

Mental Health and Me

By Kate Cameron, for Squires 2019

You cannot escape the amount of media attention on Mental Health over recent years ... People from all walks of life, even some of the younger members of the Royal Family, have spoken out about the pressures of mental health and how they have had to overcome some demon or another.

This group, for example, was set up to help support people who find themselves in the unenviable position of having to change their lives due to the trauma of a brachial plexus injury, and we have lots of lovely people come along from some of the biggest hospitals in the country, to talk to us about the resources that are available to them, as they try and re-build their lives. But what about people like me? I don't have a BPI, but do you think that I am affected by a BPI?

Let me ask a question ... How many of you here today knew the person you are with, who has a BPI, BEFORE they were injured? You have seen what the

injury has done to them. You have seen how they have struggled to come to terms with the partial or total loss of their arm, but have you also considered how this injury has affected you? For me, I didn't know my husband before he was injured, so how can I still be affected by these 'changes'?

Ok – so firstly I would like to stress that I am not a qualified medic, psychologist or counsellor. I don't have all the answers, but I do have experience. I am a trained Mentor and a natural healer, and would love to say that I have found a miracle cure for chronic pain ... but I cant. What I can do is talk from the heart and use some of the training I have received in Mental Health through my job role in the NHS, and combine that with a few insights that I have learned from training outside of my work.

So - What is Mental Health? The dictionary describes 'Mental Health' as "a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being".

The Government Website says that Mental Health "helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices", and "if you experience

mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behaviour could be affected". But do you know what signs to look out for that someone could be struggling with their mental health and well-being?

Some of the symptoms of poor mental health can include things like eating or sleeping too much, or too little. Smoking, drinking or using drugs more than usual. Yelling, lashing out at, or fighting with, family and friends. Experiencing mood swings. Feeling confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, helpless ... the list goes on and on. Sound familiar?

Let's watch this a moment ... The Black Dog -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc>

So there is hope.

From my experience, I can honestly say that it was not until I had some training a few weeks ago that I actually started to recognise what was going on in my own head. I have had my dark times and some of you may remember how I was in a pretty bad way a few years ago but, having been through a period of intense counselling at the time, I believed I had come out

a stronger person and was actually doing Ok. What I wasn't prepared for, was the realisation that I was not actually faring as well as I thought, as I was not dealing with a lot of the negativity I was facing every day of my life, both at work, and at home.

Some degree of negative thinking is natural, but if this becomes a pattern or, dare I say, a life style you are on a downward spiral which can lead to depression and self-destructive habits, which will de-rail everything that you hold dear. Remember the Black Dog? Our thoughts come and go so quickly that it seems impossible to notice them, and you start to react instinctively in a negative way often hurting those around you. I don't like to think of myself as a negative person – but I realised that I was constantly surrounded by so much negativity, it was starting to have an adverse effect on me.

Many of you may only know me from being the person sitting in the corner taking minutes, or handing out meal vouchers at these meetings every year. You are much more likely to know my husband, Ewan, the “crazy one armed Scotsman”; the outgoing one; the one with the home brew that has everyone falling all over the campsite, or the one playing pool with his feet. You relate

to him through his injury and share your own experiences with him. He is happy to talk to anyone at any time about how to try and manage pain, and he shares a whole range of bad jokes with anyone who listens. What you don't see are outbursts of anger, the frustration at little things not doing what they are supposed to, the swearing, the bad temper and typical 'grumpy old man'. Things being thrown around the shed, the house, the garden. The road rage. Promises that are made and then forgotten. The lack of respect – for both things and feelings. I have got used to fielding all this negativity and have pushed my feelings deep down inside, trying to tell myself that he doesn't mean it when he snaps at me – it's the pain. I see him lash out at neighbours who have the audacity to park too close to our driveway, even though there is still plenty of room to manoeuvre his car at the front of the house to get in and out. It's the Pain! I hear him throwing tantrums in the shed when something goes wrong. It's the Pain! I feel embarrassed, but if I try and tell him that his reactions may not be appropriate for the situation at hand, I know I am about to put my head into the lion's mouth. It's the Pain!

So what do I do to try and keep the peace? I swallow the feelings - there is nothing I can do. It's the Pain!

I often describe how I feel as watching ripples on a mill pond. You sit by a peaceful calm glass-topped mill pond, with the slightest hint of a breeze at your back. Then someone comes along and throws a pebble in ... You hear the drop, and watch the ripples as they find their way out to the shore. If you are lucky, the ripples fade out and you return to the peaceful serenity of the glass-topped pool. But what happens if another pebble hits the water before those first ripples fade out? And then another, and another ... and then someone throws in a bloody great rock ... and then the wind gets up ... Its not long before that peaceful mill pond is a mass of noise and turbulence, and you are no longer sitting in peaceful calm.

I ask again ... how can I be affected by a BPI? What is all that 'pain' doing to me? Its burning a hole deeper than any weapon. Destroying a relationship from the inside, like a cancer. I cant talk about it, because that would make MY pain even more real and I have to be strong ... Don't I? I don't want everyone knowing that we are not really as happy as they think we are. I

don't want to be seen as a failure for 'not supporting my husband'. I don't want people to think that I don't care enough to make things work come what may. I can't, and don't want to, feel the amount of physical pain he is suffering, day in day out. Hey – he is in Pain! He can't help it! But is all this fair on me? Is it right that I should just deal with it?

Then, out of the blue I saw this message on Facebook ... it was entitled ...

Because you didn't want to lose him, you lost yourself in the process.

It reads as follows:

You became a girl who kept being mistreated and you formed a habit of saying "I'm used to it".

You became a girl who kept being unappreciated and you began to tell yourself "It's okay".

