

People share their stories of mental health recovery in work and life

panorama

Monthly Issue **June 2024 #93C**

Recovery is What
Works for YOU

Taimi Allan, New
SA Mental Health
Commissioner

Supported Travel:
NSW Central Coast



Where mental wellbeing thrives

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Where mental wellbeing thrives

About us

Flourish Australia is committed to walking beside people with a lived experience of mental health issues as they progress along their recovery journeys. We passionately believe in mental health recovery, and are committed to providing the best possible support and encouragement to people so they can achieve their recovery goals. We offer this help across all 70+ of our services in New South Wales, Southern Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria.

Contact Flourish Australia!

1300 779 270 or
flourishaustralia.org.au

Chair: Prof Elizabeth More AM
Chief Executive Officer: Mark Orr AM
Chief Development Officer: Peter Neilson

About Panorama

Founded in 1996 in one of Flourish Australia's predecessor organisations (PRA), Panorama has grown to become a lifestyle magazine dedicated to informing and encouraging the recovery journey of readers. Panorama is written, designed and produced almost entirely by people with a lived experience of mental health issues.

The faces behind Panorama...



Warren Heggarty



Grant Everett

Subscriptions, questions, feedback, praise, curses?

You can ALWAYS email us at...
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Prefer snail mail?

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Disclaimer

Panorama's content is not intended as a substitute for the advice of any specialised or qualified professional. The views expressed herein are those of the authors, not necessarily of Flourish Australia, or any associated enterprises, their staff, management, employees, or service recipients

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Contributors include...

Kerri accessed Flourish Australia's Orange Service

Paul accesses Flourish Australia's Lambton Service

Elizabeth* accesses Flourish Australia's Seven Hills NSW Service

Grace Tame was Australian of the Year in 2021, and spoke at our International Women's Day event

Edwina Keelan Accesses Flourish Australia's Marrickville, NSW Service

Thanks also to Andrew Povolny, Tom Greenwood, Janet Meagher CF AM, Phil Nadin and all the others who laboured behind the scenes!

* Real name suppressed by Editor for privacy reasons.

Contributions are welcome!

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WE PROVIDE PRACTICAL

Care for Carers

Flourish Australia is committed to working closely with families and carers in their important role of supporting people close to them with a lived experience of a mental health issue.

Using a family inclusive approach, we work directly and in partnership with specialist organisations to provide support and education services for families and carers.

A list of helpful resources and Carer organisations for family and carers can be found on our website:
flourishaustralia.org.au/family-and-carers

SCAN QR TO FIND OUT MORE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Flourish Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, sea and waterways upon which we live and work.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their strong and continuing connection to land, culture and spirit.

Panorama magazine would like to recognise all people who live with a mental health issue, as well as those who encourage and support loved ones. Our universal right to lead full and inclusive lives is the driving force behind why Panorama exists. We also recognise the strength it can take to share our stories. The impact of reading about people's journeys cannot be overstated. Sharing our experiences has the potential to change lives and we hope by reading true recovery stories, it gives hope, optimism and support to our readers, especially those on their mental health recovery journey.



Spread Hope...
Your Mental Health Journey
will Inspire Others!



Did you know that sharing your own mental health recovery story can spread hope and inspiration?

Don't worry if you're not a writer – that's where we jump in! At Panorama, every story is valued! We're constantly on the lookout for stories from those living with mental

health issues. But hey, family members and caregivers, your stories matter too! Not sure where to begin? Send us a message, we would love to hear from you!

**Email: panorama@flourishaustralia.org.au
or Call: 1300 779 270**

Annie Sykes

(1952-2024)

Mental Health Advocacy Pioneer

By her colleagues at Flourish Australia
and elsewhere

Annie Sykes, was one of those people who was given a prognosis of 'no hope' due to mental health issues. The prognosis turned out to be wrong, and in fact, far from having no hope she seemed to be able to spread hope to others. Her life was often very hard, but Annie was equal to and better than what it dished out.

Born 1952 in Whakatane, Aotearoa New Zealand, Annie was Māori from the Ngatirangitahi Iwi who acknowledged a Māreikura Wahine ancestry with past strong and inspirational female leaders. Annie's connection to Māori culture became more and more central to her, especially toward the end of her life.

'Back in the early 70s' she once told Panorama, 'the only job role I could do in the mental health system was psychiatric nursing, so I studied that

at Tokanui psychiatric hospital in New Zealand. Those four years at hospital were tough because I was constantly relapsing and going in and out of hospital, and I left the course three months early.'

As a patient, Annie was subjected to forced treatment and institutionalisation where her choices and rights were removed. She had experienced violence and trauma in her life. In those days it was so common for people who were already traumatised to be retraumatised in the very institutions that were supposed to be 'caring' for them.

'The mental health system was difficult back then' she told Grant J Everett in an interview in 2023, 'it's still difficult now, and everybody knows it. I have always questioned how things are run in mental health and while I believe my hospital admissions saved my life, there was a lot of ugliness in how the patients

were treated... for instance, the staff wouldn't even bother to tell us when somebody died; sometimes we'd get up for breakfast and one of us simply wasn't there any more. There was no respect.'

Annie escaped this, came to Australia in 1988 and started a new life as an advocate and activist. From then on Annie worked to address stigma and discrimination and to educate the community about the experience of mental health issues and its social and physical impacts. She worked for 12 years on Central Sydney Area Health Service's multicultural and mental health committees. She even successfully took Rozelle Hospital to court for breaching her confidentiality while a patient there.

