

#Itsokaytotalk: The Network Rail employee leading the way in starting the conversation

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With a smile on his face and a story or two to tell, Davie O'Donnell has become a big hit as a customer service assistant at Edinburgh Waverley railway station, ensuring those passing through are happy.

But three years ago, the same couldn't be said about the Network Rail employee, who was battling his own mental health problems.

"The trigger was one day I was stood in a field in Cumbernauld and I just felt I can't go on, I can't go on like this," he said. "I had a conversation with my manager and said I needed help because I'm finding this hard."

There is no hiding from the facts. Suicides of those working in the rail industry are among the highest in the UK workforce at 1.6 times the national average, with a 3.9 percent absence rate due to mental and physical issues – more than double the private sector average.

Unfortunately, there are many who don't feel like they can open up if they're struggling and instead enter a downward spiral, impacting their home and work life.

That is something Davie is trying to change through his work volunteering at Andy's Man Club, an organisation that run talking groups for men who have either been through a storm, are currently going through a storm or have a storm brewing in life.

"The strapline of Andy's Man Club is 'itsokaytotalk' and that is so true," said Davie, who has worked in the rail industry for more than two decades. "Be you boots on ballast, drivers of trains, catering staff, or office staff, if you're not having a great day talk to someone and open up about how you're feeling.

"Confide is someone. There are a lot of pressures on those working in the rail industry, but if you're not feeling great you should take five minutes, have a cup of tea, biscuit and open up to someone."

Thankfully Davie did open up when he was struggling, initially reaching out to Network Rail's counselling service, Validium, where he underwent a psychological report which he requested.

"It came back and it wasn't good with high levels of stress and anxiety was through the roof," he said. "I went through various other occupational health referrals and I was sent on one in July 2017 which really opened things up for me, through Validium.

"It came back that I may well be suffering from a thing called Dyscalculia, which can lead to a diverse range of difficulties with mathematics.

"It was a huge relief for me because after all these years of stress and anxiety I had a diagnosis and since then I really feel like my life is different now."

A real turning point has been Andy's Man Club, which has opened the door to Davie and other colleagues in the rail industry being able to open up and help others open up about struggles they are having.

Andy's Man Club, which started in Halifax in Yorkshire, takes its name from Andrew Roberts, a man who sadly took his own life aged 23 in early 2016.

Andy's family had no inkling that he was suffering or struggling to the extent that he would do this, and as a result looked deeper into male suicide and men's mental health.

They soon discovered that male suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50, with male mental health surrounded by well-ingrained cultural stigma in the UK.

Elaine Roberts and Luke Ambler are Andy's mum and brother-in-law, and together they came up with the idea of Andy's Man Club, a group where men aged 18 and above can speak openly about their mental health in a judgment-free, non-clinical environment.

The movement has since grown to more than 100 locations across England, Scotland and Wales.

Davie, who has been involved in the Dunfermline groups, said: "I had been told in the past to man up, roll your socks up, but no that isn't what should be done, we need to talk through things and not suffer in silence.

“Andy’s Man Club has had a massive impact for me and goodness knows where I would have been in the industry without the opportunity to be part of the club.

“If things had continued the way I was in my mental health I might not have been in the industry without the support of others. The support has been phenomenal.

“My message to people going through a tough time or finding it hard is to speak to somebody, anybody that comes to me in confidence and says they’re having an issue I very much signpost them.

“I’m no psychologist, it’s a learned experience and I’m still learning, but one thing I would say is that it’s okay to talk.”

Visit <https://andysmanclub.co.uk/> for more details.