

Blue Light for change

Sgt Ed Simpson opens up about his battle with depression



According to the mental health charity Mind, 91% of police officers have experienced stress and poor mental health at work. Emergency services staff and volunteers are more likely to experience a mental health problem than other workers.

As a police officer, member of police staff or volunteer, your mental well-being can be affected by work-related factors such as repeated exposure to traumatic events, workload pressures, long working hours, lone working and dealing with abusive people.

Someone who has first-hand experience of a mental health illness is NYP's Sergeant Ed Simpson. Ed is using his experience to help others in similar situations and is working with Mind to raise awareness, challenge stigma and support their new Blue Light Scheme.

In a very frank and open interview, Ed told us how he was diagnosed with depression back in 2012, although at the time, he didn't believe there was anything wrong with him....

"I always regarded myself as a very strong and resilient cop, able to deal with whatever the job could throw at me. I had that shield or veneer which every police officer develops. I suppose it allows us to be almost disconnected from all the tragic and stressful situations we come into contact with every day and able to move onto the next."

It was back in 2008 (four years before his diagnosis) when Ed's mental health began to deteriorate. Unbeknown to Ed, the first signs manifested themselves when, as a Family Liaison Officer, he took the parents of a 17-year-old boy, who had been killed in road traffic collision, to identify his body.

I had been a Family Liaison Officer for seven years up to that point and had dealt with many traumatic and tragic events. This case was just like any other - a 'routine' body viewing following a fatal road traffic collision, I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary, it was something I had done a number of times before.



What was completely different on this occasion was my reaction to his mum's grief.

As I took his parents to identify his body, his mum's reaction was what I can only describe as horrific. She let out a scream which sounded like nothing I had ever heard before. It just devastated me, destroyed my 'shield' and left me feeling so helpless.

She was desperately trying to wake him up, telling him to open his eyes, asking him why he was so cold and what he had done to himself. He was

her baby, and he was dead and there was nothing anyone could do about it. It was just the most awful moment of my police career. I have never been able to get over that experience. I had never experienced a reaction like this before and I would never wish to again.

I can only describe that I felt as though the person I thought I was just completely evaporated in that room. I remember not being able to control my emotions, I was crying, the mother and father were crying, it was a really surreal moment for me. I had always been very strong emotionally and very resilient. I also felt immense guilt as I was meant to be there to support them. I felt like I had failed. I just couldn't understand why I was reacting like this.

I tried to move on as the days, weeks and months passed. I put it down to having just become a father myself, with a seven-month old daughter at home. I kept saying to myself that I just needed to learn how to be a dad and a cop, not just a cop. Although I didn't realise it then – it was unfortunately far more serious. That experience and my reaction to it would slowly grow and grow inside me and eventually manifest into the depression I have today. I can't explain it more than that – I still don't fully understand why myself – I doubt I ever will.

This deterioration took a total of four years before it finally changed me forever. It has been described to me by a doctor as an 'insidious onset of a depressive illness' in that it was something which developed very slowly but was ultimately very damaging.

Everything came to a head when I was working as a custody sergeant in York in 2012. It's a high-pressure environment, often dealing with people who are in crisis, or want to harm themselves. Abusive people are common place, and not just the exception.



It was an immense pressure which forced me further and further on a downward spiral which ultimately led to my depression taking hold. It basically destroyed me.

The last four months of my time in custody are simply a blur now. I remember on occasion having to put my fingers in my ears as all I could hear was 'white noise'. I'm told this is known as 'hyper vigilance' - when everything around you becomes so overwhelming that you can't process or block out what isn't important and focus on what is. I remember going to work, going home, going back to work - my alcohol intake going up and up and starting to become isolated from friends and family. I was living by 15 minute blocks at one point, literally looking at the clock on the wall in custody and thinking, get through this 15 minutes, get through the next 15 minutes. I felt so lonely, yet I was surrounded by family and friends who loved and cared for me.

At the lowest points, around June 2012, I was driving to work each day wishing I was dead. Thankfully, although I didn't want to live anymore, I didn't take that next step. Looking back now, it was a completely irrational thought, but at the time, it was rational to me which is the scary part. I didn't want to live like that because if that was life, I didn't want to be any part of it, regardless of the fact I had a wife and daughter at home. I was just a mess. Nothing like the man I once was. It's difficult to talk about that still. I hate depression the most for that.

I just had immense feelings of failure, I was inadequate, I was no good as a dad, I was no good as a husband, and certainly no good as a cop anymore.

On Saturday 16 June 2012, it all came to a head. I went into custody to start another shift, it was packed from a busy Friday night but I just couldn't

connect with what was going on. I just felt lost, like I wasn't really there and it was all a dream. Then, suddenly, it was like I just switched off. It was as though my fuse had blown and I shut down.

I felt calm. I stopped feeling anything. I no longer cared about anything or anyone – including my wife and my daughter which is just heart breaking to recall – but that is the reality of what depression can do to you when it reaches its peak.

A few days before, I had developed a rash over the right side of my abdomen which I did not attribute to having anything to do with the way I was feeling.

A nurse in custody who had over time noticed that something wasn't quite right with me and could see I was really struggling that day took me to one side and spoke to me. She recommended that I go to casualty to be checked out as she suspected the rash to be shingles which was subsequently confirmed.

Shingles is a well-documented physical manifestation of high levels of stress so it was no surprise really looking back. I returned to work a few hours later and spoke with my line manager.

