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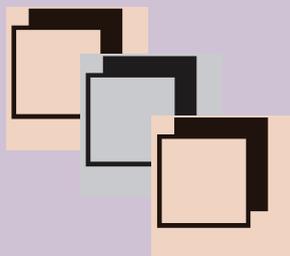
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Comment

It is a difficult subject mental health. We are primates, we need physical contact to remain healthy. Something we are being denied by a government keen to, at least appear to be, controlling the uncontrollable pandemic. As we move into 2021 with the probability of an uncertain economy with high unemployment, we hear much about the way that is affecting people. The tactic seems to be to use figures – infection rates and deaths – to keep us under control. And of course closing down hospitality venues and retail outlets to keep everyone apart. I like to relate the figures, in the thousands, to the 63 million of us that live in the UK.

I am not suggesting that a nasty disease for which, at the time of writing, there is no cure and only the promise that a vaccine programme will be rolled out in the near future, should not be taken seriously.

Aside from the physical problems associated with Covid-19 we hear much of the way it is affecting people's mental health. Now I have no training that qualifies me to comment on this issue, any more than do the many people, journalists mainly, who seem keen to draw our attention to it. We are asked to keep an eye on our colleagues for signs of mental health issues and offer support. The organisation Mates in Mind does a splendid job offering advice and resources to help. (www.matesinmind.org)

The problem for me is that this all makes 'mental health' a bit too fashionable. There is a big, huge, difference between clinical depression and just being worried about your situation. Why is it that a situation one person will cope with will turn another suicidal? Few of us are qualified to say and, it has to be said, that many people who suffer from depression appear to have no reason to at all.

My father suffered what was then known as a 'nervous breakdown'. He was a senior, very senior, executive with a fair sized firm in the motor trade. It was the fifties, 'nervous breakdown' was the go-to disease of the executive classes. There was no stigma, it was talked about, as in "When I had mine..." My point is that these guys had secure jobs, above average incomes and drove brand new executive cars – Jags, Humbers and the like. I met them. They formed my parents social circle. OK they all had responsibilities, some were self employed and, you could say, they were all self-made men but to all intent, in post war fifties Britain, 'they never had it so good'.

And yet, many, were not immune when it came to mental health problems.

Also, about fifty years ago, I had a friend who had real depression. Not just worry; hospital, frequently, attempted suicide, often. Again, with professional qualifications, a good secure job and a decent income. None of which made her immune.

And I haven't even mentioned Winston Churchill's 'black dog'.

I think we need to be careful. It seems too easy, in an attempt to draw awareness to, what is undoubtedly a problem, to turn it into a pandemic. It is no good telling people who have serious worries to just "Buck-up!" But being too sympathetic and offering advice can be just as bad. Being listened-to is often all people need. Sometimes there is nothing like 'getting it off of your chest'. Just talking out loud can often trigger a solution.

If you have a colleague, a friend, who has worries, don't try too hard to help. You just might push them over the edge. My friend discovered that she was the solution, not the problem, and once she discovered that, made a complete recovery.

John Roper

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