You became a girl who kept being undervalued and you learned how to say "I'm fine".

You became a girl who kept being put last and you naturally reacted with "It's whatever".

You became a girl who kept being taken for granted and you dealt with it by repeating "Everything's okay".

You became a girl who kept being unhappy and you regularly told people "I'm gonna be fine".

And if you're reading this right now, then you need to understand that no guy is worth losing yourself for. No guy is worth suffering for at the expense of your happiness, and no guy is worth tormenting yourself over for the sake of making Him happy.

At this point, perhaps losing him is the only way you'd be able to get yourself back because as much as you wouldn't want this to be true, he's the only thing that's in your way of finding yourself, and he's the only reason you've lost yourself for so long.

After reading this I actually thought – You know? Im DONE! I don't want to be a punch bag any more. I don't deserve to live with all this negativity. To

quote one of Ewan's favourite films – “Why don't you knock it off with them negative vibes” (Kelly's Heroes). It was perhaps the most difficult thing I have had to do, but I had to tell him that enough was enough. I wanted to be the happy positive person I knew was hiding deep inside. I wanted to cut away all the negative ties around me, to stop making excuses for the strange new member in our relationship - his pain. I wanted to start again ... but how?

Lets look at these things with different eyes for a moment ... If you saw a child acting out, 'throwing their toys out the pram', getting mouthy, being rude, getting angry at little things that don't really matter – what would you do? You would bring them up and try to explain to them that their behaviour is not acceptable, and try to teach them how to behave more favourably. But how do you do that with an adult? Someone who should know better?

As the Black Dog suggests, looking after your mental health is every bit as important as looking after your physical health. In fact, they often go hand in hand, but most people don't realise the connections, and would you recognise any of these symptoms in yourself anyway?

After my visit from the Black Dog a few years ago, I signed up to a Sedentary Workers Scheme with the gym at work and soon became a regular visitor, with my own personal trainer to help me achieve my goals. I was a self-proclaimed couch potato and, even though I had been a member there for several years, I never really stuck at it for more than a few weeks at a time. I never expected to feel that it was actually making a difference, but slowly I found that little voice on my shoulder telling me that I'd not been for a couple of days, so I went back. My trainer pushed me hard – he knew I was strong in body, but I started to realise that I was becoming stronger in my mind as well. I started to achieve things that I had never dreamed of before. I found a new level of determination to fight on through the physical pain so I could reach my target, whether that was lifting a heavier weight, or cycling further than I had before. I stand here in front of you now, an overweight, menopausal, woman of a certain age, having now completed 4 annual triathlons at the gym, each time finding that little bit of something extra to improve on my times year on year. Who'd have thought I could do that a few years ago? Not me!

A little food for thought - “If you always do what you’ve always done, you will always have what you’ve always got. So if you want something different – CHANGE!”

So what sort of life do you dream for yourself? Consider that every little thing that goes through your mind has an effect on your life. If your default setting is to lash out, you will attract more and more of that impulsive and negative energy, which starts a downward spiral of negativity that is difficult to get out of. You can start to imagine how things can get out of control very quickly. Somehow you need to find a way to put the brakes on and turn that beast around.

Easier said than done, I hear you say. The path in front of me is too steep to climb. Ok – so try looking for an alternative path. Don’t give up! You may find a slope that’s a little shallower and easier to climb if you walk around the base a little way. Nothing worthwhile in this life comes for free – you always have to put some effort in to achieve what you really want. If you focus on negativity, or even worse, you do nothing at all, you will only get more and more negative and cause more hurt and pain to, not only yourself, but

everyone who you hold dear. Your brain has to think of something though – so why not choose to make those thoughts more positive?

Three members of our committee here, have just completed the Three Peaks Challenge! What would they feel like if they had just stopped and given up? How would WE all feel if they came back saying it was too difficult, and gave up?

You need to find a path that works for you – even if it means taking one diversion after another, to find the right way forward so you can achieve your dream. The thing is that no one can do it for you. To use a quote from another movie “Endeavour to Persevere” (The Outlaw Josey Wales) ... find another route that will bring you back to where you want to be. Think differently and believe in your aim, your goal and your purpose.

Remember the Black Dog - Take time to listen to your inner self. Try to recognise how you react to things – are you reacting negatively, or impulsively? How is that making people around you react? If you are irritable, do they become irritable too? Does that make you feel more

irritable? Consider what it would be like if you stepped back and thought before you reacted ... Is there another, more gentle, more nurturing, more inclusive, way? How do you imagine someone would respond if you reacted differently – more calmly? How would their calmer reaction affect you? Can you start to feel the difference?

Allow the clutter and chatter of your mind to fall into the background and soak in the peace around you. Take baby steps. Don't try to conquer the mountain in one step. Don't fight against every step on the path in front of you, just because it is the path in front of you. Find something to lift your heart and be happy about – no matter how small. Every day, look to find more things to be happy about than you did the day before. Be Thankful. Be Grateful. Find Peace and forgiveness. Forgive Yourself! Everyone makes mistakes – its how you deal with them that defines you. Do you really want to be grumpy and irritable all the time, or do you want to feel the lightness of heart after a really good belly laugh, and having a fun time without putting a mask over your true feelings. What if your true feelings were positive? An old

Japanese Proverb says “Do not speak bad of yourself, for the warrior within, hears your words and is lessened by them”.

You can, and do, dream your reality. Its your choice whether that reality is cruel or compassionate, hurtful or helpful, negative or positive. Another movie quote ... “I kept dreaming of a world I thought Id never see ... and then one day – I got in!” (Tron).

To close ...

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old man simply replied, "The one you feed."

The past can hurt, but you can either run from it or learn from it ... So, which wolf do you want to feed?

Thank you.