

‘TACKLING DEPRESSION’

By

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Thank you for the invitation to join you tonight on this most important occasion – the launch of Nathan’s Bequest.

In my twenty years in the Western Australian State Parliament I developed a close relationship with the Victoria Park Rotary Club and have the greatest of respect for what you do.

Indeed in Victoria Park we worked together to create the Rotary Hostel at the Kent Street Senior High School. It allows students from all over the state to attend the special programs being run by the school, including those associated with the Cricket Academy. Marcus North and Luke Ronchi – currently playing for the Western Warriors – attended the Hostel during their high school education.

Let me begin tonight’s talk by telling you a story. It comes from a Buddhist Monk the Venerable Ajahn Brahm whose book *Opening the Door of Your Heart* was published in 2004.

It concerns a class in a famous American business school. The Professor came into the class and placed a glass jar on the desk. Then he brought out a bag full of stones and placed them one by one into the jar until no more could fit in.

‘Is the jar full?’ he asked?

'Yes,' replied his students.

Smiling the Professor produced a second bag – full of gravel. He managed to shake the smaller stones into the spaces.

'Is the jar full?' he asked again?

'No', said the students, a little wiser this time.

'You are right', he said producing a bag of fine sand which he coaxed into the spaces between the stones and the gravel.

'Is it full now?'"

The students were suspicious by now and said: 'Probably not, sir, knowing you'.

They were right and he then pulled out a small jug of water and poured it into the jar.

'Now', said the Professor, 'What does that teach us?'

Being a good business student and imbued with the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic one responded: 'No matter how busy your schedule, you can always fit something more in!'

'No,' thundered the Professor, 'what it shows is that if you want to get the big stones in, you have to put them in first'.

It was a lesson in priorities.

What are the most important priorities? This is a fundamental question that we all too often suppress on the altar of achievement or in the interests of short-term advantage.

That was a question I couldn't avoid early in the year when a condition that had been bothering me for some time took over.

I was paralysed.

I was trapped in my own mind. The past was the present and the future.

I couldn't laugh. I couldn't feel. With the help of my family and closest friends I made a decision to seek medical help and to change direction in my life.

I had experienced this before, but somehow the tide always seemed to turn.

However, on a few occasions this didn't happen before I experienced dreadful anxiety, weight loss and overwhelming melancholy. The notion that the 'bad' always followed the 'good' and the 'good' always followed the 'bad' became embedded in my thinking.

'Was it *me* or was it *me plus* these episodes', I asked myself.

'Why couldn't I always cope with stress? Why did stress itself sometimes become a condition....a trap.....a prison.....from which there seemed no escape. Imagine a world where every second feels like a day.

Every time it passed I said: 'This is it, it won't happen again'. But it did.....with varying degrees of intensity.

I toughed it out.

I managed.

I was good at my job – planning, consulting, advocating, defending and attacking – a true believer looking to the future.

But, despite my best efforts, I just couldn't relax.

When I managed to relax I felt invincible. I could climb mountains....a good speech.....a parliamentary defence or attack.....a productive meeting....a problem resolved.

And then.....from invincibility to fallibility. The jigsaw pieces out of place and incompatible.

Why didn't the world fall into place as planned?

Why did despair always follow hope?

And – why did despair occasionally descend into a living hell?

I recently came across a quotation from *Abraham Lincoln* which describes it with unerring clarity. At a low point he said:

'I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell, I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better it appears to me.'

'Willpower' worked when public appearances were required. It was like going on auto-pilot.

There were times when my nerves were stretched to breaking point.

I always survived and lived to fight another day.

The senses revived.

The self loosened.

Days become seconds again rather than the other way around. Pressure meant challenge rather than panic.

As time went on I began to ask:

'Was this the rhythm of life?

Why should the positive me become the negative him?

What was this melancholic force that turned things around?'

Instead of bottling it up and internalising it I cried out for help.

And there it was - family and friends.

This was the turning point - an end to pointless resistance and the beginning of change.

Medical advice and assistance followed.

No man or woman is an island. We all need help and encouragement and not one person is the same as another.

Biology and environment see to it that each of us is unique.

Therein, of course, lies the tragedy of suicide-what we lose is not a statistic but a person. All too often we see young people-bristling with potential who cross the line between hope and despair.

For adolescents the anxiety and fear associated with growing up, learning about life and looking to an uncertain and unknown future can be overwhelming particularly given the competitive pressures in today's world. Mission Australia's National Youth Survey (Dec 2005) found that 42% of 11,300 young people surveyed ranked suicide and self-harm in their top three issues of concern.

Depression can lead to tragedy and loss.

It can become embedded to stalk and haunt throughout life's journey.

All too often it stays within – like a secret for whom there is no story-teller.

To come to terms with it is the toughest challenge of all.

It's so personal.

It's so deep.

The causes and consequences of mental health (and illness) has at last emerged as an important subject for scientific analysis and public discussion. We have learnt much from neuroscience and at last have discovered the wisdom of Eastern religion, psychology and philosophy.

Depression can be treated and mental well-being sustained.

What we have to acknowledge, however, is that it will continue to be experienced.

That means individuals locked up inside themselves, their minds hammering away twenty-four hours day, forever on the precipice of panic.

They face the risk of self-harm as a release from pain is sought. They are vulnerable, needing help.

They may be politicians.

They may be tradespeople.

They may be judges.

They may be labourers.

They may be celebrities.

They may be elite sportsmen and women.

They may be the toughest of footballers or the gentlest of scholars.

The reality is that they are all flesh and blood, heart and soul and from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures.

Genetic inheritance and situation determines that some of us will be depressive.

They will need and deserve our support.

For all too long, of course, the community adopted minimal expectations and lower standards of achievement for people with mental illness. These attitudes, mixed with a dose of prejudice, were forces for concealment and the loneliness that goes with it. Prejudice and melancholy fed off each other like psychological twins. The more the prejudice the more the concealment, the more the concealment, the more the depression.

Fortunately thinking today (if not all practice) is based on a belief in human rights and a better understanding of the nature and causes of depression and mental illness.

New medications have created new possibilities.

New attitudes have created new opportunities.

New knowledge has created new approaches.

There is, however, always more that can be learnt about the debilitating affliction that has been aptly described as 'the Black Dog' and it is so encouraging to see Rotary putting the issue onto its own agenda because we know good results will follow.

This is not just an issue for the medical profession....not just for the family and friends of those who suffer.....it is an issue for the whole community, for each and everyone of us.

Back to my friend Ajahn Brahm. He tells a story of the Emperor who was not satisfied with the religions and philosophies of his day. He embarked on his own search for the truth and came up with three questions and three answers.

When is the most important time? Now – this is actually the only time we ever have.

Who is the most important person? The person you are with (and if you are alone that is you).

What is the most important thing to do? To care.

Thank you for coming tonight and showing you care.