SHARE THESE STORIES

MENTAL HEALTH LIVED EXPERIENCE STORIES









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We are a Rainbow Tick organisation and welcome people from all cultures and backgrounds to our service.

The opinions, circumstances and views of those that have contributed to this publication, may have changed since the commencement of the project. all stories have been published with the consent of writers.













THESE STORIES

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A GUIDE TO USING THIS BOOK

Highlight your favourite quotes

Use a highlighter or pencil to highlight all of the words and sentences you find that interest you. It really doesn't matter if it is because you find comfort in the words, find it relatable, felt something significant, whatever the reason if YOU find it interesting, please highlight it.

Circle the most important passages

Of all the parts highlighted in the previous step, carefully consider which one you find to be the most important to you and circle it.

• Fold the corners of the most special stories

Choose the story you find the most special, then please fold the corner of the book at the beginning of the story, so when you share this book in a later step your specifically chosen story can be acknowledged.

Use this book how you will

Share These Stories is a special book that means many different things to each person involved. How you, the user and reader of this book, use the stories is a personal journey. There are so many opportunities to grow, learn, get lost in, find comfort in and enjoy. How you choose to use the book is up to you.

Share These Stories

You are welcome to keep this book and reference it whenever you need to in the future. But, alternatively, you may also like to pass it on and share not just the physical book itself, but share your personal feelings and experiences along with it. Use this book as a chance to really connect with friends, familiy and any other special people in your life, share it with them and support each other with your own mental health struggles and victories.

BELINDA COATES

BALLARAT CITY COUNCILLOR



It's only in fairly recent times that it has become commonly accepted to talk openly and honestly about mental health. In speaking more frankly we are beginning to break down some of the stigma associated with mental health. We need this to continue and I congratulate headspace Ballarat on this important publication. I also offer heartfelt thanks to those sharing their lived experience stories. It is through story telling and sharing personal experiences that we learn more about each other, break down barriers and misperceptions and connect in a more compassionate and meaningful way. We can start to understand that no matter how different we might believe we are from others, there are so many more things that we all share in common.

Our physical health, mental health and wellbeing are on a kind of a continuum and we are still learning about how all of these are interconnected. Mental health wellness can be something that we take for granted but we know that many people face mental health challenges during their lifetime. The severity of the impact can vary greatly but at some point in our lives many will either experience being mentally unwell, or know someone with a mental health challenge.

My journey in learning about mental health is an ongoing one. I graduated from a social work degree over 20 years ago and worked as trauma counselling practitioner for eight of those years. I worked with people of all ages and from all kinds of backgrounds. I saw first hand that mental health issues can impact on anyone, anywhere and that there are a range of factors that affect our mental health. Our early influences, home or family environment, traumatic circumstances, as well as many other social, cultural or health issues can all add to the mix.

Throughout our lives challenges around relationships, cultural identity, gender, sexuality, bullying or life crises can all affect our overall health and wellbeing, including our mental health. Most of us, no matter our age, background or status will experience some anxiousness, unhappiness or depression during our lifetime. Some of us will also experience the debilitating effects of more serious mental illness or have someone close to us impacted. However, access to information, appropriate services, good support and improving our own wellbeing skills and awareness are all key to navigating difficult times.

During my early childhood and adolescence I experienced stigma and shame associated with family members who faced significant mental health challenges. I felt it for many years but looking back now through the lens of life experience, I'm keenly aware that the profound lack of understanding and support available amplified these feelings. There were very few services and the lack of information meant that community attitudes were generally rigid and unsupportive.

I hope that through publications such as this one that focus on sharing personal lived and diverse experiences, we can continue to learn more about ourselves and each other. As a community we need to ensure that people feel valued, included and well supported to achieve their best possible mental health wellness

ROWENA CLIFT

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER - WESTERN VICTORIA PRIMARY HEALTH NETWORK



Mental health issues can affect any one of us, at any time. At Western Victoria PHN we focus on strengthening regional mental health service delivery and to ensuring services are integrated and person centred. Integrated and timely care are key to improving health outcomes for individuals in the community, particularly those in distress, crisis or those who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Western Victoria PHN in partnership with the Victorian Government - funded Suicide Prevention Place Based Trials, is supporting communities to reduce the incidence of suicide through a coordinated place-based approach to suicide prevention across the local government areas of Ballarat and the Great South Coast region. Many of the trial projects have adopted a collective responsibility and impact methodology which is being led by community members in each region. Community members through participation in the working groups or via individual consultations have contributed to these needs so that all unique and important perspectives are considered to help resolve these issues and support the desired outcome of reducing the incidence of suicide across the region. While several projects are in progress like the Men's Health & Wellbeing, Outside The Locker Room and Womens over 26 + Health and Wellbeing: this undertaking is of the utmost importance, sharing lived experience narratives. Sharing a story can be personally healing. We know that no two stories are the same and perhaps no two coping or wellbeing approaches are the same. Reading about another person's mental health journey can provide a powerful message as well as let those experiencing their own difficulties, know that they are not alone, and that help is available.

Stories in this publication are united by the courage to share and the desire to connect with others and to hopefully encourage others to do the same. Each person and their story is testament to how we as a community collectively help those in need. The experiences shared in this publication are a call to all those who read the stories to look out for your mates, take action if needed and ask the auestion.

I and my staff at Western Victoria PHN are privileged to be part of this successful initiative and acknowledge and congratulate those involved in its development. It is through the sharing of experiences, walking alongside those who require support and the efforts of local people that we can make inroads into the mental health crisis we face today.

SEAN DUFFY

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER - BALLARAT COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAIR OF THE BALLARAT SUICIDE PREVENTION PLACED BASED TRIAL



I am proud to be leadership group chair of the Ballarat Suicide prevention placed based trial, a partnership between the Western Victoria Primary Health Network and the Victorian Government. A place-based approach recognises that people and places are inter-related, and that the places where people live and spend their time affect their health and wellbeing. This type of approach focuses on local needs and local priorities, and as chair of the Ballarat community group we have engaged active collaborators in developing solutions, and maximises value by leveraging multiple networks, investments and activities to deliver the best outcomes for our community.

This Lived Experience publication is an example of a collective approach and I am so pleased to support the production of this collection of significant and diverse stories captured for all to read and reflect on.

This is an important book, more so than perhaps it may seem at first. The voice of the person is critical to the evolution of the mental health system and supports that exist in our community for those who have experienced suicidality or been a carer of a loved one. Sadly, the benefit of such wisdom has not always been recognised. My introduction to the mental health system was in Ararat at the Aradale Mental Hospital and J Ward Forensic Centre as a student psychiatric nurse. I remember sitting and talking with a woman who recalled her experience coming to Australia from China. She had arrived in Melbourne with one bag. no English language knowledge, no accommodation, no family or friends and no employment. She found herself living on the streets, was extremely anxious, scared and had no capacity to advocate for herself. This 'behaviour' drew her to the attention of the authorities, she was detained in Melbourne for several months, eventually taken to Ararat and placed in the Aradale Mental Hospital. She remained there for the next 25 years. I share her experience now because it was obvious to me then that there must be a better way, we need to hear lived experience to prevent this happening to anyone again. That was in the late 80s and although we have seen significant changes with deinstitutionalisation, reforms and improvement in treatment modalities, we continually hear from individuals that they have still not been heard.

In Ballarat, despite significant system reform and advances in the workforce to include those with a lived experience, we still have so much to do as a community to prevent suicide, and implement systems supports. Other collective projects underway include, the Postvention program of work which aims to assist the coordination of events during the aftermath of a suicide, with a dual focus on bereavement support and suicide prevention among the bereaved and within the wider impacted community and the design of a trial digital platform to provide access to a database with up-to-date information to assist those individuals feeling distress or perhaps experiencing suicide ideation. The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System findings give us an opportunity now to elevate the voice of those with lived experience and use it to re-shape the way support and services are designed and delivered.

I want to acknowledge the courage and resilience from individuals coming forward with their experiences in this publication. I commend you, and those that produced it, for providing the safety and opportunity for you to do so. Congratulations to all involved.

BONNIE LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE

I sit here wondering where I start... I sit here anxious about saying the right things.... I sit here after approximately five weeks of trying to write this.

When I was asked if I would like to share a bit of my story, I jumped at the chance to contribute to such a meaningful project. I must tell you, I was very enthusiastic until the day I sat down to write about myself and my journey. I am a highly functioning human who trains others in Mental Health First Aid but when I had to reflect on my own experiences a floodgate was opened, and I found myself in the deepest part of the water.

Hi, my name is Bonnie and I have panic disorder.

I have not always had the grand title of having 'panic disorder' although I wonder if it has always been a part of me. I grew up in a household like many, I always felt warmth, loved and was always fed. I was young when I experienced reoccurring dreams of being run down by a very distinctive white semi trailer. I could not sleep and remember my mum comforting me, telling me to think about things I liked, which was dirt bikes and dancing at the time. My mum was 21 when she had me, I was her third child, so she was an expert at soothing her children although was probably not aware of anxiety. Looking back, I think I was having anxiety attacks on a regular basis.

It was not until the age of 14 years that my symptoms became apparent. Although I have vague memories of this episode my mum still remembers it like it was yesterday.



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I was home when I had a psychotic episode, there were no drugs or alcohol involved. Mum tells me I was talking to my fingers as I believed they had faces on them and I also believed there was a giant monkey in my room. Mum and dad soon had me at our local hospital where I spent the next week having had a nervous breakdown.

It was the many hours of counselling that enabled me to find the root of my unexplained anxiety. I was sexually abused by my babysitter's father at six or seven years of age. It was something I supressed for all those years only for it to rear its ugly head in one of the worst years of my life. This was the first time my parents heard about what had happened to me.

Throughout my teen and young adult years I struggled from time to time with depression and anxiety, and although I appeared to be confident and happy all the time, the black dog had me. I was 'happy' as much as I thought happiness looked like. I have been on the ride of ups and downs and it was not until I was in my late 30s when I received training and attended counselling, that I realised I had a medical condition.

In my 30s I was working in a highly stressful workplace, running on adrenaline 24/7. I did not recognise the distress my body was under and was not feeling depressed, although was greatly aware of my anxiety levels which I controlled with quick-fix medications. It was not until I left that workplace and joined a slower paced environment that everything came to a head again.

One day I travelled by train to Melbourne for a routine meeting and on return to Ballarat was faced with a scary scenario. I was sitting on the train and happy chatting with people around me. There was nothing to be alarmed about and I didn't realise, but I was about to have a full-blown panic attack. I started feeling my body 'go' – how I describe my body when having a panic attack.

I started to feel excited from the adrenaline, which is a short-lived experience. My skin started prickling all over, I felt a hot flush, became short of breath, and disassociated with my surroundings. I quickly took half a tablet to get a quick fix, although it was not to be. I tried to stay calm and breathe, using all the techniques I knew, though I was not able to get this feeling to subside. As soon as the train pulled in to the next station, I jumped off to get as much fresh air into my lungs as possible. I was in Bacchus Marsh, many stops from home and I was terrified! I called a friend who lives in Bacchus Marsh to collect me from the station so I could feel safe. I spent the next hour calming down before heading back to the station to catch the next train. My friend dropped me off and lattempted to catch the next train but I could not do it. The staff were wonderful and after gaining permission, drove me back to Ballarat. I was fine in the car as I felt I would be able to get out at any time. After that day, I did not attempt to catch a train for an exceptionally long

From that day on I thought I would be broken forever. It took me weeks to leave my home and having panic attacks when people would visit. I could not drive my car, I could not go to my doctor, I could not be in a shopping centre. I gently pushed myself a little at a time. There were many tears and embarrassing moments, although each day has been worth building my self awareness of my condition.

People are often confused as to what happens and how I feel when I have a panic attack, my husband being one of these people. I asked him what he feels like when he has an asthma attack, he went on to describe how I feel when having a panic attack. There is no one size fits all. I have undergone many therapies which, for the most part, work for me. I take regular medication, seek counselling when required, do regular meditation, have had hypnosis and acupuncture. I ensure I challenge myself to step out into the world of the unknown. I have been able to fly internationally several times since this time, not always with ease, although I keep on trying.



I have my own successful cultural consulting business where I am challenged daily by talking in front of hundreds of people or having to make quick decisions.

When I tell people I have panic disorder, they look at me in disbelief. I feel like I am doing what I love and almost living my best life, my health and fitness are my next challenges. Although I have not felt depressed for several years, I know this could again occur in the future.

I do not know when I will have my next panic attack, although I know my family and I have many strategies to assist me to get through. I know this may sound like it is easy for me to say, but I promise there are good people out there to assist and strategies to help you to live your best life.

BRITTNIE RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

My name is Brittnie and I have complex post-traumatic stress-disorder. This has been as a result of severe childhood trauma, abuse and neglect. During my childhood my parents suffered with substance abuse, this then led to me being removed from their care. I was placed in the care of a family where unfortunately I endured years of emotional abuse. I was unaware of my diagnoses until my mid-twenties, when I felt like I had opened my eyes for the first time.

In my late teens I suffered from a period of what I though was depression. I had an extremely low mood and an even lower self-esteem. I had always had a poor opinion of myself, which I later learned to be my vicious inner critic. I had just been let go from my job. I was trapped in my own head and did not leave my house for eight weeks. At this time I sought the assistance and guidance of a GP who started me on anti-depressants immediately. I had very little input from psychology services at this time.

Years passed by and I continued to plod along, taking the medications the doctor had prescribed, the doses were increased to maximum, the medications changed numerous times, but I still suffered the same symptoms every single day. This was coupled with medication side effects. I lost the fire in my belly, my motivation, I felt like I could not feel joy. I felt numb all the time almost as if I was a zombie.

I recall having flashbacks / emotional regressions over my life, but I had no idea at the time what was happening to me. I would become very reactive and aggressive in most

situations, and this made it difficult for me to maintain close healthy relationships with the others in my life.

I would be triggered by someone or something and this would leave me emotionally and physically paralysed. I would see the events happening around me, see the pictures flashing in my head but it was as if these pictures did not register in my brain, they just sort of flew by. Once my body had 'come down' from the adrenalin rush, I would then be able to react.

Recently I had one of the most intense flashback / emotional regressions I have ever had. I spent four weeks emotionally destroyed by this trigger. I was uncontrollably tearful and could not moderate any of my emotions. This took a significant toll on my functionality in all aspects of my life. I was triggered by recent circumstances that brought my childhood trauma to the very forefront of my mind.

This then led to me making a split-second decision which resulted in me breaking my hand. Both events 'forced' me to address what was going on for me. This was the turning point, the moment I took the first steps towards recovery.

I actively sought the help from a new regular GP who is remarkably familiar with my medical and social history. I was open and honest about how I was feeling and how my symptoms had become 'unmanageable'. I then asked for the relevant referrals to seek help. Over four to six weeks I had weekly sessions with my counselor as well as regular therapy with my psychologist. Keeping these both on a regular basis I found was the key to success. Being able to check in weekly and be able to unload everything on your plate, check in your thoughts and processes, to make sure you are on track as well as validate how you are thinking and feeling.

I remember my first session with my new psychologist.

He asked key questions about my childhood. I immediately 'word vomited' my entire life out for this man in about three minutes. I did not even know if he was making any sense of anything I was saying as I felt like I was speaking at 100kms per hour.

He then stopped, thought, and then proceeded to explain to me that he believed I had been suffering with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. From that moment, when he explained what complex PTSD was, it was like all the stars aligned and my entire life made sense.

Understanding my illness has been so freeing and has given me the ability to finally feel authentic in the person I know that I am. I have only just begun my journey to recovery and I know there's a long road ahead but I am determined to keep going because I know recovery is possible for everyone.



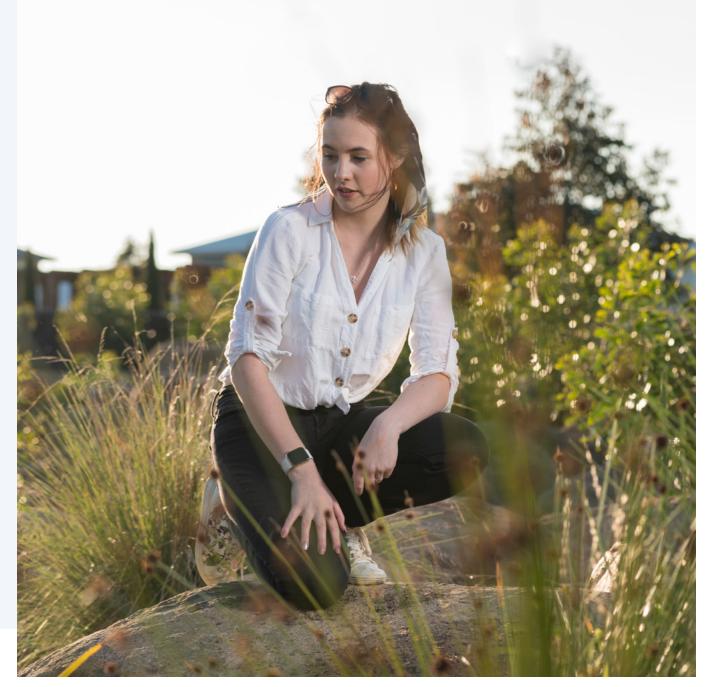
If you, or someone you know, have been effected by the content of this story and require further support, please consider contacting the relevant services listed on page 130

CAITI HAPPY WITH WHO I AM

I grew up as a particularly happy child, describing myself as coming from the perfect family. In reality, I spent a majority of my time ignoring the issues in my parents' relationship. My parents went through a rough break-up when I was 11, made worse by my dad's sudden death in a car accident. This was the beginning of a downward spiral that spanned throughout my teenage years. Between bullying at school and things not being good at home, I was sinking further into depression with each day that passed. I went from being an academic-achiever to someone who would skip school to self-harm. I was completely isolated and stopped attending school all together before the end of Year 7.

I started at a new school in Year 8, improved my grades and for the first time since my parents' break-up, I felt like I had a safe space. In fact, school became that very safe place for me throughout my teenage years. Being at school gave me enough to focus on that I could temporarily forget my own troubles. The issue was that when I wasn't at school, I was overcome by a persistent darkness that would regularly manifest as self-harm. Soon, the depression became a part of my personality. I'd accepted that the days of bright, cheery Caiti were long-gone. In fact, if you had asked me to describe myself in three words, I likely would have said short, academic and depressed.

Ever since I was in primary school, I had dreamed of attending the University of Melbourne. It was a light at the end of a long, negative tunnel. Finding out I'd been accepted into Melbourne University at the end of year 12 should have been the happiest day of my life, so why was it so underwhelming?





