

Public Education

a Key to Shining Light on Mental Health ...



Craig Hamilton makes a personal plea for society to shake off the stigma surrounding people with depression and to bring the subject into the clear light of day

IN A remarkable memoir, “Broken Open,” ABC broadcaster Craig Hamilton tells what it’s like to go mad in public and survive to tell the tale. Here Craig speaks out about the seriousness of the “Black Dog”—depression—and the urgent need for the Federal Government to make mental health care a priority.

The resignation of Western Australian Premier Geoff Gallop last year put the issue of mental health—and, in particular, depression—back on the national health agenda.

The dogs are no longer barking on the issue of mental health reform in Australia, they are literally starting to bite back ... and it’s long overdue. The issue has become so important that the federal government must initiate and support an education program for schools to better inform our next generations and provide a much needed boost to mental health resources and services.

That so many Australian’s are now on public record demanding a positive response from the government on this issue gives an indication of how widespread depression is in the community. In one interview in the immediate aftermath of Dr Gallop’s decision to resign I heard the situation described as a tragedy for him and WA. I could not disagree more with this description.

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For someone who has also experienced the depths of clinical depression personally, I can empathize with exactly what Geoff Gallop was experiencing. However, the situation could have been far worse if Dr Gallop had simply ignored the symptoms, soldiered on and allowed the depression to worsen. Then the situation could have become tragic.

With the death of Rugby League great Steve Rogers in late 2005 (whose battle with depression was revealed by his son Matt) the country was shaken again with the news of Geoff Gallop’s battle with “the Black Dog” that is depression.

In the not so distant past it would have been unheard of for anyone, let alone a public figure, to admit to suffering with depression.

It’s almost the case of our political leaders being “unable to see the forest for the trees,” as there are now a number of people from within their own ranks that have battled depressive ill-

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ness at some stage, including Tasmania's Democrat, Nick Sherry.

Slowly but surely, as the stigma surrounding mental health issues disintegrates, more stories will emerge. This will be a steady but very necessary process that will see real change, in my view, and not before time.

Make no mistake about it, we all must become better educated about issues of mental health and not take good mental health for granted. In five years from now I'm sure we will all look back and say how slow we were as a community to better deal with this very common and very debilitating condition.

We had also better get used to dealing with mental health issues and put strategies in place to minimize the impact on individuals, families and workplaces because the statistics are already saying that by the year 2020, depression will be Australia's number one health problem.

There is no doubt in my mind that in the area of mental health care we have a system in crisis and it needs an urgent and ongoing injection of funding and resources.

In the past two years I have travelled to many parts of Australia and spoken about my own experience with depression in 2000.

One thing I can assure you of, is that the condition is far more prevalent than many are prepared to admit. There still exists a stigma today which prevents many people accessing the help they need for what is a very treatable illness. It is only when depression goes untreated for a long period of time that

it becomes more difficult to shift.

My main message since going public in 2000 has been to offer hope for others. Depression is serious but it can be beaten. It can be managed but first it must be acknowledged.

The problem is on the rise and we are creating an environment for ourselves where depression can overwhelm us because life is so hectic and adrenaline-driven, where there is a lack of balance in our day-to-day lives.

It's tough to get that balance right in a world that is constantly demanding more and more from people, but to ignore our health indefinitely and pretend that we are all 10-foot tall and bullet proof is a recipe for disaster.

The things that have helped my recovery in the past five years have been a combination of medication, yoga,

meditation, relaxation and exercise, coupled with a good diet and a greater awareness of how I'm actually feeling every day.

Depression is complex, there is no question about that. However, the quicker we acknowledge we may well be dealing with the plague of the 21st century, the better off we will all be.

The time for our political leaders to stick their collective heads in the sand on this issue has long past. It's time for action. Our communities deserve it.

Craig Hamilton

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Craig (right) with Wayne Schwass & Arana Pearson in Darwin for Mental Health Week 2006