



**ALL BLACKS
DON'T CRY!**

by Mike Cooney

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN KIRWAN



“Depression was not something I ever thought would happen to me. In fact, it took me years to acknowledge it. Like many people, I forced my dark feelings and fears to the back of my mind and just pushed on in life, even though every day was a superhuman struggle to seem normal. Mostly, I was afraid – terrified of what

I might become, what I might do, and terrified that I would lose all the things I loved about my life.

“Finally, I hit rock bottom! I had lost all hope of happiness, and was exhausted from secretly fighting my black monster.

“That moment was the turning point for me, though. I did what I should have done right back when my panic attacks began: I reached out to the right people. I acknowledged I had a problem, and with that acknowledgement came the first steps on my journey to wellness.

“Most importantly, I found hope – a sense that things can and will get better – and I clung to it in the same way you’d hang on to a life-raft if you’d been shipwrecked in a stormy sea. Holding on to hope was how I got through depression.

“I’ve been through hell, and I’m back. If you’re in that place where I was, then I understand what you’re going through. If you’re in that place, and you don’t feel any hope, take a look at me and use my story ...”

– John Kirwan, ‘All Blacks Don’t Cry’

GRAPEVINE: I guess a good place to start is with the question: What is depression? Because obviously it’s more than just having a bad day!

JOHN KIRWAN: Well, I think the most important thing to realise is that depression is an illness – and that it can afflict anyone.

NOT PREJUDICED

Depression is not a sign of personal weakness. And it’s not prejudiced – it’s

an illness that can strike any of us. You can be rich or poor, unemployed or in charge of a company, brown or white, male or female ... it doesn’t matter.

It’s also important to realise that mental health has a wide spectrum. In other words, it can incorporate the feelings you have when you’re a little bit down for a while, right through to the other extreme. But depression is when those dark moods or feelings don’t go away. They stay with you 24/7.

GV: Is this problem something relatively new – or has depression always been around?

JK: I believe it's a modern disease, mainly because of the lives we all lead now. You know, mortgages, hectic pace, technology ... there's not a lot of time to smell the roses anymore!

Of course, it's also true that, in one form or another, this illness has been part of the human condition probably since time began! But I guess that we haven't always known it as 'depression'. In the old days they called it 'melancholia'. And, up until recently, depression was known as 'suburban neurosis' or 'a nervous breakdown'.

However, it's pretty obvious to me that the pressures most of us live with in a modern society have put us under a stress that's new and different to the conditions people experienced in earlier generations.

GV: Depression can be a difficult thing to demystify, especially for people who've never experienced it – right?

JK: Yeah, sure. And because there's been such a stigma attached to it, people tend to see it as a weakness rather than an illness – so they don't reach out for help.

I reckon depression is often misunderstood. Us males, especially, have this attitude where we think, *"This shouldn't be happening to me! I'm a regular guy – what the hell is going on?"* We fail to grasp that it's an illness. We're embarrassed to talk about it and ask for help. Yet, if it was diabetes, we'd go to the doctor straight away. If we were worried about our heart, we wouldn't hesitate to go and see a specialist.

Look, if you're feeling down for a few days, you're just feeling down. But

if you're feeling down for a month, and you get up one morning and the person looking at you in the mirror is someone you don't know or understand, reach out and get help – like you would with any other illness!

GV: We're pretty lucky, here in New Zealand, to have someone like you. What made you decide to share your journey so publically, when you could've kept it quiet?

JK: I feel very fortunate every day of my life. I've got a fantastic life. I'm very happy. And I've got a great job.

The truth is, though, it was hard for me to say "Yes" to the Ministry of Health when they asked me to be a part of its depression campaign.

A FREAK?

I was scared that people would think I was a freak! But I did it because I think it's important, when you're in a position like mine, to give back. And because it was so, so bad in there. I just really wanted to help others – without sounding like a dick!

If I had understood it a lot better before I got depressed, or at the early stages of my depression, I would've got healthier a lot quicker. Isn't that the case with every illness? If you can get on top of it early in the piece, you're okay.

GV: Part of your journey since has been the writing of your book – *'All Blacks Don't Cry'* – which is a very honest look at your struggle with depression. Why did you write it?

JK: Well, I wrote it because I frequently get called up by a family friend, or someone who knows someone who's



suffering with depression, and they ask me if I can suggest anything. I learned very quickly that, often, the help I was able to give people – by describing what I went through – really sped up their process of getting well. So that sort of put the idea of a book into my mind.

There's a limit to what I can say in a short television ad. But I thought that if I could actually explain this in a bit more depth, then people would be able to pick it up and read it – and, in the process, I'd be able to reach out to a lot more people.

So yes, the book's been incredibly successful. It's still selling well. And the nice thing is when one person buys it, then hands it around to everyone else. So family members and loved ones are reading it, and getting to understand the illness better – which makes it easier for them to accept and cope.

GV: *'All Blacks Don't Cry'* – that seems to sum up the Kiwi male attitude ...

