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## One step can make the biggest difference

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By Erin Archer

She sits poised and cheerful and is extremely comfortable talking about her mental health experiences, but it wasn't always this way for Derryn Grobler. She was diagnosed with anxiety at the age of 14, and then clinical depression at the age of 18.

At her worst, Derryn wouldn't eat or leave her bedroom. She cut out important people from her life, and during this time can recall an intense feeling of loneliness and shame.

"I didn't see anyone, I didn't leave my bed, I would refuse to leave my room for days at a time," she says.

It's a bleak picture many Australians know all too well, with one in five people experiencing a mental illness during a 12 month period, and almost half of the population experiencing one in their lifetime. Those who don't encounter a mental health challenge personally will most likely know someone who does.

Reminiscing the details of her past struggles, Derryn considers herself as one of the lucky ones, because she had direct support from her parents, who became the catalyst in her eventual road to recovery.

Initially, during the early stages of Derryn's depression, her parents forced her to see a doctor. But she looks back on that time without resentment, in fact, she is grateful to her parents because she couldn't take that vital first step on her own.

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"It's hard to say to somebody, 'I'm struggling, can you help?' There's no magic fix, there's no magic pill, there's nothing. It takes a lot of work, and I think I knew that and I just didn't want to deal with it," she says.

Derryn's reluctance to better her own mental health isn't uncommon. Senior clinical advisor at Headspace, Nick Duigan, says it's often described as 'self-stigma.'

He outlines that, while in reality there could be a great deal of readily available support in someone's personal life or community, self-stigma can play a huge part in preventing them from speaking up.

"They may feel that they are likely to get a negative reaction from family or friends or colleagues, but in actual fact, a lot of research is identifying that the people around them would be really supportive if they were aware that somebody was having some difficulties."

Derryn describes the months after that first visit to the doctor as challenging because even though that first step had been taken, she was still suffering from self-stigma. She refused to continue treatment.

"All my deepest, darkest secrets were out in the universe and I couldn't take it back... it felt so exposed," she says.

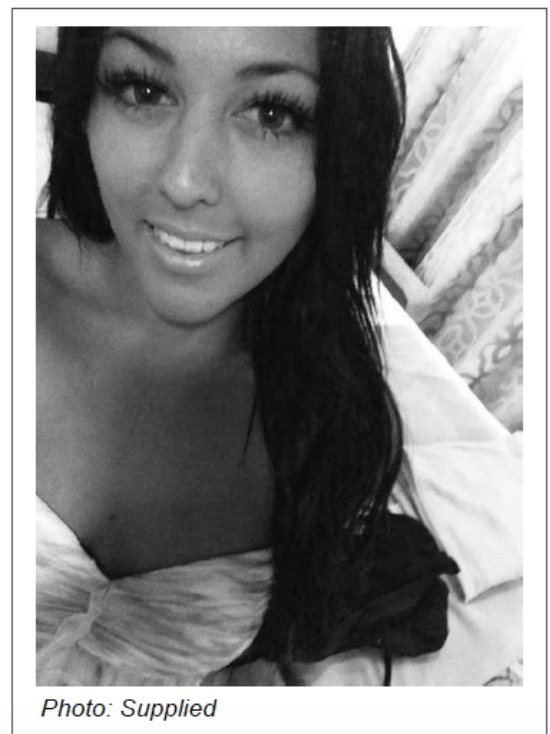
Derryn, now 23 years old, is bright-eyed and passionate about what's in store for her future. She explains how one day she just "sucked it up" and finally continued treatment for her depression, which now consists of speaking to a psychologist on a semi-regular basis.

"I just said, 'okay I can't live like this,' because it's not living it's just existing. And that's not a life that I want."

That's not to say she doesn't still have dark days, admitting the past few weeks have been somewhat overwhelming because she is nearing graduation for her university course. But she now has a better understanding of her own mental health and recognizes healthy coping mechanisms.

She says routine is a good way to clear her mind.

"Seeing people that will make me happy, exercising is a really good thing for me, just looking after myself. When it's at its worst, you don't feel human at times, so it's nice to have that routine."



Derryn is relaxed as she talks about her mental health struggles, but she can appreciate how difficult it can be for somebody else to speak up about their own battles. She hopes that openly talking about mental health, will one day be considered normal and free of taboo.

## Mental Health Month

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This hope is shared by mental health organisations across the country. Nick Duigan from Headspace says talking about how we feel needs to be commonplace, and events such as 'Mental Health Month' work as a landmark opportunity for everyone to stop and pay attention.

Throughout the month of October, events that encourage the positive discussion of mental health will be held across New South Wales, Victoria, and the ACT.

Events such as morning teas, mindfulness programs, tai chi classes and neighbourhood walks will give communities and individuals alike the opportunity to talk about mental health and wellbeing with their loved ones.

