

Matthew Johnstone's interview: I had a black dog

Magazine: Il Cambiamento – Dal Virtuale al Reale

Journalist: Massimo Nardi

Url: www.ilcambiamento.it

1. Mr. Johnstone, the OMS used your video for its campaign. Where do you find the inspiration to write the book?

I suppose the inspiration came from the experience of depression itself coupled with what I did for a living which was being a creative in advertising – my job was all about communicating simply and affectively. I took the same methodology to explaining depression as I would an ad – visually with few words. This little book has now been published in over 20 countries and the video of I Had a Black Dog has had over 4 million views. 2015 is the ten year anniversary of the book, it still blows me away how much the book affects people - in a positive way.

2. On your site, you write depression had been in and out of your life since your late 20's. When did you realize to be depressed?

As I mentioned I had a successful career in advertising, this job is all about being on, being up, winning business, impressing clients, winning awards, being relevant and so forth. Having depression was like walking through a tar pit wearing 10 soaking wet blankets, into a head wind, on an uphill gradient – it was two totally different universes. I had been to see various psychologists and psychiatrists who told me I was 'depressed' but because of my ego, because I was a 'man' and because of the very industry I worked in I chose (foolishly) not believe it and to ignore it.

3. How did you face it?

Well badly to begin with but once I began to realize that it wasn't getting any better or it wasn't going to go away I finally succumbed to the fact that I had to do something serious about it which entailed me really beginning to look after myself. There are many facets to combatting mental health issues such as anxiety or depression but acknowledging that there is a problem to yourself and others then finding the right help is key. As I like to say 'there is no shame in asking for help, the only shame is missing out on life'. Lowering stress levels, learning good communication skills, exercise, meditation, mindfulness and having a good support network are vital.

4. One of depression's causes is the job loss. Our magazine, for example, highlights stories about change of life and work. Do you think that our social and economic system is wrong and that could it cause depression?

There is absolute truth in the fact that money does not bring us happiness but in the end everyone wants a roof over their head, to be able to educate and feed our children and so forth. Money is security, so the lack of it can have a profound affect on our wellbeing and world view. How someone responds to job loss or economic woes really comes down to how resilient or resourceful they are and what sort of support network they have.

5. There are various ways to treat the disease. Even the drug. Some data highlight the increase in suicides among patients treated with psychotropic drugs. What do you think about it?

I'm not sure that I'm qualified to comment on this but I do know that Australia (where I live) it's the 2nd most prescribed country in the OECD for anti depressants – Iceland is number 1. We're only a population of 24 million and looked upon as the happy or lucky country. In a time when everything is becoming instant, people want the same when their lives aren't going to plan. Apparently doctors are becoming increasingly time poor and on average around 10 minutes with a patient. Then you have the downward pressure of insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies – the quickfix comes in a way of medication which isn't always the answer. I believe people suffering mental health issues are like fine, but perhaps temperamental sports car that needs the right tuning and petrol mix to operate well. Care, real understanding and good management are key when taking on this type of medication – not 'take these and get back to me in six weeks.'