

# Stress, depression and anxiety

Ross Jones *Vice President, Eastern, APAC*

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## Introduction

- n Thank you for coming along today as part of Mental Health Week. This, is a great opportunity for raising awareness and discussions around the various conditions we pool together under the banner of “mental illness”.
- n Whether it be depression, anxiety, bipolar or schizophrenia, all are mental illnesses that do not discriminate over who they will impose themselves on.
- n There are plenty of stats around about mental illness in NZ:
  - o 1 in 5 New Zealanders will at some time in their life experience a mental illness
  - o Mental health problems are the 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest health problem in NZ behind heart disease and cancer.
  - o Depression is currently the largest cause of non-fatal disability, yet only 3% of New Zealanders identify it as a major health problem.
  - o Despite the above stats, nearly half of all senior managers that participated in a recent survey believed that none of their workers will experience a mental health problem at work.

## Why am I speaking

- n What I wanted to do today was to give all of you a bit more insight into what it's like to suffer a mental illness. How would I know? Well, a bit over 10 years ago, I suffered what is known as a “major depressive event”. A more common term is a mental breakdown.
- n My purpose for speaking today is to share my experience with mental illness in the hope that if any of you are experiencing, or experience in the future, some of the signs and symptoms, you will not do the typical Kiwi (or Australian) thing and suck it up and try to keep going. Instead, you would put your hand up and seek help, either professional or through your network of friends, colleagues and family.
- n My hope is that, speaking today might contribute to a workplace where all of you feel comfortable, if needed, to put your hand up for help, with the knowledge that you'll be understood, and not judged.
- n My desire is also to enhance your awareness so that you will not be ignorant, as I was, when it came to depression and think that all depressed people need to do is snap out of it and think positive.

## The history

- n So how did I get to this position? Well, like many of you, I have a lot of competing interests for my time, my energy and for my brain space. I am not an island in having a fairly high pressure job with its expectations and I have a wonderful family who thankfully want my time and attention. I have other commitments in the local community (mainly through the local church and sporting clubs). All of these things in themselves could be full-time jobs, and when you are a recovering perfectionist like me, you try to spend as much time as you can fulfilling your perceived responsibilities.
  
- n None of these things in themselves are bad. On the contrary, they are great things to be involved in. My mistake was that in my perfectionist mind, I was taking responsibility for things that were beyond my control. I was doing this for a long time and when I did this the stress built up because I spent more time trying to make each of these competing areas of my life as perfect as possible but always feeling like what I was doing was never quite good enough. So I was running pretty hard for a long time but never feeling like I was going OK in any of the segments of my life.
  
- n What I didn't realise was that the chemical in your brain that helps you to process and balance all of these competing interests (*serotonin*) gets used up if you run too hard for too long. For some people, all that's needed to give your brain a chance to replace the serotonin is to have a holiday. Unfortunately, by the time I booked in a holiday, my serotonin was non-existent and the serotonin factory in my head had shut down for the foreseeable future. At the time of taking a holiday my brain wouldn't let me see anything positive that was going on around me.
  
- n When your serotonin goes, the world becomes a scary place. The trigger that started my spiral into the battle with depression was when I was a Section Manager, there was a minor downturn in the market I was working in. Rather than rationally thinking about how we would meet the challenge, my brain worked this way:
  - o Downturn in market; where will I find enough work for the 45 staff I had working for me;
  - o if I can't find them work I'll have to lay some of them off;
  - o if that happens it could result in me getting laid off;
  - o if that happens we won't be able to afford mortgage repayments;
  - o we'll have to sell and move somewhere where we can afford to live with me on the long term dole;
  - o we will lose contact with all our friends; our kids will fall into the wrong crowds.
  
- n Now that line of thought didn't happen over a long period of time. That was in a flash after realizing that we were experiencing a minor downturn. As a result, every experience was clouded in that context of irrational doom and gloom.

