

I want to start by taking you back in time and telling you the story of a young woman. The story might be familiar to you, the young woman spent a lot of time around these parts about 10 years ago. Yes, I am going to tell you the story of me in Year 12.

In Year 12 I placed a huge amount of pressure on myself to succeed. I believed I had to achieve a magic number, otherwise I would be letting myself and my family down. Unfortunately, I had no idea what this magic number was. I started spending an exorbitant amount of time worrying about what would happen if I did not achieve what was expected of me; what I would be doing next year and if my parents would be able to forgive me if I failed them. I stopped trying as hard at school because if I did not try then when I did “badly” then I could console myself that it was not my true best effort. My mood became low and I slept badly a lot of the time. Most nights I had episodes of overwhelming anxiety – the first time it happened I thought I was having a heart attack. I would lose the ability to breathe properly, my heart would race, I would feel shaky and the overwhelming anxiety would be at an intensity that I felt like I was going to die. I kept all this to myself, which is very unlike me. I did not talk to my family or my friends. I think deep down I was ashamed of how I felt and afraid of their reactions if I told them.

One night I had a massive fight with my mum, the biggest I ever remember having. I stormed out of the house and walked the mean streets of St Ives for a number of hours talking to a good friend. Eventually, at his prodding, I went home and I remember saying three little words to my mum that changed the course of my year: “I’m not happy”.

The next day I came home to a freshly tidied room, decorated with posters filled with words and phrases of why I was loved and special and bouquets of gerberas. From there things weren’t always easy, I still had the trials and the HSC ahead of me after all, but they were a lot better because I knew I had support.

When I started studying psychology I realised there were words for what I had gone through – depression and anxiety.

But when I started working a few years later I realised I had been incredibly lucky because I had had an incredible support system. Many are not so lucky.

I have also realised that my story is all too common – 25% of us will experience a mental health issue at some point in our life.

Depression and anxiety are caused by many aspects of an individual’s life, it is often an interplay of complex factors which can include; genetics, upbringing, trauma, loss of a loved one, major life stressors such as unemployment and many more. These factors may lead the individual to develop a mental health condition in the same way a complex set of factors may lead to the development of physical health conditions e.g. diabetes.

However how likely the individual experiencing these conditions is to seek treatment is generally very different to physical health conditions, with only 1/3 of individuals with a mental health condition seeking help.

I believe our difficulties communicating, our fear of vulnerability and our shame often form vicious cycles within us, leading us down a path of disconnection, anxiety and pain. We often do not share with others how we are feeling for fear of judgement, criticism or dismissal. Wrestling with these unhelpful thought patterns ourselves allows them the space

to grow and fester. Even if they do not manifest into diagnosable mental health conditions they can still have a detrimental impact on our ability to live full and meaningful lives and engaged with those closest to us.

Instead of talking, many of us choose alternate methods of coping. We try to avoid our feelings, push them away, procrastinate, drink alcohol, use drugs, eat food, exercise or work more.

We hope these activities will mean the feelings we do not want to feel will have gone or dissipated when we finish that activity but anyone who has tried these methods before will know you cannot avoid your way around painful emotions.

As we leave the Easter period, I have seen this in Jesus story. He lived with a recognition of the reality of pain, shame and vulnerability. This is something I often find I resonate with in his ministry, his willingness to be vulnerable, spend time with those in the community who were vulnerable; and those holding the communities shame. Jesus answered direct questions with parables, stories which can be interpreted in multitudes of ways, exploring rather than directing; multi layered. Jesus in his last moments spoke of his feelings of abandonment, again reiterating to me a sense of vulnerability. Yet, often today I see others twist his life to be one of certain answers, right and wrong, black and white. I believe this is another example of fear of vulnerability – if we are certain; if we know where we stand and we can point at the “right answer” we believe we can avoid vulnerability. To me though Jesus’ story illustrates we cannot avoid the painful emotions and as much as we may like we should not avoid them. When we dull the painful emotions we also dull our experiences of the beautiful emotions such as joy, love and belonging. For what is the Easter Sunday story without Good Friday?

When I was asked to speak about my dreams for the future I gave it a lot of thought. It has been churning in the back of my mind for a number of weeks. For me; my experiences, my faith, my work and study in psychology, my family, they all have shaped my hopes and dreams for the future.

So what do I dream to see in the future?

Well the good news and the bad news is I believe it starts with each and every one of us. I know for myself it has not been an easy thing and it continues to be something I work on but we need to work on dealing with our own shame, embracing our ability to be vulnerable and open with those close to us and communicating when things are hard. This takes courage, not the heroic movie type courage but the quiet everyday courage that is often not acknowledged.

We need to teach our children and young people how to effectively cope with their anxieties and stresses. That is okay to say “hey I am not okay” or “I’m having thoughts that are bothering me”. We can show them through our own words, actions, and through education that it is okay to reach out for support and it is okay to struggle sometimes. I dream of the day when a young person can identify things are not going well and can reach out for the support they need. I am lucky enough in my work to often get to see this dream turned into reality, but we still have a lot of work to do.

We need to teach our children, young people and everyone else how to respond with compassion and empathy to others vulnerabilities. I am sure we have all been in that situation where we have shared with someone our own shame story and they have responded by either; feeling shame for you, responding with sympathy rather than empathy, with disappointment, anger, dismissal or one-upmanship. We have probably all been that person responding inappropriately as well rather than responding with real empathy. I dream to see the day when people can go to others vulnerable and unsure and can almost always be met with empathy and recognition rather than dismissal or derision.

We need to stop separating mental health from physical health like we can separate ourselves up into components. Mental health is as important to a full and meaningful life as physical health. We need to fund mental health services, with the full recognition of the important and integral place mental health plays in its role in our life. I dream of the day that someone can walk into a clinic and be screened for not only their physical health but their mental health concerns.

All of these things are going to be difficult but the pay offs would be amazing. I would love to see a generation of young people growing up who are able to quickly recognise when they are struggling, open to talk about it with their family or friends and seek the help they need before it becomes something that is so much worse for them and our society as a whole.

I want to end with a quote from Brené Brown a researcher who has been very influential in my personal and professional life:

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light”.