*Bressie’s Battle*

Mental Health? What comes to mind when you hear these words? Research has shown that all too often our reactions can be negative, uninformed and disinterested. Mental Health is by and large misunderstood by the general population of Ireland, and for many it’s something they choose to ignore, shy away from, pretend it’s not there. But in actual fact it’s very much a reality in today’s society.

Statistics have shown that one in four of us will become victims of mental health issues at some stage in our lives. So we should reach out to those experiencing these feelings now and not make them feel isolated. As far too many people are still choosing to suffer in silence. They are less inclined to talk about the issue due to the social stigma that comes along with it.

But one man desperately trying to change this is Mullingar man Niall Breslin, more commonly known as “Bressie.” He wanted to share his experiences in the hope that it would help other people overcome the fear of talking about their problems and seek treatment. He wants to change the nation’s view of mental health and show that it’s not something to be afraid of, that there’s help out there.

His story began when he was only fifteen years old. He started to develop what he felt were asmath-like symptoms. Unsure as to what exactly was wrong with him, he went as far as to break his own arm just to get past a hospital door and find out some answers. He was told by doctors that it was perfectly normal to experience this at his age, but they ended up being very wrong. Bressie didn’t accept his diagnosis, he knew in his own mind that it was more than that. What he was going through wasn’t normal. But despite realising this he was too afraid to talk about it.

He continued to suffer with his anxiety and panic attacks all through his teenage years and into his twenties. He spent most of his teenage life avoiding social events and kept mostly to himself. Further down the line his anxiety led him to becoming an insomniac, reliant on sleeping pills. He went down various different paths from cognitive behavioural therapy to natural remedies in the hope of improving his situation. Although none of these seemed to help him. And soon there came a breaking point.

Just over two years ago he suffered a major panic attack moments before he was due to go live on air on RTE’s “The Voice.” A knock came to his dressing room door indicating that it was time to go but instead of heading upstairs to the studio, he lay on the floor, gasping for air, barely able to breathe.

That night he sat in his hotel room and decided he’d had enough. This illness had consumed his life for far too long and he was ready to overcome it. It was here that he was then diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder. This is the uncontrollable and often irrational worrying about simple everyday things.

Family and friends had previously told him that he was the most competitive person that they had ever met, so he decided to compete against his anxiety, and this was a battle he wasn’t going to lose. Being a former Gaelic football and rugby player he was well used to having to be physically fit. So he decided to set himself a physical challenge and adopt a more active lifestyle to deal with his problems in the hope of defeating them. Then he began training for a triathlon in aid of “Lakelands Area Retreat and Cancer Centre,” something his mother is very involved in.

Night after night, he would wake up in fits of anxiety, unable to sleep, so he’d grab his runners and just go for a run. And after weeks of doing so the frequent panic attacks stopped. He was slowly on the road to recovery. While competing in the triathlon he realised that he, not his anxiety was controlling his life for the first time in years.

Bressie has since become an ambassador for “Cycle Against Suicide.” An organisation that aims to raise awareness and help those who are experiencing mental health issues. In April and May of this year he completed a cycle in many different legs around Ireland, stopping to give talks in schools along the way. He told his story and urged students to speak out about their own problems, not to suffer alone, but was completely shocked by the number of schools who rejected the talk as they still refuse to talk about the issue and just brush it all under the carpet.

Recently along with fourteen other artists he released an album called “Simple Things.” It promotes the idea that talking about issues is the first step to coping with them and that suicide is never an option. Exercise and training helped him but there are many different options out there.

He’s on a mission to normalise the issue of mental health, get the nations to speak out instead of suffering in silence and let them know it’s OK not to be OK.