

Deb's Story



I am a 52 year old Aboriginal woman, but I didn't grow up in my Aboriginal family. My mother isn't Aboriginal and she and my step-father raised me. I had a difficult childhood and experienced abuse. This is where my mental health issues all started.

When you're a kid you don't see the mental gravity of it but I can look back now and see where it all led me. I didn't realise this until much later on; that it's been there the whole time. My psychologist said I've had bipolar, depression and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder since my teens.

I had been struggling, not getting the support I needed and my lowest point came when I attempted suicide twice. There were a lot of circumstances around it. I met my biological family, my father is Aboriginal. My dad was just a horrible alcoholic, very abusive. I met my other brothers and sisters. My brother was great. My sisters rejected me. It was a cultural thing.

I stayed one night in a hospital after my suicide attempt. I saw a mental health team worker twice after that and he was really good. He helped me understand why it all happened, and I guess in a way he was trying to assure me there was nothing wrong with me.

I still didn't start receiving more treatment for mental health for a while after that. I was having more issues and my GP referred me to psychologist at an Aboriginal Medical Service. I have been seeing him for years now.

He's moved into private practice and my GP gives me a Mental Health Care Plan so I can see him and be bulk-billed. When he was with the Aboriginal Medical Service I could have pretty much gone any time I wanted because he was within the system.

Now I have to see him under a mental health care plan so I can't see him as much. There are times when I could probably go see him every second day. There's not nearly enough appointments and half hour appointments aren't nearly long enough.

I can't do 10 visits a year to my psychologist, it's not enough. If I have a particularly hard month I use them up in a really short time. He goes above and beyond what he should have to do. There's times where he'll call me each day and just touch base and make sure that I'm okay.

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I was attending a course, as a requirement of being on Centrelink. I did a couple of courses but they focused on physical activity, and they didn't really work on the mental health.

The courses stopped and I was transferred to another job service provider. They suggested I should see a disability worker instead. I went to the disability worker, who then referred me to another service. I started seeing an Aboriginal support worker in 2014.

I recently lost both my biological father and my dad who raised me, in a short timeframe and that pushed me over the edge. I needed to see

my psychologist but had run out of sessions. I was able to go to my Aboriginal support worker, and she caught the tail end of it.

There have been times when I have had anxiety attacks and my support worker will take me over to the park and we would sit and talk. I don't want to talk to a stranger. When I have called a mental health support line and community health it would be totally different. I worry that if I called somebody from the community mental team, they're going to have a psych ambulance at my place and take me to the hospital. That's not going to help me.

I'm currently on my third appeal with Centrelink for my disability support pension. The way that Centrelink deal with mental health I'm finding is detrimental. There are ridiculous timeframes and I'm told I need to see somebody but I can't get in for six weeks. My Aboriginal support worker helped me organise it and we specifically asked what I would need on the day and they told me I just needed to bring the psychologist report.

We got there and she's read the report and said that he isn't the right type of psychologist. They made me see a clinical psychologist. I had 11 weeks to submit the relevant report and the time lapsed. I couldn't just walk in off the street to see somebody and it was hard to get in. I had to have a series of appointments for them to do the report and then the time lapsed. Centrelink knocked it back and changed the date.

I'm really annoyed that places like Centrelink have no understanding of mental health, how somebody just sits behind a desk and makes decisions and takes a professional, clinical psychologist report, somebody who's studied people and can probably read them better than anybody and some guy can make a decision to pick out the little bits of that report and negate everything else about it and base a decision on that. And I'm sort of at the point where I'd like to say 'well, you be inside my head', you know. Spend a week there and I guarantee you, they wouldn't survive.

I am getting into a more holistic way of thinking about things. As an Aboriginal woman, cultural healing can be a very good thing.

Doctors have tried to put me on medication, but my psychologist is an Aboriginal man who also appreciates that tablets aren't always the best thing.

I'm just anti-clinical, I've done drugs

(medication), and my body just hates drugs. In the past when I saw the clinical psychologist she spoke to my doctor and said I needed to be on a certain medication, but I told the doctor I totally disagreed. I've always been open with him, and he agreed with me it wasn't suitable.

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There's an extreme lack of understanding amongst the mental health field and ignorance, and whilst I understand the need for medication, I just think that perhaps they need to start considering a more holistic approach.

I'm working with my support worker at the moment doing a women's healing circle once a week. I am good with other people, you know, I'm not a stupid, senseless person. I'm a person that struggles every day and some days are good and some days aren't.

People need to be taken on a journey of self. Getting to know themselves, and going back and finding that place where loving themselves enough to want to be better.

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.*

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