

The 14th of June 2013 started for me like any other day

Until I walked through a door and found my 22 year old son Michael. Dead. Clearly evident, he had taken his own life

The gut wrenching feelings of his sadness and my loss will stay with me, forever.

There is nothing special or unique about my grief. Families and friends, everywhere lose someone they love. My pain and suffering is no greater than the next man's.

I am here today, in the hope that I can help someone or help someone - help someone else.

We all experience ups and downs. Most people are lucky and ride the roller coaster of life taking it in their stride. There are a few however, that get stuck in the dips. Unfortunately, my Michael, was one of these. For many years his demons caused him much suffering. He experienced darkness and despair that no person should ever endure.

Mental illness can take many forms - anxiety, bulimia, anorexia, depression, psychosis, bi-polar. The list goes on, as does the sadness, the lack of self-esteem, the fear, the guilt, the anger, the associated stigma and the utter hopelessness of life and living that these people can face, on a daily basis.

A mental illness is like no other. If you cut your leg - you stitch it. If you break your arm - you plaster it. If you catch an infection - you take antibiotics, if you have cancer - there is a chance to save you with radiation or cutting edge pharmaceuticals. But often, for a mental illness there is no quick or easy fix? And to the happy, well-adjusted majority of the world NO you can't just snap out of it or suddenly get over it. For some people experiencing a mental illness, it can be a living hell that can last for years – or even a lifetime.

For many, the journey through mental illness can be frightening, demoralising, overwhelming self-defeating and at times catastrophic.

To beat this illness it takes hope, it takes courage, it takes time, it takes determination and it takes help.

So what I am asking of you? Simply one of two things - to help others or to ask others for help.

I ask you to extend a helping hand to someone in need. If you see someone struggling, under pressure or down and out - extend your hand. Give just a little of your time, support or love. Offer a smile, an inspiring nod, a few short words or a pat on the back. It can make the world of difference to someone who is hurting. I ask you - to extend a helping hand and give a little.

And if you are the one that is troubled, having difficulties or feeling worthless - I ask you to take a little courage and reach out for help. People don't know how you are feeling or what is in your head. So speak to someone - tell them how you feel, how you are hurting, how you are struggling. That person could be a parent, a sibling, a friend. A mentor, a colleague or a counsellor. I ask you - to reach out.

And I ask you, please, don't ever give up. Each one of us is important. Including you. You don't need to be a great achiever, leader or entrepreneur to make a difference. Just be yourself.

To the world you may be just one person, but to ONE PERSON - YOU - may be - THEIR world.

Ladies and gentlemen, today I ask - give a little - or take a little. It will mean a lot.

I have lived with depression on and off at many different times of my life. I guess it started about the time I was 14 which was the first and only time I tried to take my own life. I have thought of suicide many, many times since, thankfully, I never tried again but I would be embarrassed to tell how many times I came close.

I have just turned 57 and the most frustrating thing is that I was only diagnosed with depression eight years ago.

At that time, life for me was getting tough. I wasn't happy at work. I wasn't sleeping well. I would get sick for no apparent reason. I was stressed and snapping at people. I had very little motivation and had awful trouble getting out of bed. I would be so tired that sometimes halfway through a work day I would go out to the car and have a nap.

As the weeks wore on it was harder and harder to drag myself out of bed and get to work. Once at work if I was lucky I could last eight or ten hours. On a bad day it might be just 2 or 3 or 4.

Now for someone, who for more than a decade thought nothing of working 12 to 15 hours a day it was a dramatic and devastating shock to my system.

At home I spent countless hours on the couch, utterly exhausted. My family helped me all that they could but neither I nor they knew what was wrong. I had medical test after medical test that all came back negative.

I vividly remember one day, I crawled out of bed, begrudgingly hauled my sorry ass off to work and sat at my desk. I was there less than 5 minutes and said to myself "I just can't do this" and promptly drove back home to life on the couch.

Eventually, my doctor sent me to a psychiatrist who diagnosed me with depression. At last I had a label for it. Now I knew what it was I just needed to learn how to beat it.

It was a massive struggle. But I was lucky. There were two things that I had to save me.

The first was a memory. A memory that back in my past I was a huge success and life was a joy. So I clung to that, believing deep down, that with a lot of hope and courage, I could do it again.

The second thing was my family – my beautiful wife and four wonderful children. They loved me and I loved them. I needed to dig myself out to look after them.

I saw my psychiatrist, I took anti-depressants. I also needed to learn from others so I read autobiographies and countless books on mental illness and personal development.

