

IT'S OK TO TALK

Many front-line professionals have distressing or traumatic experiences at some time in their career. **Andy Elwood** was a military search and rescue helicopter winchman, and on learning about the prevalence of male suicide, found ways to encourage people to talk about mental health.



KEY POINTS:

- **Suicide is among the leading causes of death among younger men in some countries.**
- **#MenDoLunchDay on 14th Nov is a campaign to start more conversations about mental health.**
- **Talking about mental health and suicide saves lives.**
- **Get your '5-a-day' for good mental health.**

Life as a Helicopter Winchman

My patient was trapped in a Land Rover, which had been compressed and misshaped after the improvised explosive device (IED) had gone off during a patrol in Afghanistan. It was the middle of the day and over 50 degrees C. The weight of my body armour was pressing down on my shoulders and restricting me getting into the enclosed space to assess the injured soldier. I could feel the threat to my own life, as well as an immense pressure to get him onto the helicopter for a swift transfer to the hospital in Camp Bastion.

I was no longer on my tour of Afghanistan as a Paramedic on the RAF battlefield rescue helicopter. I was on holiday in France, and it was five years later. I closed my eyes in the shower but I could still see his face. I turned

the water to cold and I could still feel the 50-degree heat of the day. Despite scrubbing and scrubbing at my body, I could still feel sand on my skin. I was naked in the shower, but I could still feel the weight of my body armour.

I quickly wrapped a towel around myself and came through into the small apartment to join my wife. The flashback was over, but my wife knew something was wrong immediately. "What's happened in there? Are you OK? What's wrong?" she asked.

I was still trying to work out what had just happened. I wasn't sure I wanted to burden her with these images and what I'd been through, but I was genuinely scared for myself and my future. I was thinking, "Why me? Why now? Does this mean I have PTSD? Is this the end of my flying career?"

We already had trust, but my wife made me feel I could tell her anything that day. She listened intently. She didn't interrupt. She asked open questions and allowed silences as I thought about what I would say next. She didn't judge me for what I told her. She accepted me as I was.

My wife and I were still able to go outside that day in France and gradually I began to feel better. It did take me a few days to go back into the shower, but I haven't had another flashback since. Talking about it really helped.

I was straight back to work when we returned from holiday. I was happy and continued to fly and progress in my career. I also began delivering crew resource management training for healthcare in my spare time.

The following year, 2016, was the '22 challenge'. It involved 22 press ups to promote awareness for veteran suicide prevention, highlighting the 22 veteran suicides per day in the US. Having seen the horrors of war first-hand, this campaign resonated with me. I was shocked to learn that suicide was the number one cause of death for men between 20 and 49 years of age in the UK. Worldwide, suicide is among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years in

some countries, and the second-leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds globally (WHO, 2020). When I was nominated to take part in the challenge by a friend, I decided to accept.

I got permission to use the coastguard rescue helicopter in my videos for my 'Big22' challenge campaign. The aircraft did press ups with me in one video and winched me into some places not everyone could access for other videos. It gave people a glimpse into what it might be like to fly on a search and rescue aircraft, and what the crews might go through on their missions to save lives, 24/7.

#itsoktotalk

As the campaign caught people's interest, I began travelling to other 999 bases and inviting other emergency personnel to join me doing press-ups. Very quickly I realised that people on other bases, in other emergency services, all had a lot to talk about when someone created a safe space to do this – whether pilots, fire officers, police officers or ambulance controllers. Out of the campaign grew the tagline #itsoktotalk.

Interest grew so much that I had to reduce the number of aircraft flying in our final video, as my chief pilot didn't want it being viewed as an 'airshow' by the CAA. Our final video had over 45,000 views and as a result, people opened up to me with all kinds of personal stories afterwards.

The best thing to happen as a result of the video was that one man who was in the video had the courage to ask for help. We got him assessed and he received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Having completed a personalised treatment plan, he is now successfully back at work and enjoying family life again.

I became an online advocate for talking about mental health. In 2018 I delivered a mental health workshop, which was attended by the Duke of Cambridge, at the National UK Search and Rescue Conference. My workshop contributed

to the formation of a National Steering group on mental health and wellbeing.

Mental First Aid

Later in 2018 I left search and rescue helicopters – the best job I ever had – because I believed I will help save more lives by working on mental health than I would by flying as a paramedic winchman. I'm now a mental health first aid instructor. I have made it my mission to help reduce male suicide in the UK, by speaking, campaigning and training.

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We face a crisis with three out of every four suicides being male. I grew up in a village in the UK with a suicide rate so high that we were featured on the BBC news. The issue became even closer to my heart, when a colleague, who was my instructor through search and rescue training, ended his own life. As often is the case, he was a person so many of us respected and we never suspected the level of distress beneath his professional mask.

One of the key parts of the mental health first aid course is dispelling the myths around suicide. If you are worried that someone may be thinking about ending their own life, asking directly about suicide is essential. Discussing suicide openly creates safety and trust for an individual to talk about how they actually feel and find support and a way forward.

#MenDoLunchDay

I also deliver campaigns online to reach out to men, especially to encourage them to talk about how they are, and to access professional help. One such campaign is #MenDoLunchDay on 14 November, which I founded in 2018. The idea is to have one day as part of the 'Movember' focus on male health


to take some time out and just talk to others about how you are and what's going on for you. The idea is to ask a man you care about to lunch, ask him how he is, tell him how you are, and then to take a selfie and use the hashtag #MenDoLunchDay. Women have an important role to play in this campaign. Often men who don't feel comfortable talking to their male friends or colleagues will speak to a woman they trust. Both years the campaign has been running, many women asked a man they cared about out to lunch to start a conversation with him about his wellbeing and mental health.

In 2019, the response was fantastic. People got involved at work, looked up old mates they hadn't seen for a long time, and others connected with men around the globe on voice and video chat.

We had a response from men around the globe, including Australia, New Zealand, Panama, USA, Canada, Europe and even Antarctica, where the men had lunch outside in the freezing conditions. The reports of conversations and support were wonderful. The message was that many men didn't feel alone any more and that they now had someone to talk to. They felt better for talking and being listened to, and for listening.

The Power of Listening

This is the power of real listening. It creates human connections and people don't feel alone. Real listening involves creating safety and trust, attending to the person, avoiding judgement, and not offering advice or trying to 'fix' the person. This kills fear and shame, which are barriers to people talking about their feelings and difficulties. Breaking down the stigma around mental health conversations is essential to getting people support when they need it most.

We can all listen to someone and make an impact for someone. Might you do something positive to start the conversation on mental health where you work? 

Mental Health Five-a-Day

We know that we should be aiming for five portions of fruit and veg a day, but what are five things to do daily for good mental health?

- Connect – with the people around you.
- Be active – step outside & enjoy a physical activity.
- Take notice – be curious, catch sight or the beautiful, remark on the unusual.
- Keep learning – learn and try something new, especially if it is fun.
- Give – do something nice for a friend or a stranger. Smile, volunteer, thank someone.



Andy Elwood is a former winchman paramedic with 18 years of experience working on rescue helicopters around the world. He is now a mental health first aid instructor and mental health campaigner.

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Resources

Mental Health at Work. A website curated by Mind, a mental health charity, including resources, toolkits, case studies and blogs. <https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk>

NHS Health Scotland. Animations exploring issues of mental health, suicide, and compassionate conversations. <https://bit.ly/2y4YORS>

World Health Organisation. I had a black dog, his name was depression. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc>

