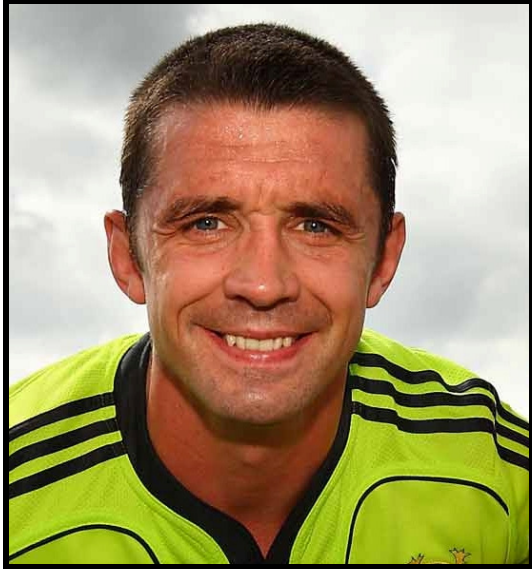


# Depressed? Please talk to someone



“I’m not nervous to talk about depression now,” said former rugby player Alan Quinlan.

**Written by Dermot Keyes**      **Photo:** Noel Browne

While the circumstances that led to the death of Wales football manager Gary Speed may never be fully known, his sad passing has highlighted an issue rarely addressed in a wholesale manner: depression.

Just 24 hours prior to Sunday’s sad news, former footballer Stan Collymore posted an emotional and brutally honest account of his ongoing struggle with depression.

In that same day’s Irish Times, reporter Peter Murtagh relayed the story of the late Kate Fitzgerald, who took her life at the age of 25 following a lengthy battle with the ‘silent illness’.

“So fit and healthy one day, mind, body and soul withering and dying the next,” posted Collymore on Twitter in the small hours of Saturday morning.

“This to me is the most frightening of experiences, and one (that) fellow sufferers I’m sure will agree is the ‘thud’ that sets the depression rolling.”

Collymore, in a plea to others who may be suffering in silence, offered this advice to relatives and friends of loved ones who find themselves shrouded in darkness.

“(Give them) patience, time, kindness and support. That’s all we need. No ‘pull your socks up’, no ‘get out of bed you lazy git’. Just acknowledge the feedback the sufferer gives, get them to go to the GP asap, and help them do the little things bit by bit.”

If the darkest dour is just before the dawn, how readily that phrase applies to anyone who is suffering from depression.

The day a person bottoms out, even if they may not automatically identify when that day is, can ultimately prove the day when optimism can make a welcome return. That may prove the day when hope returns to the life of a depressed person. And that first step may involve telling a loved one, calling Aware or visiting your GP.

“The condition often isn’t as bad as people with depression might perceive it to be because their view has become so skewed,” according to Wexford GP David Curtis.

Dr Curtis addressed the topic during the ‘Lean On Me’ seminar in Ferrycarrig last week, where he was one of four superb speakers, which included former Munster and Ireland rugby player Alan Quinlan.

It’s an issue we focus upon in a special feature in this section, with Alan Quinlan’s experiences featuring in our sport section.

The recently retired Quinlan, who went public on his struggle in his autobiography ‘Red Blooded’, has provided a public voice to this country’s most prevalent private illness. And that he has proven as great an inspiration off the field as he has in the raw heat of a rolling maul in Thomond Park may yet become his greatest achievement.

“I was always a worrier,” said Quinlan. “From a young age, I always worried about things that I couldn’t control, simple little things about what I’d be doing next week, if I had a match, what I’d be doing in school, as I said, simple things that ultimately made me stressful and anxious.”

During his teenage years, Quinlan admitted that he never opened up to his parents or siblings and masked his true feelings behind a veneer of control and apparent confidence.

“The big mistake I made in my early years was that I didn’t really open up to my family and friends...I worried about my future, what I’d do later in life, but it was a decision that I made myself and it certainly had an effect on me later in life. I always put too much pressure on myself and I always looked for perfection.”

By and large, ‘Quinny’ led a happy life most of the time, and he was among the first group of players to play professionally for Munster and subsequently for Ireland.

His outstanding form for the province led to his selection in the 2009 British and Irish Lions squad for the summer tour to South Africa. But following his suspension from rugby following the 2009 European Cup semi-final defeat to Leinster, which led to his missing the trip to South Africa, the ‘black dog’ returned.

“I was in a really bad place after that. I was in a traumatic place because (the Lions) meant so much to me...and I went through a very, very bad period after that.”

But after friends and family intervened, Quinlan finally took action by visiting his GP and, subsequently, a psychologist.

“It was probably the best thing I ever did. I’m not nervous to talk about it now...I feel it’s quite stimulating to talk about it, to be open about it and to try and send out a positive message. There are things you can do and there are things that you can change in your life to try and make yourself feel a bit better.”

Eliminating the stigma around mental illness, promoting positive mental health and letting people, especially young men know that being depressed isn’t shameful and doesn’t have to be a life sentence, is vital. We need to shout this from mountain summits, never mind roof tops.

“Stigma is based on fear and misunderstanding,” said Alan Quinlan. The misunderstanding about depression and other forms of mental illness must be eradicated, and there’s an onus on the media to do its part.