


BY MY SIDE



“ENJOY THE
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IT’S OKAY TO
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Peer support is an important part of recovery from an attempt on your life. Those who walk by your side down that difficult road will support you because they too have their own stories of strength.

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

Meet Andrea – a peer support worker in Gippsland who is an inspiration to many in their recovery. Peers are people who have lived experience in their field, so you know they truly understand what you are going through.

After a successful career in teaching and sales, Andrea still had that nagging sense of dissatisfaction. She found herself looking enviously at her friend who was working in the health sector. “I thought it was awesome and wanted to also feel like I was making a

difference.” She applied and was successful gaining work. Her interest in mental health was strengthened when a friend was self-harming and couldn’t find help. “I wondered why nobody was helping her, so when the suicide prevention project was launched and seeking a worker, I put my hand up.”

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Andrea then took a leap of faith and applied to be a part of the peer workforce. “I had never, ever shared anything about myself at work. I’d also never shared that I’d had suicidal thoughts at a few points early in my adult life.”

As a peer, Andrea feels she has achieved her goal of making a difference and loves how much she learns from being part of people’s lives and their recovery. “There’s so much stigma and fear around mental illness yet 95% of people, even with complex mental health issues, are more dangerous to themselves than anyone else. The people I work with are just like you and I, they just happen to have complex illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar, which many people find scary. I see a person who’s struggling with a mental illness and I hope that I treat them with dignity and respect and as a person, not a patient. Even when they’re unwell, I ask them what’s going on and how they are feeling, rather than what their symptoms are – I’ve learnt a lot through the peer workforce.”

Andrea came to Australia with her mother aged just five. They lived with her mother’s

new partner whom she had never met. Being away from her own father and all other family members was literally a world away from what she had known. “I had an English accent and got teased a lot, so I got rid of that very quickly! Mum’s partner wasn’t a nice man, he was abusive and a bully. Mum was one of those women who had to have a man in her life, so she made bad choices and I guess we both suffered for it.”

At school, Andrea was always put in the special needs classes, but at high school her maths teacher recognised she had more to offer. “He told me I was smarter than I thought and just had to work a little harder.” She told her mother and stepfather that she wanted to change schools and do her HSC and go on to university. “Mum said I wasn’t clever enough and my stepfather said it would be a waste of time and money because I was just going to get married anyway. Of course, that made me even more determined and put a fire in my belly.”

Changing schools and successfully finishing her VCE, she was accepted into a teaching course and had a steady part time job – things were going well. Then her mother dropped a bombshell – she was leaving her stepfather and moving in with another man and this new life did not include her. Andrea went into survival mode finding shelter with friends. After six months they also asked her to leave. “That was a really big time in my life, it was like: ‘Wow I’m 18 and I am on my own here.’”

Somehow, she supported herself through a teaching degree, then life threw up more challenges with her choice of partner. “Probably without realising it, I made the same mistake as Mum in that I met someone who was very controlling, but really clever. He came across to everyone else as such as nice guy, but underneath he had a really nasty side. “I didn’t fully realise it until I had my first child and was pregnant again with the second.”

One day after an argument, her husband told her that nothing was in her name, and



that if she left, he would take the custody of the children. "I was terrified because all I wanted was my kids, I was prepared to walk away with them and nothing else.

I didn't have anybody in the world to support me. I was terrified every night, that when I went to bed, he was going to kill me. "Eventually I escaped and moved to Gippsland with my children, I was very lucky that a family member of his supported me."

Alone with only herself and a few close friends to rely on, she bought a block of land with no house or electricity and her little family moved into it. "That was the start of things improving. My friends would always ask how I had coped without electricity or running water for that time, but I didn't care because I was free. They were probably the happiest days of my life, having that freedom and knowing we were okay."

The man who became her new husband provided a great role model for her children who are now thriving in their studies.

"If you don't have a good family, choose one, that's what I did. You need special people that care about you and love you to make life worth living. Enjoy the little things. It's okay to be happy with what you have. Everyone is striving for more, but I've just got a little house in the country and I'm happy."

Andrea's key messages

- **If you don't have a family to connect with, then choose one.** Make sure that you have regular contact with people and your community in person or via phone or digital. It makes you feel better to talk to someone and feel like you belong.
- **Be that person.** Be the one to organise gatherings of your chosen friends or family – even once a year. Be that person who recognises when someone needs to connect, bring them in under your wing.
- **Trust your gut.** When you think something is wrong, 99.9% of the time you're right. You've got to trust your feelings and emotions. If you're wrong and you ask someone if they are okay, all you do is let them know that you care about them. Everyone wants to feel cared for and loved.
- **Don't be afraid to ask: Are you okay?** Andrea is passionate in her advice to always ask 'are you okay?' and not to be afraid that the answer may be no. "You don't have to have all the answers and be fully responsible, just because you've asked, it can be shared with family and friends. Simply talk to them about sharing the responsibility and getting help. Sit with them, help them to make the phone call or whatever you've got to do. Follow up and ask permission to check in at a later date to help make sure things are moving forward."

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14

1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

1800respect.org.au

– National sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service

Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Emergency 000

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

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