

Depression talk offers insights

STAFF REPORTER

ALMOST 130 people attended a workshop on depression and anxiety in a Pretoria parish.

The Q&A workshop was presented by the family ministry group of Christ the King parish in Queenswood, under the leadership of Sheila Houghton.

The panel comprised Fr Russell Pollitt SJ, director of the Jesuit Institute; Johan Mills of the Depression and Anxiety Support Group in Pretoria; Tracey Feinstein of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG); and clinical psychotherapist and social worker Sandy McDonough.

Ms Feinstein explained that depression is a deep sadness that changes your life so that you cannot focus or complete a task. It often has the side-effect of chronic illness.

One in four workers suffer from depression and more men than women, she said, and untreated depression can lead to suicide.

Four years ago SADAG dealt with one suicide attempt per month, she said. Now it is three or four attempts every day.

Mr Mills said most members of the Depression and Anxiety Support Group are bipolar. In adults there is no cure and sufferers must take medication for life.

He urged those affected, and their friends, family members and caregivers, to join support groups.

"They help you to realise you are not alone, you can come out in the open and enjoy life. You will come

to realise that mood disorders are interconnected," he said.

Clinical psychotherapist Sandy McDonough noted that those who have deep depression "can be healed but not cured because it is part of one's personality—we need anxiety otherwise we would not be able to protect ourselves".

"Panic is normal but how you deal with it is important," she said.

Fr Pollitt raised the point of a "theology of suffering".

"We don't get a lot of help from the Bible," he said. "Even Job does not come up with one answer."

Yet, "God can enter into any type of suffering," Fr Pollitt said. "God does not take away the things we want him to, but enters into them with us." The question we must ask is: "How is God here with me?"

"God acts through other people—through support groups, psychiatrists, medication and so on. Prayer and faith don't change reality but bring new meaning to it."

He noted that there is a stigma attached to people with psychological problems and the Church needs to deal with it.

"The Church should be the first port of call and offer support mechanisms. How many parishes have support groups, and why not?" Fr Pollitt said.

Queenswood parish priest Fr Chris Townsend in his closing remarks said that "struggle defines us as South Africans".

He thanked the panel for "taking care of us" and the people present for taking care of themselves.