Another respected pioneering peer worker, Peter Schaecken advocated on her behalf. 'I ended up receiving a formal apology...' said Annie and the experience galvanised her will to

move into an advocacy role herself. That is the sort of person Annie was. She was determined, resilient, she never gave up on herself or others, she was fierce in defending people's rights, and she shared this strength with people she advocated for. When it came to a struggle, Annie was someone you would have wanted in your corner. In this way she made such a difference in other people's lives.

Annie had been an early promoter of mental health recovery, notably through her publication of 'My Recovery Toolkit' in 2002 which focused on inclusiveness, respect and acceptance for difference and diversity. Thanks to efforts like this by Annie and other activists, 'recovery language' started to become accepted in community based mental health NGOs from after this time.

She felt that her formal training, her lived experience of mental health issues and her own knowledge of trauma made her well equipped to take on the role of Independent Advocate at PRA from 2001 onwards. 'It's always my top priority to avoid retraumatising people who seek my support' she said.

Reporting directly to the board, Annie initially supported people working in PRA's community businesses. PRA's then General Manager/CEO Phil Nadin said 'I simply want to say how sad I was to hear the news of Annie's passing- I've always been so proud of the fact that we were able to provide the opportunity, through Janet Meagher's foresight, for Annie's light to shine. As she did so brightly.

Later, PRA became Flourish Australia and Annie became Senior Independent Advocate. To make the role even more challenging, there was no set model to go by. 'I was truly breaking ground almost every day.' Indeed, it is true to say that Annie was trail-blazing right until the end. Annie remained with Flourish Australia until her passing from illness in March 2024

The Holders of Hope

Annie once said "I think it's important for everyone to know that we are all holders of hope. When we're feeling a bit wobbly, then somebody else can hold hope for

us. And as we continue along our journey it's important to know that we can come back to this hope in time. I would say building a support network is vital. I'm so grateful to those who helped me grow and recover and achieve my potential.'

Flourish Australia CEO Mark Orr AM said "We thank and remember Annie for her deep commitment to lived experience leadership and advocacy, the promotion of mental health recovery from its earliest days in Australia, and as one of Australia's first peer workers. Annie was a pioneer of where we have arrived today."

The book 'Hope Strength and Determination: Celebrating 50 years of women activists and reformers in mental health in NSW 1970-2020' said this: 'Annie has a great sense of privilege to have survived and holds a deep responsibility to those who have gone before us, who stood up for change and rights.' (Mental Health Commission of NSW, 2020) Now the privilege and sense of responsibility and hope is ours. Let's continue to advance the work of advocacy that she carried out. Vale Annie!

SOURCES

Sykes, Annie and Everett Grant J 'In recovery we are the holders of hope' Panorama Autumn Quarterly 2023 pp 36-37

Sykes, Annie and Ruah Grace "Annie Syke's Lived Experience in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia" University of Sydney

Mental Health Commission of NSW 'Hope, Strength and Determination: Celebrating 50 years of women activists and reformers in mental health in NSW 1970 - 2020, page 51



OPPOSITE LEFT: Annie Sykes, ABOVE: Annie joined Flourish Australia's official Mardi Gras contingent. Seen here with Jasmin Moradides on the right. MIDDLE: Annie (second from left) at Government House with H.E. The Hon. Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of NSW (left), with Janet Meagher CF AM and Mohammed Alkhub of Flourish Australia. LEFT: Annie (Right) and Peer Worker Kathy Te Nuku (left) flank 'Coach' Peter Tos of Pre Employ Institute about 2012.

PHOTO FLOURISH AUSTRALIA ARCHIVES

BEACH 'BATCH' & FRESH OYSTERS

Travelling
on NSW's
Central Coast

By Edwina Keelan



Recently I made two trips to the NSW Central Coast which was made possible through my NDIA funding via my provider 'Closer Care.' It is a great place to visit.

One of the main towns on the Central Coast is Gosford which has mainly a Caucasian population many of whom are retired. A lot of ex Sydney siders reside there, some of whom commute and some of whom work remotely from home.

Where we stayed

In week four of November 2023 'Clara'* my carer from Closer Care and I both travelled by road for one hour in her small Toyota Yaris. We started out from Glebe near the centre of Sydney and headed for the beach on the Central Coast.

Clara is a university graduate from a culturally linguistically diverse background. English is a her second

language who is a university graduate. She originally comes from around the Red Sea!

Clara and I stayed for three days in a seaside batch overlooking the (Tasman) Sea. Batch, incidentally, is a popular New Zealand term meaning 'batchelor' or beach hut!

Later, I returned to the Central coast in week three of February 2024. This time I was supported by a different carer 'Janelle'* who is Australian who has a rainbow family, and has two little ones she calls her own.

Janelle and I stayed for two days in country in a cottage which looked like it came out of a Architecture Magazine! It had impressive minimalist feelings about it!!!

The Attractions

The Central Coast hosts many attractions: One of them is Whitton's Oyster Farm at 158 Mann's Road West Gosford. This is a family business that has been in operation for 40 years. Currently a Mother and Son are the main business decision

makers. We were lucky to have received a gift of two dozen oysters for FREE. We were most impressed!

Out in the surrounding countryside, we visited the honey making plant, which doubled as an indigenous art dealer. We also found farms which produce organic eggs. You can buy these eggs in Sydney supermarkets and they are popular with customers.

All of the main takeaway fast food joints are found here and there are so many cafés to choose from on the Central Coast.

Melbourne born photographer Ken Duncan has a gallery at 414 the Entrance Road Erina Heights which is a must see. It was exhibiting work from Botswana (in Africa) to Australia, Photos included an elusive polar bear and an at-risk African elephant. All printed on highly sophisticated paper with intense coloured inks. The images look so real. Some of the works were going for the price of a car!

