



## PRINCESS DIANA

### WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

<https://youtu.be/k9Ah9seEDFI>

Where do we begin?

From those I have spoken to through my work with Turning Point, the beginning seems to be that women in our society are seen as the carers - the ones who can cope. Whatever life throws at them - they will always cope.

On call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, whether their children are sick, their husbands are out of work or their parents are old and frail and need attending - they will cope. They will cook and clean, go out to work, attend to the needs of those around them - and they will cope.

They may be suffering themselves, from post-natal depression, violence in the home or struggling in a daze of exhaustion and stress to make ends meet - but they will cope.

Strangely, it is women themselves as well as men who believe this to be true. So deep seated is this belief that it can take enormous courage for women to admit they cannot cope, that they may need help. Either from family and friends or the support systems put in place by you the professionals.

Frequently they will attempt to survive it alone, falling help-lessly into a deeper and darker depression as they feel more and more trapped by the life they are leading. As their world closes in on them their self-esteem evaporates into a haze of loneliness and desperation as they retreat further and further from those who could help them.

Many women and men turn to alcohol to numb the pain of their despair. But because it is seen in women as less acceptable to admit to a dependence on alcohol, it often goes unnoticed. They are merely perceived as having a 'rather nervous disposition'. The suffering behind their anxious eyes so often goes unseen.

Sadly, for others the strain becomes too much and their decision to take their own life seems to them the only way of ending their pain. Perhaps they didn't believe they deserved the same support they had given to others?

For those who find the courage tentatively to ask for help the pill for every ill is most often administered. For decades tranquilizers, sleeping pills and anti-depressants have been given to generations of women - three times as many as to men!

These pills, these mother's little helpers have left a legacy of millions of women locked into a terrible torment, doomed to a life of dependence from which there is still very little help to escape. More often than not they retreat into their own private hell behind closed doors. Terrified to go out of their homes into what to them has become a frightening world. Dealing with these pills has now become a greater problem than the 'condition' that caused them to be taken in the first place!

Recently, I met a woman who against the odds had succeeded in getting off the tranquilizers she had been prescribed to help with her post-natal depression. She had been taking these pills for over thirty years! Giving herself permission to give them up had not been easy but with specialist help she had won!

Her biggest realization was that during those years she had completely lost touch with her own identity. She had now discovered that she was no longer the person others believed her to be. The drugs had closed her down. They had managed to turn her into an anxious zombie. At last, she was now able to learn how to live again and become the person she was born to be.

Whether these drugs were given in a genuine attempt to help or whether they were offered as a means of making her more tranquil and acceptable to those around her, the effect can be the same. These pills will tend to make a woman more passive to help her conform to the norm. But whose norm is it?

Isn't it normal not to be able to cope all the time? Isn't it normal for women as well as men to feel frustrated with life? Isn't it normal to feel angry and want to change a situation that is hurting?

Perhaps we need to look more closely at the cause of the illness rather than attempt to suppress it. To accept that putting a lid on powerful feelings and emotions cannot be the healthy option. That to offer women the opportunity to explain their predicament sooner, could be a far more effective use of limited resources, rather than wait until their strength to survive has been sapped.

As long as the real reasons for their problems go unnoticed and unattended, they will continue to pass on to the next generation their dis-ability.

If we as a society continue to disable women, by encouraging them to believe they should only do things that are thought to benefit their family even if these women are damaged in the process; if they feel they never have the right to do anything that is just for themselves; if they feel they must sacrifice everything for their loved ones even at the cost of their health, their inner strength and their own self-worth; they will live only in the shadow of others and their mental health will surely follow. But if we can help to give them back their right to fulfil their own potential and to share that with their family, children or friends, maybe fewer women would find themselves living a life that is bleak beyond belief.

Those women who have taken on the heavy burden of attending to others need also to be attended. Not just for their own sake but for the good of us all. Health and happiness taken at the cost of other's pain and suffering cannot be acceptable. Women have a right to their own 'peace of mind'.

Each person is born with very individual qualities and potential. We as a society owe it to women to create a truly supportive environment in which they too can grow and move forward. But if we are to help the quiet desperate lives lived behind closed doors by so many women, they need to know for certain they are not alone - that real support and understanding is there for them.

I hope this conference will help us to understand the needs of women more clearly and that you will find a way of reaching them more effectively and help to give them back their rightful, mentally healthy life.

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