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# Mental health: challenging the stigma and ending discrimination

**Stephen Lambert** *highlights the issues.*

**T**he decision of top retailers such as Tesco and Asda to withdraw offensive adverts depicting people with mental health-related issues as a danger to society is to be welcomed by all those who seek a better understanding of mental illness and its impact on individuals and families.

It's estimated by MIND and other charities that one in six people in the UK will experience a mental health problem in any given year – a conservative figure according to lead campaigners on the issue such as Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's former spin doctor. Amongst teachers, one in three will experience some form of mental health problem according to one trade union. Mental illness has replaced unemployment as the country's largest social problem. More people with mental health issues were drawing incapacity or DLA benefits than there were jobless people on the 'dole'. The World Health Organisation indicates that clinical depression will be the second most common health condition both in the UK and elsewhere in the world by 2020.

Mental ill health costs some £105 billion each year in England alone. So depression is not only bad for overall happiness, it's bad for GDP too. Alarming, citizens with a severe mental illness die up to twenty years younger than their peers in the UK, and there remains a clear link

between mental ill-health, bad housing, unemployment, family problems, debt, poor education, learning disabilities, crime, alcohol dependency and social isolation. All this is compounded by stigma and discrimination, despite the Equality Act of 2010.

Negative stereotypes still exist about those suffering from depression and other mental health problems. It's suggested that people with a mental illness are more likely to commit crime. Wrong. Many victims of crime tend to be people with mental health problems, according to the official crime figures. Also, many students in FE experience mental health issues, but few are prepared to disclose this on application forms or at interview for courses.

## Stigma

Much has been achieved by charities such as MIND, Rethink Mental Illness and the Time For Change campaign to break down stigma and taboo surrounding mental illness. But perhaps one of the biggest and bravest attempts to highlight this issue was the decision by four MPs last autumn, including North East MP Kevan Jones, to describe their own experiences of depression. Moving accounts from all four parliamentarians, ranging from Conservative

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MPs to Labour ones, which attracted a lot of positive public support, helped place mental health higher up the political agenda last July. In October 2012, Newcastle Councillors from both parties drew on their own personal experiences of this horrible condition in a constructive and informed debate in the Council Chamber – an excellent example of cross-party working and thinking on one of society's most pressing issues.

As Alistair Campbell rightly points out, depression is a horrible illness for which there is too little understanding. He says: 'The nearest I can come to describing it is that when it strikes you feel dead and alive at the same time'.

### Challenge

But more needs to be done to challenge negative stereotypes and mental health discrimination. To their credit, some larger employers in the North East region, such as NCG, have designated themselves as 'Mindful Employers' and 'Positive About Disabled People'. But though this may command overall support from executive management, much more needs to be done to educate junior managers and other staff members about the issue. It's still the case that many employees who disclose having a mental health issue at the workplace experience indirect discrimination and low-level bullying from inexperienced and ill-educated managers – some of whose ambitions exceed their abilities! Moreover, there's a clear case to toughen up the Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), which offers some legal protection from discriminatory practices at work, by bringing in an Anti-Mental Health Discrimination Act.

Too often mental health services provided by the government are patchy and treated like a 'cinderella service'. According to Campbell in his book *The Happy Depressive*, only a quarter of those suffering from mental health issues such as depression or anxiety are getting any kind of treatment or support, and that usually meant drugs. One of the country's leading thinkers on the condition, Richard Layard, in his influential work called the *Depression Report*, recommended training an extra 10,000 clinical psychologists and therapists to provide cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for those suffering clinical depression through 250 local

treatment centres, providing therapy courses costing £750. This would save the state millions of pounds in paying out disability benefits and lost tax receipts.

Earlier this month, Newcastle City Council re-affirmed its commitment to those experiencing mental health issues. The Council believes it has a role to play in improving the mental health of everyone in the community and tackling some of the most entrenched inequalities. Mental health should be a priority across all functions of local authorities, colleges and universities, who can play a positive role in championing mental health on both an individual and strategic basis. Improving mental health should be seen as an integral part of a holistic wellbeing approach to citizens who live, learn and work in the UK.

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