

PATIENT NEWS

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A note from CEO Ben Uprichard

Mental Health Month raises awareness and advocacy against the social stigma often associated with mental illness. The theme this year Tune In asks us all to tune in to our senses, our communities and to the stigma – how do attitudes and understandings of mental health and wellbeing impact people's ability to live the lives they want?

We have the privilege of sharing with you the following very personal recount of a patient's experience with her mental health.

We are grateful for this generously open and honest disclosure of the painful challenges she has met throughout her life, how they affected her and her family and how she has sought, gained and benefited from the help available to her.



***Trigger Warning:** The aim of this story is to share patient experiences with honesty. Therefore, some of the content may trigger an adverse reaction. If you are triggered, please stop reading and talk to your support team, family member or doctor.

My Mental Health Journey

Robyn Short



I never felt normal. I always felt that somehow I'd landed on the wrong planet and shouldn't be here.

I grew up in a very dysfunctional family although it took many years to realise it, and even more to admit it.

My sisters and I were all emotionally and physically abused by our mother. My father was a rage-a-holic and I was terrified of him. Whenever he was due home from work I'd hide under the house. However, I came to learn later that although he constantly yelled at us and was always on the lookout to bellow at us for some non-existent crime, he was actually marshmallow

inside and if any of us kids were hurt or sick, he would sit at the end of our beds and play his ukulele and sing to us. He only ever hit me once.

My mother on the other hand would belt the living daylights out of us with the nearest weapon she could find. This could be a rubber thong or a frozen leg of lamb, which actually knocked one of my sisters out cold one time.

I also have Tourette's syndrome and my oldest sister was very cruel and always refused to sit near me and called me "squeaky pig".

We weren't allowed to be inside through the daytime so roamed the streets as many kids of that era did.

I'm guessing this is how my sister found the paedophiles, or rather, they found us.

My childhood from the age of 4 to 14 was constant and regular sexual abuse. After that it was vicious violence from a man I was with for 6 years. Several murder attempts and constant sexual assault, a forced abortion, to name a few are the reasons I ended up with chronic major depression, anxiety and complex PTSD. He is now doing 38 years for murder.

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One sister suicided due to the early emotional and sexual abuse.

Rather than go into details of all of this and the next 20 years of damage and drama that ensued, I will focus on how I went from being a raging, angry woman trying to raise two children and maintain a marriage, to being able to function in society and be a large part of the lives of my two grown up children and three grandchildren. I am also blessed with an incredible daughter-in-law.

I was also able to get off the disability support pension and began working full time. This took 10 years of hard work and self-development and I'm not at all suggesting that this is for everyone or that what I did would work for anyone else.

I bombed out in the marriage department though. I guess some things just have to break under the strain.

My ongoing journey of relief and healing began about 25 years ago.

I have to put in the effort to practise the things that have proven to work for me: the DBT skills, mindfulness, meditation, anger management etc. I need to practise these regularly *before* I am triggered or having a bad day.

To say that it was hard would be the understatement of the year.

I didn't believe I would ever be able to become well enough to be a loved and respected part of my children's and grandchildren's lives. But I did.

They accepted and helped me for who and what I was even if I made strange noises from the Tourette's or acted inappropriately, which I often did and sometimes still do from the ongoing bits of PTSD.

I had many admissions into St John of God hospitals, both at Burwood and North Richmond.

This is where I began to hear terms like CBT, DBT, borderline personality disorder.

CBT is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and DBT is Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. Both of these were a large part of my recovery, particularly DBT.

When I started the classes, I regularly stormed off fuming, because I thought what they were saying was useless, pointless and of no value to me, let alone help me to be a functional member of society, which I never believed I could be.

After many times walking out swearing and slamming the door, I finally found that I was feeling a little more comfortable in my own skin and starting to understand what they were trying to convey to me.

I began looking for other ways to help myself, speed up the recovery process and maybe help other people suffering this or similar stuff along the way.

As much as mindfulness and radical acceptance did my head in, I eventually came to see that these were very powerful tools to have in my toolkit. And they could be used anywhere and anytime: it just took practice.

I had to learn to trust what they were trying to tell me. I had learned not to trust but this was obviously not working.

I started studying clinical nutrition and mental health and after I gained a Diploma, I continued on to gain qualifications in yoga teaching, wellness consultancy, sports and health nutrition as well as therapeutic massage.



I have recently started a Diploma of Eastern Therapeutic modalities which includes, Feng shui, Shiatsu, Qi Gong, Accupressure, Reflexology, Kinesiology, Ayurveda, Chinese herbalism, mindfulness and meditation.

I believe that the more knowledge I have of healing modalities, the more I can continue to help myself.

While I know all of these have greatly helped in my personal recovery, everyone is different.

If you start working with a health care team you need to be honest with them. For them to help you, they need to know as much as they can about what you might be doing or taking because these things affect your mental health.



It's important to tread carefully and slowly but be your own advocate. This year I have had several visits to Mayo Private Hospital as part of my ongoing mental health journey.

Things started to go downhill again with depression and other things after the bushfires and then COVID-19. These are also crossing over with physical health issues and Mayo has become my support team.

What I know for sure that works for me.

I have to put in the effort to practise the things that have proven to work for me: the DBT skills, mindfulness, meditation, anger management etc. I need to practise these regularly *before* I am triggered or having a bad day.

It includes doing yoga and tai chi which are both totally aligned with mindfulness and radical acceptance. You can't do the postures or movements without being fully there in the moment.

I find swimming really soothing and meditative as well. Eating as healthily as I can and staying away from alcohol; it is a depressant but also brings out the absolute worst in me and that is not pretty.

Taking the advice of my medical team, with the knowledge that I can question it, discuss it and have things explained when something different is suggested. I can also refuse it. But I always give it a go first.

CBT, DBT are available through the public health system as well as the private sector.

Most yoga and meditation teachers that I know will reduce or eliminate any fees.

The first step is to go to your GP and tell them honestly and openly how you're feeling. Everything will follow on from there.

**MENTAL
HEALTH
MONTH
OCTOBER**

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