

# BROADEN YOUR HORIZON



“DON'T ISOLATE  
YOURSELF. PUT YOUR  
HAND UP AND SAY:  
“I'M NOT OKAY, I NEED  
A BIT OF HELP HERE.”

When things get too much for blokes, psychologist Terry Melvin encourages them to take a step back, broaden their horizon, do the things they love and find some peace in every day.

Terry has been working with men for over three decades in his own practice and establishing programs such as MensLine Australia to ensure a first point of call for men in crisis. He now lives by the coast and enjoys filmmaking and being in nature.

We talk to Terry about men's unique challenges around mental health and wellbeing and how men, and all of us, can be more aware of how to help each other.

**WARNING:** This story contains themes of suicide. If this raises issues for you, call Lifeline on 13 11 14





### **Men need support**

We as men don't tend to seek help. I think that's largely to do with the male culture - where you had to be stoic, suck it up, just get on, knuckle down and do whatever you need to do.

For this reason, men often have difficulty in identifying and articulating their emotional life and have a rigid framework around their masculinity - making us more likely to suffer around that inability to identify and express our emotional life.

In the years that I've been practicing, there has been significant change and men are more articulate about their emotional lives, but there are still a lot of men who were brought up in fairly rigid, masculine environments, where emotions are probably limited to getting angry and frustrated and other emotions like getting hurt or feeling sad, are not on the radar. This makes it really hard if they are feeling down, depressed, anxious or afraid to actually come out and admit the way they are feeling because they might be judged for falling short of that masculine ideal.

Suicide is about despair, about someone reaching a point in their life where they simply want the pain, the hurt, the anxiety or whatever it is to end. I would encourage people in that place to reach out and see the bigger horizon. If you put your hand right up against your face, all you can see is your hand, but if you step back a little

and pull your hand away, there's a bigger horizon. When people are in a state of panic or despair, we need to see whatever we're struggling with in the bigger context. If you can find someone to help you do that, that's what's important.

### **Crisis points are key triggers**

Whenever we hit a crisis point in our lives and emotional stress and strain is heightened and coping mechanisms are really challenged.

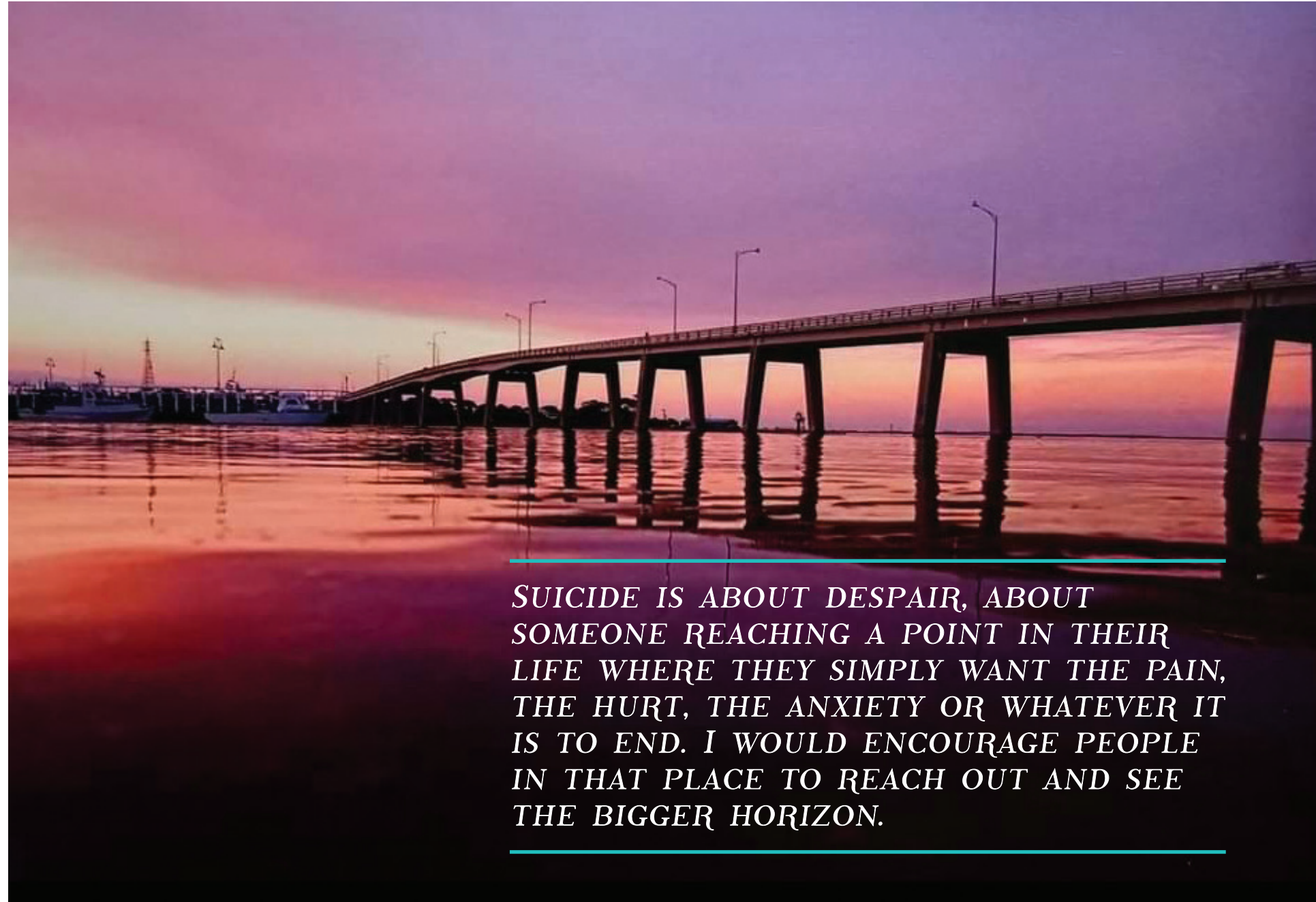
Separations and relationship breakdown are one of the key triggers for a lot of men. Men going through separation are at least four times more likely to take their lives.

