

# Eddie's Story



I grew up in Sydney and started having symptoms of mental illness when I was in Year 9. I was a really sweet, outgoing person, and then I kind of turned into a nasty person. I was super angry at everyone, my mood swings were off the wall, and I didn't get along with my brother. I would put myself in risky situations and always go out, party and do drugs and all that stuff. I was manic and just not able to stop basically. My mind would go so quick that days would go past, and I didn't even realise because I am on a different planet. Then I would shoot down, and my lows were worse than my mania. It was nine days of sitting in a room not doing anything and not talking to anyone.

The first time I thought I should go and see someone was when I had finished school. I was 19 and living in Erskineville. I was talking to someone online and told them about my suicidal thoughts, and they helped me get into contact with the people I needed to speak to.

I started seeing a psychologist and that was really good. That was the tipping point, when I started to tell someone else what had been going on my head for the last six years. I also saw a psychiatrist at Headspace in Camperdown. We started doing the pill process; trying to get the best drugs. I am still not where I want to be and I am still having monthly consultations with psychiatrists over my drugs. It's been six years of taking medication.

My parents had always taken me to Jindabyne for skiing and I loved it. The opportunity came up to become a ski instructor at Smiggins in

Perisher and I would come to the snow four months out of each year. It was my escape from Sydney, from the whole mindset. When I was here it was kinda manic, a really, really good time. Then I would go back to Sydney, be okay for a bit, and then just lose it.

I moved down to Jindabyne in 2013 full time. The stress of Sydney can be bad for someone with bipolar and anxiety. Even with the difficulties with finding psychologists and psychiatrists to see face to face and having a good choice, it is still better for me here. In summer it's a small town, I know everyone at Woolies. You can just go down to the shops and have actual conversations with people because everyone knows you, especially now with my assistance dog. Everyone's nice to you, and it's good to have that environment instead of when I used to live in the city, every time you go out, you'd see someone different or you'd run into someone different or you'd have to come across a different situation. Here it's kind of a little bit consistent.

*“I have seen six GPs while I have been down here. They leave after three months or so.”*

I had been seeing the same psychologist in Sydney from the very beginning, including when I would come down to Jindabyne during the ski season. I have never found anyone like her because we had such a great rapport.

There was only one available psychologist and I saw her on a mental health plan. We just didn't click and didn't connect, and after Medicare and everything was dealt with I had to pay \$150. I never saw her again.

I had seen someone prior to that as well. She was an hour's drive away. They were free but not someone I'd be calling up to if I really was in trouble. I'd do it more for a formality to keep the doctors happy rather than actually have a proper engaging conversation.

Psychologists have got to be very specific and you've got to open up to someone. If you don't open up to someone, or you don't feel like you can trust someone, or you just don't

click, they'll never get the full story. But I still have to keep my GP happy, I've still got to do these things and it's the only option at the moment. It's even harder when there are no psychologists to see locally.

When I wasn't seeing a psychologist I talked to my GP, and booked double appointments with her instead, because I could actually talk to her. She was as experienced as any country GP can be in mental health. She had more knowledge than any city GP would because they've got to deal with so many different people. You see your GP first so they've got pretty base knowledge. She seemed pretty much to know her stuff and the right things to say, then point me in the right direction of things. I have seen six GPs while I have been down here. They leave after three months or so. I have been seeing my current GP solidly for a year now.

I see a psychiatrist over Skype through a service called 'GP to You'. The one I am seeing now is good. I don't know where she is, she could be in Sydney. There is no psychiatrist in the area except for Canberra. If there was a psychiatrist close then I'd go see them, I prefer face to face. I don't have solid Internet here, I have to go to the GP's office. I should be seeing her once a month, I don't, because I often put off making appointments, or I'll have an appointment and something will come up and I won't make it. Sometimes I'll forget to book another one, or one day I just couldn't be bothered to talk for an hour about my feelings. I do feel pretty guilty sometimes when I miss them. I guess that's something that I've got to get myself on top off as well.

