

# Protecting our Mental Health

by Claire Gallagher

Ennis-based counsellor and psychotherapist Eamon Fortune says that protecting our mental health must become as important as caring for our teeth.

## Eamon Fortune spoke to Claire Gallagher.

“Talk about it get it out there - suicide is killing our young people and older people as well. Get it out there. Speak about it. People know it is happening anyway.”

That is the message from Ennis-based counsellor and psychotherapist Eamon Fortune who maintains that protecting and caring for our mental health must become as commonplace as caring for our teeth.

The adolescence and adult counsellor said that counselling should be part of our lives, without any stigma, judgement or fear.

Going to a counsellor should be spoken about in the same way, as people would discuss going to the dentist, doctor or even hairdresser - just a normal activity that is undertaken for the wellbeing of the person.

The counsellor believes that only then will people be able to care for their mental health and start to take action before issues gets to emergency proportions.

Reducing suicide is something we have to talk about without fear, he told *The Clare People*, if society is to bring it into the open and deal with it.

“It is about getting society to talk more about suicide and understanding what brings a person to that point,” said Mr Fortune.



“People must seek help through therapy rather than self-medicate through drugs and alcohol or both.”

“What strikes me is there are a lot of sites (internet) and information that will tell you what to do when you are feeling suicidal. A lot won't steer you in the right direction long before you get to that point.”

Mr Fortune, who spent most of his training placement working in an Ennis secondary school, said that getting into schools and making counselling part of young people's lives is the only way to “normalise it”, even as they grow into adulthood.

“If we can get more involved in the schools and nip it in the bud. I believe there should be counsellors in every school.

“It was very interesting to see while working there [school], the stigma around counselling was almost dispelled. You would hear them talking in corridors about ‘I am going down to see my counsellor’. There was no stigma around it at all.

“The service is there in the school, the ethos is in the school. It is normalised, so I think it is something that should be in every school, but what is happening in schools is that they are cutting the hours. It is interesting that they are doing the opposite to what they should be doing.

“It is easier to get to the root of a problem with a teenager rather than someone my age because we add layers and layers over it and bury it.

It takes a lot of counselling to peel back the layers to get to the root of the problem. It is different with a teenager they are not as long in this life," he said.

Mr Fortune has called on the Government to do a more in-depth study on mental health and suicide. "If they did a bit more advertising about the number of deaths out there it would help. They did a huge campaign around roads deaths."

The Clare counsellor believes that getting men in the door of the counsellor's office is particularly difficult, and maintains that if this can be "normalised", particularly for this gender, lives could be saved.

"It is about getting rid of the stigma for men that it is ok to talk about it and reducing the number of suicide," he said.

Having worked in the construction industry for years, this now qualified counsellor is well aware of how difficult men find it to ask for help. Now as a mental health professional, significantly more women seek his assistance as opposed to men.

"You don't see as many men as women coming in relation to domestic abuse for example," he explained.

"I can only remember off the top of my head one man coming to see me around my own age (40s - 50s). I'd say 99 per cent are women or young women. I have young men coming in which would be an increase in that percentage as well, but that figure is still very low compared to women. There would be cases where children are quite young [and they seek help] and one was a young man. The young man came in off his own bat and the others came through parents."

Quoting a national report from 2005, Mr Fortune said six per cent of men and 15 per cent of women suffer extreme domestic abuse; 26 per cent of men and 29 per cent of

women suffer domestic abuse, where severe abuse and minor incidents are combined; 13 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women suffer physical abuse or minor physical abuse; and 29 per cent of women, one in three, and only five per cent of men, one in 20 report it to the Gardaí.

So why the chronic under reporting by men?

"There is the whole thing around a fear of being ridiculed. You don't report this. There is a fear that they will be told 'will you ever go back and cop on and stand up to her'. 'How are you allowing this to happen?'" he said.

"I am wondering because of the under-reporting with men, and it is less likely of men coming in to talk about it as well, and that in itself can link to suicide.

"These men are thinking 'Where do I go with this? Do I tell my friend my wife is beating me? What do I do about this?' These questions all add more pressure," he said.

These men need to know there are counsellors there to help he said.

"They don't do that however, and the figures speak for themselves. We are the fourth highest suicide rate in the EU. In 2010 the CSO figures show 486 deaths from suicide - 386 were male and 100 were female. The stats would suggest that it is mostly men that do not deal with their issues."

"There are not as many services in Clare as other counties that is why it is important for people to know what services there are out there to help. Clare seems to get skipped over a lot," he added.


Mr Fortune said that for many the first port of call is to the GP who then refers the person for counselling.

He explained it was important people accessed that help.

"Talk to someone like me. Don't

hold in all the pressure. Release it. Look after your mental health. Realise that it is becoming a more common issue and you can do something to stop it. It is changing but very slowly. People are going in with their issues but very, very slowly.

"It is okay to talk to someone about suicide and understand more about what brings our loved ones to this final stage where they think it is the only way out," he added.

People must start speaking openly about mental health and suicide if it is to be normalised he maintained. 

## References

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## Eamon Fortune

I am an Ennis, Co. Clare-based Counsellor/Psychotherapist working with adults and teenagers for the past four years. I qualified as a therapist in 2010 in PCI College and went on to receive my honours degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy through Middlesex University. I work with clients who present general issues such as bullying, sexuality, domestic abuse, depression, anxiety, sexual abuse, anger behaviour, relationships, bereavement, eating-disorders, low self-esteem, stress and trauma. My client base would come from referrals from General Practitioners and also from a local domestic abuse service. If you have any views or discussions you may like to have on the above article, I can be contacted at eamonfortune@gmail.com