That was one of the hardest things for me to accept. For so long I'd imagined that leaving home and being at the university of my dreams would bring my life together like a perfect fairy-tale, but things didn't magically get better like I'd expected. In fact, the depression continued to worsen and I was struck with horrific nightmares every night. I was losing motivation. I knew I didn't want to continue to feel this way, but nothing I'd tried had worked.

I started off by seeing psychologists, who diagnosed me with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The diagnosis was almost a relief, because for the first time in my life I understood why I felt the way I did. I found comfort in talking to psychologists, but at the same time, my negative thoughts weren't really lifting. It felt as though I'd take one step forward, then three back. I ended up seeing three different psychologists, before finding Dr Jan.

For me, the therapies that worked best ended up being a combination of hypnotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. The hypnotherapy allowed me to reframe the associations I had with traumatic memories, whilst the cognitive behavioural therapy allowed me to re-train my way of thinking. I've always described myself as being an open and honest person, who is willing to tell my life story to anyone who cares to listen. Despite this, my sessions with Dr Jan made me realise that I hadn't actually opened up about my true feelings with a psychologist before. In fact, I would completely disassociate myself from my past when discussing it with anyone. Overcoming this was one of the most important parts of my recovery. When I finally did break down in front of Dr Jan, telling her about the perpetual guilt I felt over dad's passing, things took a turn for the better. She was helping me to manage my feelings and for the first time I was seeing an end to the negativity.

As time went on, I realised that one of the major obstacles to my recovery was the pressure I put on myself to fix every issue at once. I was ending up

overwhelmed and losing progress as a result.

As a school teacher, I know that I would never expect a student to learn everything at once and it was time I started to focus on fewer things at a time. I began picking a new difficulty to focus on improving each fortnight with Dr Jan. These difficulties started with managing my guilt over Dad's passing right through to dealing with issues about my home-life. As I slowed down my sessions, I began work on issues that weren't as major to me as others, but that still prevented me from living the life I'd always wanted.

A huge turning point was managing my extreme fear of being dishonest. For years, I hadn't been able to keep surprises, as I felt as though I was being dishonest in doing that. Dr Jan gave me strategies that resulted in me surprising my boyfriend with a weekend away for his birthday – something I didn't think I'd ever be able to do.

I am at a point now in my life that I didn't ever think was possible for me. Recovery wasn't a straight-forward path like I thought. There were times when things were on track and times when I went completely backwards. That's the part that people don't always tell you – you will have moments in your recovery where things aren't progressing like you expect. In the years that my recovery took, there were countless times that I lost motivation, gave up, decided happiness was too far out of reach – and yet, the hands-down best thing I did was to re-assess and keep trying.

It's been long and it's been hard, but for where I am now, persevering has been so incredibly worth it. In fact, if you asked me to describe myself in three words now, I would tell you that I am still short, still academic, but I'm now also optimistic. I've seen how resilient I can be, and I'm finally happy with who I am.

ANONYMOUS MENTAL STATE

I was tested as having mild to severe depression and anxiety in the last few years of high school by my GP and psychologist. I didn't believe I had depression or that it was "that bad" compared to others in the media or online. I didn't struggle to get out of bed in the morning or with self-care. I was on autopilot – I wasn't overly lethargic just apathetic. I went to a pretty prestigious school who expected a lot out of their students and those who could not cope with the workload and high expectations moved schools before VCE. I was not one of those students. Due to the physical and learning disability that I have had since birth, I struggled to keep up and as people like me often left, they were ill-equipped to help me. My self-confidence and self-worth took a nose dive and that was when my psychologist suggested that it could potentially be depression.

I gave up studying for tests as I saw no difference in results. I would get the lowest score in the class so would leave class to sit in a toilet stall if I was struggling to understand the work or getting assessments back. We were ranked publicly by how well we were doing in each class and I was always near the bottom and everyone knew it.

I remember asking my English teacher if she could help me raise my study score for a university course, but she told me that I was "physically incapable" of getting it. I stopped trying in English after that because I felt like she basically told me there was no point in trying, I would never succeed anyway. I was advised by my homeroom teacher and the head of the senior school not to sit my final exams, the unspoken reason I felt being that I would skew their average and make them look bad.

I developed a lot of harmful habits (disordered eating, self-harm, suicidal thoughts) to punish myself. Not because of the low score but for caring about it in the first place. In the end, apathy was a coping mechanism. If I didn't care about what test score I got I wouldn't have to cry in the bathroom for the rest of the period.

I don't think my school had the resources to help with students going through this, as they often left if they couldn't handle it. My own homeroom teacher said I was just "attention seeking" after I told her I was struggling mentally.

I saw a psychologist in this time to help me with breakdowns and panic attacks and it was helpful to just vent to someone. But there was nothing I could do until Heft. My parents wouldn't let me move schools. So, I just had to wait. And that was hard. I'm not a patient person and my psychologist said it's common for people to become depressed about situations they no control over. Whether that be an oppressive job, being bullied at school or online, or a school that humiliates its students for not performing to their standards.

My friends could only help so much. They didn't understand what it was like to be the dumbest person in the class. One girl thought an 85% made her the dumbest student, which is another issue entirely.

Although I was sympathetic to her, it did not help my own mental state. The only thing that helped for short periods of time was listening to music, drawing, writing or reading. Anything that would help me escape from how I was feeling. I would draw Batman and Robin comics in class or write short stories instead of doing homework.

I no longer have any harmful habits, but I am still working on gaining back my self-worth and self-confidence. I do this by trying not to equate my worth or intelligence to a number or how people see me. It's just as hard as it sounds after six years of implicit inferiority by an establishment that was supposed to support me. But there are so many skills and abilities in life that cannot be tested in a classroom.

Find people who will listen to you and pay attention when you cry out for help. Find something that makes you happy whether that be playing an instrument or drawing or cooking.

The take-away from my story is that you are worth more than what anyone trying to put you down says you are. Soon you will leave and go out into the real world and even if you don't know what or who you will be, at least you will get to decide that for yourself.



I was 13 when I was first able to place a name to the feeling, to the illness.

Like most young men I struggled internally with my own self-image, struggled with the ideas and pressures of what it meant to be a man. An abusive home life combined with the daily torment of high school bullies led me down a path ultimately ending in my being diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa.

Anorexia is an eating disorder and despite the stigma is a disease that affects people of all genders and all races. It is a disease that not only impacts people physically, but mentally as well.

I don't remember exactly when I stopped eating, all I remember is wanting to get bigger. to get that six pack and to be as big as I could to stop the bullying.

In February 2013, I was admitted to the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, extremely underweight, malnourished, mentally and physically exhausted, still unsure what exactly was going on. I spent the first few days undergoing tests, until I was met by a young doctor who first explained the diagnosis and disease.

Stigma surrounds us all, regardless of our diagnosis, for me the hardest pill to swallow was the toxic masculinity – the fact I had just been diagnosed with a disease that until that moment I thought was only able to affect women. How could that be?

How, after trying so hard to amount to being the man society demanded of me, could I be anorexic?

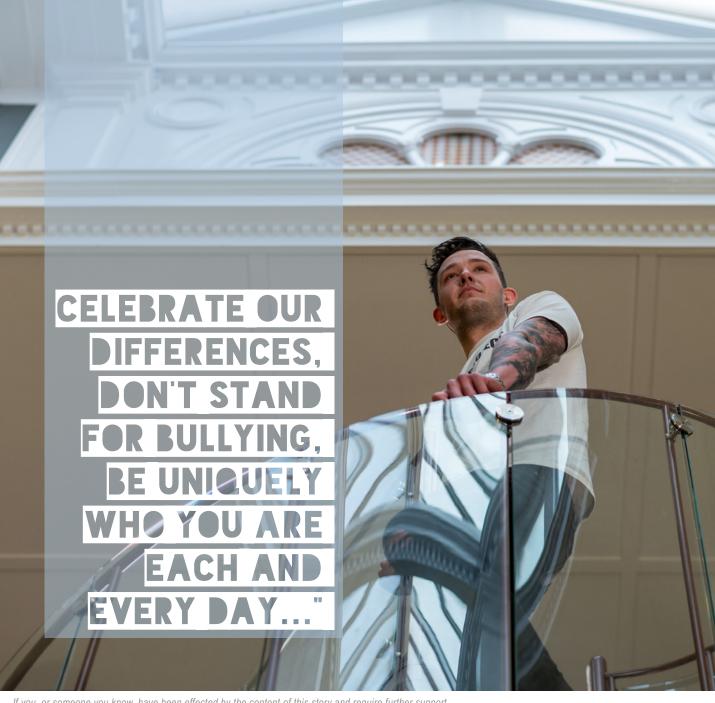
The battle of acceptance, of understanding that you're illness doesn't define you but instead is part of you, although never easy, is the first step to recovery. I was lucky enough to be placed in a ward with four other similarly aged teens, one of which was another young man. I spent four weeks on the ward, four weeks where I was lucky enough to grow and learn from my peers, to begin to break down the thought processes that fed my struggles. For me I found escape in music, with my headphones in I wasn't some sick, mentally unstable kid, but I was on fire, burning with desire, a want to be more, to be better. More importantly, I found hope in friendship, I grew very close with the others on my ward as we were all battling so hard to beat this disease that it became a much less daunting task when facing it together.

As much as I learned from my time at the Royal Children's, it took me a long time to realise, even with my acceptance, I was still afraid. For years I refused to let anyone know about my eating disorder, scared of what they would think or how they would react. I sat as the news continued to promote this life long battle as one purely faced by women. That there is the problem,

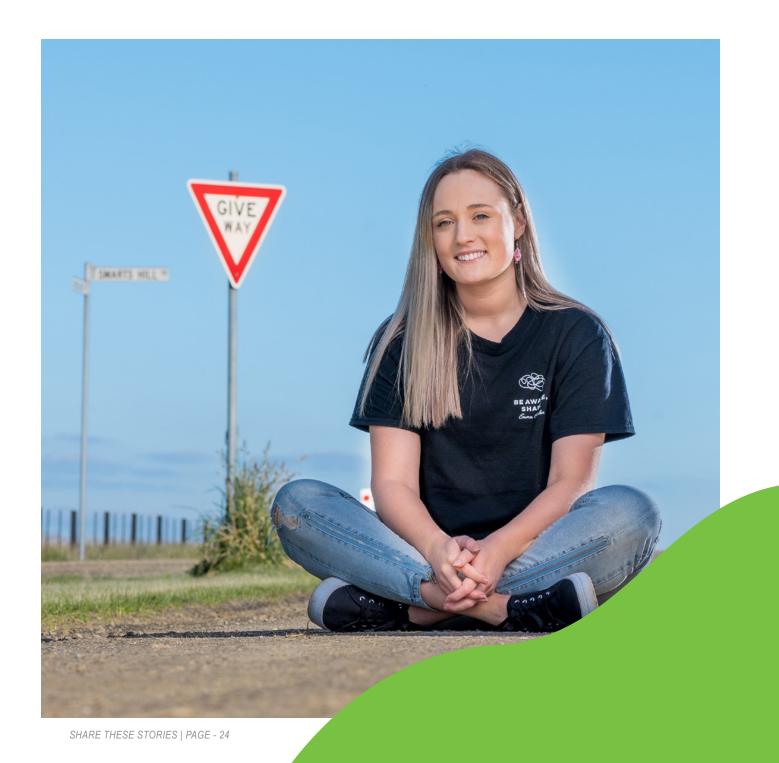
the fault in our society. Yes Anorexia is my result, my outcome, however it is an outcome reached after setting an unrealistic bar and then taking my legs out from under me. The pressure we are under as young men and women to conform and reach markers set generations before us. To stand six feet tall, with huge arms and a six pack or to fit into the smallest size on the shelf are toxic targets, they are our biggest battles. Toxic gender stereotypes and social stigmas are the seeds planted in us as children and when they flourish they do so in the form of our biggest battles – depression, anxiety disorders, or for me, Anorexia Nervosa.

If we are to grow and thrive we need to stop viewing each other as if we were poured from the same moulds. Love is our most inexhaustible source of magic and in a world that at times feels so intent on causing pain, we have the choice to stand united in our differences, love one another without judgement and to bust out these toxic traits, to fight alongside each other regardless of what stereotypes an outdated society expect from us. We are only ever as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Celebrate your differences, don't stand for bullying, be uniquely who you are each and every day and don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise.





If you, or someone you know, have been effected by the content of this story and require further support, please consider contacting the relevant services listed on page 130



EMMA WHO I AM TODAY

My name is Emma, and around seven years ago I realised the difference between anxiety and stress. I had always been an anxious person who thought of every possible outcome of every situation, not only for myself, but for everyone around me. However, the essence of 'anxiety' was never considered as my own and my family's understanding of this mental illness was very minimal.

The first time my anxiety decided to pop up and say 'hey!' was when I was taken off intravenous antibiotics following an appendix removal. I found myself in a situation where I was unable to breathe and I remember looking around panicking, searching for an answer. The doctor gave me Ventolin but part of me knew my childhood asthma wasn't to blame for this inability to catch my breath. That first night at home with these symptoms is engrained in my mind.

I remember feeling so confused and scared. Next came the heart palpitations and of course my family and I searched for a medical explanation for this as it was all we knew. I wore a heart monitor to school and did breath-tests to make sure I was actually able to breathe properly. I could when I was not in a state of panic.

Shortly after, at a family dinner, my throat felt like it was closing and I realised I couldn't stop drinking my cup of water on the table, as I feared that if I did, I wouldn't be able to swallow or breathe. This resulted in me licking the rain off the car windows all the way to the hospital so that I could keep swallowing.

After a few visits to the school psychologist who then relocated to a private practice years later (where I continued to see her), mum and I sat down to hear the words I already knew, but didn't want to face... 'Emma, I think it's time to give this a diagnosis... you have Chronic Generalised Anxiety'. I remember my mother breaking down into tears and I could tell inside she wanted to close her eyes and imagine it was a dream.

For me, this diagnosis was great. It was the difference between staying in the anxiety ridden world I was in. and moving into a space where I had control over my symptoms. I was also diagnosed with Trichotillomania during this time, which unfortunately involved the pulling of hair from my eyebrows and eyelashes as a subconscious form of stress relief.

Many years later, we fast forward to a completely new version of Emma. I have my Psychologists to thank for helping me to get to a point in my life where my anxiety doesn't control me.

Over the past two years I have been actively participating in various forms of self-help such as increasing my knowledge and understanding of mental health, mindfulness colouring, meditation, floatation therapy (cannot recommend enough!). Naturopathy and use of essential oils.

I now have the ability to separate myself from my anxiety. This involves acknowledging its presence but having the power to choose to let it go.

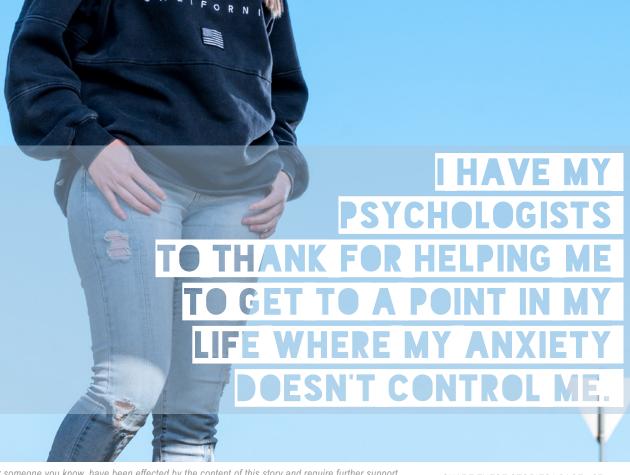
I share all of my findings and experiences of anxiety on my mental health Facebook page, 'Be Aware, Share', which is a platform that encompasses honesty, actively works to break the stigma around mental health and gives people the opportunity to seek advice and information regarding support services in their communities.

To those of you reading this that feel as though your anxiety is the driver in your life, I promise that with help from a psychologist and active efforts to engage in selfhelp you can take control. If I could tell my 16 year old self anything it would be this..... "Please don't be scared. The power to change, to be better than anxiety and to gain control, is within arm's reach. Thank you for seeking help when you did. Your decision to open your mind, share your confusion and soak in every inch of information you were given has led me to develop a passion for mental health and a power to share my experiences with everyone else without fear of judgement."

Anxiety, you have given me a special ability to notice when someone needs help and you have taught me to be selfless and aware of everyone around me. For these reasons, you have led me to work in teaching and disability where I can help people become the best versions of themselves and give each person an equal opportunity to succeed. You have helped me form strong and purposeful friendships where feelings and emotions are communicated without judgement and best of all, you have made me who I am today.

Make the decision to gain control over your anxiety too. It was by far the best thing I have ever done (and will ever do) in my entire life. I am not saying it will be easy, but by God it will be worth it! Don't let anxiety control you.





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GEORGIA BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

I think that positive stories of recovery are so important. When you're sick, it is easy to think that this is all you are, all you'll ever be – an overwhelming feeling of stagnation really. But positive stories offer hope, they remind us that people have been where you are, they have made it through and so can you. I hope that by sharing my story, even if only one person resonates with it, that I can help others to believe they can make it and that they are worthy of life and recovery. Finding a place to start this story is always the hardest part, but I guess my story of recovery starts in 2017.

I first went to a doctor – not for my own benefit, but to assuage fears others had of my wellbeing. I was convinced that nothing was wrong and I just wanted confirmation from a doctor. However I walked out of that appointment with referrals and a diagnosis of Anorexia Nervosa (AN) among other mental health conditions. I really didn't accept my diagnosis, I didn't feel sick and I didn't think anything was wrong until few months later I was pulled aside by a former teacher (current co-worker) whom I trusted greatly, who basically said "what's wrong George? And don't tell me nothing because I can see something is wrong...". That was the first time I realised people were concerned for my health, so for a few weeks I decided I would try to recover.





However, I 'fell off the wagon' so to speak and I started losing weight again. I was threatened with an involuntary hospital admission. At this time too, I was working at a school and was told by my manager that the students were noticing, which really concerned me. By then I had acknowledged the fact I was sick and hearing that young students `were noticing' really concerned me. I was worried they'd see me and think my relationship with food and exercise was normal – which, of course, it was anything but. This did motivate me to recover but again, this motivation didn't last long.

Months passed, I really wasn't living. I was merely existing. My mental health declined, I was struggling. I had no motivation for life and wished I wasn't here. So many times I wondered how painful it would be to end it all, I honestly thought I was a burden and that everyone would be better off without me. I isolated myself because the thought of socialising was too much (you don't realise how much food brings people together until you're scared of eating). I was exhausted to the point where basic tasks like getting out of bed in the morning were a huge effort. I struggled getting through the work day. Not only the mental part, AN takes a toll on you physically. I was told I had osteopenia with the bones of a 60 year old. I was anaemic, dizzy and freezing cold all the time. I was miserable, I really hit a low point. When I was sick with Anorexia, I lost so much more than weight. Host friends, health, employment, education, my will to live, my independence. I lost myself.