Then there is the famous Australian Reptile Park where you can sing 'see you later Alligator' to a real alligator at the park's alligator pond! You can also find koalas, kangaroos, and a rare and endangered species of reptiles.

Outside of Gosford you can also find an art gallery which features a Japanese garden with a shrine bridge, landscaped in impressionistic style. You can colour-in a kimono at the gallery or just sit and watch works on display at opposite end of gallery.

There are op shops on the Central Coast which are heaps cheaper than Sydney, by far!

In the countryside around Gosford we found that some of the roads are quite bad. I suppose that the big trucks rip up the roads leaving them best suited to a 4 wheel drive!

The country side and the bird life include Kookaburras and Robins, but spiders and snakes are also common on hot days! Best be careful!

If you are like photography a good old tripod comes in handy to take selfies, and they are cheap. Ensure the tripod fits your mobile device or camera first before purchasing!

If that is not enough...

- Other places on the Central Coast which you might find of interest for further reading include:
- Woy Woy - a very famous town South of Gosford.
- Erina Fair - the big local mall
- Extensive Inland waters called (confusingly) Brisbane Waters.
- A mysterious Quarry at Wondabyne on Mullet Creek that cannot be accessed by road.
- The famous Hawkesbury River Bridge at Brooklyn (named after Brooklyn New York).

**Names changed to protect privacy*

WHY NOT SHARE YOUR OWN HOLIDAY EXPERIENCES WITH PANORAMA?

ABOVE: Mmmm! We were so pleased to get these delicious Aussie oysters from Whittens! **(OPPOSITE TOP).** **OPPOSITE CENTRE:** A cold-blooded welcome from one of the Australian Reptile Park's scaly residents! **OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** Sunset at the batch. **PHOTOS PROVIDED BY EDWINA KEELAN.**



Taimi Allan

Mental Health Commissioner of South Australia: Improving the Way We View Lived Experience



Taimi Allan was sworn in as the Mental Health Commissioner for South Australia in 2023. She has dedicated her career to improving the lives of people with mental health issues, with her past professional roles including being the Director of Ember Innovations, CEO of Changing Minds, sitting on the New Zealand Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, acting as Mental Health Advisor to the NZ Royal Commission on Abuse in State Care, and Deputy Chair of the Suicide Mortality Review Committee of NZ, among others.

Taimi is a big believer in the power of sharing our lived experience to improve the life of others walking a similar path, and that we can use the arts to massively change the way society views mental health.

She told us all about it.

Taimi, as Mental Health Commissioner for South Australia, what are the standout issues that you would like to fix or improve in local mental health services?

"The first thing I noticed when I got here, an underlying issue like peeling back the layers like an onion, is that we have a pretty poor public narrative in South Australia about what "mental health" and "distress" means, particularly in the media. We still have this "us and them" mentality where society is going backwards in the language we use, and we still have this "mad equals bad" narrative. All of that definitely needs changing, because it stops people from reaching out early, and that leads to acute services being overwhelmed down the track.

"I'd like to change the narrative of mental health experiences and challenges in Australia to a strengths-based perspective, to show that it's something most of us will go through at one point or

"We can not only survive, but thrive"

Taimi Allan

another to different degrees, and that it's something we can get through. We can not only survive, but thrive."

How important is the "Nothing About Us Without Us" motto when it comes to bringing change to the mental health system?

"It's absolutely integral to share and draw on lived experience presented from a first person perspective if we want real change. If we tell stories ABOUT someone, then we don't have the whole gamut of

ABOVE: Taimi may be new to the job, but she brings decades of experience PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIMI ALLAN

their experience, or what they've learnt from it. It's the same when we create system change and quality improvements: unless we know what the barriers are, we've got no hope in trying to change them. So with the "Nothing About Us Without Us" narrative, in everything from the governance of our systems to how they are presented in the media, we need to use our stories wisely to create real change."

I understand that you would like to foster more of a connection between mental health services in Australia and New Zealand. What are the benefits of these two nations supporting one another?

"We don't share our ideas widely enough, and I am a BIG fan of sharing, even if it means giving away your best ideas! Both countries have incredible pockets of innovation, but there's a bit of "heads down, bum up" culture where we squirrel away what works best, rather than sharing it. Sometimes, the work we perform doesn't come with a large enough promotional budget for us to tell people about it. My hope is we can draw closer and share what works."

What made improving the lives of people with mental health issues a career passion of yours?

"I think the career chose me, not the other way around! I've worked in the arts and hospitality and communications and film and telly and food and wine and travel, but even though I was always driven to work really hard (I don't think I've ever had a day off work), I never felt good enough, and it took me through some very dark experiences.

"When I first moved to New Zealand from South Australia years ago, I saw an ad in a newspaper saying they were looking to hire people with a lived experience to support quality improvement in mental health units, and that was at the very beginning of what we now know as peer support and consumer advisory. Knowing that what I'd gone through would not be seen as a deficit, but actually a qualification, was amazing.

"I brought my whole self, my business knowledge and customer care experience and hospitality

attitude and my way of storytelling through the arts and directing and acting, to become an early leader in the mental health space."

With your work with the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission of New Zealand, what benefits did it bring?

"There were many areas. The Commission created the strategic direction, the political nous, if you will, to understand the current issues. I joined due to my lived experience, and I wanted to find a way to consult people with mental health issues genuinely and authentically, putting equity first. Using a holistic model, we advocated and wrote many reports and policy papers. We developed frameworks to assess what was important to people with a lived experience, and their families and support people. It was entirely person-centered."

