



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

## Mental health: 50 important facts

Last Saturday's *Ghandi xi Nghid*, the current affairs programme I anchor on Radju Malta dealt with issues surrounding mental health. These last couple of years we have seen this topic popping up occasionally on the national agenda. The truth is that we are nowhere near solving one of the biggest challenges that humanity has been toying with, that is, 'the mind'.

I am listing some facts that emerged from the programme last Saturday which I invite you to reflect on.

Fact 1: One in four persons, that is 25% of our population, that is an estimated 118,750 go through mental health problems out of a population of 475,000 (as in 2017).

Fact 2: Stigma is much less of an issue today than it was 30 years ago - but still exists and still has a negative impact on people suffering from mental health conditions and their families and friends.

Fact 3: There is more awareness on mental health issues with more programmes of awareness on the media. Probably one of the most successful initiatives these last years was Richmond's Mental Health First Aid course offered to a number of people; the general population, students, employees and employers.

Fact 4: Matthew, who was on the panel during the meeting and has a severe condition of Psychosis, speaks about hallucinations, which are sensory experiences, which he has to live with day-in-day-out. He says that at times it is difficult to make a distinction between truth and hallucinations. He explained during the radio show that he spent two years not talking about his condition because he was afraid to do so. He carried this secret with him all alone until he couldn't take it anymore. The external reaction of what was happening to him was interpreted by the people around him as laziness, whilst in fact he was struggling with hallucinations in many of its forms; auditory, tactile, visually, olfactory and gustatory.

Fact 5: Mental health treatment is about dealing with the condition on a medical and social level. One should complement the other - they are equally important.

Fact 6: Miriana, who also was a guest on *Ghandi xi Nghid*, says that even though she has overcome her eating disorders, in her case namely, anorexia and bulimia, she feels that this issue will be 'part of her' for as long as she lives. She also says that there were moments when she was struggling with this condition where she felt that she would never manage to get away from this situation.

Fact 7: Miriana places a lot of value on listening to recovery stories. She says they were fundamental for her own survival.

Fact 8: What is happening around us, the choices we make as a society and community, leaves a lasting impact on our mental health. This I believe is a fact that we need to ponder

about. So maybe it is partially our fault that people are getting sick because of the direction our lifestyle is taking?

Fact 9: There is certainly more awareness on eating disorders.

Fact 10: Miriana said that she can remember the onset of her eating disorder start when she was still 10 years old.

Fact 11: All three guests spoke about the fact that they were struggling with these mental health challenges on their own in their teens, I repeat 'on their own'!

Fact 12: Liam says that he suffered from bi-polar behavior since he was 16 years' old, first triggered by burn-out during his O-Levels. His behavior would fluctuate from being depressive to having abnormally elevated moods. He says that at one stage he spent almost 1 whole month hardly sleeping.

Fact 13: Mental health is largely a chemical imbalance - comments like, 'u eja qum minn hemm', 'u ghamel kuraqq', 'u tint-laqx' are essentially the wrong things to say.

Fact 14: Mental health is largely effected by environmental factors.

Fact 15: Medical treatment, according to Psychiatry Chairman, Dr Anton Grech, is not random but based on diagnosis and what best treatment to use with the less possible side effects on the patient.

Fact 16: The over-use of tranquilizers, that was so 'fashionable' in the past, is now 'a thing of the past' - thankfully!

Fact 17: At the ER at Mater Dei Hospital there is a Psychiatrist on stand-by 24 hours a day.

Fact 18: Ms Stephanie Dimech Sant, CEO at Richmond Foundation said that a support line, 1770 is currently available. This service will be expanded in the coming weeks. In the meantime, 179, 112 and speaking to the family GP are a must if people feel they need help.

Fact 19: Kelsey Renaud, Psychology Practitioner, says that the factors that bring about a person to consider and commit suicide are not homogeneous. From a study she did as part of her Masters in Psychology supervised by Dr Greta Darmanin Kissaun and Dr Kristina Bettenzana, it is estimated that between 1995-2018 there were 635 'successful' cases of suicide, circa 2 persons a month or 24 persons a year.