It had been a long time coming but I eventually chose to recover. I was trying hard at recovery, seeing everyone in my treatment team regularly, but it had been so long I didn't think I could change. However eventually I was admitted into an in-patient clinic for eating disorders, and that admission changed my life. I honestly think I can give a lot of credit to my admission for me being able to recover. I realised I wasn't doing recovery right, as I was now in an environment where I had to confront my emotions and everything that was going on. I couldn't use my behaviours as I had done previously, so I learnt strategies to manage. I was so supported by the team

there, and my team back at home. I finally had the skills and motivation to do it properly. I meticulously planned my discharge, and I kept up what I learnt in the clinic at home and nearly a year later I am weight restored and finally able to eat at peace.

I have gained weight, and as I have weight restored, I have gained so much more than weight. I've gained supportive friends and an understanding of who is there for me. I learnt I am loved and wanted (despite what I think), that I am not a burden, and that yes people would actually care if I something happened to me. I have learnt that I am capable and I am starting to learn that I am OK as I am.

Needless to say, recovery hasn't been easy. God no, it's been one hell of a journey. I fell back so many times, I struggled so much. Especially at the start as I was doing things my eating disorder told me not to. Not acting on ED behaviours was hard. I used the behaviours to mask emotions. I had the idea that somehow these behaviours would lead to happiness (yet they never did), so not doing them took a lot of will power and was a major struggle. But once I pushed through this part, it did get easier. I'm starting to find myself again. I'm starting to try to accept my weight restored body. I am back at work full time and genuinely enjoy life. I have plans for the future! I can eat out with friends, go to events and places with people, I am living. Happiness came after what felt like years of pain, but here I am. I made it. Yes, I still have bad days, but that is ok, I'm handling them a lot better now. I can say I am currently the happiest I have been in years, which is quite the achievement. I can't put into words how glad I am I chose to recover.

If you are just starting on your recovery journey, I want to tell you firstly how proud I am of you for taking those steps, and to not give up entirely if you have slip ups along the way – it is part of the journey, no story of recovery is linear. I want you to know that you are worth recovery, you are worthy of a life beyond your eating disorder and that you will get there if you keep at the decision to recover.

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Know there is no shame in seeking help, in getting a diagnosis, or taking medication etc. If you need to go to hospital, go – there is no shame in doing this either.

I found the Eating Disorders Victoria and the Butterfly Foundation helplines and websites really helpful, as were Lifeline and Beyondblue when I was really struggling. As for local supports, Ballarat Community Health were great in providing me with low-cost health care and I am so thankful for my doctor for being so understanding and supportive. Also, if you're under 25, headspace may be able to help, or at least point you in the right direction.

As hard as it is to accept, recovery is up to you. No one else can make you recover, your family, friends, doctors, nurses etc can support and guide you through it, but they can't make you recover, they cannot save you. You need to choose to recover every day and it's a choice

you'll probably need to make hundreds of times a day. If you muck up, that's ok – try again. Take small steps every day. Use your supports such as close family and friends, see your treatment team, take your medications, keep in contact with friends, and take care of yourself as best as you can.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again, recovery is hard but it is worth the struggle. I made it, and so can you. Believe in yourself. You've got this.



HARRY COMMITMENT TO MYSELF

My mental health problem started when my father left. It was a hard transition for me and my three sisters. We had to go to lawyers and family consultants to see who we would be living with, so we never quite knew where we were going to end up. It was super stressful, because my family had already been broken up once when my dad actually left. I didn't want it to happen again by having to live in two different places. I felt powerless, in that where my sisters and I lived, was up to the government. This made me angry because It felt like I wasn't being listened to.

As things got worse my mum made me seek help by going to sessions for kids whose parents had separated. However these sessions did not feel very meaningful and felt like I just had to be there. I also went to other services, however I hated it there because it felt too clinical. I felt like just a number not a person looking for help. Soon after, I ended up going to headspace. The first times I went, nothing changed but that was before I found a connection with one of the workers. I now realise it was important for me to establish a trusting relationship with a worker who I could express myself to safely and emotionally, and from here, I could be supported.

As I went in to the senior years of high school my depression got worse. I ended up pushing good friends away and burning bridges. I had so many family circumstances to navigate with mum and dad and felt very protective of my sisters. I felt a lot of responsibility on my shoulders. School was expecting at least three hours of study from me each night. Because of these expectations, I felt there was no room for my identity.

Every day was just about getting through each day, one at a time. I kept going until one day I realised I was out of energy, I couldn't be bothered, I had no motivation for anything. This left me with what seemed like an easier option at the time, ending my life. I realised I had to seek help. Mum and I were arguing a lot. I wouldn't/couldn't get out of bed. The things that I previously loved such as drama, media and seeing my friends didn't even motivate me anymore. I could put on a big smile and perform in the school production but inside I was hurting - everything was heavy. Because of my 'brave' front, nobody checked in, nobody asked how I was, but why would they have? On the outside I appeared totally fine.

Lended up going to the GP and getting diagnosed with depression and getting medication. I wasn't too impressed with it at the start because of the effects of toxic masculinity, 'manning up' and being too proud to accept help. But I gave it a chance after some thought and it ended up really helping.

I don't want to focus on the negatives, I want to focus on the positives and the recovery. The progress is never linear and even now, where I am much better, I still have my bad days. On these days I feel so alone my heart aches. Recovery to me was finding something, anything to hold onto and live for, if you're not going to live for yourself. For me that was my mum. When things were at there worst mum was there. When things were heavy, mum lightened the load.

The hugs, the meals, the check ins, mum was there – even the cold-pressed apple juice that mum always made sure was in the fridge when I'd had a particularly bad day. The juice was there, mum was there.

I've gotten back into what I enjoy, reading, catching up with friends, and I've even gone to Europe. Things that I didn't/couldn't do, before I got help. On days that my illness acts up and I don't want to do anything besides disappear from the world, I know I just have to get up and push through. Nothing big, just little things such as getting up to have breakfast, or to sit with someone so I don't feel so alone. I force myself to do these things to fight back even a little, to improve that little bit every day.

If I rewind back to the start, two things have happened; I've started a journey of recovery that may never end, but with this I have grown into a person that recognises the importance of being kind to myself and having positive people around me. I now have islands that I can climb upon when the ocean is rough.

This journey may never end but I have made a commitment to myself to be honest with who I am, however that may look, and to share my experiences and learned knowledge with others around me.





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JAKE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

My first encounter with the idea that some of the most unexpected people could be struggling with their mental health, wasn't when I was eight years old and was told that my father had suicided – it was years later when I finally was able to talk about it and ask questions about what had actually happened. It struck me then that there can always be something so serious, yet so hidden, that is affecting and hurting those that are around you.

My father is a prime example why we should reach out and ask someone for help as this was something that he never did himself.

Sure, dad had many, many mates that he was always having beers with, or having over to the house for family events, or working with, or seeing on a regular basis. But I could almost guarantee that none of these people knew what was going on inside his head, or even knew that him and mum had separated four weeks before his suicide. Thinking back, not even us four children fully understood what was happening during that month.

Something I always used to think about and still currently do, is how could a man who owned his own successful local business, who had a wife and four kids, who saw nothing but love when they saw him every day, a man who was well-known in the area and well-loved, take his own life in the blink of an eye and leave all of that behind? How could things be so bad for someone that they would do something like that and leave the carnage for everyone else to deal with? Here one second, gone the next.

The answer can be as complicated or as simple as we like, and we may never truly know what went through his mind in those last moments. What we do know is that this is the result of not seeking help, of not taking even the smallest bit of control and trying to help yourself.

Dad isn't to be blamed in this. It was something that I struggled with for so long. Blame and anger. Getting angry and blaming him for tearing down all of our lives. But it isn't his fault. He was unwell. Not physically unwell, but mentally. His mind was structured in such a way that the only way to improve his current situation, was to completely remove himself from it. He was limited by his time, a time where men were too scared to break the 'macho man' mould and talk about their feelings, to reach out and ask for help from those around them when things weren't going well.

Things are improving for men these days, with more options becoming available and the topic becoming destigmatised, but this was back in 2006. Back then things were completely different.

If I'm completely honest, I suppressed any thoughts about dad's suicide for years after it happened. I didn't think anything of it when all of our closest family and friends started to arrive at my grandparent's house that night, all with tears in their eyes, hugging my mum, coming in to check up on us kids that were sitting in the other end of the house wondering why there was so many people coming over at once.

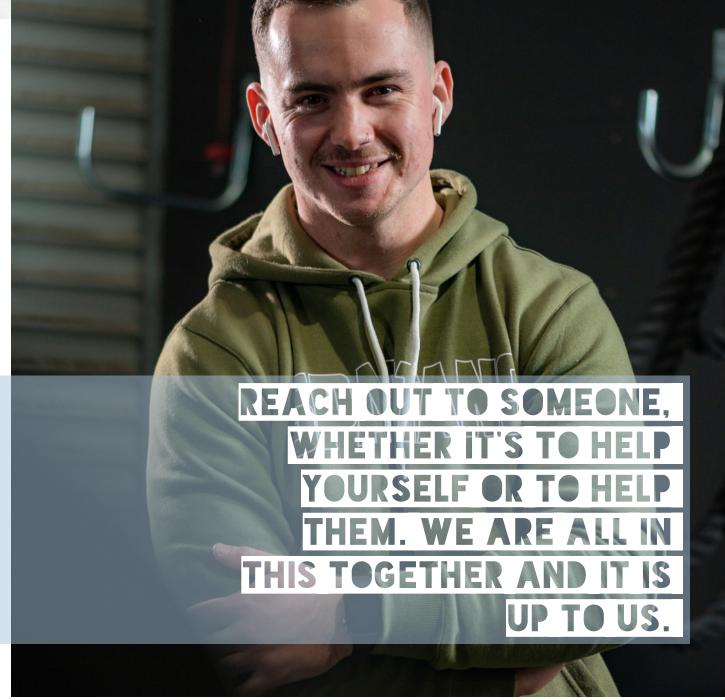
We were broken the news gently and I don't remember how each of my siblings responded to it, but all I can remember is that I didn't cry. Yes, I was upset, but I don't think I properly processed what had actually happened for quite a while, it just became a fact and life continued. It wasn't until a couple of years later when we moved from East Gippsland to Ballarat that I suspected that something just wasn't right with me and that I didn't process emotions the same as other people.

I had become an angry and emotional ten-year-old who was just nothing but nasty. This was when I had my first experience of treating my mental health. As it turned out, I had made a habit of just suppressing my emotions over long periods of time then having sudden and aggressive outbursts. Mum began taking me to see a local grief counsellor, who I would sit with once a week and recall memories of my family and do a whole different range of things that got me to focus on all the good memories and constantly recall them. This helped me dramatically during that part of my life and I think this was when I actually fully came to terms with what happened.

What I've recently learnt is that improving your mental health isn't just a two-step quick-fix, or something that can be done by doing one or two things and then is forgotten about. It is the same as your physical health; it needs to be maintained, looked after and given the best possible chance to grow and improve. Just like your physical health, there will always be rough patches. It's just learning what to do in these rough patches for your mental health to get you on the mend straight away.

What has helped me the most is having a strong support network around me, which for me, is strong male figures. I owe so much of who I am today from the many different men I've had around me ever since it all happened. From my uncle and grandfather, to the close mates I've had around me at different points in my life, and even their dads as well. Of course there's also my Mum who has done her absolute best raising four kids on her own after it all.

Reach out to someone, whether it's to help yourself or to help them. We are all in this together and it is up to us.



If you, or someone you know, have been effected by the content of this story and require further support, please consider contacting the relevant services listed on page 130

ANONYMOUS RECOVERY

When I think about my mental health journey, the first thing I think about is the first time that someone spoke to me about needing professional help. They tried to reassure me that seeking help was a really normal thing to do and related it to having a broken bone and that people get broken bones fixed all the time. But now that I've been through the journey, I realised that it really isn't like that at all. Bones are easily fixed, put a plaster on it and let it rest; the body does all the work. The process of recovering from a mental illness takes work and commitment. It takes courage and a whole lot of patience. It takes longer than fixing a broken bone.

When I was 18, I found myself in a situation that is unfortunately all too common. I was in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship. I was worn down to a shell. I was constantly made to feel worthless and powerless and a burden. This relationship lasted two years. Two years of feeling all of these things. I knew nothing else. I had accepted that life. I stopped knowing how to care for myself because all I knew were the rules that had been set for me. I didn't know how to leave and I didn't really want to. Some nights I would leave, I would stay in a hotel room and sit with my back to the door afraid he would find out where I was. I spent a lot of these nights not sleeping. I remember it being the middle of summer, in a tiny hotel room with the only light coming from the air conditioner that I had left on all day. But I felt nothing. I wasn't hot. I wasn't cold. I was just numb. I spent a lot of time staring at myself in the mirror, watching bruises forming around my neck and repeating the words "this is your fault". But I knew nothing else, I always went back. That is, until the world shifted slightly and I decided I needed to go.



IT TOOK ME **MANY YEARS** OF BEING INCREDIBLY UNKIND TO MYSELF TO **LEARN THE IMPORTANCE** SELF-CARE. It was both the hardest and best decision I ever made. I was out, but I was broken.

What came next was a very long process of figuring out what had happened to me. My abuser did a really good job of taking away my voice. I was afraid that people wouldn't believe me and sometimes exactly that happened. I was 21, living in an entirely new town and the only people I knew and trusted didn't mind when I decided not to be kind to myself. I was 21 and I was addicted to drugs.

Having unhealthy coping mechanisms was incredibly exhausting. Drugs were just the beginning of avoiding how I truly felt. It was the perfect mask. I engage in substances, self-hate evaporates and I feel warm again. I was walking a fine line between throwing my life away and being a perfectly functioning adult. I was paying rent, working two jobs and socialising - I was functioning. Self harm was my way of being able to feel again. I was stuck in a cycle of trying to accept what happened to me wasn't my fault and punishing myself for what happened to me. I refused to speak about it and I refused to believe I had a problem. Something had to give, and it did. I overdosed. I never really wanted to die but I definitely didn't want to live either. I was 23 and I was in a hospital bed detoxing. It was November and almost my twenty fourth birthday. No one knew where I was and I was too ashamed to tell anyone. I needed help but I didn't know how to help myself and I certainly didn't think I deserved it. I felt an overwhelming amount of shame. Every time someone noticed the track marks on my arm or the self harm scars, I would get a stab of shame in the pit of my stomach and I felt like I was on fire. But this time I noticed something different. There was finally light. It was small but it was there and that was all I needed - hope. I was clean and I was ready to deal with my mental health.

It took me quite a long time to feel comfortable talking about myself. I was embarrassed and being honest to a complete stranger was terrifying. But the counsellor was patient. He let me change the subject over and over

again. I relapsed a lot throughout this process. But I didn't fail. I relapsed again and again but I never saw it as failing, just part of my process. The more I opened up about what I had experienced the more I realised how unwell I had become. I was getting flashbacks multiple times a day, I wasn't sleeping and I couldn't focus on anything. I didn't want to take care of myself anymore. The counsellor noticed these signs before I could and made a referral to someone who specialises in trauma. I saw this as him giving up on me. I spiralled and I lost control again. Eventually I reached out to the service I was referred to. I didn't meet their criteria and was refused counselling. At this point I knew I wasn't doing well. Addiction was hiding close by in the shadows and I was still using everyday. I kept searching. I found a program really close to where I was living. I was accepted and put on a waiting list. I waited for three months. I was in limbo. The first session was with a trauma specialist. I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't like her approach. I felt invalidated and I felt small and fragile. Heft the session asking myself if what I had experienced was really that bad at all, had I just overreacted? Why was this still affecting me, all these years later? This is when I learnt the valuable lesson of one counsellor doesn't fit all. Keep trying. Keep searching. Keep allowing yourself to get the help you deserve because I did deserve it and I still deserve it now. todav.

Relapse. It's a word that scares people. Particularly people who struggle to understand addiction. But it's reality. It happens, and when it does happen, it's okay. It's temporary. It starts off being something great. You remember why you used drugs to begin with and you remember how easy it is to feel numb. But then it starts getting harder. Every day it gets harder. You remember how hard it is to keep up and you remember how much work it takes to keep going. You stop enjoying it and now you're just using, so you don't feel sick in the morning. But morning always comes. Forgive yourself.

It took me many years of being incredibly unkind to myself to learn the importance of self-care.

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Being kind to myself gives me the mental clarity to be kind to other people. Take a warm bath with candles, watch your favourite movie with your favourite person with your favourite food. Enjoy food for what it is without counting calories and feeling guilty. Go for a walk and stand on all the crunchy leaves. Caring for yourself can sometimes be the hardest part of the day but if you're empty then so is everything you do. Fill your cup first.

I turn 28 in a couple of months. 10 years on and I'm still in counselling. I'm still allowing myself to heal and I'm giving myself as much time as I need. Because healing invisible wounds takes longer. If there's anything I have learnt from everything I have experienced, it would be to remind myself that I deserve happiness. It's not being ashamed of having scars and knowing that covering

those scars with tattoos doesn't take them away. It's catching myself before I fall because I definitely still fall sometimes. It's letting myself feel everything I need to feel and understanding why. It's being proud of myself and being proud of what I have accomplished. It's coexisting with myself and being comfortable.

Recovery is a word that means something different to everyone. Today it might mean that you got out of bed and you washed your hair and you let the warmth of the sun hit your face and you were able to smile and laugh. Tomorrow it might mean staying in bed and letting yourself recharge. But every inhale and every exhale means you're still trying and that's what recovery is all about - not giving up. Recovery is not linear.



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ANONYMOUS BENEFIT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

This is a story about my journey with mental health and how medication has both impacted and improved my quality of life.

Before I can get into how I found my way to finding the right medication for me I have to give a bit of a backstory about my battle with mental illness. I have had depression since the age of 12 and always felt like the world weighed heavily on my shoulders. I often took on other people's problems – being a sensitive and emotional person I've always felt the pain of the world. My upbringing was anything but 'normal' and my childhood was tainted with feelings of fear, anxiety, abandonment, loneliness and an aching sadness. I was insecure, feeling like I wasn't pretty enough, or bubbly, or sporty and I definitely was not 'popular'. I had wished and wished that I had a normal life.

