

Stripping the stigma from mental illness

A new campaign aims to get people talking openly about mental health problems

Interview: Vanessa O'Loughlin

Main picture: Feargal Ward

Words such as depression and mental health have become much more common in our everyday lexicon over the past few years, particularly since several high-profile personalities from arenas including the arts and sports, have talked openly about experiencing and managing depression.

Stars including English actor Stephen Fry and GAA players Alan O'Mara, Seamus O'Donnell and Conor Cusack have been at the forefront of opening up this discourse by sharing their deeply personal experiences.

The World Health Organisation estimates that one in four of us experiences mental health problems. But, away from the parallel universe of famous figures, is it still a handicap in the real world of the workplace in Ireland?

According to research in 2012 by the mental health campaign group See Change, 50 per cent of Irish people would still deliberately conceal a mental health problem at work because of fear that it would have a negative impact on their careers and professional relationships.

Jeanne McDonagh is the press and external relations manager for the Bar Council of Ireland. She was diagnosed as having bipolar depression 16 years ago. "It's never affected my work," she says. "If anything, it's made me want to prove myself a lot more and it's made me very empathetic with people in similar situations, which is very useful when you're in communications. I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt and I've

built very good relationships as a result. So it's been nothing but a benefit to me."

McDonagh has a type of bipolar disorder known as dysphoric elation. "This means I get bad highs – I'd be crying, upset and sad even though I'm high. It's also rapid cycling, so my mood can change literally within the course of a day, several times." These extreme mood swings are now controlled by the medication and lifestyle changes she has made.

McDonagh first experienced depression when she was 15 years old. She describes this period in her life until she was properly diagnosed in her mid-20s as "very scary".

"It was the lack of control," she says. "And it was very alienating for people around me. The minute I got the proper diagnosis, one of the things I did was start reading and looking into the illness, finding out as much as I could about it. Because that gives you control over it and that's very empowering."

"My illness was very hard to diagnose, but I was very lucky that I got a good psychiatrist. Then, eventually, they found the right mix of medication, and so far it's been very stable. And I've a really great psychiatrist and he works through things with me."

McDonagh is aware of her own triggers, such as seasonal changes and emotional stress, which could lead to a bad episode. She has a range of learned coping skills to manage these, including mindfulness practice and physical exercise – and she's started a running club at the bar council.

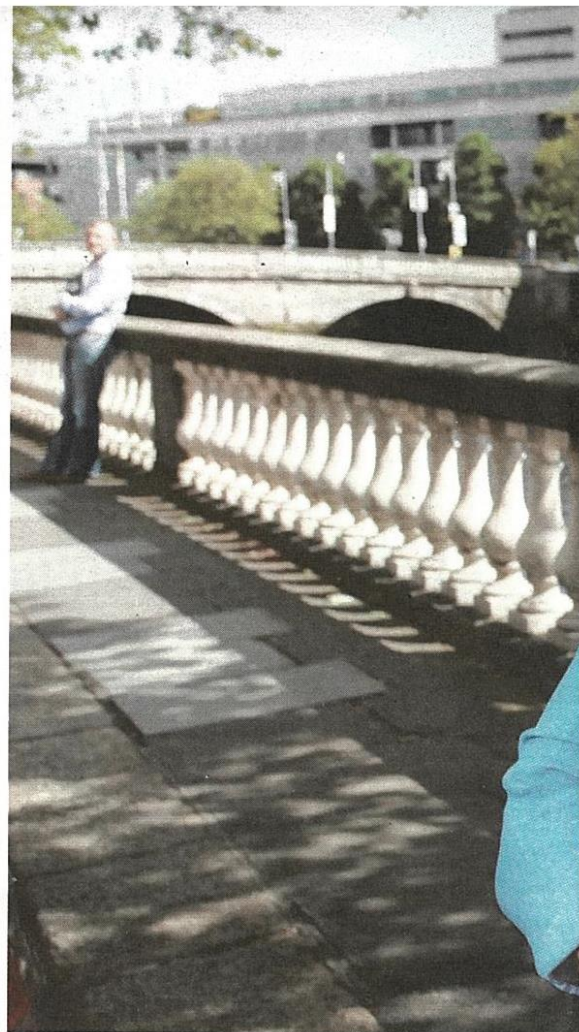
She is also pragmatic about strictly adhering to a regime of

medications. "The way I look at it is that it's a chemical imbalance. I'm missing certain chemicals so, therefore, the sensible thing is to replace those chemicals, and then everything's fine. But if I am in the midst of a high or a low, I'll have a change of medication under my doctor's supervision."