The sessions can either go one of two ways, good or bad. We have either got a good Internet connection, both video streams are fine and you can actually have a conversation and see each other's facial expressions, or it drops out. I think that's really important to be able to see them. I think I take more off someone's face than what they're saying when I am talking to them. I think that's really important to have. If it works, it works great. I can have a conversation, and get it done, and I'm sweet because I'm just comfortable in my doctor's office. But if it doesn't work and it keeps dropping out and I have to call over the phone, then it just becomes a waste of time, and it becomes stressful and frustrating.

The second time I tried to talk to her it was probably four months ago and we had to talk over the phone and instead of being an hour it ended up being half an hour. It was just

frustrating for me to have a piece of technology not work when it really should have. It's pretty simple and because it didn't work then I was kind of in the wrong mindset to really give her the information that she needed to know.

My GP referred me to a service in Cooma called Personal Helpers and Mentors through the Schizophrenia Fellowship. I've been seeing them for about a year. My worker and I will just chat, she's kind of like an unofficial psychologist I guess. Someone to just being able to freely talk to her about my feelings confidentially to someone who's not a relation. If I have appointments in Cooma or Centrelink in Cooma, she will come help me with that. Any Centrelink information or anything to do with my recovery or the doctors or anything like that that get sent to me all get sent to her as well so she can make sure that I am on top of everything.

She's a really good base person or if I have trouble with something or if I need help with anything, I just call her up. I used to see her once a week but the funding changed and now I can only see her once a fortnight. If I didn't have her, things would definitely be a lot more disorganised. Organisation is super difficult for me, and my partner who is my carer doesn't live here fulltime.

One service that she set up for me is my safety linked phone. Because I'm pretty rural, and live by myself anything can happen. It's kind of like one of those ones for old people, if you fall over you press the buzzer and it calls them. For me, it's if I have a panic attack. In the past I have had them, I can't use a mobile phone, and I just can't function. I have three points of contact for them to call, so the service will call them, or emergency services. It only costs a dollar a day and I am pretty happy with that. Even if I get bitten by a snake or fall over in the shower it's a good bit of service.

I've had a mental illness assistance dog for two years. My partner and I got him at eight weeks of age specifically for the purpose of being an assistance dog. He's been by my side 24/7 and we have only had one night away from each other; the bond is just ridiculous. He is amazing and he is doing really well with his training. He helps me confidence wise and can tame my reactions to things so that I don't get as angry with people.

There's shops I wouldn't have even walked into if I didn't have him with me or if I didn't have someone else to go in with me. People ask me whether the stigma of walking around with an assistance dog without a physical ailment is hard. I feel much more comfortable with him than not with him, so it's much easier to deal with that so called stigma.

I don't work now. The reason I stopped the work that I used to do is it was really customer service based and I worked with children. I was not happy with not being able to control my state of mind or my reactions to situations when I had to look after children. I would have

really bad physical symptoms in the mornings before work, and if someone said something that didn't sit well with me, even a joke, I would go outside and burst into tears. I loved the job and it would be so great to do that next year, that would be the ultimate goal.

Since I didn't work, I didn't feel I was applying myself in a social space. I felt like I needed to do something that wasn't just for me so now I volunteer with a wildlife rescue group. It keeps me really busy in winter which is really good. I have been raising a kangaroo joey for the last year, in a few months she will go into a pre-release program. I love animals more than anything and that's been really good but it has also been really hard because sometimes they die, and when they die it's hard. The animals are the ones that make me get up in the morning.

*“We have either got a good internet connection, both video streams are fine and you can actually have a conversation and see each other's facial expression, or it drops out.”*

I haven't been to emergency or been in hospital because of my mental illness at all. I had a friend in high school who had bipolar and was in a hospital numerous times. I visited there, and after being there I haven't wanted to be in a position where that happens. I have tried to put in as many plan Bs as I can. I know I will have panic attacks and things will happen, but it's just about managing them so I don't have to end up in hospital. It probably will happen at some stage, but thankfully I've been okay so far.

**Contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 if you are in need of immediate assistance, or talk to your GP, local health professional or someone you trust.**

*\*Names and photograph changed to protect privacy.*

*The views and opinions in these stories do not necessarily reflect or represent the views of COORDINARE – South Eastern NSW PHN, and is not advice that is provided, or information that is endorsed, by COORDINARE. COORDINARE is not responsible for negligence or otherwise for any damage however arising from the use of or reliance on the information provided in these stories.*