

HEALING THROUGH CULTURE

“JUST KNOW WHEN
YOU’RE ALONE THAT
WE HAVE OVER 40,000
YEARS OF CULTURE
ON OUR BACKS.”



Proud Barkindji man Sam Weston recently spent time doing 169 push-ups every day for two weeks in preparation for the Push-Up Challenge. One for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who lost their life to suicide in 2018 – and he carries his People, Country and world’s longest living culture in his heart with every move.

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

“I’ve got anxiety and depression. Everyone has issues to deal with, but for me it’s been a big part of my life. So, I took on the push-up challenge to raise funds for mental health. It’s pretty meaningful to be able to do something for others.”

He came across some alarming statistics as he prepared for the challenge. Lifeline Australia reports the suicide rate amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is more than double the national rate. In 2015, suicide accounted for

5.2% of all Indigenous deaths compared to 1.8% for non-Indigenous people.

“Any life lost to suicide is tragic, it doesn’t matter what your race, ethnicity, gender, age – I don’t think there should be any correlation. These figures show me that there are wider issues at the cause. The fact that males aged between five and seventeen years old contribute one quarter of all deaths through suicide shows that it’s important to acknowledge and champion young people (Aboriginal or not) so that they have confidence in themselves – which I think I lacked growing up.”

“As an Aboriginal man, it’s pretty confronting to see that by just being born, you’re placed in that higher risk category. Also, that my Dad, Uncles and all those other people around me are in that higher category – it’s hard to lift yourself up when everyone is down.”

But Sam is doing a *deadly* job of thriving in his life and career and by taking on inspiring projects to support his friends, family and community.

Growing up in Broken Hill in far west NSW, some of his fondest early memories are of weekends at the Darling River and swimming in the Menindee Lakes. At twelve he moved to boarding school in Geelong. “I guess I felt like a big shot, I was going away and thought I’d be fine, but when I got there, I was very homesick and cried for the first week.”

From school in Geelong he went to Brisbane for his first job working for Telstra over the summer and then straight to university in Warrnambool. “I’ve stayed in Victoria. I don’t know why I like these cold places. I’m still not used to the weather down here. They said in my first year in Geelong that this is just typical Melbourne weather and you get used to it – but I’m still not!”

Whilst working briefly in the city for The Healing Foundation, he applied for a traineeship opportunity on Phillip Island in the Water Industry. He was successful and has since been offered full time employment. He challenges his anxiety by taking on public speaking roles at work. “I’ll give it my best shot. I’ll stand there with my hands shaking, but I’m giving it a crack.”

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He has days where his depression means that he doesn’t really want to do anything or see anyone. “But I don’t let those feelings affect me... I try not to punish myself too much because there’s no point, it’s just a chemical imbalance, you can’t take it personally. You can’t really control it, so just ride the wave and let it pass. My doctor told me that I’m not an Aboriginal person who struggles with anxiety and depression, I’m a person that struggles with anxiety and depression who happens to be Aboriginal.

Sam would like people who may not be aware or acknowledge mental health as a real issue to reflect that: “Happy people don’t kill themselves.”

Sam’s pride in his culture shines - although he admits it’s a daily challenge. “The world is not designed for us and it’s our job to try as best we can to navigate it.” His advice to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is profound. “Just know when you’re alone or going through mental health struggles, that we have over 40,000 years of culture on our backs. As long as you try to best navigate the concrete world, I’ll be

proud of you because a lot has changed and we’re doing our best to survive. In general, there’s a lot of good people that want us to succeed, I wouldn’t let those that don’t share that mindset hold you back.”

Sam’s advice to others is that when you ask someone how they are, especially if they are a good friend, to dig a little deeper when they just say okay. “I always appreciate if someone does dig a little bit deeper or if you’re not comfortable talking at an in-depth level, kind gestures like chocolates, a little gift or a note, just something to make someone feel special. A lot of the time you feel like you’re worthless or you don’t know what you’re doing and it’s always nice to have someone just to acknowledge you.”

His brothers are also a key part of his support network. “Blokies don’t tend to talk about their feelings, so it’s nice to just hang out. I’ve got a few friends here that I’ve made over the last couple of years, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It’s nice to have an Aboriginal community here that makes me feel supported and I like helping them out as well.”



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Sam's tips for keeping mentally fit:

See a doctor. Find out how they can help you.

Get enough sleep. Remember, using phones and iPads late at night can lead you to lose sleep.

Eat healthy foods. I'm still guilty – I love my Maccas! But, they say what you eat is what you are and that's just an easy one to remember – to eat healthy.

Exercise regularly. Exercise releases endorphins so that's what makes you feel happy, even if it's just a brief moment, it's better than nothing.

Monitor your time on your phone and computers. Social media is great to keep you connected to people. But you do need to take care as this platform makes it easier for cyber bullying. Switch off sometimes and relax.

Practise mindfulness. I don't do yoga because I can't sit still, my anxiety makes me fidget, but just being aware of how you're feeling and acknowledging it and just being aware that's it's just that chemical imbalance.

Hang out with friends and do things that make you happy.

I've got a few happy places, they're all my hobbies... playing the guitar, running, being outdoors I guess is my happy place on a broad scale is just acknowledging all of those little moments of my life that I'm happy - they're my happy place.

Don't let it hold you back or worry what other people think – it is something ultimately out of your control.

"I'm part of the longest living culture in the world, so by uplifting me or any other Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander person you're helping us to carry on the legacy of over 40,000 years worth of knowledge and tradition. I'm saying this because I believe culture gives us our purpose in life and can help mend some of those mental health problems."

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Headspace www.headspace.org.au

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au

**Victorian Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation Inc.**
www.vaccho.org.au

Yarning SafeNStrong 1800 95 9563
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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Gippsland PHN acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their elders past and present. We also recognise, respect and affirm the central role played in our work by people with lived experience, their families and/or carers. Gippsland PHN is committed to providing inclusive services and work environments where people of all backgrounds, sexualities, genders, cultures, spiritual beliefs, age, bodies and abilities are valued, supported and celebrated.