The 42-year-old is clearly adept at thriving in a demanding role, which she's held since 1999, and at managing her illness. But she doesn't believe her situation is unusual and knows several people who succeed in high-pressure careers while experiencing mental health problems. "They function to a really high level. They control their working environment, so there is something in their life that isn't spiralling into madness," she says. "Obviously it gets to a certain point where, if it's relentless and it keeps going, you just have to say, 'Right, time to get out of here'. And I've done that. I've taken time out from work."

Since joining the Bar Council in 1999, she has been honest with her employer and has found her workplace to be a proactive and supportive environment. Last year, her boss Jerry Carroll, director of the Bar Council, appeared with her on RTE One's Morning Edition programme to talk about her illness and the supportive environment she works in. This led many other colleagues to offer their support and share their own experiences with her.

"I got a beautiful card from one barrister who wrote: 'I never knew, I never realised. And it doesn't explain so much.' It was a great experience that people felt they could come and talk to me as a result of



Jeanne McDonagh: 'The way I look at it is that it's a chemical imbalance'

'If I had one leg would that hold me back? I'm missing chemicals. I replace them. I do the job. I don't think that should be a plus or a minus either way. I think the problem is the stigma around it'

speaking about it, and that they felt the workplace was a safe environment to speak about it."

McDonagh has never felt the need to conceal her bipolar disorder and doesn't feel it has ever been an impediment to her career. "Why would I hide it? I mean, if I had one leg, would that hold me back?" she says.

"I'm missing chemicals. I replace them. I do the job. I don't think that should be a plus or a minus either way. I think the problem is the stigma around it."

Earlier this month, McDonagh became one of 50 'campaign ambassadors' for See Change who are sharing their experiences to help others and to end the stigma that surrounds these issues. See Change – an umbrella group of 90 partner organisations, including the charity Aware and business federation Ibec – has been rolling out a national campaign of events throughout May, including distributing 300,000 green ribbons, to get people talking openly about mental



health problems.

For McDonagh, the end of this stigma is in sight. "A lot of people tell me about various issues they may be having in their life, but I don't think that would have happened say 15 years ago," she says. "I've seen it change unbelievably, even in the past 15 years. Something seems to have clicked in the consciousness. I think it's also the fact that so many people have experienced depression in some stage of their life."

The financial services multinational Deloitte is one of 16 employer organisations working with See Change to deliver training on mental health in the workplace to its staff. Shauna Bonner, human resources executive with the firm, says: "Feedback received from our training courses and our awareness initiatives has been very positive. Having an open culture whereby people can talk openly and freely without stigma is important."

The company recently gave each of its 1,350 staff in Ireland a card



Shauna Bonner, human resources executive with Deloitte: 'It's okay not to feel okay'

and two teabags for National Time to Talk Day, in order to encourage them to take some time out of their working day to talk about mental health and disability with friends, family or work colleagues.

Last year, it introduced an employee assistance programme for its 200,000 staff worldwide as a support mechanism for them and their families, which provides a free confidential counselling and information service for employees and their families for challenges they may face, both at home and at work.

"The steps we have taken over the last number of years have definitely made a difference and have encouraged people to be more open about mental health," Bonner says.

"We want our people to feel supported, engaged and to succeed in all aspects of their life. If they are experiencing issues, we want to support them through the difficulties they are facing. It is important not to be afraid to ask for help –

because it's okay not to feel okay."

In 2008, the Mental Health Commission report, *The Economics of Mental Health Care in Ireland*, estimated the direct annual cost of poor mental health in Ireland at €3 billion, or 2 per cent of our GNP. These costs include absenteeism, reduced productivity, unemployment and loss of potential labour supply. And they go far beyond the monetary.

"You've got to invest in health," McDonagh says. "At the far end of the scale, it's the loss of life through suicide. We have huge suicide rates, so I don't think you can say: 'We can't afford it'. You can't afford not to."

If you would like to talk to someone about mental health problems, you can contact the Samaritans on 116123 for round-the-clock support or the 1Life suicide prevention 24/7 helpline on 1800-247100. There is a county-by-county support service directory available at greenribbon.ie/need-help