I think it is wonderful when prominent people such as yourself are open to sharing their personal lived experience. What are your thoughts on people being more open about their lived experience in the face of continuing stigma?

"If we look at all the social movements in recent history, like Black Lives Matter, or Rainbow Rights, or the Women's Rights Movements, NONE of them talked about the "stigma" of being those identities. Rather, they talk about being prideful, or having pride in, their identities. So I prefer to address prejudice and discrimination, because those are things we can challenge legally by saying, "By law, you cannot do this." This gives us ground to stand on where we can express our pride.

"Sharing your lived experience can be a double edged sword. If you work in mental health, regardless of your role, acknowledging the value of your lived experience is vitally important, and we should all be more open about this, including with how we recruit staff. Of course, it's a lot more difficult to disclose a lived experience in any other sector, so I understand the reluctance most people have in leaving themselves open and vulnerable, because we're not yet at the point as a society where we're not being discriminated against due to our mental health issues.

Continued next page



ABOVE: Back in 2022, as a farewell gift from her colleagues at Changing Minds (a peer-led national not-for-profit organisation in New Zealand) that also celebrated her new role with Ember Innovations, a non-government organisation in NZ that is also peer-led, Taimi was honoured with a hand-carved hoe waka paddle that held great meaning and significance for her in this time of transition. PHOTO FROM TAIMI ALLAN

Continued from page 9

“One of the programs I seeded in New Zealand (and is still running and snowballing in a beautiful way) is the Tall Trees program run by Changing Minds. We assembled over 760 people who said they had a lived experience, and we shared all our knowledge and skills. We developed training and mentorship around evidence-based language, what we can use to challenge prejudice and discrimination, and discussed the framework of human rights. From there, they were sent back out to the communities and workplaces in which they already had influence where they could use what they’d learned at Tall Trees to make lasting change.

So if someone was advising the CEO of a company, they could suggest developing policies to protect what the employees value. If you worked with the police, you could educate the officers on what they need to know before attending a mental health call-out. If you were working at a newspaper, you could be a guerrilla journalist who strives to change the way the media talks about mental health.

“The Tall Trees network is now in the hundreds, and includes people from all works of life who use everyday conversations to change attitudes and behaviours. That is the power of a social movement.”

How did you originally connect with Flourish Australia?

“I connected with Flourish Australia at a consumer forum 15 years ago, as I used to attend a lot of those earlier on. Being a CEO with a lived experience has allowed me to make a lot of close connections with NGO leaders in that space. I’ve been in touch with the Sydney-based Flourish Australia services for years, and it was great to see that you’ve opened a branch down here in South Australia, too.

“The first Flourish Australia representative I met was Fay Jackson (General Manager Inclusion), who’s a bit of a superstar. She’s been involved with Flourish Australia forever. She’s amazing!”

A lot of our readers have a keen interest in the arts. As you’ve had a lot of professional experience in this space, what makes the arts so important to people with a lived experience?

“The arts are a HUGE passion of mine. Through the Mental Health Commissioners Grants I funded 25 local performers to attend the Adelaide Fringe and put on mental health-themed shows. Each of those performances was a campaign of its own, covering a wide range of subjects.

“These shows reached an audience of around 18,000, and in terms of diversity and sheer numbers, were far more effective in changing the way people see clinical practice and media narratives than any campaign we could stick on a billboard. When we talk at people and tell them what to think, you’ll get pushback. People get quite defensive, as nobody ever thinks they’re doing the wrong thing. But the audience reactions

after seeing these shows indicates over 90% experienced a positive change in their attitudes towards mental health, and felt more empathy towards those with a lived experience.

“All of these performers have survived and thrived against the odds, and they wanted to educate the audience about what that means. Traditionally, mental health campaigns don’t tend to change a lot of attitudes, but with the arts you can sneak in some covert education while the people are being entertained and delighted and surprised and confronted.

“When the audience leaves, they’re laughing, they’re crying, they’re going on these roller-coasters of emotion, and they will be reflecting on what the performer experienced.

And they walk out, changed.

Commissioner Taimi Allan spoke with Grant J Everett



ABOVE: Taimi has attended and presented at many consumer forums and conferences, and is well known in the mental health sector of New Zealand and Australia PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIMI ALLAN



How Grooming and Abuse Can Make Mental Health Issues More Likely

By Grace Tame

Grace Tame is an Australian activist and advocate whose has used her experience of being groomed and sexually abused by her teacher to empower and inspire others experiencing similar traumas. Named Australian of the Year in 2021, Grace's work has been instrumental in bringing about legal reforms that make it easier for survivors to tell their stories. Grace spoke at Flourish Australia's International Women's Day 2024 webinar...

Courage is a decision to act when you feel you are able, and I feel privileged that talking about my experience might make life a little easier for other survivors and help educate everyone in our community about the grooming pattern so that we disrupt the cycle of abuse.

Trauma rewires your brain and reward pathways which can lead to maladaptive behaviours. I was abused at a time in my life when I was still forming a sense of self, so it's a continuing process for me of trial and error to find the right balance, which has been tough on my loved ones, too.

Trauma gets trapped in our cells and it helps to physically release it. Running provides natural pain relief in the body and rugged terrain requires mindfulness, much like when things get rocky in life.

We don't focus enough on precipitating events and behaviours, and need to educate not just children, parents and those who work with children, but those in the legal system and the wider community.

The most important thing is that we tell our story on our terms. It has the power to destroy the shame that for so long made us feel alone, many taking their truth to the grave with them.

Vulnerability is not mutually exclusive to strength and I want to provide hope, share prevention strategies and drive law reform by genuinely connecting with one another and sharing our vulnerabilities.