JK: Yeah, exactly. I think the title says it all. You know, the whole Kiwi culture of rugby, racing and beer. We're tough New Zealand males – and the All Blacks are the pinnacle of that, aren't they? They always have been, as far as this country's concerned.

So the title was a bit of a teaser – a way of saying: *"Just because we're All Blacks doesn't mean we don't cry ..."* We need to understand that everyone goes through tough patches. It's human nature – we all experience good times *and* bad times.

GV: You battled depression during a lengthy portion of your All Black playing days, and there's a bitter irony in that. I mean, on the one hand, you were at the height of your career, with everything going for you ... but, on the other

hand, you were facing the worst lows of your life.

JK: Yeah! I eventually reached the point where I had to change some things in my life. But I was lucky that I could still function. To be honest, I think I was at the top of my game during 1987, '88 and '89 – whereas in 1989, '90 and '91 I was probably at my deepest darkest lows. By then I wasn't playing as well as what I would've liked to. But, like I said, I still managed to function, so I was pretty fortunate really.

PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!

Thinking back, the first person that beat-up on me about all this was ME! I used to tell myself, "What the bloody hell have you got to be depressed about? You're an All Black, for goodness sake! You've got the best life in the world!" But that actually just made it worse ...

When you're battling those lows, it's not easy to keep going. Some people can't even get out of bed. But I managed to disguise it, most of the time. That's quite common with depression. When people discover that someone they know suffers from depression, they're often genuinely surprised: "*Hey, I worked with that guy on the job, and I didn't even know!*" "*I sat right next to that girl in the office, and I never even realised!*"

It's an illness that can easily be hidden and disguised ...

GV: You've called depression a 'selfish disease' – what do you mean by that?

JK: Well, one of the negatives about depression is that it's incredibly personal and isolating – everything comes back to *you being low*. And that can be devastating

on your family, especially on partners. You have nothing to give. That's why I call it a selfish illness – because it's all-time-consuming, all-energy-consuming.

What people on the outside don't always understand is that, often, you're struggling to just get through the next minute! You're struggling to get through the next hour, the next day. You have to be selfish to cope, because you're scared of what not coping could mean: losing it, suicide, whatever your issues might be ...

GV: I guess you must've asked the question: "*Why me?*"

JK: Sure. Everyone asks that. And I think (you've probably got this written down, too, as one of your questions), the other thing everyone asks is: "*What caused it?*"

GV: Yeah, thanks – that was going to be my next one!

JK: Well, firstly you go, "*Why me? This shouldn't be happening to me! This is so unfair!*" I imagine that's the case with most illnesses. Then you start looking for the reasons why. And, the problem is, there are *no* 'reasons why'. It just is ...

I spent a big part of my illness asking myself those two questions.

GV: How did your depression manifest itself – what effects did it have on you?

JK: There was some pretty scary stuff ... couldn't get out of bed, crying, worrying that I was going to hurt someone, hurt myself. Lots of weird things, lots of self-doubt, lots of bizarre thoughts, crazy thinking. I used to wonder if I was going mad – Jack Nicholson stuff, you know? '*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*' type of thing!

But the trouble is, the fears are real ...

GV: How long did you keep it hidden, and what was it that finally motivated you to reach out for help?



JK: I hid it for about two or three years. And, I mean, I could still be hiding it, if I wanted to! But it was my choice for the truth to come out.

The fact was, I just couldn't go on. I was right at the very end. So I didn't have a choice, really. I couldn't function any more. And my advice to people is: *Don't let it get to that!*

GV: So your journey towards health – how did it begin?

JK: One step at a time, one day at a time. I started again. I went to the doctor and was put on medication – all that stuff that you need to do. But it wasn't until I actually *accepted* it that I started to get better.

My mum gave me some incredibly wise advice. She told me to accept it. And she also told me to “enjoy the little things” – things you do every day that you've taken for granted, like having a shower, drinking a coffee ...

When I started accepting it and taking care of myself mentally, physically and spiritually – that was the day I started getting better.

LIKE A RUGBY GAME

Prior to that, it was 'me-against-it' – I was fighting the depression like it was a game of rugby. But the day came when I finally said, “Look JK, this is what you've got. You need to accept this, and then get very good at it!” – which was pretty scary at first.



But it meant I could start again with a clean slate – which felt fantastic!

GV: “... *get very good at it*” – what do you mean?

JK: Well, I needed to live with it and have a great life with it. And the day that happened, I actually started having some respite – because it's 24/7 when you're in there.

There was also a day when I actually took the fear out of my anxiety attacks ... I can remember it clearly. I said, “*Righto mate, come on! If you're out there, come!*” You see, with anxiety attacks, you're always waiting for them. They were the scariest things that I ever had happen.

And when you *aren't* having them, you're waiting for them to arrive.

So I kind-of spoke to my anxiety attacks, and said, *"Okay, I've lived through 100 of them, I'm going to live through the next one, so bring it on! You're going to come, you're going to go and good luck to you!"* And as a result, I took fear out of them – and they started to go away as well.