- n No matter what wise counsel received from friends and family, I could not get above that dark cloud of impending calamity. So this built and built over a few months. I did irrational things to escape the situation:
  - o I put a spending freeze on my wife Sarah (maybe that wasn't so irrational). My thoughts were that we had to save as much money as possible for the impending demise of my career.
  - o I applied for a number of jobs, went through the interview processes, landed a number of them and then pulled out. I could not see any positive in anything. When you are like this you miss so much. There are so many thoughts going on inside your head that you don't have the brainspace to just enjoy stuff like simply kicking back and watching your kids play with each other.
- n A good friend suggested that maybe I should see a counsellor. I had been doing some work with a not-for-profit set of counselling centres called The Cottage. However, while I appreciated the sentiment, my ego was thinking "*.. counseling; I don't need counseling. That's for people with psychological issues.*"

## **The Breakdown**

- n One Thursday morning I fronted up at breakfast with some mates where I thought I could chat about what was on my mind, but I just turned into a blubbing mess. My friends helped pull me together and then I headed off to work.
- n I got to work, sat down at my computer, and at that point the hard drive in my brain shut down and I could not think straight enough to type anything. My only thought was "... I've got to contact the Cottage." I called and Nicki, the counsellor who answered the phone, said that I should come straight down.
- n I jumped in the car and got there as fast as I could. As soon as Nicki and I started talking I became a blubbing mess again. It was like the dam holding in my angst just gave away. This was pretty unusual, because I'm not usually a crier. Looking back, that experience was almost a relief, but little did I know that this was the start of my experience into the weird world of depression.
- n Nicki sent me to my GP who was awesome. We discussed where I was at and what I was feeling and he concurred with Nicki that I was suffering from a major depressive event. He prescribed some medication for me and ran through what I was going to experience in the next couple of weeks while the medication to replace my serotonin kicked in.
- n At the time I wasn't quite sure what some of the coping mechanisms that Nicki was telling me about were for but unfortunately it wasn't to be long before I found out.
- n What came next were the darkest two weeks of my life. Everything that my GP and Nicki said would happen did. That first night I woke up in absolute panic. This wasn't being a bit agitated. It was like nothing I had experienced. It was bordering on psychosis.

- n I had been in and out of sleep and whenever I woke I would have these visions of words flashing up in front of me on something like a billboard saying "Self harm". I had never put these words together before, let alone think of harming myself, and this absolutely freaked me out. I was in total panic and didn't want to be anywhere near the knives in the kitchen. Needless to say this totally freaked Sarah, who called hospitals to find out what to do.
- n Thankfully Sarah remembered that Nicki had said when things get totally out of control, concentrate on breathing. Count your breathing as it can give you a sense of being able to control one thing in a world that will be totally out of control.
- n So I spent the rest of that night in the fetal position in bed counting my breaths. It's probably obvious, but it was not a great night. For the next week Sarah and I managed to convince the kids that I had a bad flu. I sat under covers on the lounge, pretty much in the fetal position counting my breaths. I was going to counseling with Nicki every couple of days and this gave me something to look forward to because while it was hard actually opening up to someone, I felt that this was the only way to get through this out of control situation.
- n I should say, my kids are older now, and I have shared with each of them, at a time they could better understand, what I had learned from my experience with depression. Thankfully, this has helped them when they have had school friends suffering worse than I did, My kids were able to understand and effectively be there for their friends.
- n During that first week, rational thought was a long way from me. I was scared for no real reason. I was freaked by the words "Self harm" flashing up at me constantly. I only felt safe when someone was with me. This put a huge strain on Sarah, but it was awesome to see my close friends pitch in and babysit me when Sarah needed a break. It must have been weird for my mates to see me like I was but they just sat with me and listened and kept my illness to themselves. It was great to have them caring for me.
- n My boss at the time, Steve Linforth, was awesome. He understood because he had seen a relative go through something similar.
- n Just a funny story during this period. My mum and dad tried to help out but their understanding of depression was similar to mine prior to me suffering from it. Their solution to snap me out of it was to come over with multiple re-runs of their favourite comedy, "*Everybody Loves Raymond*". Their idea was if they could make me laugh I would be all better. While their intentions were great, their total disconnect with where I was at was hard to take. I ended up giving them a book on depression so they could get a better understanding.

- n People who are depressed aren't sad, so trying to cheer them up is a waste of time and, if anything, it isolates sufferers more because it reinforces that people don't understand what they are going through.
- n When you are depressed, you feel emotionally dead. There is no emotion; happy or sad – just nothing.