You can't pour from an empty cup. I make time to ground through simple things like time with family and friends, running, doing art, so

that the pressures of life doesn't become all consuming.

Our strength comes from the way we handle and respond to life's challenges.

How can we advocate in family court when it's often shrouded in secrecy?

It's not always easy to share our story in certain contexts. What matters is spotlighting behaviours and attitudes where they occur. My psychiatrist estimated that we'd clear out 2/3 of trauma patients if we properly dealt with childhood maltreatment, so we need to focus on the big picture of systemic change.

How can we contribute to change?

We need to encourage children to understand their right to say no and give them agency over their own bodies. It's important to respect elders but it's okay to set boundaries and say no. For biological reasons children have a different set of rights to adults in our society but we can teach ideas that go a long way to being able to recognise red flags and be okay with setting clear boundaries.

Feedback

Lowami (LouLou) from Flourish Australia's Community Advisory Council said...

"It was a real privilege and honour to listen to Grace on the day when we recognise all women. Grace is such a trailblazer and an amazing role model for all survivors.

"I found her talk interesting, encouraging, informative, inclusive, insightful and inspirational. Her presentation was a series of light bulb moments for me, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

"Like Grace, I do positive things like mindfulness, meditation, exercise and work, as well as having proper sleep hygiene and eating healthily."



ELIZABETH'S 'EXECUTIVE DECISION' And Where She is Driving It!

By Elizabeth*

Elizabeth* came to a decision one day that she had to change her life. We first met her in Panorama Summer 2024 p24 where she revealed how much the kindness and understanding she encountered at Flourish Australia had encouraged her. We encountered her again at the Greater Western Sydney Harmony Day picnic at Penrith. We asked her how she went with a recent job application and though she was not successful this time, it turned out that there has been plenty happening. Time for an update from Elizabeth - Editor

Making a major lifestyle change is a big thing, but as my friends said, if you can start the ball rolling, then one thing influences another. You develop momentum and you find it is easier as you keep going.

What is needed is that first EXECUTIVE DECISION to start it all off. Besides, I had quit smoking two and a half years ago, AND managed to lose 20Kg of weight. While I am pretty happy with that outcome I would like to lose a bit more one day. The problem with exercise for me is that it makes me physically ill when I do it for more than say 20 minutes, but that doesn't stop me from doing it for 20 minutes though! I attend hydrotherapy at a pool on Sydney's lower North Shore with my partner Kate* and I also walk most days.

Learning to drive a car for the first time at around thirty years of age was a little awkward to begin with, and the COVID Pandemic came and disrupted my progress for a while. But I got a new driving instructor and continued with it later, and now I am on my P plates. I'm driving a black Lancer at the moment, which I think of as a fairly masculine car!

Fifteen years ago I was a patient at Redbank House, Cumberland Hospital near Parramatta NSW. Last year, I applied for a job there as a Peer Worker but only recently I discovered that I was unsuccessful.

How it started was that in August last year I was asked to be a guest speaker and talk for an hour before about thirty Health Staff. My lived experience talk was training to go towards their accreditation as staff. I spoke about involuntary admission and treatment, which I have experienced. They asked me some questions and so I thought I would take the opportunity to ask about whether there were any jobs going! I got a call back from someone about twenty minutes later and eventually it led to an interview at Redbank House. I think I did well at the interview. I described how fifteen years earlier I was in the exact same position as the patients. So they would be able to see me as someone who was originally very unwell but who came through it successfully enough to be able to want to give something back!

Applying for a job in the health field it can be quite an involved process because, you need to get vaccinations, have police checks and working with children checks.

I currently live independently, in fact I have done so for five years now. Previously, though, I was helped out by the HASI (Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative) over a period.

The medication I was put on makes me very hungry. Not only has it caused me to gain weight but it has interfered with healthy sleep. I also had trouble with nightmares too, so I was not inclined to go to bed early. But I would sometimes end up sleeping for 14 hour stretches. My meals were disrupted too. I might have a meal at three in the morning. And during the ten or so hours I was awake I was very slow-moving and felt like a zombie. I just could not go on living like that. I had to find a way to get my life back, but not at the expense of becoming unwell again. With medication, everyone has their own personal needs and so together with my doctor I have aimed to find a dosage that helps me stay in control without leaving me feeling so tired and worn out.'

It can be very difficult to maintain a clean and orderly home while you are feeling so debilitated. I worked my way up from a HASI 'group home' in Carlingford to a one bedroom apartment in Parramatta; then a far better place that proved to me you need to have an orderly home to have an orderly mind!

Right now

I am living in a home owned by a family member in Kirribilli with my partner Kate who has a chronic physical condition. We are both

there for one another and Ironically, we met while going for blood tests!

I have come to develop my own insight in to what a doctor would call my symptoms. I might have a disturbing hallucination and it might upset me and I might cry because of it. Kate knows that I have these experiences and supports me. However I know that other people don't experience the hallucinations. For some people, they find it harder to realise that one's own hallucination is not seen or heard by others.

Also Kate and I work well together looking after the house. I love making the bed and she doesn't, so that's my job. I am no good at IT and she is, so that becomes her job!

**Real name has been suppressed by Editor for privacy reasons.*

(In conversation with Warren Heggarty)

OPPOSITE: Whether or not you consider a black Lancer to be a rather masculine car, learning to DRIVE one as Elizabeth has done is a great achievement!

Learning2B (L2B)

An interactive program designed to support your journey.

If you are being supported by a Flourish Australia service, you have the opportunity to expand your capacity building activities with Learning2B!