Those years felt like an earthquake, I never had stable ground to stand on, and the years since have been an aftershock that continues to affect me mentally and psychologically to this day. The truth is childhood trauma never completely fades and that in itself can have a lasting effect on your mental health. Recovery is a journey, there isn't an end point where you are officially cured and you dust off your hands and move on. Sometimes my mental health is great and sometimes it kicks me in the shins, but that is all part of having a mental illness, it's about learning and growing. You need to be aware of your triggers, notice when your mental health is slipping and reach out for help when you need it.

When I was 19 years old I had a breakdown. Actually that's a lie, I had a lot of breakdowns. But one in particular sent me on the path to discovering medication that treats mental illness. I had spent much of 2017 either spending all of my money on the weekends getting drunk or in my bed, hidden in my room, avoiding every responsibility I had, besides going to my casual job once in a while. My bed felt like a warm and comforting void that would suck me in and give me refuge, but I was trapped there by my depression and I couldn't get out.

One day I realised that all of my friends in my home town were toxic and problematic to my mental wellbeing. I felt like my life was going nowhere, I had no purpose and the stress and breakdown of my family had caused me to lose my sanity. I remember calling my mum screaming and crying on the phone. I thought about suicide. I felt like the world was ending in my mind. My mum rushed back home and comforted me. This was when she began to insist that I try a little thing called medication. Hooked into her eyes and saw the concern and panic. She was afraid of what my mental health may eventuate to. I agreed that maybe this is something I could try. My mum accompanied me to my doctor's appointment; this was my first step toward recovery. She did most of the talking at my appointment, she explained my symptoms, my breakdowns and all the other little details of my mental health. The doctor explained what the medication was and what it would do but I didn't really pay much attention to what she was saying because I just expected that it would fix all of my problems. My doctor then gave me a prescription and sent me out the door. Following the appointment we headed to the local pharmacy and the prescription was traded in for a small box of pills. At first I had mixed emotions about the pills. I somewhat felt optimistic mixed with discomfort as I was diving into the unknown. I thought maybe it would help drag me out of the void I was stuck in but it seemed to have done the complete opposite.

One day I woke up and I had an epiphany, I realised

that I wanted to pursue a career where I could help others like me. I felt as though this gave me purpose and empowerment. It was then that I decided that I would move two hours away and start a new life. I pulled myself out of the void. I felt proud of myself for deciding to make a change in my life and discard some of my unhealthy habits. So I decided to throw my meds in the bin, thinking that I was okay without them.

I went a few months without needing any medication, my mental health was in such a good place. But then suddenly the hard hitting lows started coming back again. Except much, much worse. I also would have these episodes where I would be up late drawing in my sketch pad like a mad woman, and then jumping to another activity and never feeling satisfied. I called my mum and admitted to what was going on. She recommended I get back on the medication again.

So I went back to the psychiatrist and they put me on a new medication. Unfortunately it didn't do too much. By this time I had nearly given up on trying medication but my mum convinced me to go back another time as she believed that I had inherited her genes. That I also had Bipolar. I explained all my experiences and symptoms I was having with my new psychiatrist, he listened so intently to what I had to say and told me that I had been prescribed the wrong medication to support me. He told me that I have Bipolar Type 2, and that a mood stabiliser would be a better fit. This is when I was introduced to Lamotrigine which has really worked for me. I have now been taking it for two and a half years. I haven't had nearly as many mood swings as I had with my other medication. Although the new change was good it still wasn't enough to stop the fluctuation of anxious feelings I was having daily. I couldn't go outside on my days off, I couldn't handle people coming over and I constantly felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable at work.

I decided to go back to see my psychiatrist, again, and he agreed that I may need to try another medication. The combination of the new drugs have helped me



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immensely. I no longer feel anxious, or struggle to get out of bed as much as I used to. I generally feel happier and free of the void that was sucking me in.

For three years I struggled with finding the right medication for me, every new drug as an experimentation to see if it may work. But with most medications there are usually side effects. I've had medications that have increased my suicidal thinking, I've had one's make me snappy and aggressive and I have had others that have made me feel drowsy and kind of zombie-like.

Medication is not the solution for everyone and can have a completely different effect with each individual. But in my recovery journey it has been essential to get to where I am today. Whilst taking medication I have been able to achieve great things. I completed the diploma of community services, I have had two jobs in the mental health field and have supported many others who have had similar experiences to me. I have two beautiful dogs who have been an amazing support for me. I have a better relationship with my family and a small handful of great friends in my life in Ballarat. I am so thankful to be where I am today. If there's any advice that I can give, it's that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and to please try new things if it has the potential to benefit your mental health. That may not be medication, but it may be something that might pull you out of a void.

Thank you for reading my story.



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JOSHUA NEVER LET IT BEAT ME

I was in Grade 5, there was a boy in my grade bigger than me, intimidating. He punched me, kicked me but what hurt more than any punch or kick were the names he called me. He called me gay, a faggot, a poof. I didn't know why he called me these names or why he targeted me, was it because my mother was a lesbian? Did he even know my mum was a lesbian? He made me think "am I gay?" – does he know and I don't?

His torments were relentless and I used to pray he would be sick and not be at school. I wanted to stay home almost every day just to avoid that one person, he made me feel small, pathetic, insignificant, sad. I didn't want to feel like this and even more I didn't want anyone to know I felt like this either. One day after school it got too much and I felt so sad. I was going to bed and started crying my dad came and asked what was wrong. I explained to him about the boy at school and my dad simply told me "stick up for yourself, don't let him make you feel like this". I went to school the next day and when he grabbed me in a headlock I drew my arm back and with all my force I punched him in the crotch. He didn't bother me for the rest of that day or the next day or the day after.

I started to feel better, happier. The days went on, topics changed and the class started sex ed. I was excited and interested in learning about what was happening to my body and how it was changing. I already didn't like my body and couldn't wait for it to change. I started to get curious about what or who I was attracted to, I found myself looking at the diagrams and pictures of penises rather than vaginas, wondering if it was normal to be so curious. I was back to feeling curious, sad, low and small.



It came time to go to high school and I was hopeful and excited. I wanted to make new friends in a big school - surely I would find my place with new friends. I tried to be confident at school, I didn't want to get bullied again. I would do anything not be a target again. Year 7 was ok, it had its ups and downs I had a few friends and that made me feel great. I had a girlfriend or two, childish relationships. I tried to put on a brave face at school but always struggled. Year 8 came quick enough, it was more of the same, was never great but I always managed. I started to get more and more curious about sex, I went to a friend's house to have a sleepover and he showed me pornography. I had never seen anything like this before and I thought I should be looking at the woman and her breasts yet I found myself watching the man's penis. I remember thinking "what's wrong with

I was so certain I couldn't be gay, I didn't want to be gay. I looked up religious camps online and wanted to check myself in. I would do anything not to be gay, but that would mean admitting I was. I wasn't ready to do that. It was around that time I realised I was depressed and nothing was making me happy. It was different from being sad, I didn't want to exist. I started being sexually active with females, almost forcing myself to be with women. I was on a constant mission to prove to everyone including myself I wasn't gay.

My depressive thoughts got worse. I gathered the courage to tell my mother how I was feeling and she took me to the doctor who diagnosed me with depression and anxiety. I was referred to a psychologist and given medication and things got a little better. I didn't find myself planning ways to take my own life anymore but I still felt low and confused.

I kept going about life as normal going through high school having girlfriends off and on. I was now 18 and on holidays in Coffs Harbour with friends when my first gay sexual experience happened – no one knew apart from the stranger I just met and me. I didn't tell my friends or a single soul, the holiday was over and I went

back to normal life in Ballarat. A year had passed when I was talking to one of my closest friends and I told her about my experience on my holiday, she was shocked I waited this long to tell her, I kept assuring her I still wasn't gay I only did it to try it. I swore her to secrecy and we didn't speak of it again until December 2014 when I told her I was gay, and I want to 'come out'. I called my dad and asked him to come around to my house, I told him I was gay and prepared my self for the worst possible response. I had no idea what to expect from the man Hooked up to, he was tough but kind. He responded with the words "we love you no matter what". That was the first time I truly felt accepted and felt complete and unconditional love from him. I felt relieved and unstoppable. Everyone I told responded with love in one way or another.



I started dating men not long after and was feeling incredible, happy and accepted. I thought nothing could break me.

I stopped taking my anti-depressants, thinking I would be ok and didn't need them. I was wrong, I felt lethargic like I couldn't get out of bed. I hated the way I looked, sounded, acted, and wanted to cry constantly. I didn't want to eat so I didn't, some days I wouldn't get out of bed it was the worst I had ever felt. I wanted to not exist again, I wanted to die and a started thinking of ways i would end my life again. I was scaring myself with these thoughts. It wasn't until one day I had left for work not realising I had left my phone in my bedroom with the

door shut. On my return home, my housemate told me they were too scared to open my bedroom door in case they found me dead in there.

It was then I realised it didn't matter how good my life was going, I had a mental illness that needed treatment. I then went back on medication and started seeing a psychologist again regularly. I still take medication and see a psychologist now at the age of 25. I manage a busy barbershop and I have a happy relationship with my partner as well as many positive relationships with family and friends. I will always have a mental illness, but I manage it now and will never let it beat me.



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KIRALEE THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY

I've always been a highly-strung person. A perfectionist as a child, I thought this was natural – healthy even, since it constantly meant I was aiming to go above and beyond expectations. Sometimes, this is okay. Most of the time, it's a fast-track to burnout and a lack of self-worth, since you're never as good as you want to be.

Being a high-functioning individual suffering from anxiety can make diagnosis difficult, especially if your anxiety is continuously propelling you forward into new opportunities, to meet new people, to take on more work. I'm sure to an outsider, I look like I'm doing well ninety percent of the time. I am always aiming to please - nothing gives me more anxiety than thinking I might have failed someone or let them down. I crave validation but ultimately it doesn't matter, because I am my harshest critic and my anxiety won't really let me have a 'win', it is always looking for what's next or what needs to improve.

I consistently take on more than I should, I don't do well with 'down-time' because I don't see it as productive, and I promise so much - to others and to myself - that I am continuously setting myself up for failure. Doubt is a constant, nagging voice. What if I should be doing something more productive right now? What if I'm not as good as others?

What if I need to be doing more to reach my goals? What if my job is holding me back from that? What if I'm in the wrong job? What if my friends all think I'm a loser? What if I change jobs and don't like it? What if my parents hate me for it? What if I fail?

Do any of those sound reasonable? No. Do I think like that on a daily basis? Absolutely. Do I know how ridiculous I'm being? Yes, but also no. A big part of anxiety is recognising how your anxiety is trying to 'help' you, and then calling it out when there is no 'evidence' to support how you are feeling. My therapist taught me that. For example: What if my parents hate me for it? Let's think - have my parents ever hated me for something? No, they love me. A lot. Actually, I don't think it's possible for them to hate me, not for anything. So that's fine. And as far as supporting me in my life choices? They have always supported me. There is nothing to suggest that they would disapprove of me leaving my job for something else. So where's the evidence? There is none. My anxiety is working overtime and in this case, it is being unhelpful. By going through this process, I am training myself to think things through and not jump to conclusions. It's not a cure, but a management technique. What if I'm in the wrong job? Well, there might just be some evidence to support that one, so it might be worth thinking about, so long as I don't catastrophise it.

Picking up techniques that were useful and having someone that I could talk to really helped. For me, this was a therapist – someone who knew about anxiety and who was, importantly, an outsider. I first saw a therapist after having a breakdown that resulted in me leaving my first job out of uni. I moved home to live with my parents, and only started seeing someone because I thought there was an issue with my heart, after which my doctor diagnosed me with severe anxiety and referred me to a therapist. It was nice having someone to talk to who I couldn't let down by describing the way I felt at that job, or how my thoughts can get overwhelming, or how I

would wake up crying, dreading the day ahead, because they had no personal stake in my life. They didn't judge me for any of it, or be critical of the way I'd handled a situation, and would often provide me with the harsh reality checks that those closest to me couldn't.

What I have realised since, is that my job was not a good fit for me or my condition. I needed more freedom, and the opportunity to be more in control, as well as be more creative. I also needed to be open with friends and family, listen to them when they tell me I am doing well and talk to them when I feel that I'm not.

Another thing that helped was to talk to similar minded people. It helped so much to be working with some of my creative idols after leaving that job, and for them to reaffirm that what I had gone through sounded difficult and that they – as creatives – think I made the right decision to go freelance, which is what I am doing now and it makes me happy.

I still get anxious, but I have put myself in the best position to manage that and to recognise bad thoughts, and I know that when things get bad, I don't have to face it on my own. I can always make changes, I can always ask for advice, and I have people behind me. There's always a way.



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LAURA CHALLENGES

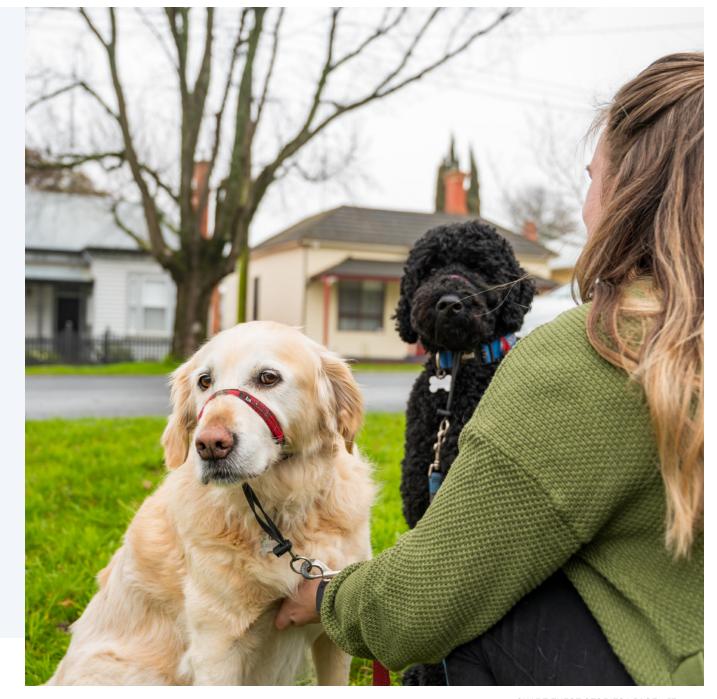
I have Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of prolonged and repeated traumatic events. It has developed in response to a family member sexually, physically, psychologically, emotionally and financially abusing me.

My first memory of being sexually assaulted was when I was five years old. I frequently had nightmares, fear of being alone with him – I would not let go of my mother's hand at night. I would scream for my mum which would result in the perpetrator hurting me more.

As I entered my teenage years, I began to stand up to him which led to more punishments. He had broken me. I was sick of his abusive ways. I became angry with myself. No one seemed to care or to want to help me. I wanted to die every day because of what was happening to me. I began self-harming to help with the pain. I had to see the pain on the outside.

I often felt misunderstood and left out. I was trying to figure out my confusing life alone. I still had contact with the perpetrator until I was 22 and this affected every aspect of my life. I was trying to get through university and relying on my family financially. I didn't want anyone to know about the sexual abuse.

At the age of 19 I was first referred to the Youth Mental Health team by my doctor due to increased disordered eating behaviours and difficulty sleeping.



I NOW CHOOSE TO BE AN ADVOCATE FOR THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH IN OUR COMMUNITY.

My self-harm behaviours increased and at this time my GP was more concerned about my safety, and I was admitted into the in-patient psychiatric unit for the first time.

I saw myself as a freak for being in a hospital setting and not being able to ask for help earlier. I felt like a prisoner. It felt like no one wanted to help me. I was constantly passed on from psychologist to psychologist because no one could understand me. In many ways I tried reaching out for help but no one could hear my silent screams.

During my hospital stays the nurses were fantastic. I was offered female nurses due to my history and was offered a lot of space. In the beginning of my journey I was frequently in the hospital, particularly over the Christmas and New Year period. I also had great supports from the Family Violence Unit and the Sexual Offenders Child Investigation Police Teams throughout the court processes. They have helped me learn how to protect myself and not rely on my family who have turned their backs on me.

My family are still waiting for me to say that I lied and ask for their forgiveness.

Due to my experiences I often felt hurt and alone, leading to reckless behaviours. I met a man online and he raped me. I said no to him. I tried to push him off me. I stood up to this man by giving my evidence in court, leading to a tough court trial. I am not going to lie and say it was easy, because it wasn't. It has been the hardest thing I have ever had to do. Even though it didn't lead to a conviction I know I tried my best.

My treating clinician has helped me through everything. I no longer feel alone. The Youth Mental Health Service helped me through suicidal thoughts and behaviours in a safe way so I no longer need to be hospitalised. I have also been referred to various other services to assist with financial hardship and housing crises. My clinician identified ways to help me that no one had ever before.

Since turning 25 I am no longer a client of the Youth Mental Health Service, however I still require some assistance. I regularly take medication, attend art therapy, equine therapy and counselling. Therapy helps me to manage my emotions, flashbacks and nightmares.

I am also very fortunate to have a side-kick to get me through each day. His name is Charlie and he is my assistance dog. Charlie is a two-year-old Golden Retriever x Poodle and is still learning everyday about how best to assist me.

An assistance dog is trained to assist an individual with a disability. They can be trained by an organisation or by their handler with the help of a qualified trainer. Legally an assistance dog is classified as a supporting aid and therefore is protected in the same way a wheelchair or a walking stick is.

Since having an assistance dog with me I have gained independence. I can comfortably leave my house and not be overwhelmingly terrified of the world. Charlie is able to pick up on my emotions very quickly and if my breathing becomes out of control he will nudge my hand. He can often be found standing on my feet, or leaning up against me to keep me grounded. Particularly at the supermarket he is a barrier between me and other people.

Despite all of my challenges, I am a member of this community. I work, study and participate in a sporting club. I have a life – I have chosen a family consisting of friends and my dogs. I choose every day to participate in this world and to look to the future, to be a member of this society. Although some may see me as crazy for struggling with my mental health, I am strong. I am not weak and I will not be pushed around.

I have chosen to not let these experiences define who I am. I now choose to be an advocate for those who struggle with their mental health in our community.



LAUREN RECOVERY IS A ROAD

In high school I wasn't comfortable with my body image, and I developed an eating disorder. Though this started in Year 7, it began to worsen in Year 9 and I eventually attempted taking my life. Looking back, I believe I was crying out for support. It started with low self-esteem and then grew until it turned an extreme corner. It took visiting a psychologist in Year 9 to help me see this.

I was in Year 10 doing VCE psychology funnily enough, when it was decided that I needed somewhere I was safe from myself. I was in hospital for about a week and a half, though it felt like years. I was given a change of medication and introduced to meditation. It was the place I suddenly realised how serious the issue was, having to look back at what had happened, how numb I was.

