

# It's OKAY *to be* SAD

Living North columnist Dr Maurice Duffy explains why he sees sadness like a wall between two gardens, but whatever that wall is made of, it's okay to admit that the wall is there

I often describe sadness as a wall. A wall made of glass for some as they can see happiness but cannot seem to grasp it. A wall of straw for others where kindness and positivity can blow it away. A wall of rocks for others where help, listening, support and counselling are needed to navigate a way to a brighter future.

On the BBC this week I was asked for advice on dealing with the stress that caring for someone can impose on our mental health. Sometimes it's not good enough to be strong now because things will get better. Yes, it might be stormy now, but sometimes we cannot get it out of our heads that it will rain forever, and this pain will never end.

Mental illness is a broad term. It doesn't always reflect what a person is actually dealing with and it can be hard to know the difference between the regular ups and downs of life, and mental illness or health concerns like depression and anxiety.

We often find that people experiencing mental health concerns feel ashamed, weak as individuals, and worried about how their family and colleagues might react if they talk about it. However, the only thing more exhausting than depression is pretending that you are ok.

Minimising a person's feelings by what I call a positivity overload might help those whose depression/stress sadness is a wall of straw, but it can have the direct opposite effect on others.

What I call 'negative validation' that is, supportive comments and behaviours that communicate that the feelings, actions, or responses of those suffering are normal, and that simple positive words or thoughts can resolve the situation, will not be well received by people with low self-esteem and whose wall is made of rocks.

On the other hand, people with high self-esteem and walls of straw will tend to respond well to either positive reframing or negative validation.

I would suggest that we never urge a depressed person to snap out of it, suck it up, tough it out, or just get over it. And don't tell them the sun will rise tomorrow. None of this is to say the cheer-uppers using positivity are bad friends or partners, or that they lack empathy. It's simply hard for people who have high self-esteem to be fully empathetic when dealing with people who lack it because that is not their own mind mood.

The question I ask of somebody that's silently struggling is, what are you thinking? My advice when it's the right time and wanted is: Let me listen. I am happy to sit here silently with you. Yes, it is difficult, no I cannot take all the pain away, but if you choose you don't have to live this way. You don't have to struggle in silence. You can be un-silent. You can live with a mental health condition, you can live as a carer, so long at some stage and at your pace you open up to somebody about it, because it's really important you share your experience with others so that you can get the help that you need.

Probably the greatest advice I think anyone can offer is, if you suffer, know that I stand with you quietly for as long as you need. I want to understand your pain. I'm so sorry you feel that way.

These days people want quick fixes to difficult problems. But healing doesn't happen in a day. There is no pill or treatment that can heal you within an extremely short amount of time, which is why it is essential to remind yourself that healing takes time. When caring for someone else you might experience challenges and difficult feelings such as:

**Stress and worry.** Where you spend a lot of time thinking about your health or others' health and what will happen in the future.

**Burnout.** Where you feel you are just going through the motions of life and this is destiny. Burnout is nature's way of telling you you've been going through the motions of caring, but your soul has departed.

**Anxiety.** Many carers say that they feel a constant anxiety about the health of the person they care for, or their own health.

**Isolation and loneliness.** This can be a major challenge because some people are always on call and there is no respite.

**Less time for yourself.** You probably have less time to look after yourself, for example to be physically active, eat healthy food and relax.

**Money worries.** You may have to pay for extra care, medical or travel costs.

**Lack of sleep.** If you support someone who needs help at night – or you're very worried and stressed – you may not get as much sleep as you need.

**Guilt, frustration and anger.** You may feel frustrated if you've given up parts of your own life, or feel you have no choice about the situation. You might end up directing this anger at family or the person you care for which could make you feel guilty. Take time to be compassionate to yourself.

If you feel like any of the above then there is help out there and you must talk to someone.

My generic advice to the carer who some days feels like screaming out loud, who feels their very soul is departing, who is hating themselves for starting to resent the person they love and want to care for is:

Self-care is vital and you must forgive yourself and talk to yourself as someone you love.

Remember so far, you've survived 100 percent of your worst days. You're doing okay. Let's take one day at a time.

You must find a way to get some respite and replenish lost energy. Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you.

Do not beat yourself up for your feelings. You are only human you don't have to have it all together all the time.

Be honest with the person you care for and remember they may not know what they are going through. Tell them how much you care but it's hard.

Find your local carers support groups – they can be vital in giving you the support you need and helping you speak to people in similar situations.

Make the time to do things that you enjoy, such as walking the dog, getting exercise and meeting friends.

Acknowledge that you may not be able to 'fix' the person you are caring for but that you are there to help and support them.

Your breathing is your greatest friend. Use meditation to return to it and you will find greater inner peace. Start by doing it for five minutes a day.

Create a new self-care practice every day. Moments/minutes where you calm your mind and focus exclusively on other things.

*Dr Maurice Duffy is Visiting Professor at Sunderland, consulting coach to the NHS, the Australian cricket team, Durham Cricket Club, international golfers, rugby and many sports people, and also coaches many senior FTSE 100 business leaders and politicians around the world. Find out more at [www.mauriceduffy.com](http://www.mauriceduffy.com) or follow him on twitter @thebeaksquawks*