

John's Story



I moved from Melbourne when I was 18 and I have lived here ever since. I was a nursery man for 30 years, with an interlude in forest research. I was highly respected in the industry and then it just all caved in when I had a back injury. I went through a rotten floor and landed on a steel girder. My back was already on the way out, being a nurseryman you work on ground level. The accident was the start of the end because I crushed a disc. I ended up having four different lots of surgery on my back, and since then I've lived the life of chronic pain.

My depression started after the second surgery. I couldn't work so my wife and I bought the business. The plan was my back would get fixed by all the surgery and I would take a step back, not be so hands on, just be the guiding hand. I just went into this deep dark well of my depression that engulfed me. It destroyed my marriage, we lost our business, and we went bankrupt.

With my depression, I would just load myself up with pain killers, and just put my head under the doona and escape from the world. I have been told I have this syndrome called 'Boom and Bust', where I just go out and work myself into a mess, and I end up in bed for three days in pain. I've done up my garden, and I have people who say if I can do that, why can't I work? But it was very slow.

My GP and pain clinics I had seen had prescribed anti-depressants, but other than that I hadn't seen anyone for my depression until the first time I attempted suicide. I overdosed and ended up in hospital for about a week. I was in the high dependency ward for about four days, and then three days in the general ward.

I didn't actually get put into a mental health area. At that point the mental health part was very, very small. Because I had attempted suicide I had to be assessed before I was allowed to leave. All I wanted to do was get out of there and make up to my family and friends for what I did. But at that time, mental health workers were very scant on the ground here. It ended up taking about three days for someone to finally come and see me. I spoke to him and he spoke to the doctors and they gave me the go-ahead to leave.

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I was so sick of lying there doing nothing, waiting around. I had actually gone up to them and laid it on the line. I went up to the doctors and said 'if you don't get a mental health worker to me by tomorrow morning, I'm just going to walk out of here no matter what the law or what you say. I'm just going to get up and walk out'.

I was referred to a psychiatrist. I saw him and he just basically said 'there's nothing wrong with you. You've taken a hell of a hammering physically and mentally in the last few years. It's understandable that you're very depressed,' and that was it.

I felt it was a sort of a kick in the pants to myself when I did it. A bit of a wake-up call to move on from this. Sort of more self-help and self-discipline. But then things deteriorated again, and I attempted suicide two years after my first attempt.

After my second suicide attempt I was referred back to my insurance company because my case is a worker's comp case. They actually insisted that I get some psychological help, and I had about four lots of six sessions. In the end we decided we were just going round and round in circles. She couldn't really help me anymore, so I stopped seeing her.

I attempted suicide again, and this time I was put in a mental health unit. The treatment and the lack of dignity was just absolutely terrible. It was the first time I'd ever been in a mental health unit, and I'd been stuck in a booth for six or seven hours. I asked if I could sit outside

and have a glass of water and a smoke. The nurse said 'Nuh! You earn privileges around here'. They took everything off me; my phone, my iPad, and it was a real shock to see the way that I was treated.

The next morning, there were two older staff trying to sort out my medication, and of course I knew exactly what I needed to take. They were making mistakes and every time I got up to approach them to say I could sort it out for them, I got yelled at to get back in the chair, not to approach, and stay there. It was really horrible treatment. But as with last time, I only stayed in overnight.

I saw a psychiatrist the next day and he basically said the same thing as the first psychiatrist, 'considering what you've been through, it's understandable you have severe depression.' So that was the one and only experience I had with the mental health ward. It left a lot to be desired.

During all this time I couldn't work because of my injuries. I researched how to propagate difficult plants and I had some good degrees of success. This kept me occupied the first three years, and then all of a sudden, something changed. One day I just went from having intermittent bouts of depression that I'd get myself out of and be happy, to just the depression being permanently there.

For the first time in my life, I started getting anxiety attacks, which I'd never experienced before. They were really serious, where I couldn't even walk out the back door. I would call my adult sons to ask them to take me to hospital and then I would back out, knowing what the mental health ward was like.

Then finally one day, all I could do was curl up in the foetal position. I told my son he had to take me that I couldn't take it anymore. So I ended up in the mental health ward for a week. This time it was a lot better, plus I think they were very aware of what my opinions were from my previous experience because I had said something. I think they were told to be a bit more gentle and reassuring with me. The facilities and all that were nice, but I found it very mind numbing for someone like myself who reads a lot and writes a lot. There was just nothing to do. It drove me insane being in there. I was glad to get out.

After I got out I saw another psychiatrist. He upped the level of my medication, but I started feeling like a real knocked out zombie so went back down of my own accord. My GP is pretty

trusting in how I use my meds. He knows I don't make radical decisions, besides the suicide attempts. So he says he knows that I know how I feel, and that if I feel I need to adjust something its fine as long as I let him know.

My GP oversees most of my care, and I only see psychiatrists sporadically, usually when I've had a suicide attempt. The last time I saw one, was when my peer support worker could see I was going downhill about two months ago. I was in a mess. She suggested I get a medication review.

It was while I was in hospital for the week that it was recommended I get a peer support worker. I approached the local service provider, but I think at the time they had staffing issues, and it actually took probably two months for them to actually get back to me. That was five months ago.

I saw my peer worker once a week, and I went to a creative writing course run through them on Mondays. I write a lot when I am in the right

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head space, and some of it is very therapeutic for me. My tutor was really impressed with my writing, and said I should pursue it as a career. I'd like to pursue it as a full-time course at university but in all practicality, it doesn't lead to any solid employment.

The peer support service I am with has had a number of staff leave and due to this I have lost my peer support worker. I feel that this has broken my bond with my worker, whom I depended upon. I used to be able to go to the office to have a chat and have a sense of security. I feel devastated as I had been doing my creative writing course through the organisation, and now it has all gone.

I currently see a psychologist. I have had three sessions and he is good. What I've noticed with the psychologists is each has a very different demeanour. Some are more intense than others, some are more clinical. It's sort of meeting and having a chat. I don't find him very clinical. He has also got a lived experience with chronic pain.

While the organisation I am with had suggested I become a peer support worker, my psychologist didn't think I should do that. I would still be involved and thinking about mental health and all that. He feels that I need to get away from it altogether.

My back injury has worsened which has caused my depression to get worse also. I have had a recent admission into hospital and now will be back seeing all the specialists again, trying to find answers.

I still feel a sense of hopelessness. At the age of 53, not working, not having a partner, and just a whole loss of dignity. I've lost all desire and ambition, I don't know where I'm heading. I've just got fear and dread of the future, and loneliness. I'm over the chronic pain and I'm over my back controlling my life. I'm over depression.

For me it's been a combination of unforeseen incidents that just snowballed into this massive problem that I've found myself in.

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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