Before I was stuck in a hole that was slowly being shovelled in and I was suffocating. It took courage for me to realise that I needed help and that was the scariest step, but a step that saved my life (literally).

My family didn't understand what was going on in my head, but wanted to help, and at the time this seemed annoying. But my family is also a factor that saved my life. My sister came to visit me in hospital and it was one of the wake-up moments where I realised I needed to live, if not at that time for myself, for her.

I continued to seek help after hospital, I'm not going to say it was a smooth recovery because it wasn't. I had my lows, I felt awful and thought why should I even bother, but I did.

I decided to apply for a school trip to India and this was a massive and terrifying challenge, but it gave me something to look forward to. There were questions as to whether I was safe enough to go, so I started trying to prove that I was, until I actually was. I went and wow it changed my mindset. I was around people the whole time. I came home from India, not recovered because it doesn't happen in a month, but with a little more want to live.

I continued with my psychiatrist sessions and focused on the little things, if I made my bed in the morning, yay! If I had lunch - yay! I still do this today.

I graduated high school and started at university in a course I love. Two years in to university and I believed it was time to come off the medication I had relied on for a number of years – it was scary.

I didn't know if they were the only thing keeping me stable or if that was me. I was in a safe environment and had a healthier mindset when we lowered my dosage. I gradually came off the meds and I had support, this was the thing that signalled to me that I was no longer just getting better for my sister, I was getting better for myself. I had a lust for life and I was looking at what I wanted to do in the future.

I still sometimes have challenges with my eating and my relationship with food and my mental health, but as long as I acknowledge and notice it, and talk about it, then I am continuing to get better and recover.

I saw nothing getting better with my life at the lowest point and I wanted to die. I didn't think I deserved to be here anymore. It felt as though nothing was going to get better and no one understood. But there is a future and there are people who have gone through similar situations as you – I didn't think I was going to make it to 17 and here I am pushing 23, and have graduated university. There are a lot of things in the world telling you that you aren't worthy, or you aren't good enough, but you are, and there is so much beauty in life.

Recovery is a road with a lot of potholes, but if you keep driving, the destination is worth it.



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MAGBUL TAKING THE TIME

The circumstances around my mental health was trying to get ahold of my grief and anger. The mental state I had was heavy, it ate me up, and I made the choice to avoid the feelings of pain, grief and heartbreak. The resolution I came up with at the time, was to be occupied with friends so I could distract myself every time I got lonely. The thought of being lonely would consume me and give me a completely negative view of life. The work I had been doing at the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) was my second distraction from the thoughts I had been going through.

During this time, my friends were supportive as I had started to communicate to them what had been happening for me.

My mental health started changing as I began to acknowledge it more. In my culture we don't acknowledge mental health or information relevant to it, so we just kept the mindset of "it's just a bad day". As our culture doesn't promote mental health, reaching out to family almost seemed impossible. I ended up opening up to my mum, and it was a turning point for me as she acknowledged my emotions and understood and comforted me. We shared experiences and it gave me strength to continue my battle with my mental health. That support from my mum stays with me today. I gained more insight with my mental health as I turned to my family and focused on my values and goals. The feeling of happiness and self-improvement, and just the commitment gave me a feeling of happiness.

The turning point I had going for me was when I reached out to headspace and described my situation. I realised other people were going through the same things and that I had many friends and supports around me. They gave me guidance and advice to understand and learn how to deal with my situation – especially when I struggled after losing a family member to suicide.

Experiencing losing someone to suicide really gave me a wakeup call, and gave me a prompt to understand mental health in the community as well as working out what affected my feelings.

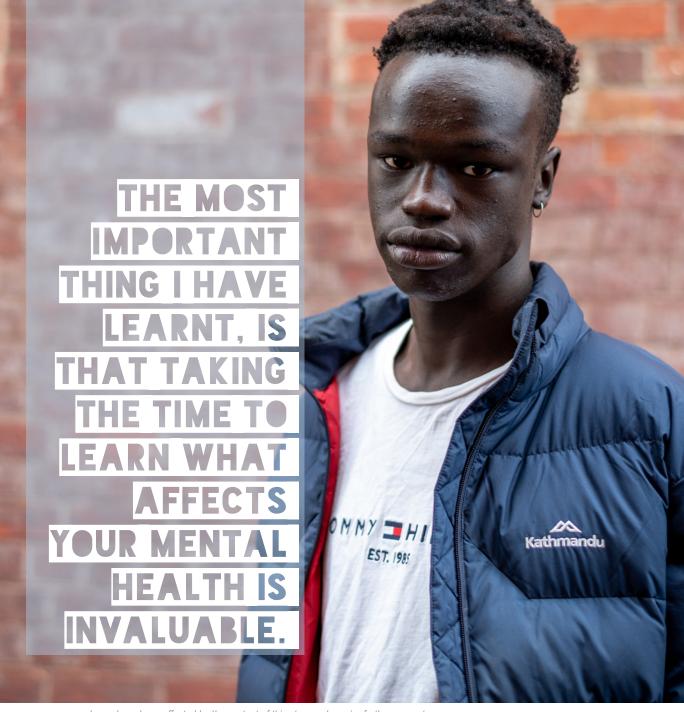
When I lost my cousin to suicide it gave my mindset a shutdown button and I isolated myself to the point of not eating or drinking or even seeing daylight for days. In the following weeks, my disappearance was noticeable to my friends, as I would decline invitations or make excuses. In the end one of friends pulled up at my house to check on me, and it is still something I appreciate to this day.

Looking back I know that letting myself grieve and feel heartbreak was all a part of the process, as difficult as it was.

I'd like to say that you are not alone, and no matter what the situation is – reach out for support, whether that be to friends, family, or someone in the community you trust.

The most important thing I have learnt, is that taking the time to learn what affects your mental health is invaluable.





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MITCHELL STILL CLIMBING

There is a giant pit. A giant circular rocky impossibly deep pit. There is no end to the pit, at least no one knows what's at the bottom. A lot of people argue about what's at the bottom, but it's just an endless void as far as we know.

The pit is despair, the pit is self-destruction, the pit feeds on our self-esteem and our self-worth.

There is a rim around the top of the pit with a path and life is our journey walking around the pit. Sometimes something comes along and knocks us in. We start falling a bit. Maybe it's someone close to us dying, or losing a job or a house, an accident, or a break up. But when that happens, sometimes we catch ourselves, sometimes we can pull ourselves back out. Sometimes we need friends or family to throw us a rope. Or throw a net and catch us themselves. Maybe it's our dog or cat with its little teeth clamped around the rope, dragging us back out.

See for me, it was all of those things and more. It was family, death, friends, injury and accident and of course the bigger, more unshaven bastard called alcohol. I fell and I fell. I fell for years, I fell so long, half the time I didn't know I was falling, falling became normal. And then I hit a ledge. Right at the bottom of this pit, as I was about to welcome the void, I hit a ledge. And the ledge had a sign. And the sign said "I'm not ready to be without you yet. Don't you give up. Love Mum." And I stayed on this ledge so long, caught between welcoming the void and reading the sign.





Then I looked around and I saw a path. A rocky ladder built in to the wall of the pit. It said, "Geelong Salvos Detox".

And so you start climbing.

It's not easy, on your first day of detox you have a seizure from the withdrawals. But you hold on and you keep climbing.

By day 14 you go to the gym. It's not easy but you go. You are nearly 200kg and you struggle to walk around the detox facility, but you keep climbing.

And in detox are other people like you. You meet B and he keeps going to the gym with you and introduces you to NA, where you meet others climbing. You can help each other to make sure you don't slip. And it's not easy, but you keep climbing.

By day 120 you get to the end of the ladder that was detox and you have to leave Geelong and go home to Ballarat again and leave behind everyone you were climbing with.

It's a mental health rehab facility, and it's not easy, you see other people falling. But they don't want help getting back up they want to pull others down with them. You can't help them right now, and it's not easy, but you keep climbing.

And then you get a new room mate, T. And you help each other keep climbing. You keep going to the pool, you've missed the water so much but you couldn't get back in it because you couldn't take your shirt off in front of other people. But you do it, and you start swimming again. You are losing weight and enjoy being out with friends again. It's still not easy, but you can keep climbing now.

It's years later, and you are living independently, you are still going to the gym and you've lost a lot of weight, you are even doing a few programs for fun now and you are starting to enjoy more things, as well as wanting to find more things to enjoy. Sometimes when you look up, you even think you can glimpse the top of the pit.

You are still climbing, but it's a lot easier now.

PAT THE CHOICE IS YOURS

I know when I type this a tear or two is bound to come up and I definitely won't feel the most relaxed I ever have. But not all those tears will come from pain, some will be from the joyful times in between, some from the happiness of how far my life has come in such a short time, and how for now, most of this is simply the past and no longer a current issue.

I don't know how long it took for stress and anxiety that affected my daily life to kick in, I'm obviously not a doctor, psychologist or mental health expert, I'm just an average 23-year-old bloke. I don't know how much could be considered 'normal' given the circumstances, or if you'd call it an 'illness', and honestly I don't care, what happened happened, six plus years of priceless lessons is all I see.

All of this started at 15, after multiple tests and surgery to the left side of my neck, I was diagnosed with cancer – Hodgkin's lymphoma to be exact. It was obviously stressful and scary, everyone I had ever known that had had cancer had died. To see my family in tears hurt. And to see a kid who'd been my best friend since we were eight years old, hold back tears hurt.

In a way I had the easy part, I could only imagine how painful it'd be to watch someone so close to you go through this and not be able to do anything, wishing you could take their pain away.

I had no treatments for the next two years, just tests and looking back now I realised how much I stopped caring for myself physically and mentally. I let myself get up to 106kgs, two doctors told me to lose weight. In hindsight this was all due to the stress I was not dealing with. I was young and hardly knew what stress and anxiety meant.

I ended up being diagnosed two more times, once a week before my 18th birthday and only a couple weeks after my grandfather passed. That diagnoses was followed by a month of radiotherapy to my neck.

A couple of months after completion of that treatment I was diagnosed again but was unlucky as the lymphoma spread to my chest before the radiotherapy. It led to feelings of regret, as it was my choice to have radiotherapy instead of chemotherapy. The lesson I learnt was don't always take what you view as an easier option to avoid temporary fear.

The final diagnoses meant surgery to my chest, followed by chemotherapy. I was scared but I was still happy it was me and not anyone close to me. In 2012, at 15 years old this all started and I finished six or seven months of chemo in February 2016 at 19 years of age.

But this is where the anxiety really kicked in. During the year after, I was so physically and mentally drained, I'd spent so many years focused on just wanting to survive, once life began to feel more normal, I really started to notice how I was feeling mentally.

I felt constant fear, confusion, fatigue. I was shaky, restless, sweaty, and had no clue how to calm down, every single day. But as with everything in life, things changed. I'm lucky my mind wouldn't let hopelessness creep in, I always knew things would get better.

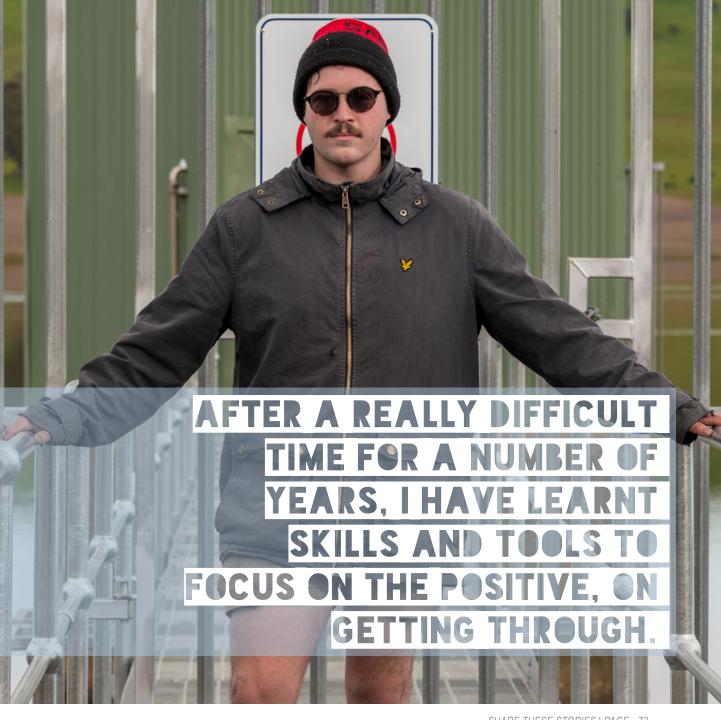
I've had a couple of turning points that made me feel a lot less stressed and anxious, and I say less because I don't think you can be fully stress and anxiety free - to some it's common sense, but others need to learn not to focus on it so much, it won't help.

One day I guess my mind had just had enough. I was sick of feeling like it. I was with my old man and I just started crying and struggling to talk. He drove me to the doctor, I didn't even feel like I could drive. I was on a low dose of medication already from chemo and we talked about increasing it, however in the end I was told that professional support would help me. So I picked up the phone, made that appointment and it paid off.

Over the next couple of years I finally let that stress out to someone, learnt ways to control those feelings, and got myself to the fittest I had ever been – losing close to 40kg. I still had a bit of unease, I don't know why. I think at times maybe I focused too hard on trying to not feel that way, I still had fears I wasn't addressing about the cancer.

Then in March 2018, that best friend I spoke about earlier, a bloke who was there for me through all of this, who would come over close to every day when I was having treatment, who helped me so much in getting back to a normal life post chemo - at 21 years old, on March 22nd 2018, he tragically passed away. He fought for 24 hours after a workplace accident. To this moment that was the worst day of my life. It hurts to see your friends upset, see his family, who I'd known for so long, in pain, to see doctors and nurses upset because they did everything they could to keep him alive. To stand there and look at your best mate lifeless in an ICU bed, as his dad walks in, puts his arm around you and say "come on mate, it's time to go".

Things changed for me from then on. Although the months after were tough and even now grief will strike me and forever will at times, I know that I can't control certain things - so I can't sit there and think of the 'what ifs'. I have to take what I can, take everything he taught me, and live my life.



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From that day, I put so much from what I'd learnt over the years from health professionals, life experiences and what my mate taught me in to practice.

Maybe it's simply the reminder you will die someday that gave me that push? But over the months and couple of years since, I've begun to feel less stressed, and now, anxiety is barely an issue. I've run two half marathons, returned to footy, completed so many goals, and the best part is I've begun to feel like that person I was before this all happened.

One thing I have learned is that life is going to stress you out enough, so don't make it any harder on yourself. Try not to worry about the stuff that is out of your control. It is inevitable to feel fear and to react to circumstances, however I have learned that I have a choice in how much I let this affect me, to let it make my life better or worse.

After a really difficult time for a number of years, I have learnt skills and tools to focus on the positive, on getting through. The main thing I would say to someone needing support is that you have choices, a choice in how you let fear influence, a choice to use your excuses as excuses or a reason why, a choice to look after yourself physically and mentally.

No matter how traumatic or how hard your life has been, you're not alone. I wish I didn't have to be diagnosed with cancer three times, have multiple surgeries, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, lose a best mate in tragic circumstances, and see so much pain in people, but that's out of my control. So you just have to take what you can, learn from it and move on. It'll take time, but the choice is yours.



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PEARL SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

Sometimes taking care of yourself can be the hardest thing to do. Sometimes I eat healthy food, exercise regularly and get to bed early, and other times I eat copious amounts of junk food and stay up to 3am watching crappy reality TV on a weeknight while my dog stares at me.

Like many, I have lived with depression and (at times, crippling) anxiety for a long time. I can't really remember a period of time longer than a year or so that it didn't interfere with my life in some way. For me, this usually means I withdraw from relationships and spend a lot of time inside and away from other humans. At my best, it is something I can manage using all of the tools I have worked hard to learn and develop. At my worst, I don't get out of bed, refuse to get dressed and struggle to find the energy to eat food, let alone healthy food. I hide under the covers of my bed, paralysed.

I have tried all kinds of strategies to manage 'it', such as medication (great for many people but didn't work well for me), psychologists (highly recommend, you just need to find the right one for you), meditation (harder than it looks), yoga, pilates, boxing, weight lifting and so on.

All have their place and have worked for me at different periods of my life, but I find that it can change and I will need to mix up what I do (sometimes frequently) to be most effective. It has been hard and I have faced some really difficult times over the years, but even after all of that I was completely unprepared for just how much harder it could be.

In 2016, my mum's partner was tragically killed by a car while crossing the road on his way to the shop. It was the day after Valentine's Day and my mum was still asleep when it happened. He had planned to go and buy milk so he could wake her up with a coffee. He never even made it across the road. After the most intense six weeks of my life caring for my mum, we decided it was best that she got a passport and left Australia for a while to go and live with one of her closest friends in New Zealand. She needed to get away. Nearly four years later, she hasn't returned.

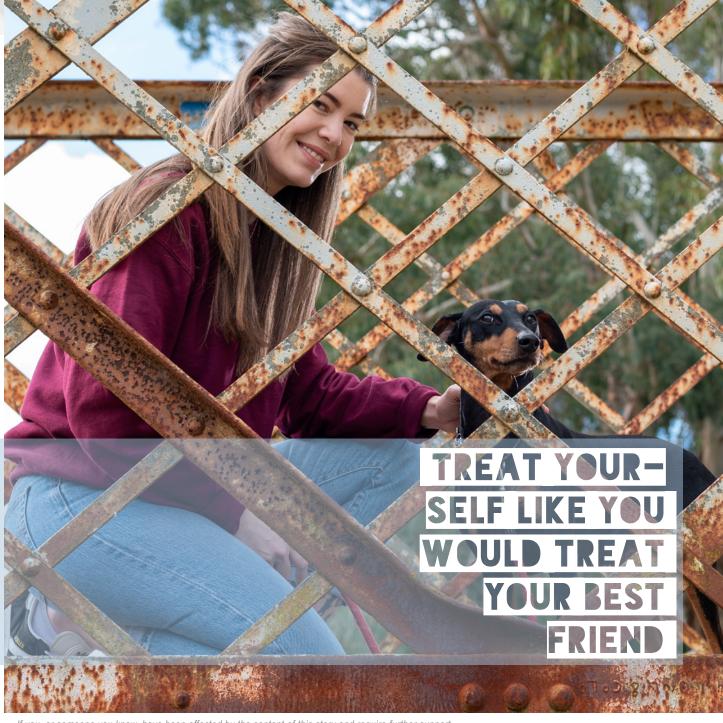
At the time of George's death I had just returned from a holiday with my partner and I was in that post-holiday relaxed mindset. I was feeling well and was generally really happy with my life and where it was heading. I was studying, I had a stable job, my partner was loving and supportive and I had some solid friends around me. I was feeling strong and managing those nagging depressive episodes the best I could.

