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Wednesday, October 14, 2009

Politician tells his story as mental health study launched

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MARY MINIHAN

FORMER NORWEGIAN prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik shared his experience of depression with TDs and Senators at the launch of a report on the mental health of Oireachtas members yesterday.

Mr Bondevik left office for 3½ weeks to deal with a depressive episode during his premiership in 1998 and returned to work afterwards. He went on to win a second term as prime minister.

“My job was to govern a country, but I felt totally empty and without value. I was not even able to get out of my bed,” he said.

The report launched by Mr Bondevik found 15 per cent of TDs and Senators who responded to an anonymous survey had sought help for a mental health problem.

The report was prepared by a cross-party Oireachtas group on mental health, led by Fianna Fáil TD Chris Andrews and Fine Gael Senator Frances Fitzgerald. Amnesty International Ireland assists the group’s work.

One in four Oireachtas members who took part said they have had concerns about their mental health and 94 per cent said they knew at least one person who had experienced a mental health problem.

Nearly two in three of those who responded said they would speak out publicly if they experienced a mental health problem, while the remainder would not or would be uncomfortable doing so. A total of 33 Oireachtas members responded to the survey.

Telling TDs and Senators about his experience, Mr Bondevik said: “It happened on Sunday in August 1998. I was the prime minister of Norway. I was scared. For some time I had been feeling sad. Lack of sleep had reduced my energy. Different problems, even small, were exceedingly difficult to solve.

“This again made it even more impossible to sleep. I tried to perform my work as normally as possible but I could not concentrate, and I got a strong feeling of anxiety.”

Mr Bondevik said he “hit the wall” the day before an important meeting about the budget. Given intense media interest in the outcome of the meeting, his absence would have been remarked upon. He therefore decided to issue a press release about it.

“But how should we phrase it, how should it be explained? It was an unprecedented situation. I said, ‘Why don’t we just say it as it is?’” Mr Bondevik said he hoped this would avoid speculation about his condition and contribute to combating the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

He said it had been a “tremendous personal defeat” to realise that he could not go to work. For over 30 years in politics, he had enjoyed his work and while he often felt tired and stressed he always recovered quickly. “Is it possible to have, and to show, weakness when you are a leader? Yes, I do believe so,” he said.

“I was privileged to get the help I needed through extraordinary professional support and massive support from family and friends.”

He said he had also used medication.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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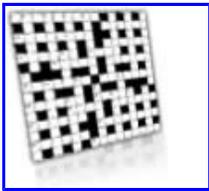
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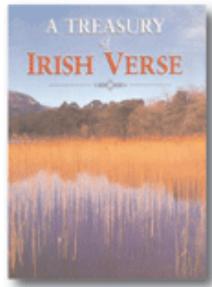
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