

Church campaigns can help lift stigma from mental health

Nick Benson

We must stamp out the stigma associated with mental health issues, the director of a Catholic mental health project has warned.

Ahead of this year's World Mental Health Day, which falls on Tuesday, 10th October, Ben Bano, director of Welcome Me as I Am, which promotes mental health and dementia awareness in parishes and deaneries, has urged Catholics to offer support to those who suffer from mental health issues.

"As World Mental Health Day approaches its a good opportunity for parish communities to reflect on how we can be a welcoming environment for those with mental health issues who are often likely to be on the fringes of our parish community," Mr Bano told *The Universe*.

"I recently ran a programme of mental health awareness sessions in in parishes across the Diocese of Westminster in partnership with Caritas Westminster and there is plenty of scope for this approach elsewhere."

Princes Harry and William have helped to raise the profile of mental illness within the past 12 months by candidly discussing their own experiences of the condition.

Earlier this year the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry spear-headed Heads Together, a mental health initiative which combines a campaign

to tackle stigma and change the conversation on mental health with fundraising for a series of innovative new mental health services.

As previously reported in *The Universe*, the royal trio commissioned a series of films as part of the Heads Together campaign to encourage people to talk about psychological issues.

The Bishop of Arundel & Brighton, Richard Moth, who is the lead Catholic bishop for mental health, praised the 10 films, which featured both celebrities – including former England cricket captain Andrew Flintoff, rapper Professor Green and comic Ruby Wax – and ordinary people describing the life-changing conversations where they opened up about problems such as anxiety or depression.

At the time, Bishop Moth described the films as "an important step in raising awareness" and said it was important to promote discussions on mental health issues throughout society, particularly among youngsters.

However, Mr Bano pointed out that despite the recent campaigns and publicity to raise the profile of mental health in the community, a great deal of stigma still remains associated with the topic.

"We need to remember that one in four of us is likely to consult our GP over stress related issues," Mr Bano said. "Research suggests that men are much less likely to talk about mental health issues

than women and the suicide rate for men is up to three times greater than that of women," he added.

"There is an increasing focus on the mental health needs of young people in an insecure and often challenging world."

Mr Bano suggested a number of initiatives that parish communities can do to address issues:

- Helping to make welcomers aware of people looking lonely or isolated and ensuring that they are invited to tea and coffee after Mass if possible.
- Inclusion in prayers of intercession for people with mental health as well as physical conditions.
- Organising a 'Healing Mass' for those troubled in mind and body with an opportunity to be anointed as many people find this sacrament very helpful.
- Organising a notice board in the church (perhaps in conjunction with the local MIND charity) on helpful sources of counselling and support.
- Organising a 'mental health first aid' course to equip those in visiting and pastoral roles to be more aware of mental health issues and signpost people for specialist help as required.
- Developing social groups to address loneliness and social isolation, which can be a precursor to mental illness, particularly in older age.

More about 'Welcome Me as I Am' on:
www.welcomemeasiam.org.uk