Losing a job and unemployment are also triggers because a man's identity is so tied up with what he does. No longer being a 'breadwinner' produces internal conflict as it is at odds with the expectation of how a man 'should' be, even though that role is no longer as well defined as it used to be.

Rural men are also at risk, particularly when there is a crisis, often financial. The isolation that a lot of rural men experience can have a significant effect on compounding their own isolation and their inability then to reach out to say I'm not coping.

Young men have a lot happening such as pressures around identity and expectations laid upon them. I think this also applies to men generally - we are all going through a fairly significant period of transition.

Older men often are not prepared and struggle around retirement - they had the fantasy of the boat or the caravan and retiring to the beach or doing a trip around Australia with the wife or partner, but once that's done, they suddenly ask what's next? I suggest that men don't retire but move into their 'preferment' - uncovering what it is they really want to do with their life in the years remaining to them, what's important and how they want to make a contribution in their community. Once they've started to ask those questions, I think they move to a better place where they are much more at ease and comfortable.



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### **Tune Your Antenna to Warning signs**

When someone's normal, healthy pattern of functioning starts to change, we need to ask what's going on and are you okay? And then, make sure we follow up. Reaching out is a responsibility we all have - particularly to men.

### **Warning signs to watch for in yourself and others include:**

- Emotional state becomes flat - they're losing their mojo.
- Starting to withdraw from social interactions.
- Expressing a lot more anger and frustration.
- Stopping eating or losing weight.
- Not doing their normal activities whether that's playing sport, going to their social clubs or interacting with their mates.
- Starting to drink more or even take drugs.

## Get your motor running

Sometimes people can't self-motivate and ask for help, so we need to help them do this. Speaking to someone in a professional sense is a good first step.

Once they finally get in the room and we're starting to have a conversation, they learn how important talking about something is for them and start to experience the lift of the heaviness that's been on them if they're in a depressive state.

I often describe depression by likening it to an engine that's wound down and it's not functioning as well as it should be and how one of the biggest challenges is trying to reverse that and get the engine going again. That won't happen if you just sit around and do nothing. Part of the strategy is to invite them, encourage them and support them to start re-engaging with the kind of activities they enjoyed doing in the past or even start something new.

It's important to actually start doing something because we are do-ers – and by doing something, the engine starts to turn over again. The more men can continue doing that, the better.

## Find your happy place

The environment is very important for men. I've often spoken to guys who surf, and they all say that when they're out on the water, when they're surfing, it has a big impact on them emotionally.

### Key messages

**Develop an internal life.** Spend a bit of time each day just being still and paying attention to what's going on in your head and heart. We tend to be overactive and fill our lives with things. If we can develop an internal life, then we're more able to pick up on the warning signs that we're not traveling well.

**Don't isolate yourself.** Put your hand up and say: "I'm not okay, I need a bit of help here."

**We all need to look out for each other and men especially.** Don't be afraid to ask the question: Are you okay? He might open up and talk about what his worries are, what his concerns are or what is happening for him.

There's a lot of research around our relationship with the environment and the benefits of walking, bushwalking, walking along the beach, getting out and swimming, surfing, playing sport. Having that engagement with the environment or finding a special place where we are at peace with ourselves is very important to assist in managing and regulating our moods.

## #storiesstrong

### WHO TO CONTACT

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**Beyond Blue** [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Aboriginal Men's Referral**

**Crisis Line – Brother to Brother:**  
24-hour service 1800 435 799

**Headspace** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

**Mens Line** 1300 78 99 78  
[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

**National Centre for Farmers Health**  
[www.farmerhealth.org.au](http://www.farmerhealth.org.au)

**Switchboard Victoria** [LGBTIQ peer support] 1800 184 527

**Suicide Call Back Service**  
1300 659 467

**Well Mob** [www.wellmob.org.au](http://www.wellmob.org.au)

**Immediate danger –**  
call Emergency 000

**LEGAL DISCLAIMER:** Please note that the information provided in this article is for general information only. It is NOT intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice from qualified practitioners. If you have concerns regarding your mental health please seek professional advice.

This article is part of the #storiesstrong suicide prevention campaign which highlights a series of twenty articles developed by a diverse range of people with lived experience of suicide and experts in the field.

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For more information visit [www.gphn.org.au](http://www.gphn.org.au)

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