Another thing I did was exercise. I had learnt that regular daily exercise was a very essential component to beating depression.

Having never been into sport I decided to swim. My first day at the local pool I swam 6 laps. Over many months I swam further and further - to 8 laps, 10 laps, 12, 16, 20.

Then one day while on holidays I saw a sign "Lorne Pier to Pub 1.2km Ocean Swim." I thought "I can do that" and eight months later there I was, in the water with 4,200 other swimmers.

As you may imagine, there was little else to do except swim - and think. And there's plenty of time to think. And my mind repeated something that my darling wife had said to me. "Righto smartie - what happens if a shark bites your leg off?" Well here I was, out in the ocean, thinking just that. "What does happen if a shark bites my leg off?" After months of training and determination it wasn't the missing leg that worried me. It was "How the hell would I run over the finish line?"

I did finish and I felt fantastic.

With even greater focus I competed in the Hazelwood 5km Sauna Swim. Of the 91 swimmers, I was the one that broke all records coming in at No 91, with the slowest ever time. Did I care? No way. Again, I finished and I felt fantastic.

It was during, I suppose you could say, my rebirth, that I heard something at a seminar that to me was very profound. A study had been done on what people feared the most. It was discovered that peoples' second biggest fear was a fear of dying and their biggest fear, by far, was of public speaking. Think about it. That means most people would rather die than stand up on a stage.

So what made that study profound for me? The challenge. The challenge of overcoming an immense fear. I thought that if I could be courageous and stand tall on a stage and help and inspire others, by telling my story, by guiding them to their own successes then I could achieve more than I could ever hope for.

Two years ago I joined Toastmasters to get the public speaking skills I needed and now thanks to Toastmasters and the wonderful people at beyondblue I am achieving my goal.

At different times in my life I can see the tell-tale signs of severe depression still lurking in the background and with that thoughts of suicide. With what I have learnt from others and about myself I know I need to be forever vigilant. At times, it can be hard but with medical help, the love of family and friends and some concerted effort I continually try to live with the setbacks that we all face in life. Each day I push forward, step by step, to the very best life I can have. If you suffer from anxiety or depression – you too can push forward, step by step, to the very best life YOU can have.

Since my son's death my immediate family and I have become closer often checking up on each other at random times and also spending more time together. The most important thing has been to talk about Michael and how we feel.

I think the worst thing to do after losing someone is to hide your emotions and not speak up. Often a person may feel or think the same thoughts as their partner, child, parent or friend but they don't share it for the fear of hurting the other. Chris, my wife, and I speak often about how we feel, how we are grieving and what we are thinking. By doing that we have taken massive steps in helping heal ourselves and each other. Unfortunately, the statistics of couples separating after the death of a child is exceedingly high. All I can suggest to help prevent this happening is to be considerate toward each other - and to talk often.

Tonight, I am here to represent beyondblue and to give you a rundown of what they are achieving in your community.

beyondblue is an independent, not-for-profit organisation, working to address issues associated with depression and anxiety in Australia. beyondblue's key aims are raising awareness about depression and anxiety - reducing the associated stigma and encouraging people to seek help early.

Today in Australia, more than 1 million people are experiencing depression and more than 2 million are experiencing an anxiety condition. We know that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 8 men will experience depression in their lifetime. With anxiety, the numbers increase, as 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men are likely to experience anxiety in their lifetime.

I would like you to take a moment and have a look around this room. Some/many people here will undoubtedly experience depression or anxiety during their lives and it may be difficult to think about but you, a family member, friend or colleague may also struggle with these conditions.

So what is depression? Many people think depression is just mere sadness. That someone is weak, lazy or just out to seek attention. Others think depressed people just need to snap out of it. Let me tell you they are all wrong!

Depression is more than just a low mood, it's a serious illness that has an enormous impact on both physical and mental health.

A person experiencing depression can over time lose interest in work, hobbies and doing things that they normally enjoy. They can lack energy, eat more, eat less, have difficulty sleeping or sleep more than usual. As a rule of thumb, a person may be depressed if he or she has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time for more than two consecutive weeks.

And what about anxiety? We all experience stress and anxious feelings don't we? It is a common response when a person is under pressure, and these feelings generally subside once the stressful situation has passed or the 'stressor' is removed.

But anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't subside and are ongoing and exist without any particular cause or reason. Anxiety is a serious condition - that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life.

A person may be experiencing an anxiety condition if he or she feels worried or anxious most of the time and finds it difficult to calm down.

