

DON'T MAN UP; OPEN UP

BY LES

If I were to offer one piece of advice to any men struggling with their mental health it would be this: don't man up; open up.

Open up to friends, and to family. Open up to education, to books and podcasts. Open up to exercise and mindfulness, to new ideas and new experiences. Open up to self-improvement. Open up to the possibility that you can overcome this, that life can get better, that you can be happy.

You are unique, the challenges you face are unique - but you are not alone.

When my mother broke her arm, it was easy to diagnose. The bone was broken, clear as day on the X-ray scan. The doctors knew without hesitation how it would be treated. She was given a cast and told exactly how long it would be required. Those around her knew how it would impact her and in what ways she would need to be supported. It was not subjective. The bone was broken, it could be repaired and after that, things would be back to normal.

When my mother was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, it was not so easily identified. There was no obvious cause and there was no cure or remedy to make it go away. She would have to learn to live with diabetes, educate herself on the changes she would need to make to her day-to-day routines to enable her to continue to live a happy and fulfilling life. Her family also had to learn to adapt. She would have to live with an invisible illness, that would be with her for the rest of her life.

In my experience people without experience of depression view it like the broken bone. That it can be easily fixed. That when someone is released from hospital they must be on the mend, or that when their six counselling sessions conclude they are healed. I have found depression to be far more akin to diabetes. We must learn to adapt our lives to deal with the situation, see the warning signs, adapt to face the highs and the lows and acknowledge that perhaps these things won't simply mend in time. Instead, we will need to take proactive steps with the support of those around us to live that happy, fulfilling life we desire. Don't seek to fix the past, instead focus on building the future.

When you break a bone there is an instinctive knowledge that the pain, whilst excruciating, is temporary – our mind reassures us that it will not last. That we will get better. With depression we are not afforded that luxury. When the black dog bites the mind feels nothing but certainty that the pain

will last forever, that the only way for the suffering to end, is for life to end. But the truth is: suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem and, by seeking to prevent life from getting worse, it ends the possibility of life getting better.

Depression is one of the most challenging illnesses a person can face and the modern world exacerbates the symptoms: stress and anxiety are unavoidable on a planet facing global and humanitarian crises, where taxes are high, affordable homes are unavailable, where television, glossy magazines and social media channels remind us of the life we are missing. We are crushed by the weight not of how our world is, but of how we think it should be. Depression is the voice in your head looking for an excuse to end it all, and these days excuses are in abundance.

But depression isn't a mood; it's an illness, and where most illnesses take hold of your body, depression takes hold of the mind. Through it all, it's vital to remember that the voice telling you to give up, to end it all, that you are worthless, is the voice of the illness, and that you can push back. On the days when you feel strong, you can acknowledge those thoughts for what they are and let them pass by. On other days, when you don't have the strength to fight back, it's vital to let others know you are struggling. That you need support. Not someone to fix your problems, not someone to make the storm clouds go away, just someone to sit with you until the storm passes. The world is slowly getting better at supporting mental health. I hope that in the coming years this becomes common place in schools, colleges, universities and workplaces; and that mental health is put on the same level as physical health both in education and treatment.

In the meantime, it is on us to take charge. To speak with others, to educate ourselves. For us as individuals to know our own trigger points, to know the warning signs. To find what works for us. More importantly, it's time to end the narrative that we as men need to shut up and deal with it. It's untrue, and it's unhelpful. So, I urge you from the bottom of my heart, don't man up; open up.

It gets better.

TOP TIPS:

- **You are not alone.**
- **Don't seek to fix the past, instead focus on building the future.**
- **Push back on the negative voice of the illness.**
- **Let others know you are struggling, that you need support.**
- **Get to know your own trigger points, to know the warning signs and find what works for you.**
- **Don't man up; open up.**