of teams and individuals out there who think otherwise, have opted to tap into her expertise and reaped a rich reward by so doing.

“Every time we think, we’re telling stories to ourselves and to other people. But the most important story we tell is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves; it’s the most important story we tell everyday.”

She continued: “I also refer to the pictures that we run through our heads on a daily basis, and I like to think of it as our own personal cinema, one that’s always running and impacts on our lives.

“That picture influences how we interact with people, it depends on how we behave on a daily basis and that picture always depends on the feelings we have on a daily basis.”

For 400,000 people in Ireland every day, that picture can be distorted, blurry and difficult to digest.

But, as Caroline reminded the ‘Lean On Me’ audience in Ferrycarrig last week: “We have full control over the picture that we run ourselves...but sometimes we need tools to help us to make sure that that story and that picture is more positive than negative.

“A lot of time on this island, we focus on what we don’t want to happen on a daily basis as opposed to what we want to happen. And this has a huge impact on our performance, be it in sport or in our careers.”

Instead, we need to focus on what we want, what we hope for, be it for ourselves or for others. “The language we use on a daily basis is highly significant,” she added.

“I’ll give you an example: if you go down to the shop in the morning as many of us do and the shopkeeper asks how you are, what’s the thing you’re most likely to give? I’m not too bad. And when you’re not too bad what does that mean – it means you’re not too good either.

“But here’s the thing, and I often say it to kids as well as athletes that I deal with. If you’re not too bad, there’s something wrong, something isn’t as good as it ought to be.

“We focus on the ‘don’t’ part in our heads when we say we’re not too bad. But if you go down to that shop again and get asked the same question and you tell the shopkeeper, ‘I’m fantastic’, just watch the difference.

“And the reason I use that example is that I want everyone to be aware of the culture that we can get sucked into, about the thoughts that we filter through our personal cinema and in turn how we choose to filter them.

“I’ll give you another example and this time I’ll focus on a compliment – i.e. ‘that’s a gorgeous top you’re wearing tonight’ – what’s the response? Ah, sure I bought that in Penneys or Dunne’s.

“Why? Because it’s nearly a crime to accept a compliment in today’s world. We’re no good at saying what we’re good at and giving ourselves a pat on the back.

“So my advice is to accept the next compliment you get and watch the response. This is about awareness and how we’re thinking in today’s world. We have to get better at focusing on what we want to happen, be it sport, be it work, be it in life.”

Caroline Currid also focused on the importance of talking. “It’s important to take out the trash in our minds, and when all that stuff is in our heads, it’s like a washing machine; with all this noise spinning around so loudly that we can’t even hear what we’re thinking. We need to empty that machine as regularly as we can.”

Bill Cullen, as he said on innumerable occasions when referring to his daily 4am starts, begins his day in front of the mirror, uttering two words: “I’m fantastic.” It might sound hokey, but Ms Currid believes there’s some merit in such an approach.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking about just before you go to bed at night, you’re going to be churning about those thoughts for the next seven or eight hours while you sleep. So the last thought we have at night ought to be something positive, something upbeat, and it’s a technique I use a lot with the teams and athletes that I deal with.”

So while the left side of your brain, the half loaded with logic shuts down at night, the right side, home to the subconscious, needs to be positively stacked.

“Just before you go to bed, make those thoughts positive. I get players and individuals to write out key strengths that they have, five or six of them. I get them to put the note on a bedside locker or on

their bedroom mirror and just before they go to bed, I ask them to read the note, to help them focus on their positive strengths.

“It’s a simple tool to use, but it’s incredibly effective and if you start doing that, you will notice a huge difference in your mentality when you wake up in the morning as a result of feeding your brain with positive thoughts.”

Referring to ‘triggers’ that influence how we feel about ourselves, Ms Currid emphasised the importance of exercise, listening to music, along with verbal and visual triggers (such as what Bill Cullen uses in front of the mirror).

“We need to reduce the noise level in our heads, because that’s when the negativity can seep in. When it comes to decision making, I always talk about the importance of controlling the controllables.

“We cannot control everything – but we as human beings have an awful habit of thinking about the things that we can’t control, such as the weather, which is something we talk about an awful lot in this country.

“We’re also notorious for fixating on something that’s happened in the past, something that we no longer have any control over. So that’s why I emphasise controlling the controllables.”

Deciding to take action is the single most important step that anyone can take when it comes to taking positive, affirmative action. And that applies to work/life balance as much as it does to promoting positive mental health.

“We write our own script,” Caroline Currid continued. “Many people say that you can’t control your thoughts. You absolutely can control them. We have thousands of them coming in and out of our heads every day and we control every one of them.

“But if we don’t take action in a positive sense, if we don’t set goals for ourselves, then all of the preparatory work we might put in won’t bring about the desired end result. We need something to aim for. If you can’t see something, how can you realise that ambition?

“This is all about what we want out of life and every day that goes by; we have an opportunity to make what we want happen. But if we don’t know what that is, then it’s definitely not going to happen for us, so we need to see where it is we want to go, be it work, be it sport, be it in a relationship.”

Caroline's fascinating half-hour presentation concluded on a positive note. "The reasons you've made the decisions you've made are the reasons why you are where you are in your life at this point.

"There are different ways of getting the best out of yourself, but you have to take action in order to make that happen. It's all about choices and decisions, about the film we want to see in our heads, the story that we want to tell.

"We need to cut the culture that we've had for so long in this country. We need to be able to take compliments. We need to be able to say what we're good at. We should be able to rhyme it off. And that's where we need to go as a society in general."