

CUSTODIAN FOR HER COMMUNITY

“KNOWING THAT
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EVER – THAT’S
THE MAIN THING.”

Professional surfer, Sophie Fletcher is a Community Custodian for Lifeline. At just 20, she is inspired by the power of the ocean and helping others to be the best they can be.

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

Growing up on Phillip Island and surfing the world’s waves as your job sound like a dream, right? But, just like every person, Sophie has to ride the waves of life and wants to share the power of reaching out to others.

The past year was challenging for Sophie. One where doubt crept into her mind and affected her surfing performance. “I think

what held me back from getting results, was the guilt of the amazing lifestyle that I live. Why do I get to travel the world and surf, shouldn't I be working nine to five? I would feel sad, and then wonder why on earth I felt sad when I have the best life travelling the world surfing."

In the end, she came to the conclusion that there is no right or wrong with emotions. "You can't label emotions, you've just got to feel and know that people will support you no matter what."

Talking to a sport psychologist helped her return to her values and purpose. "My purpose is to be courageous and resilient and from that, I can continue to grow, learn and inspire others. This brings me happiness and I know I'm being the best version of me. Clarifying that was such a release and weight off my shoulders."

Growing up on an island, surrounded by the ocean, she fell in love with surfing at a young age. "I loved all sports, but something was different about surfing. You're in mother nature, it's out of your control. You are super present while surfing, you can't think about something you've been stressing over during the day because you're taken away from that hustle and bustle of everyday life. Going for a surf is my release. Even if it's been a rough day, I come out just buzzing. There's something about it, the energy of the ocean, I just connect with it."

As much as Sophie wants to be a great surfer, her higher goal is to be a good person and inspire others. Becoming a Lifeline Community Custodian was an opportunity for her to give back to her small island home and its surfing community that has suffered losses from suicide over the past few years. One of 21 athletes around Australia to be selected, Sophie was chosen for her ability to have a positive influence on her local and surfing community.

Sophie has a large social media following and acknowledges the positives and negatives of this medium and how it tends to make people compare themselves

against other's lives. She uses her pages to encourage good mental and physical health with posts such as this one on RUOK day:

"Instead of comparing ourselves with one another on that range, just entering that with compassion, empathy and understanding. It's not about whether or not someone has gone through more than you, or whether someone has gained or lost more, it's about being human together and just feeling what we feel together. Knowing we all experience these emotions based on so many different things and so many different life experiences on such a big spectrum so if we can all just work together with compassion".

And this one on World Mental Health Day:

"Sometimes we need to focus on how we care for ourselves mentally and emotionally, maybe that's taking a step back, asking for help, forgiving or spending time alone.

A keen journal writer, she uses this tool to get her thoughts and feelings out. Each night she writes down three things that went well that day – those things that put a smile on her face. She has also recently started to practice mindfulness. "I was listening to a podcast that said that 49% of the time we think about the future and 30% about the past – so we're

never really fully present. Now I just practice saying: 'what can you hear, what can you smell' and look around and acknowledge what's going on right now and to bring myself back to where I am. I also practice yoga and focus on my breath. With surfing, I'm 100% present. I can't be thinking about what I've got to do tomorrow or things that need to be done or worry about what happened yesterday, I've just got to ride the wave, where I am, right now."

Sophie acknowledges that we're all on this journey and just trying to figure it out. "It's okay, not to be okay, and know that there's no real judgement around that. There are people out there like Lifeline, and your friends, who will help and support you no matter what. Knowing that you're not alone, ever - that's the main thing. Just knowing that there's support out there and to ask for help. It's

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just reducing that stigma around it. You might feel it’s embarrassing to think a certain way, but it’s not. It’s brave to ask for help. It shows strength, rather than just holding it in – cause then you’re just going to overflow.”

She definitely advocates having a support network and reaching out for help. “I’ve got a lovely little support crew and it’s nice. I have a wonderful relationship with my parents and my closest friends and also the people that train me and coach me. I feel like I could always ask any of them for help and advice. You’ve also got people like Lifeline and Beyond Blue. You’re not on your journey on your own and I’m inspired by people all the time. We all have a pretty cool story and that’s who we are. I enjoy sharing my story and enjoy listening to others because that also inspires me. Share your story, I know I’ll certainly love to listen to it.”

Sophie is looking forward to continuing learning and, along with her surfing career, has launched her own small business side project transforming her artworks into decal stickers for surfboards.

Gratitude is a theme she often uses to inspire others in her posts. She recently posted pictures of surfing in Indonesia, sleeping in a grass hut, in a remote, little community and reflected the following...

“Enjoy the simple things and be grateful for the treasures we already have. Why do we get upset when there’s traffic, no WIFI, not possessing the newest iPhone or not getting enough likes to normal? I’m guilty of all this too. We get caught up in modern society of not having enough and defining our happiness from that which takes us away from the things that really matter. These photos were captured in a remote community in South-East Asia where money isn’t a concern to the locals, except living day-by-day with what they have. It blows me away that they never stop smiling and laughing, they have nothing we consider valuable in a first world country. No TV or electricity, no one on the internet, none of the stuff we’re addicted to that we think we must have just to be happy, instead they have family, kindness and joy. They are proud, no judgement, there is beauty always there. So just a friendly reminder to keep smiling and be grateful for the little things you value.”

Sophie sprinkles inspiration and, while she is riding the wave of success in surfing, she is more focussed on the long journey of life. “Ultimately, if I’m being the best me, that’s the best I can do. I also want to keep my identity. I’m not just Sophie the surfer, I am Sophie the friend, the daughter, Sophie everything. Surfing is currently the main part of my life, but I want to be able to inspire people from all walks of life.”

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au

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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