I guess I knew that we'd never be the same again. What I didn't really consider at the time though was the long-lasting weight that you can carry around when you experience trauma – whether it's your own or even other people's. I had dealt with bouts of awful depression and anxiety before, and I had even learnt how to manage it to the best of my ability... But what was this new form of hell I was experiencing? I wondered if it would ever get better, if I would ever stop crying and feeling deep pain inside my chest. It felt like even the cells in my body were weeping for my mum. Trauma does strange and powerful things to our mind, body and soul.

Even though I knew this in theory, somehow through all of this, I ended up getting angry with myself for becoming unwell again. I thought I could handle it, why was it all failing at a time I needed to be strong? In reality, I was failing to see the obvious – I was faced with an unbearable situation and I was having a fairly normal response considering the circumstances. I now realise that, even when you're well equipped with practical strategies, tools and support – sometimes life drops a giant turd on your doorstep.

With the benefit of hindsight, I now know that it wasn't my fault for not having the tools, I had never dealt with a situation like that before. How was I supposed to know? I needed to be reminded of the support I already had, but I also needed to go out into the world and acquire some more. This was hard but I truly believe that clichéd analogy that suggests one of the hardest parts of any journey is the first step. It's tricky things like saying it out loud, telling a friend, telling a parent or calling an advice line. Or it can be scheduling an appointment with a doctor, booking in with an expert, starting medication, getting to those exercise classes. This stuff is not easy at the best of times. But we can do it. The more we do it, the easier it gets.

That's why I now like to say to myself, and I encourage you to think this way too, treat yourself like you would treat your best friend, your favourite aunt, your adored pet. Talk to yourself like you would to someone else in your situation. Speak to yourself kindly and think about what you would want your most loved person in the world to hear if they weren't feeling well. If they were feeling defeated for needing to seek help, you would gently remind them that even strong people need to revisit (or even establish) support networks. Seeking professional support and implementing self-care strategies is in no way a sign of failure, it can be life changing and is something to be celebrated no matter what stage you're at in your journey.



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RECOVERY JOURNEY

In 1997 at age 28 I became unwell almost overnight, losing touch with reality and finding myself in a psychiatric hospital involuntarily. That set me on a path that I am still walking today but with an outcome I could never have imagined back then.

Over the following five years from my first psychiatric hospital admittance, life spiraled out of control. I was forced to live near a small town on an isolated property where I knew no-one, was diagnosed with schizophrenia, then clinical depression and this led to me attempting to take my own life.

On that day, and I won't go in to intimate details, I had a plan to end my life and had made no secret as to how it would happen. The night before I had been crying tears into my dinner that mum had cooked, thinking to myself that she was oblivious to the fact that this would be the last time she ever cooked for me. How wrong I was.

By mid-afternoon the next day I found myself lying in bed like so many other days only this time I had attempted to enact my plan but I had survived. I was angry but still alive. The realisation that mum had outwitted me and gone above and beyond her capabilities (or so I thought) made me come to the turning point in my life that I haven't looked back from (even though my fourth hospital admission followed I had found a new resolve vowing that I would not return).

As I lay there it dawned on me that if I had been successful in ending my life I would have left my mum with decades of sadness and emptiness from having lost her only child. And that even though I was in immense mental pain I couldn't do that to her. So I made a deal with myself. While mum was alive I would stay alive and that was the thread that I clung to in the early days.

As the days turned into weeks and then into months, having support from mum, receiving ongoing treatment from Ballarat Health Services and finding a medication that worked for me, my life began to mean something again. I had been encouraged to join the local cricket club a couple of years earlier and even though I had not been a willing participant on the field the guys at the club encouraged me to stay involved.

At times this meant receiving a bit of sledging/stigma about why for example, I didn't have a job. But that was the social connection I needed and in the future I would find myself coaching junior sides and being voted captain of one of the teams.

By the year 2000 I was tipping the scales at 100kg and made the decision to lose 30kg over 12 months. The deal would be that if I reached my goal by the day of the 2001 AFL Grand Final, my now long hair would be shaved off at the BBQ held on the day, representing a new start for me. Over that year, my mates from the cricket club really encouraged me to keep going as they saw me transition in front of their eyes. Don't forget they had only ever known me as an over-weight person with mental health issues. On the day I achieved that goal, I realised that I had reached my first main milestone on my recovery journey – though it didn't stop some clown from turning the power off half way through my hair getting shaved off!

I think back now and realise that I unintentionally educated the cricket club, and more widely other members of the community, as to not only what mental illness looks like but more importantly what recovery looks like.

As a consequence of losing weight my next goal was to return to work, which I did in 2002. By 2012 I felt that I would like to give something back and to help others with mental health issues, so on the advice of one of the support workers who had assisted me I enrolled to study at Federation University in Ballarat in 2013. I studied a Cert IV in both Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs and upon successfully passing the course found employment with Wimmera Uniting Care in Horsham in 2014.

In 2016 I was presented with the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council's Consumer Worker in Community Mental Health Award for my peer work and in 2017 became Ballarat Community Health's first ever peer worker.

I now look at my employment this way, if one in five people have a mental illness that means four out of five people aren't qualified to do the job I specialise in!

I can't believe what my life looks like today as opposed to when I saw no future for myself and this is what drives me to do the peer work that I do. My motto is that if I can successfully manage my mental health with the right supports in place, then so can anyone else.

Everyone's recovery journey is different but having a mental illness should not stop anyone from having goals they would like to achieve or from being an active member of their community.



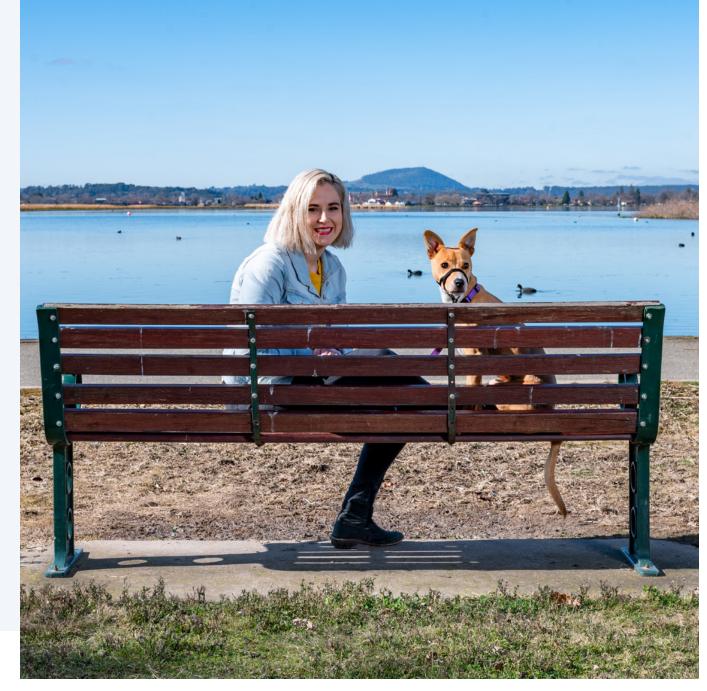
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ROBYN NEVER GIVE UP

I'm Robyn and I suffer with Bipolar Type 2 and anxiety. Many people aren't aware that there are two types of Bipolar and most thinking only of the extreme high and lows. The difference between the two types, in simplest terms, is that Bipolar is a mental health condition that is defined by extreme mood disturbances that also affects a person's thoughts and behaviours. The big difference is that Type 1 experience episodes of mania whereas Type 2 have periods of hypomania. For me, I continuously feel like I'm on a wheel that's spinning around and around, up and down and me holding on for dear life. I experience both hypomania and depressive symptoms but spend more time in the depths of depression. My mood changes can consist of less sleep, racing thoughts, more energy, talking faster and my body trembling because I'm so heightened.

Over the years we have found out that there is a genetic link in my family which can be very common with Bipolar. It can also occur due to other things like environmental factors, physical illnesses or substance use which can all trigger an episode.

I was put on my first antidepressant when I was 15 due to suicide ideation (I am now 35). For the next three years I thought of suicide most days with a plan in place. I found out recently that there was a safety plan in place in case I didn't turn up to school. I became a loner because none of my friends understood the fight I was having in my head every day. It became easier to retreat from social activities or I was just left out completely. I believe I have always had anxiety but back then it wasn't really known like it is today and I fell between the cracks. At this time, my life was crumbling and my anxiety started to grow in power.



YOU CAN TURN YOUR LIFE AROUND AND THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.

My panic attacks started when I was 16 or 17 years old and are something I still struggle with today. I was re-diagnosed with Bipolar when I was 23 and was completely shattered. I believed that one day I would no longer be depressed but Bipolar is for life. I really struggled and to be honest I still do. For some reason I think I should be able to control it but the more I fight the worse I feel. I constantly think I'm failing but I have hope that with more work this can shift. I'm not sure whether my anxiety has become worse over the years or I'm more aware of it. Some days I can't leave the house, work can be crippling and I avoid social situations. It completely rules my life some days but I'm always working on new strategies and believe that one day it's not going to have so much control.

I had my first clinic admission when I was 20 due to my increased thoughts of suicide and fears for my safety. I had five more over a 10 year period. Four admissions were for extreme depression and suicidal ideation and my last admission was for my first ever hypomania episode. Each admission lasted around four weeks.

What was the turning point for me? Two years ago I was given the opportunity to be a co-presenter at a suicide prevention conference. Prior to that moment I never thought I would be able to stand up in front of more than 50 people and touch on my journey, my diagnosis and my suicidal past. Up until that point I believed that my story was insignificant and I didn't really have anything to offer the world. To my biggest surprise I was the only speaker who received a standing ovation and that moment changed my life.

The empowerment, support, validation, acceptance and kindness turned my mind into a place where I do matter, my story matters and I now have the opportunity to help others. I was told that I have the chance to be the voice of those who aren't able to speak, which I constantly remind myself whenever life is getting too hard and overwhelming. It's my drive to continue at times.

I don't see my journey as that of recovery but one of wellness. I will have my diagnosis for the rest of my life and will always need to manage the ups and downs which means I will never be 'recovered'. But my life has dramatically changed over the last four years. I gained deep insight into my illness and worked hard at developing strategies to better the quality of my life. I couldn't have done this without my psychologist, psychiatrist and GP. Its imperative to have a treatment team who work together with you at the centre of their care. My psychologist helps me see and deal with things that are thrown at me and takes me out of my irrational head and focus on the important things. I would definitely suggest having some form of therapy because we can't do this alone and everyone needs help at some point, and that's ok.

Other strategies that work for me are definitely keeping a routine. I try to go to sleep at the same time each night, I try to walk every day, music helps with my anxiety and it drowns out the voices in my head. I've found since eating healthier my mental health has improved greatly. But my biggest helper is now my beautiful assistance dog Niah. Having her has improved so much for me and makes my life a lot easier.

Keeping track of my symptoms allows me to intervene early and hopefully decrease the likelihood of a crisis. Being kind to myself has really turned my life around as instead of holding onto things and continuously hounding myself I can now let things go quicker.

My message to you is that mental health is hard work. It takes time to learn the strategies that work. It's hard to fight stigma but most of all it's hard fighting our inner demons. But please know that it is possible. You can turn your life around and there is always hope. I look back just two years and I would never have dreamed being where I am now. I have been stable for four years, have a great job, am managing my symptoms well and for the first time in my life I have faith that my future is bright. The sky is the limit. Believe in yourself, ask for help, be kind to yourself, never give up and remember you are enough.

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ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTABLE AND HEALTHY

If I could go back in time I would visit my 30-year-old self just to say, "You are going to be okay. It is actually, truly, going to be okay."

My world started caving in on itself a few months after my first baby. The euphoria of meeting my gorgeous little guy was steadily overtaken by a sense of desperation and dread that left me sobbing my way through each day. Things got worse after the birth of my daughter a couple of years later and this time I was diagnosed with post-natal depression.

The next few years are a miserable blur in my memory. Angry, anxious... obsessive, hyper-focused... hopeless, depressed... I didn't recognise this person I had become. Not eating, not sleeping, operating on a strange sort of autopilot. My husband took me back to my doctor and I remember him telling her that I had the frantic, vacant eyes of an addict but that I wasn't taking drugs. There were lots of appointments for a while and after several psychologists and two psychiatrists I was eventually diagnosed with Bipolar Type 2 Disorder.

Before my breakdown, I didn't know much about Bipolar and the diagnosis came as a shock. I would never have described myself as a "moody" person. Cheerful, measured and considerate ... not impulsive, temperamental, angry.

But as I started reading about the condition I began to recognise patterns throughout my life – bursts of inspiration and creativity as well as strange periods of inexplicable despair. I learned that hypomania doesn't always feel euphoric. For me it often felt like agitation, anxiety, and sometimes blind rage. To see this stuff emerging in myself was beyond confronting. It felt like my brain had completely betrayed me and turned me into a monster while the sane part of me watched from a distance, utterly helpless.

The diagnosis took others by surprise too. People who knew me well said "There is no way that you have Bipolar." I would look at them blankly, panicking. "Don't ask me to tell you about the secrets I can hardly admit to myself... how I work all night rather than sleep... how I yell at my beautiful family until they cry... how it feels to wake up in the morning with a horrific urge to hurt my own children for no apparent reason and how terrifying it is to confess that to my husband so that he can make sure they are safe. Don't ask me to convince you that I'm crazy. You won't believe me, or if you do, you'll hate me." I couldn't say any of that out loud.

My recovery journey felt long and bleak. It was a couple of rocky years before the psychiatrist found the right combination of medications that finally helped me get well. It has been hard work but I've slowly learned how to manage this thing. I know there will always be days when I wake up with an overwhelming sense of dread and misery even before I've opened my eyes. And times when my anxiety makes it feel like I'm going to implode. The difference now is that I know it will pass in time, and I know I'm going to be okay. When I'm at the supermarket checkout and someone asks in passing, "How are you?", I still get a strange little thrill of pride and gratitude that I can honestly answer, "Fine thanks." I have been fine for seven years and it feels good to acknowledge that.

But my story is just as much about the people around me as it is about myself. I have had the most amazing village of people supporting me, for years, and I don't take it for granted.

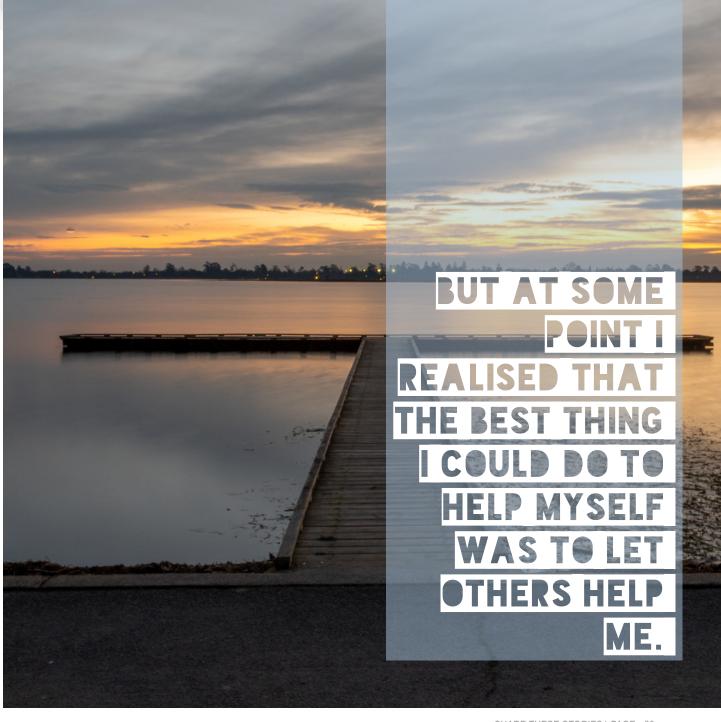
My children are the reason that I am so fiercely determined to be well, to stay well.

My husband was always there reminding me that he knew me and loved me, even when he saw me at my worst. He took me to find help when I couldn't do it for myself. When all I could think about was my need to run away, he stood in front of the door, took the car keys from my hands and assured me I was going to be okay. My doctor was a lifeline. She saw me weekly and would simply ask me about the kids, about work and about how I was coping. And then at the end of each bulkbilled appointment she would tell me I was doing great and ask me to come back again next week.

Our family and friends rallied around to help with practical support and random acts of kindness. My parents and in-laws provided the safe and caring space for the kids that, sometimes, I just couldn't provide. And whenever they looked after the kids they would send them home to me with meals for the family and clean laundry.

My colleagues became a second family. They listened, cared, checked in with me after a rough day and brought extra lunch to work so that at least I was eating something. It was nerve-wracking to be honest with my boss about my mental health when I needed to take time off work, but she was so supportive.

Accepting help can be tough and, if I'm honest, it felt humiliating to be on the receiving end of so much concern and support. But at some point I realised that the best thing I could do to help myself was to let others help me.





Now I'm in a better position to reach out and support others. My heart goes out to people battling along on their own.

When I'm struggling, I still find it difficult to be honest about it. But transparency helps me stay accountable and healthy so I often let loved ones know when I'm wobbly and I pay attention when my husband flags concern.

I wouldn't recommend that people go around broadcasting their challenges far and wide, but it's so important to find trustworthy and safe people to share the journey with. The word grateful doesn't quite cut it when I think about how lucky I am.

SHAUNTEL I CAN DO ANYTHING

Living with BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder) is difficult to say the least. BPD is one of the most stigmatised and misunderstood mental illnesses. During my battle with BPD, I've been labelled as untreatable, manipulative, selfish and unlovable.

The smallest trigger can send me from feeling happy and content to feeling uncontrollable rage and suicidal. The constant and uncontrollable cycle of heightened emotions is exhausting, defeating and often challenges and dictates the way I live my life. One moment I can go from being content and okay, then within minutes I'm filled with self-hatred, guilt and feeling like I'm a burden on everyone's life. When this happens, I'm overcome with the feeling of needing to punish myself by physically damaging myself in various ways. I have this overwhelming feeling in my mind that I'm already too much to handle and that everyone I trust, love or become close with is just going to leave me and I'll just be abandoned. My response is to always leave before they get the chance to leave, finding any possible way to destroy the relationships and friendships I have.

This is all centred and created by my own insecurities and fear of abandonment. I understand why most people find it difficult to understand and comprehend BPD. BPD is often characterised by rapidly fluctuating moods, unstable sense of self, impulsiveness and a lot of fear of various things.

This often makes us act and think erratically. The thing is we might do all of these things. I might hurt myself because I thought you were annoyed that I didn't do something. I might cry because I feel that I've burdened you and you now hate me.

