

DENISE WELCH FIGHTS

AT THE beginning of last year television actress

Denise Welch astonished us all by admitting she'd suffered from depression for 17 years.

She told how agonising bouts of utter despair had driven her to a nervous breakdown.

It was so severe that in December 2005 she walked out of the pantomime she was starring in and stayed in bed, shaking and having panic attacks, for three days.

Luckily, with the help of counselling and anti-depressants she regained control of her crippling mood swings. And in October a smiling Denise told the Mirror she'd got her life back on track and had never felt better.

Now, however, the actress who shot to fame as Coronation Street landlady Natalie Barnes and is currently starring in BBC drama *Waterloo Road*, has revealed the illness has returned.

"It happened about six months ago," she says. "And unfortunately I'm not able to control it at the moment. The last bad episode was about a month ago. I have a really elevated mood, swiftly followed by a really low mood.

"I'm going to go and get my hormones checked in case it's hormonal. I had a check to see if I was menopausal, which came back negative. But I'm only really low for three days a month, so there's a definite link.

"I'm not frightened, because I know it will lift. I'm just thinking: 'Please don't let this happen' because I have to get on with my life.

"When I was really low I considered suicide as a possible way out. I hate it when people say suicide is selfish. They have no idea what clinical depression feels like. It would have made no difference if I'd won £3million on the Lottery and a lead opposite Will Smith. It was a black hole there was no way out of."

She accepts that she'll probably be on anti-depressants for ever. "They're a low dose and won't harm me physically," she explains. "They're not happy drugs and don't give me a high. They just control the chemicals in my brain."

The depression also makes it harder for Denise, 47, to stay on the wagon. She was a heavy drinker for 30 years before drying out nine months ago.

"I never drink during the day, but when I started drinking I was powerless to control it," she reveals. "So I suppose I was an alcoholic.

"And it's really hard, not drinking through these lows I'm getting. But it's the best thing I can do. It means they lift much quicker."

Denise - who is married to actor Tim Healy, 53, and has two sons, Matthew, 17, and Louis, four, with him - still craves a drink at the end of a long day.

"Yes, I'd still love a glass of red wine," she says.



TOUGH LESSON: Denise in *Waterloo Road*

"But if I had one I'd have to have another. And after 10 minutes the craving goes away and I forget about it.

"I don't stay at parties for more than 15 minutes any more. It's difficult without the Dutch courage alcohol gave me. But I've gained more than I've lost. I'm happier without it."

She's also happier now that she's stopped taking cocaine. After her breakdown she admitted she'd "dabbled for a while" with recreational drugs.

She said: "I was foolish. I fell into that trap of doing drugs because they were around." But no more.

She's all too aware of the devastating effect they have. "I can't bear being around people who do it any more," she says. "I can spot them a mile off. It kills conversation."

And she takes a strong stance on Kate Moss's cocaine escapades, which the Mirror revealed last year. "It annoys me that she's earning more money since it all happened," she says. "OK, she hasn't set herself up as a role model, but the very fact that she advertises products bought by young girls means she is one."

Since Denise cleaned up her act she says her 17-year-marriage has improved too. It took a knock in 2004 after she admitted having a five-month fling with 36-year-old stage hand Steve Murray.

She's still uncomfortable talking about the episode. "It was a blip," she says. "It happens to lots of people. It's just that mine was publicised.

"Last year was a tough time, but Tim and I are stronger together than ever now. And he's stopped drinking around me - partly out of respect for me and partly because he's embarrassed to be drunk in front of me. I'm sure when he's out with his pals he goes out on benders, but we enjoy quiet meals together instead."

Another advantage of her healthier lifestyle is that she's looking better than ever. With her bright smile, sparkling eyes and slim size-12 figure she could pass for 10 years younger. And she's overjoyed that older women such as Sharon Stone, Madonna and Twiggy often hog the headlines these days.

"Bloody hell, I'd love to look like Sharon Stone!" she laughs. "It's great that we can be sex symbols now, although I'm not sure about Madonna's leotard-wearing. She's got an amazing figure, but we're nearly 50. I think you can be sexy without showing your crotch off."

Denise lost half a stone last autumn, but has put it back on again.

"Since I stopped drinking I've become a bloody chocaholic," she moans. "I need to replace the sugar from alcohol somehow. My son says I should join muffins anonymous." She's trying

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STRONG BOND: With husband Tim Healy