Fact 20: Dr Anton Grech says that official statistics on attempted suicide do not yet exist but from data collated from Mater Dei Hospital, it is approximated there are 3-5 patients a day (circa 1,800 a year) that enter Mater Dei Hospital following a suicide attempt. This is probably still not the full picture as a number of others might opt

to use private GPs and/or private hospitals once they attempt this behaviour.

Fact 21: A notable change of behavior, together with people speaking about suicide, claiming to feel sad are all significant indicators worthy of note and should not be downplayed or ignored.

Fact 22: There are a lot of community services that are developing in the field of mental health. This is the way forward.

Fact 23: Dr Anton Grech says that research shows that 80% of people who commit suicide would have spoken about what they would be doing in the week before they carry out the act.

Fact 24: In suicide no one can predict the future.

Fact 25: Dr Grech states that it is a myth not to speak about suicide when people are depressed. Research shows that it is important to speak about it as it lessens the burden and consequently the risks.

Fact 26: A relative of a person who committed suicide says that for the family it is not easy to understand and even more so to accept the situation. It is imperative that we develop services that can provide advice and guidance to family members on how to be able to deal with such situations.

Fact 27: This same relative says that in the first instances it is likely that we judge people who say they are unhappy as wanting to disturb the serenity of the family and that s/he is the black sheep of the family - it is the wrong thing to do and say.

Fact 28: Family members still find it difficult to accept that a member of the family is suicidal.

Fact 29: Dr Grech explained that when individuals have hallucinations the brain is experiencing the same action as people who are actually things. In other words, it is 'as real - as real' for them.

Fact 30: At times people with psychosis find it hard to discriminate the actual from hallucinations.

Fact 31: According to Dr Anton Grech we have very good cure and service provision in the mental health sector.

Fact 31: Research shows that people are still afraid to ask for treatment when troubled with mental health.

Fact 32: It is important to have a good quality hospital that does not carry the stigma because if people feel uncomfortable with the hospital services it would be more difficult for people to ask for help.

Fact 33: According to Dr Anton Grech, Mt Carmel Hospital is not fit for purpose - I can't agree more.

Fact 34: Dr Anton Grech,

Chairman of the mental health services says that the objective of his team is to make hospital services 'obsolete'.

Fact 35: *Dar Kenn ghal Sahhitek*, is a state of the art service that provides specialized support services for people with eating disorders.

Fact 36: Work is being done so that mental health treatment that needs hospitalization takes place in Mater Dei Hospital.

Fact 37: Work is progressing well on the new mental health treatment facility in Mater Dei Hospital.

Fact 38: Two new wings at Mt Carmel Hospital have been completely renovated, until MCH can be disbanded.

Fact 39: We need more coordination between the different stakeholders in the mental health sector.

Fact 40: In these last months around 200 residents have been discharged from Mt Carmel Hospital and placed in a number of hostels run by Richmond Foundation and *Suriet il-Bniedem* Foundation.

Fact 41: A section in Mt Carmel Hospital which had very serious structural problems will be demolished and turned into a garden.

Fact 42: Mt Carmel Hospital is ¼ of a mile from one end to another.

Fact 43: Because someone is underweight doesn't mean that one is anorexic. We need to be careful on how we label people.

Fact 44: Having mental health support services within the employment sector are important, it spells success or failure for employees with mental health problems.

Fact 45: Relatives of children with mental health problems said that schools do not understand mental health conditions of children well-enough.

Fact 46: Dr Anton Grech says that medical cannabis has its positive impact. There isn't enough research on the use of medical cannabis, especially in certain medical conditions.

Fact 47: Medical cannabis is not pure CBD and still has relatively high extracts of THC, sometimes more than that of a 'joint'!

Fact 48: Mental health problems start featuring very early on in a person's life.

Fact 49: Liam says that it is important to be open with your friends at school on one's mental health problems. At times school friends just do not understand why the behaviour of a person changes the way it does.

Fact 50: Dr Anton Grech states that our educational system (formal and non-formal) is creating more tension in our children and instead of developing our abilities it is adding more pressure.

"Ghandi xi Nghid"

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