I finally began to get some enjoyment back into my life ...

GV: You mentioned taking care of yourself *"mentally, physically and spiritually"*. What did that actually involve?

JK: It meant making time for myself. I went on a spiritual journey to find out what feeds my soul. I began reading lots, cooking, and activities that re-energised me – like, just in the last couple of years I've taken up the guitar. And physically, I go to the gym and look after myself, because that makes me feel good.

I sort of put everything into its compartment and started working on each one ...

GV: So getting some balance back in your life – that's been a key to staying well?

JK: Absolutely. And understanding that wellness is everyday. I mean, what have you done for yourself today, spiritually? And when I say spiritually, I mean it could be praying, it could be meditating, it could be reading a book ... whatever nourishes you. Most people can't answer that question.

I do something for myself everyday. And I work hard, as well! I can do 12 to 15 hours work a day, but I also take time out for me. Keeping that balance is crucial.

GV: Do you think depression's curable?

JK: Of course! But let me qualify that.

Mental health has a wide spectrum. There are some forms of mental illness you can't 'cure' as such – but you can control. Some forms of depression need controlling with medicine, just like many other illnesses.

Can you be cured from diabetes? No. But you can live with it and you can control it. So it's no different.

GV: You've been well now for over 15 years. Do you still have fears that the 'black dog' might come back?

JK: The answer is no – simply because I'm no longer scared of it. But it can take a long time for that fear to go away.

GV: This is a tough one John, but what do you say to the family of someone who's committed suicide? Those feelings of blame must, at times, be overwhelming.

JK: I try to tell them, *"It's not your fault. It's an illness that can kill, and it's not your fault. I can't begin to understand the pain you're going through, but it's not your fault ..."*

A lot of the parents I've spoken to really beat themselves up – wishing they'd tried to do more. But, like I say, it's an illness ... and it's a really scary illness if you don't get help.

SUICIDAL?

People who take their own lives often can't see how many people really love them. They're desperate, and they think there's no way out. Sadly, those left behind can spend a lifetime beating themselves up, thinking there's something more they could've or should've done.

Somehow they've got to try and make peace with themselves, and move on ...



GV: What's been the most memorable feedback from your involvement in the depression.org.nz campaign?

JK: I've had some incredible responses. One that stands out happened at a rugby test match, when this young guy came over to talk to me. He was dressed in a suit and tie, and told me he was a successful lawyer. Then he said something which changed my life: *"If it wasn't for you I'd be dead!"* He explained: *"Thanks so much for what you're doing about depression, because it saved my life ..."* and he walked away.

His story made doing those ads worth it. And I've heard from hundreds of people who've also been helped. It's incredibly humbling ...

GV: Do you have a final word for someone who's struggling with depression? And how can friends and family help?

JK: If you're battling depression, you need

to reach out and get help. It's an illness, and you will get better. But you need to stop fighting it and accept it. It's an illness like every other illness. You'll have to work hard to get well. And remember: wellness is every day, it's a journey.

As for friends and family: it can be really hard on those who aren't suffering. I think education and knowledge are really important, so read my book ... go to the website www.depression.org.nz ... and find out all you can about it. It's really important, for people who are depressed, that those around them are trying to understand and are willing to just listen. 🌱



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HAVE YOUR SAY!**



GO TO GRAPEVINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE. SHARE YOUR POINT-OF-VIEW AND READ WHAT OTHERS RECKON.

DEPRESSION: SELF-TEST

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? (Circle your answer)	Not At All	Several Days	More Than Half The Days	Nearly Every Day
Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
Feeling bad about yourself – or that you're a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the paper or watching TV	0	1	2	3
Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite – being so fidgety or restless that you've been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1*	2*	3*

Work out your score: 0 + _____ + _____ + _____
= Total Score: _____

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

If you scored ...

0-9 (LOW)

It sounds like life's okay at present, and you're not showing any signs of depression. It's still worth checking out www.depression.org.nz – especially the self-help section on how to live a balanced life. And it wouldn't hurt to come back sometime in the future and test yourself again.

10-14 (MILD)

It sounds like life might be a bit tough for you at the moment. Better not to wait until things get worse. Talk to someone you trust (family, friend, spiritual leader, etc) about how you're feeling. And get some help, either from your doctor or at the Depression Helpline – or work out a self-help strategy using the information on www.depression.org.nz.

15-19 (MODERATE)

You're showing some signs of depression, and would definitely benefit from some professional help. Your doctor's a good place to start. Don't forget to talk about the way you feel and any of the symptoms you may be experiencing.

20-27 (SEVERE)

Your score is in the severe range, so you really need to get professional support as soon as possible. Remember, asking for help is not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of strength.

*** IMPORTANT:** If you're having thoughts about hurting yourself or killing yourself you need to reach out straight away and talk to someone who's trained to help. For example: call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757. They are available 8am to midnight 7 days a week.