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EXPERIENCE, GRATITUDE, FAMILY

...and Seeing the Patterns in Life

By Warren Heggarty
with Tina Irving

"I am such an optimist!" said Kerri A, who accesses Flourish Australia's Orange service. This optimism, unfortunately was also one of the reasons she had repeated periods of being unwell. Kerri discovered through lived experience that things work better for her when she takes prescribed medication. As many of our readers know, sticking to medication can be a challenge, even if it works well!

Kerri explains 'When I found a medication that worked okay and suited me, I began to feel so well on it that I would just stop taking it! I would be optimistic that I would not become unwell again. But I did. This is something that had to change for me to stay well.'

Fortunately, in recent years as she endeavoured to keep out of hospital with the support of Flourish

Australia, she managed to avoid the same trap. It is hard to keep taking medication when you are not actually unwell. Intuitively, getting well seems a good time to stop. But sometimes medicine has a preventive effect.

For example, we take blood pressure meds even though we feel fine and our blood pressure has never been better. Add in unpleasant side effects and you find that it is so easy to forget all about it... and that's when things can get curly.

This is such a common phenomenon with people like Kerri, or me (Warren) who take medication that prevents a crisis happening. You need to balance the unpleasant side effects against the possibility of something much more trying!

'In the end,' Kerri admitted, 'I think time, age and wisdom made me think differently. Seeing the way my hospitalisation adversely affects people made me think I have to be more responsible, my son needs me

to be well! Besides, during the three months which I spent in hospital last time I was there, I began to notice how the other patients were. I realised that I was like that too when I am unwell!'

'Another factor that changed my mind about medication was that going over my history I could see a pattern emerging. *When I go off my medication- I get sick!*'

Kerri also noticed that the longer she was off medication, the longer it would take to become well again. 'I began to see how my condition (my diagnosis is schizoaffective disorder) is chronic. One tablet a day is not much of a sacrifice for sanity!'

A Middle path

Besides, not many people LIKE to be in hospital. The challenge for Kerri was to find a situation that allowed her to concentrate on getting better while staying out of hospital. This was where Flourish Australia came in.

'Navigating the health system can be confusing but I found the hope and direction I needed when I connected with the group activities provided by Flourish Australia. Without the group, I'd be back in hospital.'

'Flourish Australia at Orange has been a place I could stay a few days and feel fully supported. Just knowing that it was an option took the pressure off and I bounced back quickly.'

Every day, Kerri's priority is her mental health. She has learned that if there is some emotional upheaval that it is time to ask for support. 'I also know my early warning signs. For me I go off my sleep, my energy levels skyrocket, I believe I have extra powers...now I know what to do.'

Family and Values

My family have always lived by our Christian beliefs, that it costs nothing to show kindness. For me, that means being caring by nature, relating with gentleness, sharing laughter and joy, and treating everyone with respect. Finding the right support, has accelerated my recovery. Seeing the flow-on effect this has on the happiness of my family, inspires me to keep moving forward.

I'm grateful for how caring my family have been throughout my journey, reading everything they could get their hands on about mental health to understand how they could best support me.'

I used to be very hard on myself but their genuine care has softened me and given me self-compassion.

They encourage me that 'I can do this, and I'm going to be OK!'

The support is very practical, including with my finances, but it's the human connection that means the most. They sincerely care about who I am as an individual and come alongside me with enthusiasm every step of the way as I go after goals that make me happy. One goal is to sell my Zentangle art one day!' (See story on next page)

'I've gained so much understanding about what's important to stay focused on for my mental health, from Peer Workers with their own lived experience. They get what I am going through. I can feel the weight of stigma that was always such a scar on my life, falling away.'

'They take me for who I am and make me feel like I bring something unique and special to the table. We've grown to feel like family and I was saddened when I move on. I can't give them enough credit for the kindness they've poured into me. It has been life changing. I'll never forget it. I've become a better, happier, more outgoing person.'

LEFT: Kerri has become a 'better, happier, more outgoing person. BELOW: Close up of Kerri at work OVERLEAF Kerri with a Zentangle platypus. PHOTOS BY TOM GREENWOOD OF GREENWOOD MEDIA

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Why I Wanted to be a Clown

Kerri A. Shares a Family History

I had a typical childhood for the era that I lived in where we appreciated freedom, innocence and the simple things in life. I was the middle child and had two brothers. Sport and school were important parts of our lives. In those days, mental health issues were not spoken of.

When I was unwell, I was very fortunate that my family would always be there to support me, I remember them telling me that I was unwell, but of course I didn't see it that way. I would get angry and act up at them. They would remain calm, continue to show understanding and compassion and were always concerned about my safety and wellbeing.

What made it more complicated was that other members of my family had mental health issues. When I was only ten years old, I witnessed my mother attempt to take her own life. The only way I could process this traumatic event was to be funny and make people laugh. I wanted to be a clown.

It was not just my mother. A number of close relatives of mine all experienced serious mental health issues at times and some had also tried to take their own lives.

Back in the 80s and 90s mental health was just 'coming out of the closet' and was still sorely misunderstood by most people.

It is strange that my family may have been both the source of my issues as well as my greatest support! Perhaps heredity is behind it. Perhaps an environment like this 'normalises' mental health issues.



UNTANGLE WITH ZENTANGLE ...AND GET INTO THE FLOW

By Kerri A

With the Zentangle technique I can find a Zen state of mind as I create a colourful tangle of dots, lines and curves. It's a way of allowing my inner child free expression which brings me peace and joy, helping me to overcome the social anxiety that was holding me back. When my symptoms flare-up my art helps me to stay grounded. It gives my confidence such a boost to see how stoked my Support Workers are when I share something I've created with them.