BPD is most often hyperemotional, erratic, and irrational. Being constantly worried, fearful, anxious, on edge and suspicious is honestly exhausting and draining. Most of us are healing from trauma (which most often than not makes it harder) and we have developed these behaviours and beliefs as a response to our trauma.

A big part of my healing and recovery journey (alongside reaching out, therapy and medications) was reverting and connecting back to culture. Being on country, near a river or lake, I felt at peace more than I ever had before. I felt the presence of my ancestors with me, guiding me and reminding me no matter what challenge or tough time arises in my life, my strength, my culture and ancestors will always get me through.

My ancestor's presence and guidance will always heal me and help me heal in the most natural way possible and connecting to land enables me to do that. My connection to culture and my ancestors gave me a sense of identity, a sense of worth, and that I was here walking this earth for a reason.

During my darkest days, I had lost myself and my connection to culture. During this time, I really felt like nothing and I had no reason to live. The cultural healing 'gave me back to myself'. I didn't have to fight, I didn't have to hide anymore. I once again embraced who I was. I embraced my culture

and it gave me endless amounts of strength and resilience.

Returning to education was also another major turning point in my recovery. Completing my Certificate III in General Education at TAFE gave a sense of accomplishment and worth. It finally made me feel like I could do something with my life.

For so long I felt as if I couldn't do anything with my life due to my mental illness. I let the negative opinions and views of others affect the way I lived my life and viewed myself as a person. While being at TAFE, I learnt that it was okay to be myself and that the opinions and views of me and my past don't define me and the person who I am today.

For so many years I felt like I couldn't make the changes or take the steps I needed to towards recovery. I felt that I couldn't escape my past and that my trauma defined the person I was. I threw on a disguise and hid the person I truly was and pretended that I was fine. For a while I was ashamed that I didn't feel 'okay' mentally. I didn't want anyone to know about the pain I was in or what I was truly feeling on the inside. I didn't want people to view me differently as a person because I had mental health issues. I was so afraid of the world's criticism I kept my struggles bottled up. I kept it to myself for too long and it would eventually get the better of me.

It took me a while to learn that even though I was dealt the wrong hand of cards in life, that I can rearrange that deck and create the life I need and deserve. I had to learn and understand that there is no time frame for you to achieve your aspirations in life.

EVEN THOUGH I WAS DEALT HE WRONG HAND OF CARDS IN LIFE, I CAN REARRANGE THAT DECK AND CREATE THE LIFE I NEED AND DESERVE.

There is no time limit on making necessary changes in life. We are all uniquely our own individual selves. No two people are the same. Being on different paths and journeys in life is okay.

No matter how dark your world gets there is always someone out there who cares about you. It's okay to not be okay. There is no shame in reaching out for support. No matter the challenges or adversity you face in life, there is always the light at the end of the tunnel.

Your world might be raining, and the door might be shut, but the sun will always come out again and the door to the next chapter of your life will open.

"Don't just survive - fight for your future" – these few words spoken by Jazz Thornton made me feel hope for the future and truly made me believe that I can do anything that I aspire to do.



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SAM A LEGACY IS ALWAYS THERE

"I bet you can smile in two seconds."

This was my mum's catchphrase. If me, or any of my brothers were grumpy, sad or just being little smart asses it would pull us right out of it. We could never wipe the grins off our faces.

Lynnie was her name, a kind, hardworking, sensitive, inspiring and bloody tough single mum. With just those few words, mum could fix absolutely anything. I think everyone has that fear of losing their mum. When that fear came true for me it was the biggest and saddest day of my life. I was 19, and had just launched my first business. Things were really looking up.

Just seven weeks after her diagnosis with cancer, mum lost her short but fierce battle. In a heartbeat it felt like everything good in my life had disappeared. Money gone. Business gone... my superhero, gone.

My family were – and still are – a team. My brothers are much older than me, so growing up it was just mum and me. She did an amazing job raising my brothers and I remember wanting to grow up just like them. Dad was a violent and manipulative man and this left its mark on us both. Everything mum did was an attempt to protect me from this. Even today I find it hard to remember much of this time, such was the grief and trauma. This has made understanding mum's life and death much harder.

Although it was Mum who suffered most at his hands, even after they separated, all she wanted was to protect me from him.

So how do you get through losing someone so close? At times it definitely feels like you never will, and the feeling of complete emptiness is inexplicable. It just sucks. Like everyone says though, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, you just have to find it.

Be resilient, losing someone close to you makes you realise that in some way, they are greater than the sum of their parts. YOU, and all of the people that they loved are now that legacy.

Without even noticing, my actions and decisions were informed by everything she taught me. My sense of self, morals, habits, flaws and anxieties. I realised that the stuff that made up me was the same stuff that made up her.

Only in death can that legacy become yours, so own it. That's what you can fill that hole in your heart with. It's always going to suck that the person you love is not there anymore but if you stick at it, all of those sad bits are going to be replaced with the most joy you've ever felt.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction and the harder it hits you, the more amazing it's going to feel at the other end.

There is no simple one-step-fix-for-everything.
There's no four easy payments of \$9.95 solution to getting through losing a loved one. Although, here are a few not-so-easy steps that I think can give you a head start.

Tell everyone about them
 Never be afraid to share the wonderful
 momorious you have about them no detail

memories you have about them, no detail is too big or small.

Make them proud

Every time you do something awesome, do it for them and remember how proud they would be.

- Cry as much as you bloody want
 Crying isn't a bad thing so don't make it
 one, enjoy it, it feels so good!
- Lean on the people around you whenever you need it

It's okay to fall apart, just don't do it alone. There is no shame in being sad and no time limit on feeling better.

- Be kind to yourself
 YOU'RE DOING A GREAT JOB!
- Remember that your loved one lives on in you

When someone says "you remind me of them", wear it like a badge of honour.

A legacy is always there, it never dies. And she can still make me smile in two seconds, every time.



f you, or someone you know, have been effected by the content of this story and require further support, please consider contacting the relevant services listed on page 130

allgoodbro?

SEAN PURPOSE

My first introduction to mental health, specifically depression, was when my father sat me down when I was 12 years of age and told me about his illness. He explained to me that what he had was something that cannot physically be seen, with symptoms that me as a 12 year old would not be able to notice. He told me "his head was sick". He assured me that it wasn't an illness and that it wouldn't be a death sentence. Little did I know that him saying that was a promise to himself that he was going to make it through for me and my brother.

My dad coming to me at such a young age and talking to me about mental health is probably the best thing that he could have ever done for me. I knew what it was then, I understood that it was real and that it can affect anyone. When it affected me, I knew that I had it covered (at least I hoped).

At the age of 16 I started to go off the rails a little. Weekdays were spent skipping school and going to the gym. Weekends were for throwing parties, underage drinking, drugs and committing petty crimes. At the time I thought I was just living a fun life, it only took me until the death of a close friend to realise that I was living a life that I never wanted. I was hurting my parents and I was hurting myself. Just before I turned 18 and I was getting my life back on track. I was studying Personal Training and realising my passion for helping others. My life seemed to be amazing, all until I started to experience feelings of sadness, loneliness, shame and developed an attitude that life simply was not worth enduring. It came out of nowhere and it almost destroyed me.

I still remember the night I was put in the back of a police car, intoxicated through drugs and alcohol. It was my twentieth birthday. I was out celebrating with my friends when the drugs took over and turned me into Mr Untouchable, someone that thought he could take on the world without consequences and not get hurt. How wrong I was.

It took four police officers to restrain me that night, I was pepper sprayed and thrown to the ground with force. The pepper spray hurt, it closes your lunges and stings your eyes beyond belief. The ride back to the police station was only three minutes but to me it was an eternity. The pain of the pepper spray was enough to make the tough guy act that was portrayed just an hour before, turn into a weak, crying little boy. I was placed into a cell and told to sleep it off. I couldn't believe I was in this situation. They took my clothes and dressed me in a pull over raincoat type thing, bright blue. I didn't sleep that night, I screamed and screamed to go home. I wanted to get out of that place.

At 6am, the officer in charge walked in and handed me my things. They said I was free to go and showed me the door. The next step was calling my mum and telling her I needed to be collected from the Ballarat Police Station. This event changed my life.

My depression spiraled out of control, I was two years into my first business at this point and the events of that night affected it dramatically. I was so embarrassed about what happened I didn't want to show my face in public. Ballarat is a small town and the events of the night got around town fast.

I considered packing up my business and moving away, starting fresh. I considered giving up, I considered suicide.

Over three years of receiving treatment I endured many ups and a lot of downs. I found myself in situations where it was me saying to myself "Just do it, it will make everything go away".

There was a certain day when I was just 21 where I drove out into the bush just outside of Ballarat. It was just me, no music, no phone, just me and my thoughts. I felt like I had nothing left and was completely empty. All I could feel was the balance of fear and calm.

After my suicide attempt and the small circumstances that led me to not complete it, I realised that the whole experience was insightful and eye-opening and that maybe I was still meant to be here. I always knew I had a bigger purpose, I just had to find it. Although still under heavy medication and suffering, I followed my dream of running my Personal Training business. I worked harder, I did more, and I won more. I wasn't cured, but I was creating my own happiness.

The most memorable part of the four years was one morning when I was at home with my mother and I was just about to head away with friends for the weekend. Mum was helping to pack my bags when she said "Don't forget the anti's (anti-depressants)" I looked up, smiled and said 'Mum, I haven't been on them for five months now!". Mum broke down, I didn't even realise this was such a big deal- but in hindsight I completely understand her emotion.

Fast forward to 2018, I had worked hard on my businesses and recently opened my second gym but the real gift was about to come. My daughter, born January 28th. The moment I laid eyes on her I was instantly in love, she changed my life within the first 30 seconds of meeting her. I was completely overwhelmed with happiness. I knew I had a purpose, and this was it.

BIGGER PURPOSE, JUST HAD TO FIND IT.

My attention is now heavily focused on getting blokes to open up and start talking about mental health. Too many men are dying, too many men are suffering in silence. I am forever thankful for seeking help when I did. It is terrifying thought to think that my daughter would grow up without her dad. All it took was a conversation. An admittance of "I'm not ok".

Being a dad has taught me that life is so very precious. Every time I am feeling down, I remember that I am the luckiest dad in the world and I have a little girl at home that needs her dad to come home and help her grow.

It has been almost four years since I have required medication for depression. This doesn't mean I am cured but I am better. I have an absolute passion for my life, and I am forever grateful for everything I have. I am lucky enough to run businesses that I love and have two kids to watch grow, they're my proudest achievement.

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SHARE THESE

ANONYMOUS ADVERSITY CREATES OPPORTUNITY

I have experienced challenging mental health my entire life. But I will no longer let a label define me. I am more than a diagnosis – this is my story.

When I was diagnosed with Bipolar in my thirties, I had previously been diagnosed with severe depression in my late 20s. I struggled to accept the diagnoses. I knew I had periods of depression throughout my 20s and completely ignored seeking help for the occasional episodes of hypomania. In my early forties, my symptoms became far worse and I was additionally diagnosed with another condition on top of the Bipolar –Complex PTSD. I started to get other symptoms, triggers, nightmares, hypervigilance, anxiety, sleeplessness and anorexia, I had suffered eating disorders my entire life.

I began to remember my traumatic childhood. Over a span of 12-14 years I had been a victim of sexual abuse. All of the abuse I suffered occurred in institutional settings. To block out and manage my feelings I turned to substance abuse.

After many trips to hospital my parents, on hospital advice, admitted me to an exclusive private psychiatric hospital. During my admission to this facility I was sexually abused. In later years this facility was investigated for questionable practises. After this abuse I was transferred to an adult acute ward and again experienced sexual abuse.

In the weeks that followed, upon leaving psychiatric care, I ended up with further addictions from the medications I was prescribed as an in-patient. I withdrew abruptly from these, alone, at home.

It was the only way for me. I had been placed in a rehab facility and I didn't stay more than three days. It was not a great experience going cold turkey and I became very sick, but I never became addicted to any further substances knowing how awful withdrawal was.

Because some trauma had occurred at high school I never returned to school and left at 14. At 14 I made my first attempt on my life.

One of the tools in my recovery involved pet therapy and I was brought a small sheepdog. As I learnt new ways to adjust to a life managing drug free I was also learning to love this pet and not focus on my trauma. This changed my life and I began healing and this beautiful dog changed my life.

I adored her and felt I had responsibility and a reason to live, it gave me meaning and purpose and finally I felt something I felt loved me unconditionally. Having come from a very dysfunctional family setting, these feelings were new for me.

I trained her at dog obedience, went on to gain titles in dog obedience trials and at 17 I won two "Best In Trial" awards. Then for a few years became a dog obedience instructor in outer eastern Melbourne and trained others in how to train their dogs. That was the beginning of volunteering for me and I have continued to volunteer in some capacity throughout my life.

I did return to school as an adult to study two diploma's and began my own business while raising my three sons. Studying subjects that I was really interested in meant I enjoyed school far more as a mature aged student.

In 2013 I decided to report one of the people who sexually abused me. The effect this had on my mental health was devastating. I was made to testify [in court] twice. I lost a lot of weight, 26 kilos in six months. My Bipolar had been rapid cycling the whole court case and I was living on little sleep. Stress of trauma recall.

I was not believed by general community as a victim post-court, and there was many negative and stigmatising comments written in the media, particularly on my past substance abuse and that I was a mental health patient when abused. It was high profile and again I spiralled and attempted to take my life, and depression set in and being disbelieved took its toll.

Eventually, I did reach a turning point. This was due solely to the endless help of one of my children, he was 16 at the time. He did not give up on me. I turned my anger on recovery.

I was turning back into a victim and I was not going to be that again.

I used my anger to exercise and this helped with the anxiety. I cycled, swam, got back on my stand up paddleboard, walked, did yoga, exercised every day. With fitness came appetite and I started to regain the weight I lost. I began to eat healthy foods to nourish my mind and body and with that I felt calmer. I practised mindfulness and gardened to ease my anger. I learnt art therapy and crafts to ease the anxiety I felt and it all helped. Art was a very good distraction for me.

I reconnected with friends and returned to work, but still struggled with anxiety and periods of depression. I made a decision to take time off to heal. Part of this was to do the Voices for Change program with Ballarat Community Health and tell my story through public speaking.

TURNING BACK INTO A VICTIM & I WAS NOT GOING TO BE THAT AGAIN.

professional services to help them on their recovery journey and to educate the ignorant of stigmatising language around drug and alcohol use and much of this comes from childhood trauma.

Life will always throw adversity at us, every single person has lived-experience of some sort or another. It can be a harder struggle for those with mental health conditions, but do not underestimate your ability to help another human, we all have something to give. For it is from the worst storms that we slowly begin to shine.

Never Give Up.

advocacy work with VMIAC.

I try to advocate for others who have experienced childhood sexual abuse in assisting them to link with

I try to educate the public on childhood trauma

awareness, mental health stigma and how I now

manage my mental health. I have been an advocate for

suicide prevention in various areas over the years but

Suicide Prevention trial, helped on working groups as

one of the lived-experience participants. I am also on

the PHN Regional Mental Health Governance Group

and Leadership Group and have done and continue to

recently with the Western Victoria PHN Ballarat Based

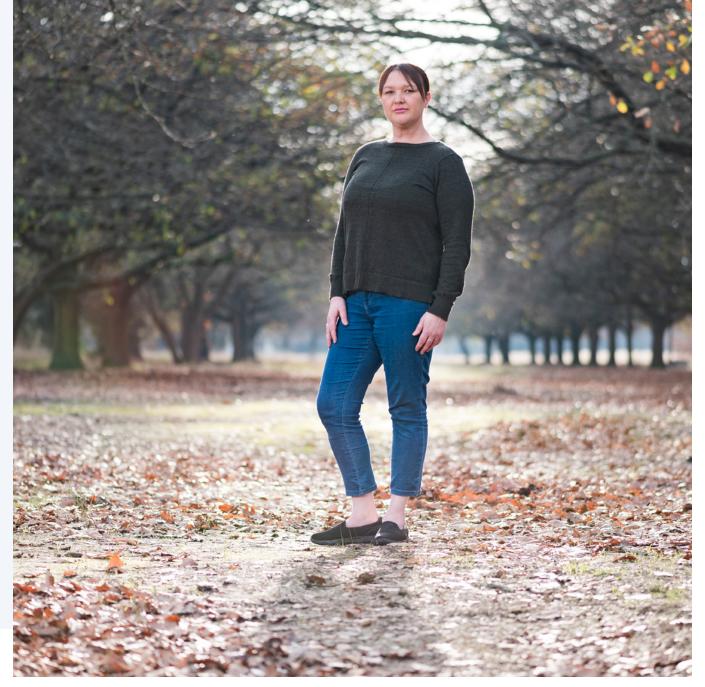
TANYA YOU CAN SUCCEED

In my early adulthood I met a man that I thought was incredible. He showered me with gifts, told me he loved me, that he wanted to be with me, wanted a family and seemingly all the things I wanted. What I was to find out was that this man was incredible, incredibly narcissistic and controlling.

Our relationship was a whirlwind. We met and moved in together within weeks. We got engaged within just months and married 12 months later. We had our beautiful baby boy four days before our first wedding anniversary. Little did I know the hooks were firmly planted and he was making it difficult for me to leave.

It was just three months into our marriage that I found out he was unfaithful for the first time (there were at least two more times). When I confronted him he blamed me. It was at this exact time that I found out I was pregnant – a child that I had longed for and was excited about. However, my baby was also the reason I forgave his infidelity.

As the years went on there was a lot of name-calling, withholding affection, inconsistent compliments, gas lighting and spending money on me at times, only to use it against me later on. I was desperately unhappy and overweight. Having to plan my life around him and what he wanted was becoming draining and mind-numbing. I fell into a routine of pleasing.





My life wasn't where I wanted it to be and I remember when I turned 30 I cried the whole day. I was in financial debt due to him, I was in a job I hated and wasn't having my mental and emotional needs met by the person who was meant to love me. I had lost me.

I decided that I would do something for me. I started focusing on my health and weight loss and succeeded. I lost 26kgs and felt amazing. I finally felt like me, like a person and not just an object in the background. I felt like a shining diamond and not just one that is buried deep in the dirt waiting to be uncovered.

However, that was met with accusations, such as "you are sleeping with someone", "you're dressing up for others", and that I wasn't "right". His aggression increased, and started isolating me from my family and friends. This is when the more aggressive behaviour began, he was punching holes in walls, starting more aggressive name-calling, more arguments, physically pushing me and throwing things.

It wasn't long before I decided that my marriage was over and we weren't safe. I began putting plans in place to leave, I opened a bank account just in my name that I put whatever money I could spare into and created an exit strategy.