## **Starting to recover**

- n One of the important misconceptions that was cleared up for me after about a week of being on the *medication* was that it didn't dull my mind. On the contrary, it sharpened my thinking and gave me great clarity. Many people resist the medication but please don't. The medication enables you to have enough clarity of mind to make the counseling effective. They work together in the healing process.
- n It was amazing, but after about a week and a half, I was feeling significantly better and the weird thoughts were starting to recede. I felt well enough to start thinking about going back to work. In saying that, I was still waking up everyday to the distinct images of the words "self harm". When I went back to work, I was seeing Nicki every two weeks for counseling. While it was hard, it was great to actually peel back some of the layers of my personality to try to discover how I got to the position I was in.
- n The path to depression is different for everyone. There is no one trigger to the pit and there is no one formula to get out of it. The best solution is to know the warning signs and get help before you find yourself in the pit.
- n My experience was intense, but it was also the type of depression that has the best recovery rate. I have a good friend who suffers chronic depression that is debilitating to the point of sporadic hospitalization. For him, this keeps recurring and has continued for nearly 20 years. So in comparison, I had it easy.
- n For me, counseling was really good to help me to see that I was a perfectionist who was impossible to please. Even when I knew I had achieved something and I was complimented for it I would palm it off and still find fault in what I had done. This perfectionist mentality was prevalent in my attitude to my work, my family and pretty much all other aspects of my life.
- n My attitude set me up to fail at all of these things constantly. My work was never up to the standards I set myself. I was never a good enough father or husband.
- n When you are a perfectionist who takes responsibility for things that aren't your responsibility, the load can be very heavy to bear. I really had to learn to pull back from being a perfectionist and I had to learn to accept that not everything was my responsibility. These are things that I still struggle with at times but, let me tell you that when these lessons sunk in, it was like a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders.

- n It probably took about a year of medication and counseling before I started to feel relatively balanced again and did not have dark thoughts coming in and out of my mind. I could function in all aspects of life, but it was when I was on my own that some of the dark thoughts crept in.

## **It's a significant event**

- n Depression is a significant event in someone's life. I remember a mate asking me, after about a year, whether I still thought about depression at all. My response was "everyday". And I'd have to say that 10 years + on, it is still the case. While many recover from depression, you never forget. Similar to your life being defined before or after significant events, there is a constant reminder of life before and life after suffering from depression.
- n While I would never want to wish depression on anyone, it is something I would never swap. I have learned so much through the experience.
  - o I'd have to say that I was pretty hard-hearted toward those suffering emotionally and psychologically. Experiencing depression has opened my eyes to this not being something you have control over and you can just snap out of. It is an illness, just like a heart attack, that you have little control over.
  - o Thankfully, I've been able to be used with family and friends and here at work over the past 10 + years to help in a few situations with people suffering from stress, anxiety and depression and for that I am truly grateful.
  - o The event has helped me to better see the many blessings that my life is full of. The experience has helped me to stop taking responsibility for things that aren't my responsibility. I now see perfectionism, in the extreme, as a negative rather than wearing it as a badge of honour.
  - o I am able to have the brain space and emotional strength to be a possibility thinker rather than looking for impending doom that is highly unlikely to occur.
- n Some real positives I have seen in my time with depression are:
  - o You can recover to live a productive life. Since my major encounter with depression, I was still able to progress at work in some roles that were, and are, still fairly high pressure.
  - o More people are talking about depression and anxiety in our society and more sufferers are willing to talk about their experience. At the time of my event, I kept it quiet at work because there was the chance it could be a career killer at that time and with that leadership.
  - o Now, there is greater acceptance in the workplace that depression and anxiety are common.
  - o At SKM previously, and now at Jacobs, we spend a lot of money on safety. We train our staff on all aspects of safety so that we can minimize the risk of physical injury or worse. About 18 months ago we looked at our health and safety stats and realized that most of the physical injuries that occur are minor in nature and rarely require time off work, yet we spend so much money on injury prevention.
  - o While less in number, incidents of stress related illnesses (including depression and anxiety) in the workplace require significantly more expenditure to get people back to work, yet we had spent very little on preparing our managers to help prevent incidents of stress-related mental illness. Thankfully, this has changed and we have rolled out a managers' training program in Australia, in consultation with Beyond

Blue (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>) to better equip our people managers to identify warning signs and put measures in place to get staff the right help.

- n I could talk for hours about my experience. Depression is an illness. If you suffer from it, it is not because of a weakness in you. Get help and get it sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, many of the crimes and murder suicides that we see on our news have all the symptoms of a psychotic episode that probably started with depression or anxiety and remained untreated.
- n If you are suffering, don't let it go unchecked. Speak to your GP or contact a counsellor or our EAP provider and talk it through. If you have an illness that affects your heart you get it treated. If you have a mental illness it should be no different; you get it treated. If you or a family member are suffering, you have access to some great counselling services through the Jacobs EAP service. Reports from people who have used the EAP service have been hugely positive.
- n If you suspect a friend or a work colleague to be suffering, ask them, "R.U.O.K" and be there for them and just listen.
- n Happy to answer questions.