People experiencing an anxiety disorder feel overwhelmed or frightened by sudden feelings of intense panic and anxiety. They also experience recurring thoughts which contribute to anxiety, but may seem silly - to others.

Mental illness does not discriminate it can affect people of every age at every stage of life. To help ourselves and others we all need to start talking about mental health, to seek help and check in with people we are concerned about.

Every week in Australia around 33 men and 11 women die by suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death in men under the age of 45 and women under 35 with at least 6 Australians taking their own lives every day.

This equals to around 2300 deaths a year, which is the larger than the national road toll.

Suicide is the leading cause of death for young people aged 14-24. Nearly 1 in 5 young men in the past 12 months have felt that life is hardly worth living and nearly 1 in 10 young men have thought about taking their own life.

We know, a high proportion of people who take their lives have untreated depression. Suicide prevention is also a key area of focus for *beyondblue* due to its effect on public health and the impact of suicide on families and communities.

Every suicide has tragic ripple effects for families, friends, colleagues and the broader community.

2300 deaths a year is 2300 too many.

Research also estimates there are 30 attempts made by people for every death by suicide that happens.

Suicide is a behaviour and not in and of itself an illness or disorder. Suicidal behaviour is complex with many influencing factors – biological, psychological, environmental, social, cultural, economic and spiritual.

While there are strong links between depression and suicide it is not necessarily causal in nature. Most people with depression or anxiety are not suicidal and a person does not have to have depression or anxiety to be suicidal.

The key issue is 65 to 70% of people with depression and anxiety don't seek, the help, they need. Why aren't they getting help? The stigma they feel in asking for support, a lack of knowledge and the uncertainty of how and where to get help.

With the right support and treatment people will recover. So by having this conversation about mental health in our community it is one step towards breaking down the stigma and encouraging people to get support. It is a life and death issue.

Every now and then, the press report on the suicide of a celebrity. Worldwide, people mourn the sad loss of the famed. The recent death of Robin Williams eclipsed all others – every newspaper and radio and tv station ran endless stories and tributes of his works.

But more importantly lifeline, beyondblue and other help line calls centres were swamped - and several websites were on meltdown. People - needed help - needed answers.

We can be hopeful that the death of Robin Williams will create greater attention, instil better understanding, foster more care and compassion and provide much needed help and support to those struggling with anxiety and depression.

The downside with a report of a suicide, whether within a community or across the world the people that are the hardest hit are those that are struggling with their own demons. Some will say to themselves "If someone I know can take their own life, then why can't I?" "If Robin Williams can take his own life, then why can't I?" If you are having those thoughts - I plead with you - Learn from others.

Learn - from those that have died. If they had decided to "hold on" just that little bit longer. If they went out and sought help. If they reached out and spoke to someone. Then perhaps they may have managed to turn their lives around.

Learn - from those that have survived. If you are struggling, seek out the survivors. Ask them what pulled them through. Ask them - how they coped. Ask them - how good life can be.

If you think you are different, if you think are broken, if you feel alone in the world, perhaps what you may not realise is that you feel the same fears and frustrations that so many other people do, young and old. The saddest thing, is most people - don't or won't talk about it. I ask YOU to break that mould. I ask you to speak up. People will listen, people will help. Look around you, tonight is all about bringing your community together, young and old, to help each other. Tonight is about YOU. Speak up. Become a voice for your own salvation.

From listening to my story Courage and Hope are the emotions I would like you to take away today

Depression and anxiety are common and treatable conditions. Support is available and it's important to seek help early, the sooner the better. With the right treatment most people will recover.

It's important to know the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety so that you can monitor your feelings and behaviours and also look out for those around you.

If you think you may be depressed or have an anxiety condition or you know someone who might talk about it and seek help from a general practitioner or mental health professional.

If you want to find out more about the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety, treatments and where to get support visit the beyondblue website or contact the beyondblue support service on 1300 22 46 36.

The beyondblue support service operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is manned by clinical staff who can help you access information about depression, anxiety and related disorders, to order resources and locate health practitioners in your area who have expertise in treating mental health problems.

If you would like to support beyondblue in their work there are ways to help including donating funds, organising a fundraiser or sharing beyondblue content or resources with others.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some important points

Don't Ignore the Signs. Give or get help, now

Don't Ever Give Up. No matter how bad you feel cling to something that gives you hope

Eat Well. Sleep Well. Exercise Daily

Stay Connected with family, friends and colleagues

And the most important message to every one of you is to **Start Thinking About and Having Conversations about Mental Health.**

Thank you for listening to my story and please remember – **Have Courage. Have Hope**