I first heard of Zentangle when I was doing an art group between

2007 and 2013. A fellow participant commented on one of my artworks and she said 'It looks like Zentangle art' That was 2011,

I started doing actual Zentangle art whenever I felt creative. Then a psychologist I spoke to suggested that I try doing it whenever I am going through troubled times or am feeling low. for a while I was doing it nearly every day, from thirty minutes to an hour, sometimes longer.

'I practice mindfulness so once I start drawing I get into what sportsmen call THE FLOW. It's like you are in a relaxed state like



What is Zentangle?

According to the Zentangle web site 'Zentangle is non-representational [i.e., it's not a picture of something] and unplanned so you can focus on each stroke and not worry about the result.' You start off with a TANGLE which is a basic pattern of dots, lines, curves and esses. Each Zentangle can be drawn on a small piece of paper called a TILE -because when you do a number of them you can make a mosaic out of them! There is no actual Zen Buddhism in the religious sense, the word Zen is used in a colloquial sense to represent mental focus. If you are interested in exploring Zentangle further, there is a Zentangle blog and a Zentangle newsletter. Why not go to YouTube and watch a Zentangle in progress? – WH

meditation yet you are so focused you lose yourself! In art group I might start off with say a tangle of small flowers, then it may flow on the design to lines, then leaves or half circles. While You are doing it it just seems to flow like a meandering stream. It's such a peaceful thing to do.

It is not just Zentangle. At the moment I have also turned my talent to sketching things!

ABOVE: Kerri with a Zentangle that magically became a platypus! INSET: Some more of Kerri's Zentangles. PHOTO by Tom Greenwood of GREENWOOD MEDIA



Recovery is What Works for You

By Paul

Flourish Australia's HASI Plus program supported me in my recovery by helping me to develop my living skills and independence so that I'd be ready for the next big step: moving into my own home to live independently.

I first met the Flourish Australia staff when they visited Morisset Hospital, and when I was discharged in 2019 I thought their HASI Plus program at the Lambton service sounded good, so I joined it. I was in the program for three years, getting ready to transition to my own home.

My goal was simple: I wanted a 2-bedroom unit that I could afford. So when the HASI Plus staff took me to see a property I could get through social housing, as soon as I had a look around the place, I said, "Yes, I'll take it!"

I'm happy with the service that the HASI Plus team offered, and they've been really helpful with other things,

too, like supporting me to fill out my NDIS forms.

While life can get busy, I still like to visit the Flourish Australia day-to-day living centre at Newcastle for a few games of pool with my friends, a talk with the staff, and be a part of community activities.

Feeling super proud of my achievements, especially after hearing the Flourish Australia staff give props for the work I've been putting in. It's awesome to see my parents all smiles, watching me thriving in my journey towards independence. Just makes me even prouder of how far I've come.

Recovery for all

It's been a long time since I left hospital and moved into the community, and my mental health is going well. My advice for people with mental health issues is to keep taking the medication, and to stay off illegal drugs.

You can still be in recovery even if you still hear voices, but it's important to remember that it's just a voice, it can't actually do anything. It might comment on who you are or what you're doing or where you're going, and it might even be there for the long run, but I learned you can get used to living with voices. You just need to find the right way to cope with them that works for you.

I've been employed as a medical packager for a few years, and having a job has helped with my mental health. I've also made some good friends at the factory.

So I'm working and have friends and live in my own place. I'm very happy about my freedom.

Goals

I have a few goals in life. First off, I want to visit the Philippines for a holiday. My whole family is from there, and I have aunties and uncles I can go to visit. My family also has a house where I can stay, so I'd save a lot of money on hotels.

I'm currently in the process of getting a cat to keep me company. The good thing about cats is they're quiet, they don't bark all night.

While I enjoy my job as a medical packager, I did an online course in Medical Device Design a while back, and I've been using the second bedroom in my flat as a workshop for my designs. I'd like to find work in this field someday. I might ask Flourish Australia to support me with this!

Paul spoke with Grant J Everett

ABOVE: With Flourish Australia's support, Paul is living the life he wants. IMAGE OF PAUL TAKEN BY CLAIRE SMITH

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Keeping Both Eyes on Diabetes: The Mental Health Connection

By Grant J Everett



More than 1.5 million Australians are living with diabetes, and it is particularly common among people with mental health issues. For instance, people with depression are 2 to 3 times more likely to have diabetes than the general population.

The good news is that diabetes is manageable, but keeping it in check requires making positive lifestyle changes to your dietary choices and getting enough exercise, and there's usually a medication component to it as well.

However, some factors, like mental health issues, can make it difficult for a person to stick to a diabetes care plan, and if you don't manage your blood sugar well enough, this can lead to many debilitating and potentially fatal health problems like heart disease, nerve damage and gangrene.

Diabetes can also damage or even destroy your eyesight, which is why people living with diabetes are encouraged to make regular eye appointments.

How can the KeepSight program help?

On the subject of eye health, the KeepSight program was created to make it easier for people with diabetes to remember when they are due to get their eyes checked next. Delivered by Diabetes Australia and

the optometry sector and supported by all the leading diabetes and eye health groups in Australia and New Zealand, KeepSight has been detecting and preventing countless eye problems long before they lead to vision loss.

Justine Cain, CEO of Diabetes Australia, said: "This (KeepSight) program is changing lives by supporting people with diabetes to proactively look after their eye health and prevent complications."