If they had just said to me: "How are you doing?" I would probably have responded with: "It's shingles, I'm alright, I'll be back in a few days", but they didn't, they said: "How are you doing, because you look absolutely terrible and you don't seem yourself?" Because they had acknowledged that I looked unwell and I didn't seem to be the same somehow, I felt able to say in that moment: "No, I'm not alright". It was like a huge weight had been lifted from me.

By expressing this to someone else, it forced me to realise that I needed help and what I had been experiencing was not normal. I sought



help from my GP who diagnosed me with depression. When I first heard the word depression it was a huge shock. I remember saying to my GP "I can't possibly have depression as I'm not sad."

“ I have learned now that depression is not about sadness, for me, at times it can be a feeling of terrible hollowness, sometimes an unexplainable sense of loneliness, a lack of self-worth or feeling that I have no purpose in life and a loss of who I am or was.

This moment was just the start of the journey. It was good that I had finally figured out that there was something wrong with me, but I was in a bit of a state to say the least. I had gone right off the edge of the cliff and felt as though I was nothing. My identity and purpose had disintegrated. I wasn't able to be at work, and not being at work gave me even more of a lack of purpose. It was like a vicious circle.

Sadly at the time, due to NHS cuts, I was unable to access any treatment for 19 months.

However, I came back to work after a year, having built myself up through a combination of medication and help from the charity Mind. Initially, I was reluctant to get medication as I viewed it as yet another weakness. But as my doctor said to me: "If you came in here wanting treatment for any physical illness, I would give you tablets to help and you would probably not bat an eyelid. Depression is just another kind of illness (depression) which is within another part of the body and medication will help you cope and recover from that illness."

Reluctantly I did start to take medication. I remember being stood over the kitchen sink with the tablet in one hand and a glass of water in the other for what seemed like hours.

I'm glad that I did take it, as slowly, after about a month, I started to level off. I am still on anti-depressants now, they haven't cured me, but they have

helped me adjust and cope with the impact that depression has, and continues to have on my life.

While I was away from work, I became involved with the charity Mind. I had hit rock bottom and started to realise I needed to try something to help myself as I couldn't wait for the NHS due to the waiting lists.

I contacted Mind and was put on the list to attend a group session for people suffering with mental health difficulties. I was quite reluctant at first as I didn't know who I was meeting or what to expect. But it was just a room full of 'normal', everyday people from all walks of life. Listening to other people made me realise I wasn't the only one. At the time, I truly believed that no-one else could possibly be in the same situation as me.



The whole experience has been completely life-changing. My career as a police officer is now heading in a totally new and unexpected direction. This may sound strange but I genuinely believe that I am in a privileged position as a police officer with a lived experience of mental illness and I don't see this as a weakness anymore.

I can understand looking back at all of those people I have dealt with displaying mental health conditions and have a better understanding of the horrendous impact it can have on your rational thought and well-being. I am determined that something good will come out of this experience otherwise it will always be just a bad experience I had and nothing more.

When I came back to work I thought I would be the only police officer who had ever had depression. I'd never spoken to anyone else about it, never heard of anyone else with it and I thought I would be completely alone. But when I came back to work and people asked where I had been, I decided I would be totally honest. To my surprise, people really opened up and would say: "Same here, I've been on anti-depressants", or "my husband or another member of my family has depression" and I realised just how big an issue it was and I was far from being alone.

It's just not something we talk about in the same way we would talk about a physical illness. I have found that just talking about it with people, having a normal conversation about it, is actually quite therapeutic – but tiring too.

As a population in the UK, there is a stigma attached to depression and mental health conditions making it feel taboo to talk about it. I want to share my story with you and say that I believe it is okay, it's not abnormal and you are not alone and it should be no surprise that people working within the police are at a far greater risk of developing mental health illness than the general public due to the situations we have to deal with.

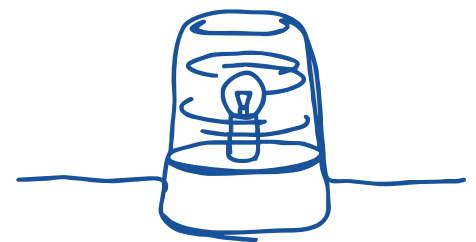
I found out that Mind were launching their Blue Light scheme. It was the perfect timing for me and an ideal opportunity to be part of the change needed. I proudly became the NYP Blue Light champion and have since been privileged to be working directly with Mind to use my experience to assist them in developing the Blue Light Scheme which is slowly building momentum and will soon be here in North Yorkshire.

I have been involved with the Blue Light Scheme quite heavily over the past few months, from speaking at their annual staff conference in July, to a national media interview, a webinar and taking part in a working group to help develop their next five-year strategic plan for 2016 - 2021. I am also on the cover of the small booklet they have put together (which will soon be available to every officer in NYP) called 'How to manage your mental well-being'.



I finally feel I have a purpose again. I hope that sharing my story, and opening up about my experience will help others in similar situations to understand that they are not alone and give them the courage and understanding to seek help.

If you have been affected by anything you've read in this article, please know that you can speak to welfare, colleagues, family and friends. Likewise if you are concerned about anyone else, please seek advice, don't keep it to yourself. You never know how much you could be helping someone.



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http://subsites/ValuingPeople/Pages/Well-being_programme.aspx