The abuse continued and I just kept thinking "not long now". I tried to leave a few times but the element of doubt that comes with being told "you can't do this without me", "I will be back and I will make your life hell if you leave". This kept me there with him. I remember thinking, it's easier to stay than leave and have the terrible situation I knew he would create.

Around two years after I decided my marriage was over, after 12 months of secret counselling, I found the courage to finally end the marriage, and asked him to leave.

That was just the beginning... After I ended our marriage, initially I felt a weight had lifted, but then I felt guilty.

I had hurt the person I married - but he was already so far from the person I thought I married.

He called me at work and told me I needed to explain to our son why we aren't together. So, we all sat around the table and I explained to my son, 10 years old at the time, that mummy and daddy weren't together because mummy doesn't love daddy anymore. With that, he lashed out, got up and went to the bench. I tried to process what was happening as it was surreal, but he came at me wielding a meat cleaver. It only barely missed. My son stood in between him and me screaming "don't hurt my mum".

From here, he went into manipulation mode, saying things like "how can you do this to me, there has to be someone else?"

He arrived on my doorstep one morning early, with a life insurance policy and had listed me as the beneficiary. He was telling me that he was going to attempt suicide and asked me how it felt to have someone love you so much that they are willing to end their life to give you money.

The night everything changed. I was out for dinner for a work function and I received 87 text messages – at midnight I had had enough and went home. I was woken from my sleep by him turning on my bedroom light. I remember the look in his eyes, he was someone else, somewhere else, and somehow I knew exactly what was going to happen.

I grabbed my phone in a panic to call 000 but he was on top of me and grabbed it. I ran down the hallway after him to get my phone back and that was when the first blow came. He had hit me, a backhand across the face and I fell to the floor. He was on top of me choking me, he had his finger in my mouth and split the corner of my lip. I managed to get my foot up to his chest and kicked him off. I got up and he choked me again, this time putting my head through the lounge-room window. We fought for what felt like hours.

Finally, he turned and with two hands pushed me. I fell

hard, hitting my head on the table and crashing on the tiles. I heard a snap and I instantly couldn't feel my legs, I thought he had broken my back. I would learn later that he had fractured my pelvis. I was screaming in agony whilst laying on the floor. I remember looking up at him and it was like the evil person that had done this was gone. He stopped, picked me up and put me in his car and took me to the hospital.

Today, people ask me all the time, how do you deal with this rubbish? How do you keep going? And the answer is simple – I have to. I have two children that I have to be strong for, I can't give up. Who will be there for them if I do? Who will guide them on their path? I have to show them that no matter what happens, you are in control of your life.

After two years of counselling, I have figured out that it's ok to do things for me. It's not selfish to have a plan for my life and I shouldn't feel guilty. I moved in to my own home, brought my own car and did whatever I wanted. Without ridicule and abuse, and without feeling guilty for the first time in years.

I enrolled in university at 39 years old after deciding to follow my dream and complete a criminology and justice degree. I figured that if I can support people going through a similar situation to mine, maybe all of this hadn't been for nothing.

He used to say and do things that he knew would push my buttons and I would react until I didn't react anymore. It was then he realised he didn't have the control he once had and he desperately wanted that reaction. I learnt to treat our dealings like a business deal – we were in

business discussions and our business was our son.

I wrote this to show people in the same situation of family violence and dealing with a narcissistic ex or partner, family member or friend, that you aren't defined by what's happened to you. It's not who you are, it's just a thing that happened. Take back control of your life, you're not what they say you are or aren't. You can succeed without them, better, you can THRIVE without them.

Written with the extraordinary love and support of an incredibly kind and genuine lady – my beautiful mum. Thank you for showing me the strength and independence I have inside of me, and for telling me to always have a voice.



"Is there a pill that can make me happy?"

This question sticks in my mind today. I was 19, headspace was in its infancy and my life was a waking nightmare full of chaos. I was at my first GP appointment to get assessed for treatment.

It was the first time my emotional state had been explained to me. The first time I had been told I had mental illness.

I would go to sleep paralysed by fear, afraid something would get me in my bed. I would fall asleep exhausted and wake only to swing my feet from the bed onto the floor and cry. Cry at the destitute nothingness I felt, the hollow feeling in my chest. I had been trying to make it alone in the world for so long. I was trying to leave behind a life of violence and drugs. But my mind would not cooperate with my plans for a new life.

I remember asking, when I was told about anxiety and depression, about a pill. A short quick solution to my anguish.

Looking back it puts my persistent drug dependence disorders in a whole new light. Chasing my own tail constantly in a constant pursuit to regulate my emotions. That's what headspace did really. It helped me understand myself and further – reclaim who I was. I remember my youth worker turned to me and said "we now have this thing called headspace, we realise how much mental health plays into substance abuse. I'll book you in if you're interested?".



He told me about headspace opening, explaining there may be a link between what was happening in my life and my 'head space'.

I was struggling. I kept going back to a man who had been abusing me from 12 years old, feeding me drugs, hurting me. I couldn't stay away. I thought with him was the only place to calm my storm. Him, and an ice pipe. It was all I knew.

My youth worker helped me book into a GP as a first step. She was warm and attentive. Her name was Julie. I sat there, a skinny wisp of a girl, shoulders hunched, fiddling with my necklace as I was accustomed to do in the presence of anyone with professional status. She noticed so much about me that I did not.

When I asked her about the 'happy pill' she chuckled warmly and was not at all dismissive. Kindly, she said, "if I knew of such a pill, I would be very wealthy".

But alas, there was no quick fix, no pill. There were, however, psychologists who could help me work through the trauma I had suffered and my mental health issues. She explained PTSD, anxiety, and depression to me. These concepts of mental illness were things I thought only 'other people' suffered.

The thing about mental health is that we don't realise that we have it. Unlike physical health, the insides of our minds remain elusive. Some of us fail to see the connection between what is happening in our lives and its connection to the internal perceptions we have been developing over the years. So much horror becomes normalised.

This was a development for me, it was shaped by a range of factors, such as parental abandonment, abuse, and fear. Though I was in my own life and in my head, I was unable to recognise the space within me that was as volatile as the ocean.

Up until then, I had been in and out of detox many times but I could not shake free of the nightmare that was my life. I didn't understand why I felt an impending sense of doom. I had a range of theories, perhaps I was psychic, and perhaps the miserable events that caused me so much pain and were so profound, that their impact rippled through space-time and my brain registered it. I grew up with a range of compulsions for the fear at night. Counting in threes, checking every drawer, every cupboard and soon self-harm became a means of relief. This soon gave way to drug use. I didn't know who I was anymore. I had grown up with a fierce determination to solve the world of its ills, including mental illness but lacked the right tools to apply it to myself.

I used to have a recurring nightmare. I was in a car which was hurtling across the road, gaining speed, I couldn't reach the wheel and I couldn't reach the breaks. headspace, when it came into existence, gave me the tools I needed, ones to unravel my mind, to understand it. The fear, the hopeless destitution, drug use, homelessness, inability to escape family, and sexual violence. I needed more control, to grab the wheel.

The sounding board and the tools my psychologist gave me enabled me to stop, and view the terrain, I could assess what my feelings really meant and how to respond to them in a healthy way. I could have more control over my own mind and how it shaped my behaviour.

I was able to stop going back to that man. I was able to find a life for me. For who I really was. My head space.

What began as a treatment for drug use soon became a reclamation of my identity and control over my own life. It became a delicate weaving into the fabric of society. For those of us with limited parental guidance, or role models, headspace began a way in which we could finally kick-start that developmental process, to catch up with the rest of society.



I went to university, graduated with distinction, and am now on the board for the youth service that helped me in those years. I am a published writer for mainstream articles and am working on a book. I do a range of public speaking and media. I am doing my honours thesis on childrens' right to safety.

I took that man who hurt me to court to say that I belonged to society, I had human rights and not just I, but we, we are deserving of belonging to the same institutions and society as everyone else.

Thread by thread we are woven back in. It was still hard work. Still is. But I have more control now, more tools. I'm stronger and more confident behind that wheel.

There is no magic pill, there is nothing that can make your life not be what it was. But by God, there is something to help you be strong enough to carry it.

It may not fall away but I was able to take that life and use it for something good and precious – and mine. Our paths may not be like our peers, I am still different but we are not alone.

Our journeys are made richer by the organisations we encounter along the road, those who give us perspective, rest, and guidance. Those who build community.

I am proud, for our lives are more than the sum of their parts. To understand ourselves meant understanding the world and where we belonged. Thank you headspace.



ZAVIER WE ALL DESERVE HELP

My name is Zavier, I'm 25 years old, I have a Disney tattoo, I love rock climbing and tabletop gaming. If I could use any animal to describe me it would be a duck. I'm a nurse working in mental health, I'm also transgender (they/them pronouns) and autistic. I am all of these things and they all makeup and influence my personality. It isn't just one thing that defines who I am, but the really important thing to know is that right now, I am happy.

I wasn't always though — I was a sad kid and like many other people I felt as if I never quite fit in anywhere. I was born as a female into a conservative Catholic family and I was considered a tomboy which I was expected to grow out of but didn't. I was bullied early in school because I was seen as nerdy and cried only once. I learnt to suppress and hide any outward expression of my emotions so the bullies wouldn't get a reaction out of me.

At age eight I remember thinking for the first time "I hate my body". I would think "I'm fat" and "I'm useless". Retrospectively, I was none of those things, but it was very real at the time.

Things started to get really bad when I was about 13. I struggled to know what emotion I was feeling, what name it had, what caused it and how to fix it (something I would later find out is one of my autistic traits). For a long time, I coped with negative emotions by self-harming. This was around when puberty hit – normal body parts started to arrive, I put on a little bit of weight and my eating became very disordered.



This was also the age I realised I was attracted to girls, not boys and growing up Catholic I was taught that this was "unnatural", "disgusting" and meant I would go to hell.

No one knew about any of this. I hid it and played my part. I pretended to be happy and that's what people saw. I didn't think I was allowed to be unhappy or had any reason to be. I had food, a house and a family that cared for me. I knew that mental health problems existed and were real and terrible for other people who had them, but I thought I was just being stupid. So, I smiled and made everyone believe I was happy.

I hid everything for a really long time. I came out as gay to my parents and friends when I was 18 to mixed reactions. My mum told me I needed to give her time to get used to it but that she still loved me. My dad was, let's say, less supportive and seven years later still thinks that I should just choose to be "normal". My school friends told me they were ok with my sexuality but "as long as I didn't dress like a man" and they continued to say homophobic things like "that's so gay" instead of "stupid" and using words like "faggot" and "homo".

When I started university I moved out and met people who were much more open-minded and everything was good for a while. I loved my newfound freedom and independence, but that happiness didn't last long. During mid-semester break, my housemates went home and I lived by myself for five weeks. It was a really tough time. I started ruminating about everything I never talked about, it would take me hours to fall asleep, my eating habits became especially disordered. I lost weight and I was constantly aching, dizzy and tired. When classes started up again, I struggled to focus or hold meaningful conversations with anyone.

It all hit breaking point one uni party night when I'd had a few drinks, and something clicked in my head and I started to panic. I started to hurt myself and cry and hyperventilate and at 2am I didn't know what to do except call my mum. I told her everything. It was the first time I'd told anyone about my self-harm or that I wasn't the happy person I showed the world. Like the amazing person she is, she drove an hour and a half to come to give me a hug and told me that I would be alright. She also told me that other people in my family struggled with mental health issues and that it was ok.

She took me to headspace the next morning and that's when everything started to get better. I began regular sessions with a counsellor who helped me to accept that I was different, she gave me tools to put in place for when I couldn't sleep or felt the need to hurt myself. She helped me talk about and identify my emotions. At first, I felt ashamed that I needed a counsellor but I found myself looking forward to sessions because even though they were hard, I always left feeling better having shared and talked through the things that bothered me.



During this time, I realised that the negative feelings I held towards my body were dysphoria because I am transgender.

I'm non-binary and having a very feminine body is highly distressing. Over the next few years, I slowly needed less and less counselling, I found a supportive community through roller derby and have taken steps to transition including surgery to remove my breasts and taking hormones to de-feminise my features.

So here we are now, my body matches my brain. I've admitted that sometimes I struggle in my head and that's ok, I have a supportive social circle. My disordered eating and self-harming are now virtually non-existent.

Most importantly, I've stopped hiding and pretending to be someone I'm not and that is what made all the difference.

I'm happy.

It took me so long to get help because I didn't think I deserved it, I thought other people had more reasons to be sad, so I suppressed it. But everyone struggles with something and we all deserve help. Other people's negative experiences don't diminish the validity of your own. Go get help because you're worth it and you deserve it.



If you, or someone you know, have been effected by the content of this story and require further support, please consider contacting the relevant services listed on page 130



ANDY PENNY

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFFICER
SHARE THESE STORIES - PROJECT MANAGER

Throughout recent years, the mental health sector has seen an increase in early intervention supports, the dismantling of inaccurate and harmful stigma, and an increase in accessibility to mental health in the community. With the increase of peer workers in health and welfare organisations, we are seeing professionalism align with lived experiences of mental health, an invaluable resource of expertise.

Almost two years ago, headspace followed in the footsteps of its lead agency, Ballarat Community Health and their passion for peer work, and developed what is now the SHARE THESE STORIES publication – a collection of lived experience stories from members of the community. The stories provide personal accounts of how each individual managed to find hope and wellness in times where their own mental health had faced significant hurdles. They show vulnerability and diversity in how hope can be found, and even re-defined.

Throughout the years in my role at headspace Ballarat, I have been humbled to have such insight into those that have reached out for support or needed some steering in a healthier direction, however nothing has ever bought me closer to the topic of mental health, its positives and negatives, than collecting these stories.

Acquiring these stories was so much more than a simple offering, or a request from a mental health foundation; it encompassed lengthy discussions, relationship building, promoting safety, confidentiality, and all underpinned by compassion and connection.

I've often likened this process to winning a lottery ticket, the lottery ticket of complete humbleness and insight into the absolute bones of vulnerability. I feel rich in emotion. These stories are incredible, the people who wrote them are amazing, and this is their gift to you, the community; their experiences and learnings for you to take.

This project would not have been possible if it were not for the incredibly high standard of care provision Ballarat Community Health set for themselves and the community. I am privileged to be along side the most knowledgeable of leaders, and have colleagues that constantly remind me of why I am so fortunate to work in this field.

Lastly, it's important to recognise the efforts that these writers have taken in sharing their stories, to experience such difficult times, to overcome them and share them is incredible. We know that achieving good mental health is unique to each of us individuals, so we thank each and everyone of those that contributed to this book for sharing their journey into finding hope for their mental health

Our mental health is always with us, just as our physical health is. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not so good, but it's there. Look after it. Thanks for sharing these stories.



TIPS FOR CARERS

I am by no means an expert on anything and least of all an expert on parenting, however here is a few lessons I've learnt along the way.

- Act early and take it seriously. If you possibly can, get them to engage with services before a crisis.
- Get kids their own Medicare card when they turn 14 or 15. This means
 they can access services without you if they need to. They will still
 be on the family Medicare card as well as having their own until your
 medicare card comes up for renewal. Don't let them be embarrassed
 to ask you to take them to the GP for a mental health care plan (or for
 anything for that matter), the reason they don't get help.
- Have some time just the two of you. I started a family tradition of going on a mini-break with each child as their 16th birthday present. It was one of the best things I ever did as when you're both driving each other to distraction, you'll have that stress-free time when you reconnected to remember and fall back on.

- Be the adult... this is so hard, and I failed often. Try not to need to have the last word every time.
- Get your own help. Be a positive role model for using talk therapy. See a counsellor yourself to talk about your own problems because these will be affecting your child/young person, the way you relate to them and the way you parent. Don't send the "broken kid" to therapy without having the courage to look at your own issues and behaviours. You are probably not making it worse but you could be making it better by dealing with your own stuff. Be brave enough to own your own shit and admit how your problems have impacted on your kid. Apologise to them if necessary and do better in the future. I've found my children to be phenomenally forgiving of my mistakes and stuff ups. They certainly taught me a thing or two about maturity, kindness, love and forgiveness that's for sure.
- Try and practice unconditional positive regard. Be on their side, show
 up for them even when they don't deserve it. Especially when they
 don't deserve it! Also, you do not have to put up with abuse or family
 violence from your young person. Adolescent violence is family
 violence. You have a right to live your life free of violence even if it is
 your own child, it is NOT OK. Seek support 1800 RESPECT.
- Say no and say yes. If your teenager hates you at times, then you're probably doing an OK job.
- Finally, one of my favourite sayings is "This too shall pass".

SUPPORT SERVICES

Emergency 000 (24 hr)

Lifeline 13 11 14 (24 hr)

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (24 hr)

headspace 1800 650 890 (9am – 1am)

QLife 1800 184 527 (3pm – 12am)

1800 RESPECT 1800 737 732 (24 hr)

Sexual Assault Crisis Line 1800 806 292

National Alcohol and 1800 250 015 (24hr)
Drug Hotline

Family Drug Support 1300 368 186 (24hr)

Well Mob wellmob.org.au

Embrace Multicultural Mental Health embracementalhealth.org.au

FEELING INSPIRED?

If you decide to share your story, how you talk about your experiences and what you choose to share is entirely up to you. It's okay if you decide not to share your story publicly – there are many other ways you can be a strong mental health advocate in your community.

If, when, how, and with whom you share your story is entirely up to you. Telling your story can be a difficult and emotional experience, especially if you have not shared it with many people before. If you do decide to share your experiences, it's important to think about the boundaries and self-care strategies that you might want to put in place.

It's important that you share your story in a way that is safe, both for you, and for your audience.

It is important to be really clear about your purpose. Think about why you are sharing your story and what key messages you would like your audience to take away.

The first step in preparing to share your experiences is to write out all of your ideas. The following questions will help you to think through a number of different elements of your journey.

- What mental health challenges do you have experience with?
- What were the signs and symptoms?
- What was your life like before this experience?
- How did your mental health challenge effect your life?
- What prompted you to seek help?
- What was helpful in your journey towards recovery?
- How do you keep yourself well?
- What do you enjoy doing now?
- What are the main things you would like the audience to take away from your story?

For more training and resources on how to tell your story safely you can go to:

- batyr batyr.com.au
- jack.org jack.org
- Our Consumer Place ourconsumerplace.com.au
- SANE Australia Peer Ambassadors
- Being Leadership Academy
- Mindframe A guide for lived experience speakers: talking about mental illness











Share These Stories gives an incredible insight into the lives of individuals who have encountered mental health challenges of all kinds. Read first-hand accounts that offer real hope for those starting on their recovery journey. Share These Stories breaks down stigma and empowers the authors and the readers of these truly heroic stories.









