



news

## 'Behind the Smile' Exhibition helps break the stigma of mental health

By Sangeeta Haindl — It is predicted that one in four of us will be affected by mental illness within a year. Though the effects are as real as a broken arm, it is an invisible and silent illness. This is why **Mental Health Awareness Week 2016** is taking place in the UK from 16-22 May, helping raise awareness about this taboo issue. This year's theme is "relationships."

Mental illness is still surrounded by a certain prejudice, ignorance and fear. These negative attitudes mean it is harder for mental health sufferers to work, make friends and live a normal life. The stigma surrounding this type of illness makes all these things harder, because the stigma isolates them. It stops people from getting and keeping jobs, as people with mental health problems have the highest 'want to work' rate of any disability group, yet have the lowest in-work rate. One-third report having been dismissed or forced to resign from their job, and 70 percent have been put off applying for jobs, fearing unfair treatment.

This stigma has a negative impact on physical health. People with mental health problems tend to have poorer than average physical health; their physical health problems are often misdiagnosed. Sadly, as a result, people with the most severe mental health problems die, on average, ten years younger. Now, using the power of art during Mental Health Awareness Week to help break down this shame is the *'Behind The Smile'* exhibition by the artist Toby Brown at Samir Ceric's *Debut Contemporary* gallery, with a [private view in London on 19 May](#). Two years in the making, the exhibition is supported by several well-known names: Alastair Campbell, journalist, broadcaster, and author, and former Communications Director for Prime Minister Tony Blair; BBC TV presenter and vocal coach Carrie Grant; the lead singer of the indie group Embrace, Danny McNamara; "This Morning" presenter Anna Williamson; former "Coronation Street" actress Georgia Taylor; and singer-songwriter Sandi Thom, all of them sufferers from mental health issue. Brown has also painted the singer Amy Winehouse, from a photograph that was found on her computer after her death in July 2011. Campbell came up with the hashtag for the show, #ArtToChange.

Each portrait took nearly six weeks to complete. Brown, the artist, says, "It has not been easy taking a person back to a dark time, as often it is not where they want to go," adding "I am so thankful that the people I have painted let me take them there. I want people to know that there is no shame in having a mental illness . . . if people in the public eye can open up, so can anyone."

Brown wanted to capture Alastair Campbell's openness to share his personal story of mental illness within the painting. The photo Brown took of Campbell captured him with "red eye," which gave him a sense of devilment, and the painted red eye in this portrait sets it apart from more realistic portraits. Campbell likes the mood that Brown has captured of him: his vulnerability entwined with his strength, the compelling stare. This art exhibition, along with the rest of Mental Health Awareness Week, is working hard to forge a society where mental health problems are not hidden in shame and secrecy.

Photo: EP Contributor Sangeeta Haindl, artist Toby Brown, subject Alastair Campbell, Debut Contemporary gallery owner Samir Ceric

Photo Credit: Toby Brown at The Debut Contemporary

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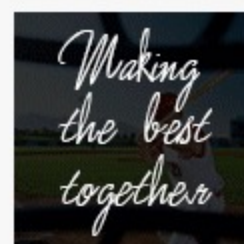
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