There will also be music festivals, food and entertainment festivals and charity sports matches across the participating states and territories, as well as an active social media campaign to help garner more popularity.

The non-government, community-based organisation behind Mental Health Month, Wayahead, says the initiative aims to help embrace and maintain the best possible mental health and wellbeing for everyone.

Chief Executive Officer of Wayahead, Elizabeth Priestley, says one of the key advantages of holding an event during October, is giving people the opportunity to connect with others.

She says loneliness is currently a huge issue in communities, especially for individuals going through mental health difficulties.

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**“You don’t have to be on your own to be lonely; you can even be with people and still feel lonely. So sharing things and having the opportunity to meet with others can actually be the first step in avoiding loneliness or starting a process for treatment.”**

According to Nick Duigan, events like Mental Health Month gives people the excuse to have specific conversations about wellbeing, which might not have been held otherwise. He says those conversations leave people better informed, less fearful, and better able to support others in their community.



The National Mental Health Commission 2016 Report Card, shows mental health awareness is becoming a lot more prevalent in Australia. Along with Mental Health Month, there are other initiatives such as ‘R U OK? Day’, and ‘World Suicide Prevention Day’ that can act as both an opportunity to spark a conversation with a friend, family member or colleague, and to raise money for charities.

When Derryn was in her early teens, she can’t recall these types of mental health events being as popular or engaging as they are now. As she’s grown from a troubled 18-year-old to a more confident 23-year-old, she reveals how easy it now is to talk to her mum about her mental health.

She credits the rise in societal acceptance of speaking up, when you’re feeling down.

“It’s becoming not as dramatic as it once seemed. If I were to be in that same situation now, I don’t think I would have waited as long [to speak up].”

This year, Wayahead chose the same theme for Mental Health Month as 2017: Share the Journey. This theme highlights the importance of making talking about mental health a normal and healthy process.

Elizabeth Priestley says the theme was so popular last year and was able to engage with communities tremendously, so it was a no-brainer to recycle the theme for 2018.

‘Share the Journey’ can be interpreted in different ways. It can mean informing loved ones when things are tough, connecting with others who have been through something similar, reaching out to someone who might need your help, among many others.

Organisations that are taking part this October aren’t just limited to specific mental health foundations. Many community groups across New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT have united and put their hand up to be part of the initiative.

“One of the purposes of Mental Health Month is to actually engage with your community... but it also encourages people to seek help at an early stage,” Elizabeth says.

It’s an important message to commit to, because 54% of people with a mental illness do not access any treatment. And this is worsened by delayed treatment due to serious problems in detection and accurate diagnosis.

## Seeking Help

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Mental Health Month is an important starting point to begin crucial conversations about mental wellbeing, but taking that critical step can be complicated, and seeking help isn’t as easy as it might seem.

Nick Duigan, says many people are able to recognise signs and symptoms of a declining mental health battle in other people, but will often fail to notice those signs when it applies to themselves.

He says dissemination of mental health information is a key part in reducing the stigma that surrounds it.

“Increasing understanding, awareness, confidence and language, is all a really important part in this process because that will help people who are struggling themselves to identify signs and symptoms and seek support.

“But it will also increase their capacity of others around them, to be able to ask if they’re going okay, or respond in a way that feels like that person is having their needs met,” he says.

In a recent Headspace campaign, called “Keeping a healthy headspace”, people are encouraged to regularly check in on themselves to promote healthy self-care strategies. These tips consist of practical ways to improve wellbeing every day.

### 7 Tips For A Healthy Headspace

- ✓ Get enough sleep
- ✓ Eat well
- ✓ Do things that are important to you
- ✓ Stay active
- ✓ Spend time with friends and family (including pets!)
- ✓ Learn new ways to handle tough times
- ✓ Cut back on alcohol and other drugs

Sharing a piece of advice, Elizabeth Priestley says one of the best ways to better your mental health, is to just take that first step because it can not only have significance on your own life, but also the life of others around you.

“Don’t feel embarrassed, don’t feel ashamed, what you’re experiencing is what many other people have experienced.

“If we all do it, the level of mental distress in our community would come down dramatically,” she says.

Derryn is of the same belief. She can’t stress enough the importance of encouraging healthy conversations with a loved one, a colleague, or even a trusted university lecturer. As a young person, she also understands the crucial role social media can play in supporting someone through mental health troubles.

“Even something as small as sharing it on Facebook... You never know if that’s going to open up a really good door for them, or have it open up a line of communication to say to somebody, ‘I’m not doing well.’”

If this article has brought up any issues for you call Lifeline on 13 11 14, or any of the other contact numbers provided.

## If you or anyone you know needs help:

- Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467
- Beyond Blue on 1300 22 46 36
- Headspace on 1800 650 890