To date, KeepSight has seen over 400,000 participants, a major milestone in the prevention of diabetes-related eye complications.

www.keepersight.org.au

Keeping on top of it

Actively managing diabetes can be a major source of anxiety, and stress hormones can cause your blood sugar to rise or fall unpredictably. Recommended ways of lowering your stress and anxiety levels include being physically active, doing relaxation exercises, calling or texting a trusted friend, having some "me-time" in whatever form you enjoy, and eating healthily. Things like being sick or injured can also increase your blood sugar.

Studies also show that talking therapies, either one-on-one or in a group setting, can make it easier to manage stress and anxiety. Diabetes support groups, for instance, are a great opportunity to share your

thoughts and feelings with other people who are stuck in the same nautical vessel.

Are you using the support on offer?

There are many specialists who are there to help you manage diabetes more effectively, and quite a few will provide their services under Medicare if you get a referral from your GP. For instance, Endocrinologists can provide a much deeper understanding of diabetes and its challenges than your average GP, and a one-on-one diabetes educator can help you to problem-solve a wellness plan, addressing a few issues at a time. Seeing a podiatrist is also vital, as they make sure your feet have healthy circulation, a big issue for people with diabetes.

But ultimately, keeping diabetes under control is up to you.

SOURCES:

"KeepSight program sees over 400,000 participants," Diabetes Australia website
 "Diabetes and Mental Health," Centres For Disease Control and Prevention website

ABOVE: Prevention is key with eye health. PHOTO FROM 12019 ON PIXABAY

"Diabetes distress" is when a person avoids doing what is required to keep their diabetes under control, such as not checking their blood sugar or skipping doctor's appointments.



How to Measure Your Recovery

NEW APP TO DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES

By Warren Heggarty

You may already know about how the RAS-DS* and CANSAS* conversations are used to support people who access our services. Flourish Australia wants to take things further, to improve outcomes for everyone with the help of the Recovery Assessment Scale and a new app we have developed. Most importantly, WE NEED YOU TO BE INVOLVED!

The app was developed in partnership between Flourish Australia, Sydney University and Enlightened Consultants. It is called 'DRIVing my own mental health Recovery;' **DRIV-R** for short. It is based around the Recovery Assessment Scale (Domains and Stages) which is known as **RAS-DS** for short. It has been funded through the Medical Research Future Fund.

Best of all, the **DRIV-R** app has been co-designed with people who have lived experience of Mental Health Issues; including people who access

Flourish Australia's services like Michael Wren, Marni Holden., Heidi Chan, Benjamin W., Stephen F., and Timothy M.; and support workers like Carl Michael del Rosario, Rhodian Deetlefs, Brad McCarthy and Andrew Povolny. We're proud to say that in the very early stages, Panorama's own Grant J Everett was involved. The Research Team includes Andrew and Professors Nicola Hancock, Justin Scanlan and Anne Honey.

Michael Wren (Bathurst service) has been a member of Flourish Australia's Community Advisory Council. He spent five months working on the development of the **DRIV-R** App. 'It was time well spent' he said. 'I was really excited when I was asked to work on the App project. I believe that digitizing things will be a way of reducing all the paperwork. I think it will give us more control and help our recovery process become more person-led'

DRIV-R allows you to rate yourself according to the four **RAS** domains (see below), then compare results from different times. You can opt

to learn more about particular results, share and download them and keep your own running notes. Your scores are presented in graphic form to make it easier to track your progress.

Recovery Assessment Scale

You may have already used RAS-DS but in case you haven't it is a 'tool' that measures outcomes. These can be grouped into four 'domains'

1. Doing things I value
2. Looking forward (having a future focus)
3. Mastering my Illness
4. Connecting and Belonging

For example you might have a goal to become less anxious. You can record how anxious you are on one date then compare your self rating on subsequent occasions to see how you progress.

How to become involved

Now that the app has been produced, it needs to be used in trials to see precisely how useful it is. This is where you can become involved!

The Research Team is seeking pairs of workers and people accessing **FLOURISH AUSTRALIA SERVICES ONLY**. These pairs will be divided randomly into two groups. Both groups will use the Recovery Assessment Schedule (**RAS-DS**). One group will delay using the app for six months while the other will start using the app right away. This means the research team will be able to see how much of a difference the app can make over a period of time.

If you access Flourish Australia and wish to participate in the trial, please talk to your support worker, watch for our flyers or contact:

nicola.hancock@sydney.edu.au

andrew.povolny@sydney.edu.au

from the research team.

* **RAS-DS Recovery Assessment Scale Domains and Stages**

* **CANSAS Camberwell Assessment of Need Short Appraisal Schedule**

ABOVE: You have heard the old proverb, no doubt, 'Many hands make app work.' Or something like that. The DRIV-R app allows you to nominate people to belong to your recovery team! IMAGE PROVIDED BY ANDREW POVOLNY

NDIS

Support for you, your family,
and your carers.



We will walk alongside you on your recovery journey, as well as help you live in the community, learn new skills, and do the things that are *important to you*

AT FLOURISH AUSTRALIA we can assist you to:

Our NDIS services

Flourish Australia is a registered NDIS provider. We support people who have a complex mental health issue to live the life they want to live. We have been in business since 1955 and have assisted many people to:


- Find a job
- Undertake training or study
- Make friends
- Connect with their communities
- Sort out day-to-day issues
- Find a place to live
- Stay healthy
- And much more


The most important things to us at Flourish Australia are your health, wellbeing, and recovery journey.


We are here to help

We know that applying for the NDIS or seeking support can be a confusing and intimidating process. Contact us and we will help you during all stages of the process.


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 Find out if you can access the NDIS

Think about your current needs, goals, and supports 

 Meet with your NDIS planner and get a plan

Decide which service providers you want support from 

 Put your plan into action



NDIS

Where mental wellbeing thrives