

Depression and anxiety - a sickness, not a weakness

Depression and anxiety can strike anyone anytime. Marc Gascoigne knows how easy it can happen.

Last updated 10:48, February 2 2016



Look out for your mates and loved ones, says Marc Gascoigne.

I don't know anyone in my circle of friends and family who has been killed in a car accident. Or on a quad bike, or by drowning, or in a work accident, or any other sudden accidental death.

Except for suicide. In the last few years I have lost three close friends or family to suicide, the latest being my nephew on January 10.

Almost everyone I have talked to since then has said the same thing to me.

"My brother has tried to kill himself three times."

"My sister-in-law hung herself in the back garden."

"I lost my cousin last year to suicide."

Everyone knows someone who has done it.

What the hell is going on?

Why, when we live in the best place on earth, is this so common?

The answer is – it's a sickness, if it's not treated it can cause appalling misery and ultimately death. But it can be treated, and it can be managed.

I've got nothing to be depressed about. I have a fantastic marriage and three great kids. We own our own farm, and while the current payout is of fairly big concern, we will survive - as long as it picks up soon.

But despite not having any major problems, I have suffered from depression and anxiety on and off for many years.

I would never have admitted to having depression before – I had nothing to be depressed about, how could I have depression? I just thought I had to "sort my shit out" and "pull myself together" and get on with it. Typical Kiwi farmer, tough guy attitude – I'm not a weak pussy that needs to talk to some shrink about my feelings – hell no! And medication? Forget it. That's for losers.

But in April-May last year I went through a really rough patch. It felt like the world was closing in on me and I was tormented by hideously overwhelming anxiety attacks. Again there was no reason why.

Initially, when I went to the doctor I asked him to do some blood tests – surely there was something missing, a simple explanation to what I was feeling?

My blood tests were completely normal. I had to swallow my pride, I had to face the fact that I had depression. I had to accept I had a problem, and I had to accept I needed treatment.

I don't know why there is such a stigma attached to depression. I tried to maintain an outwardly normal happy façade to the rest of the world, because I didn't want anyone to know. I thought it was a weakness.

But the reality is it's a sickness, a chemical imbalance in the brain, and until you realise that and do something about it, chances are it won't get any better.

Why was I embarrassed to have depression? If I broke my leg I wouldn't try to hide it from people. If I had diabetes I'd be doing everything I could to treat it, including taking medication.

I believe that half the battle is won when you admit you have a problem and seek help. The best place to start is with your GP, and they can refer you on for the appropriate help or prescribe medication if that is what is needed.

Again I don't know why anti-depressants attract such a stigma. I'm on them, they work, I have no side-effects, I feel "normal" again. I wish I'd done it years ago.

I'm not saying that medication is the answer for everyone. There are plenty of other options. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is one example. Exercise is another. For me, a great way to burn some stress and clear my head is to head out for a run or bike ride.

Another good place to start is the Rural Support Trust, a bunch of bloody good people who are there to help. And the best thing is they understand farming and the stresses that it can cause. Look them up.

The Farmstrong website has some great information, and there are plenty of other websites to check out. If you ever get a chance to listen to John Kirwan, grab it with both hands. Doug Avery is another great speaker if you can get to him.

I'm also writing this for all the people who don't suffer any mental health issues. Look out for your mates and loved ones.

If you think someone is struggling, ask them how they are.

You would be amazed what a difference a small gesture or supportive words can make.

For me, it was a good friend turning up on my doorstep and telling me he knew exactly what I was going through as he'd been through the same issues. Thanks mate, that was my turning point.

Two years of low payouts has caused a lot of anxiety, I know, and that is completely understandable. And there's a multitude of other reasons for being stressed out, it happens to all of us.

But if it has got to the point that you can't see a way out and if it is affecting your relationships with family and friends, then it's time to do something about it.

Do it for yourself, do it for your family, do it for your friends.

Don't wait for years like I did. And most of all don't wait until it's too late.

Remember it's a sickness, not a weakness. It's not worth hiding it away.

And it's certainly not worth putting your loved ones through a lifetime of pain by taking your own life.

Ask for help. If you don't get it, keep asking until you do.

RIP James, Alan and Scotte.

Marc Gascoigne is a Cambridge dairy farmer. He welcomes feedback at marcmaria1@gmail.com

WHERE TO GET HELP

The Mental Health Foundation's free Resource and Information Service (09 623 4812) will refer callers to some of the helplines below:

Rural Support Trust – 0800 787 254

Lifeline - 0800 543 354

Depression Helpline (8 am to 12 midnight) - 0800 111 757

Healthline - 0800 611 116

Samaritans - 0800 726 666

Suicide Crisis Helpline (aimed at those in distress, or those who are concerned about the wellbeing of someone else) - 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Youthline - 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz