

“Talking to friends has made things easier”

KEEN ROAD CYCLIST and mountain biker Stuart Potter was diagnosed with clinical depression in 2011. He tells *Rob Hicks* and *Hannah Reynolds* about how he's learning to live with the condition, with the support of his friends and family



One in four people will have a mental health problem in any given year so statistically we are all likely to know or work with someone who has been affected by the issue. Here 36-year-old cyclist Stuart Potter tells his story, while his manager, his riding buddy, his business associate, and his wife

explain how they help him deal with clinical depression. “I got into cycling when I was 16,” Stuart says. “I’d always been into riding my bike with friends, it was a symbol of freedom for me, and once I hit 16 I started going to a college that was 12 miles away. I would ride to college and have the mickey taken out of me by people on the bus because I

was wearing Lycra. I then met a couple of people at college who were a bit more into cycling so that was the start of me buying a proper road bike. “When I had just turned 17 I was on my way home from my pal’s place when a truck hit me. I had no serious physical injuries that I can remember but I was in severe shock for about a month. I seemed to

Kenny Wallace, Stuart’s friend and riding partner

“I can remember when Stuart told me. We were out on our bikes, and although I can’t recall what he actually said, I just remember being surprised followed by being extremely relaxed. I have been through slightly similar things — albeit on a smaller scale — and it felt reassuring that we could bounce off each other.

“Although I could tell something was up I never asked him about it. My belief is that if I decide to investigate what’s going on with Stuart, then that makes it all about me. If the support that he needs is just somebody to be there and not talk about it, then that’s best for him. If he then wants to talk about it, then it’s his choice. It’s not about me.

“I stand in the background and let things ebb and flow so that when he needs my support I can come and help him. A lot of experts say you need to be normal around people with mental health problems. But what is normal? I think the best thing is try and not feel awkward. Be at ease, and accept it. If the time is right to ask questions then ask. If it’s not, then don’t, and make sure you listen.

“At the end of the day, it’s all about knowledge. The gap between those who are experiencing mental health problems and those who don’t understand it is due to a lack of understanding. TV documentaries tend to use the most extreme examples to highlight issues such as depression and that widens the gap even more. In reality, people with mental health problems are normal everyday people and aren’t these monsters. You’ve probably met hundreds of people in your life who have experienced mental health problems, and you were none the wiser. It’s so much more common than some people may think.”

come out of that OK at first but I had post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD].

"PTSD is classed as a form of mental illness and if treated properly it can go away but sometimes the effects of it can stick. What I now know is that a lot of the symptoms of it didn't go away; I just got really good at managing them. The great irony is that all I wanted to do after recovering from the crash was get back into cycling. I got into time trialling and racing — cycling was always an escape.

"I'd always had mood swings and problems coping with certain stressful situations and there have definitely been some darker moments but mostly I ignored it and as long as I could get out on my bike easily and get my head back together that was enough to keep me going.

"My first daughter was born five years ago and that was a whole new level of responsibility. Lack of sleep puts a lot of stress on anyone and on a relationship. At the same time a few things went wrong at work, the business I was running folded and I got another job but got made redundant. Things got more and more difficult to deal with. A mood swing too far frightened me and my wife. Diana insisted I needed to go and talk to someone about it.

"I didn't go to the doctor saying, 'I

have depression.' I went in there saying, 'I don't know why I am here.'

"It all seemed quite straightforward to him. He just said, 'It sounds like you have depression to some degree.'

"That was simultaneously terrifying and enlightening. There is something wrong with me but it does mean there is an explanation for all of this.

"I told a couple of friends initially but not many. My cycling mate Kenny was one. It was really difficult because at the time it was hugely emotional whenever I tried to talk about it, even with someone I really trusted. People you are really close to can be hard to talk to because they are emotionally connected to the situation. It can be really hard to have a frank conversation.

"It's been a long process. Friends come in different categories. There are those you meet up with and can have a laugh — with them it's just general small talk — but there are others who every time you see them you have deep, in-depth conversations. There were only some friends that I could talk to at first because I knew I could tell them without them feeling uncomfortable. The more I talked about it the easier it got and the more it helped me understand things.

"The best thing a friend can do is to let you know they are there for you if you need anything. You can't push

Sian Harris, Stuart's friend and business associate

"When I first met Stuart, I didn't know that he was experiencing mental health issues. His front was excellent, although I did pick something up and I don't know why. My dad says, 'People that have experienced mental health issues — I have — resonate on a slightly different frequency.' And that's how I kind of think of it. I just had an inkling that something was there.

"I haven't known Stuart for as long as some of his other friends, but that doesn't make it harder for me to connect with him and try and help him. It shouldn't matter what your relationship is with that person. You just have to try to be there and help to support them.



"Stuart is a very brave person and is very open about what's going on, whether he's talking to friends or complete strangers. Telling people helps get things out in the open, and people aren't tiptoeing around the subject. I also find that if people know about it, then if you are experiencing mental health problems, it's not kept away as a secret, and you haven't got to build 'strong relationships' in order to whisper it to someone. You can just speak openly about it.

"For me, I just try to be a mate. It's about being supportive, attentive and actually listening, rather than just hearing what they are saying.

"It's also about not judging. And that comes down to when I answer the phone, and I hear the tone of voice. That might tell the story or it might not, so don't prejudge. See what the person has to say. And sometimes don't ask the question. Gauge the way someone smiles, their body language or even the way they hold themselves. Don't prejudge things and think just because you know this person has this history that you know the cause or how they are going to act. Instead, pay attention to them at that point and see what they have to say and accept that is where they are at that point. Be aware."

Time to Change is England's most ambitious programme to end the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental health problems. Run by the charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, it is funded by the Department of Health, as well as Comic Relief. Start your conversation today at time-to-change.org.uk or tweet with the hashtag #timetotalk

**it's time to talk. it's
time to change**
let's end mental health discrimination



Tony Miller, Stuart's manager

"When Stuart told me he was experiencing mental health problems, it was kind of out of the blue. But I commend him. From the outset, it was like, 'Well done.'

"It can be very hard for people to open up and talk about issues like these, so good on him for addressing it and bringing it to the company's attention.

"I'm happy he talked about it, as it clears the way forward. In the environment we work in, there are a lot of stresses and frustrations and it can be very tough sometimes mentally. So when you are able to, I guess you should put your cards on the table. It helps to understand and deal with situations in a slightly different way. And that has proven to be right several times, where there were situations where I understood a lot more because I knew the background.

"Stuart telling me his situation has had an

someone to talk because it is so hard to talk about. You don't want people to really push because that is going to make you hide even more.

"Just having someone say, 'Is everything alright?' is enough or maybe making a suggestion of what you could do together; nip out for a coffee and a chat or a bike ride.

"If they are a good friend they know the stuff that will get you out of your shell. Kenny will drag me out on my bike because he knows it will make me feel good. Once he told me he'd come over for a ride but if I didn't feel like it that would be alright. When he got to my house he said, 'Let's just go. If we're back in 30 minutes that's alright too.'

"Of course, once I was out I was happy and glad to be on my bike. At the end of the ride he said to me, 'Think on this and remember how this makes you feel because there are going to be times when you will really think you can't be bothered to do it and you should.' He still reminds me of that occasionally.

"Talking to my friends has made things much easier."



impact on our working relationship, but it's been a positive impact. I deal with things slightly differently now. If there's been a situation where a lot of stress is involved, then I can understand the reasons why a lot easier.

"I and everyone in the office don't see this as a negative at all. We all have our different challenges. This is one area that may be difficult for the person to cope with, but we've all got different issues that affect us in different ways.

"In a working environment, it's good to be aware of any situation. Don't be negative or dismissive until you understand it. In our company there could be many experiencing the same problems, but you don't know. It could be all around us. I would always advise people to come forward and talk about things, so we can help, understand and be more sympathetic when needed, which is important as an employer."

Diana Potter, Stuart's wife

"Things started coming to a head just before he was diagnosed, and that was what prompted us to get help. From the symptoms Stuart described, it was clear to me that he was probably experiencing depression. Stuart was resistant to the idea of help at first, but he opened up to Kenny the same week and Kenny agreed with me. Both of us saying the d-word meant Stuart had to consider it seriously, and that's when he approached the doctor.

"When you're living with someone who has depression, you do feel that you are not allowed to have a bad day or feel miserable yourself, and it can be very hard to ask for time to look after your own needs. But we've learned the hard way that I need to stay well too. Otherwise, when the inevitable crisis comes, you'll have no reserves and things can quickly fall apart for the whole family.

"It's essential that people who have mental health problems have people around them they can trust. Sometimes people with a mental illness can find it difficult to reach out to those around them for fear of how others might react.

"At times you do have to be the engine that keeps the family running. Try not to feel guilty about taking the time and energy to look after yourself, as hard as it can be to ask. And when your partner is in a good phase, make sure you let go and allow them to take up their responsibilities again. It's good for both of you. Sometimes it helps to encourage people to help out, even when they are not at their best.

And don't be afraid to ask for help for yourself, whether that's a counsellor to talk to or a friend to take the kids for an afternoon to give you a break."