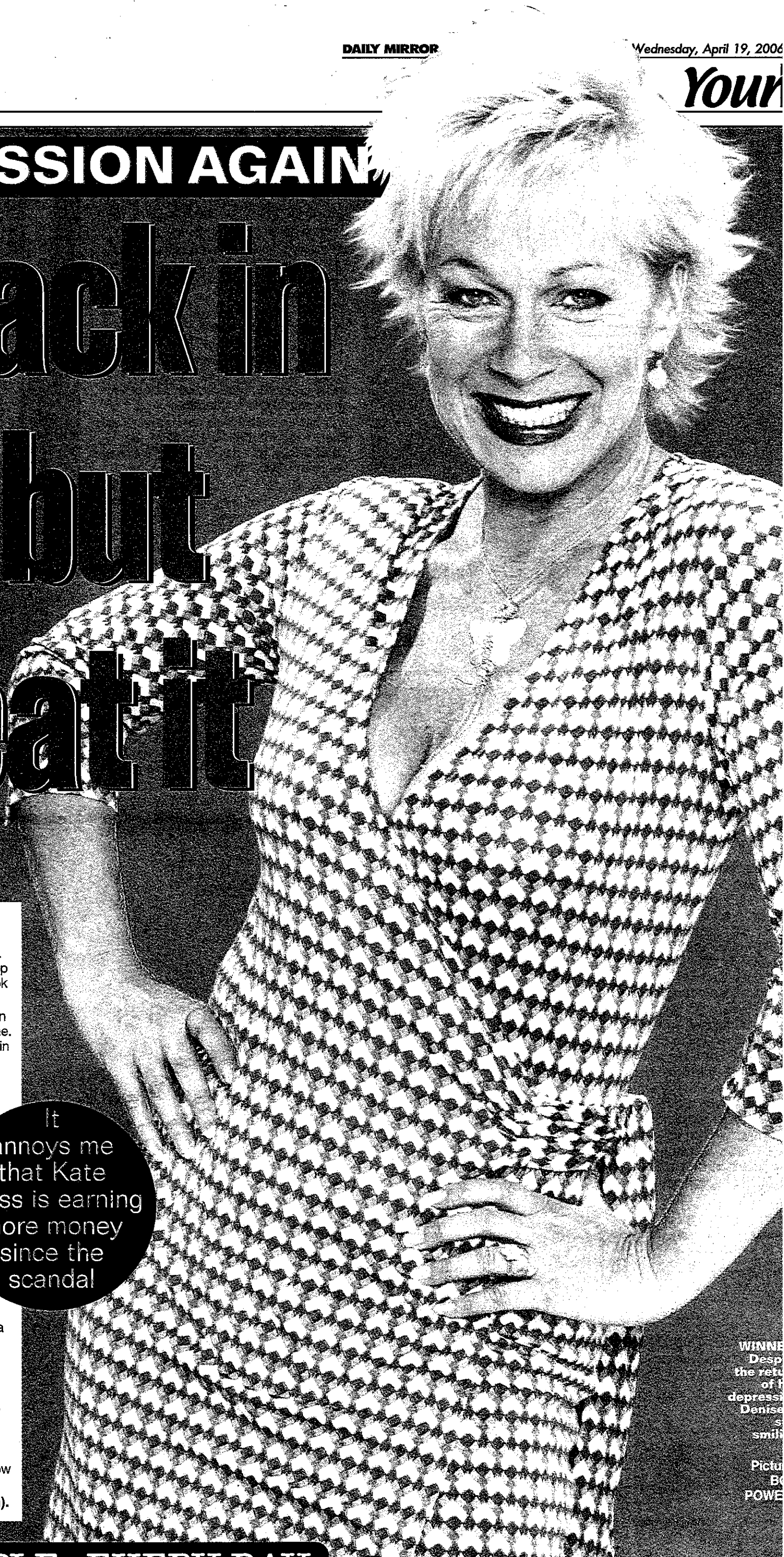
HER DEPRESSION AGAIN

I'm back in

hell... but

I'll beat it

EXCLUSIVE
BY ANTONIA HOYLE



to balance her love for chocolate with regular exercise and is training for a 10km run for Marie Curie and a three-mile walk for Depression Alliance. "I have a trainer but don't have the discipline to keep fit on my own," she says. "I've lost my desire to look like a stick insect anyway - life's too short."

And busy, too. In addition to filming Loose Women she'll star in another series of Waterloo Road in June. Playing man-eating French teacher Steph Haydock in the BBC drama, set in a rough Manchester comprehensive has given her respect for teachers.

"I've got the utmost admiration for them," she says. "Even playing one can be intimidating when the kids are told to kick off. Children these days have no respect for authority. It's terrifying."

She is good friends with her co-stars Angela Griffin and Jill Halfpenny. She has known Jill, 29, since Jill was a 12-year-old child star on Biker Grove.

"I was in it for three episodes and used to sit doing homework with her, Ant and Dec in between filming," she recalls. "In fact, Ant and Dec say that's the reason they ended up in showbiz - because I was so bad at teaching them maths!"

Of Steph, who's just had a one-night-stand with a colleague, she says: "She's only behaving this way because her husband's left her for another woman. She's not a nymphomaniac, she's just desperate."

Luckily, Denise's own sex life is faring somewhat better. "Sex becomes different with age," she says. "You don't have that stomach-churning excitement, but you know what buttons to press without embarrassment."

And she adds with a smile: "I can remember it now because I'm not drinking any more."

● Waterloo Road is screened tomorrow (BBC1, 8pm).

It annoys me that Kate Moss is earning more money since the scandal

WINNER
Despite the return of her depression, Denise Van Outen smiles

Picture: BOB POWER

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