

People share their stories of mental health recovery in work and life

panorama

Monthly Issue April 2024 #93A



**4 Things I Learned
for a Healthy Mind**

**Choosing Sobriety:
Choosing to Feel**

**Veteran Suicide:
Lived Experience
and Prevention**

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About us

Flourish Australia is committed to walking beside people with a lived experience of mental health issues as they progress along their recovery journeys. We passionately believe in mental health recovery, and are committed to providing the best possible support and encouragement to people so they can achieve their recovery goals. We offer this help across all 70+ of our services in New South Wales, Southern Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria.

Contact Flourish Australia!

1300 779 270 or
flourishaustralia.org.au

Chair: Prof Elizabeth More AM
Chief Executive Officer: Mark Orr AM
Chief Development Officer: Peter Neilson

About Panorama

Founded in 1996 in one of Flourish Australia's predecessor organisations (PRA), Panorama has grown to become a lifestyle magazine dedicated to informing and encouraging the recovery journey of readers. Panorama is written, designed and produced almost entirely by people with a lived experience of mental health issues.

The faces behind Panorama...



Warren Heggarty



Grant Everett

Subscriptions, questions, feedback, praise, curses?

You can ALWAYS email us at...

panorama@flourishaustralia.org.au
Prefer snail mail?

Publications Officers, Quad 3, Level 3,
Suite 3.01, 102 Bennelong Parkway, Sydney
Olympic Park NSW 2127

Disclaimer

Panorama's content is not intended as a substitute for the advice of any specialised or qualified professional. The views expressed herein are those of the authors, not necessarily of Flourish Australia, or any associated enterprises, their staff, management, employees, or service recipients

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Contributors include...

Graham Seaman is a theatre academic who presents papers internationally. He accesses services at Flourish Australia's Armidale branch.

Rebecca Keevers has conquered her substance abuse issues, and has started a successful business

Kristy Mounsey is a Member of the Community Advisory Council who experiences benefits from her autism

Jessica Kuo shares some of the tips and tricks she's learned for maintaining a healthy, well mind.

Contributions are welcome!

Publications People

Grant J Everett writing

Kylie Bolton graphic design

Warren Heggarty writing

Tina Irving story editor

Peter Nielson Chief Development Officer

Jasmin Moradides Development Projects Manager



Inspire
YOUR
Community
WITH YOUR STORY

You don't need to be a writer to share your story with Panorama's readers: we can help you to write your story. We especially like recovery stories from people with a lived experience of mental health issues.

Email us at: panorama@flourishaustralia.org.au



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Flourish Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, sea and waterways upon which we live and work.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their strong and continuing connection to land, culture and spirit.

Panorama magazine recognises all people who live with a mental health issue, as well as those who encourage and support loved ones. Our universal right to lead full and inclusive lives is the driving force behind why Panorama exists. We also acknowledge the strength it can take to share our stories. The impact of reading about people's journeys cannot be overstated. Sharing our experiences has the potential to change lives and we hope by reading true recovery stories, it gives hope, optimism and support to our readers, especially those on their mental health recovery journey.



FAMILY & CARERS

At Flourish Australia, we understand the important role many families and carers play in supporting someone with a lived experience of a mental health issue to stay well and part of their local community.

When someone comes to us and asks for support we discuss with them the involvement of their family and other important people in their lives, and what supports they provide. If we are able to obtain that information we will record it so our staff know who is important to the person and their recovery. We will also make contact with you to check what supports you may need to undertake your important role and discuss your involvement and communication preferences.

Other Organisations

Sometimes families and carers want more information and other contacts. There are a range of organisations that provide specialist supports and information for carers.

A list with contact details can be found on our website at: flourishaustralia.org.au/family-and-carers

Carer Gateway: carergateway.gov.au

Mental Health Carers NSW: 1300 554 660

Arafmi Queensland: (07) 3254 1881

Private Mental Health Consumer Carer Network: 1300 620 042

Mental Health Carers Australia: 1300 554 660

Kids Helpline : 1800 551 800

COPMI: Children of Parents with Mental Illness: copmi.net.au



Graham's International Adventures in Theatre

By Graham Seaman



Graham's lifelong love of live theatre led him to achieving academic excellence at the University of New England. The author of several academic papers on theatre, Graham has formed close ties with people in the industry.

The Big Move

I moved all the way from my home in Penrith to Armidale, an eight hour distance, for two reasons: so I could be closer to my brother, a local Minister at Armidale Presbyterian, and so that I could study a Bachelor of Arts at the University of New England.

I earned my Bachelor degree majoring in English and Communications with an Honours in Theatre. I've also completed a Graduate Diploma in Local Family and Applied History. For my Honours and Graduate Diploma I completed one subject every six months, with two essays per subject. While I was studying I lived at the Wright Village apartments next to UNE, and I really enjoyed the culture of mixing with students who shared my passions. UNE is a great uni!

Theatre has always been at the core of my life, so when I left school and started taking drama classes, my teachers stressed how important it is to see as much theatre as we can, and they liked that I'd had so much experience enjoying plays.

The staff from Flourish Australia have always supported me during my studies, and they were there to cheer me on at both my graduations.

Papers

I write academic papers about the theatre, and while they're usually based on shows I've seen, some are also historic. I've visited the State Archives to search through their records on microfilm and newspapers a number of times.

My first paper was called Theatre In The Community, and some of its content came from my Honours studies. I dedicated another paper to Debra Oswald, with an emphasis on her play "Gary's House." Debra is a prolific Australian playwright who is capable of writing hilarious scenes, but she can also take them to the darkest places possible. One of her plays literally brought a tear to my eye, it was so powerfully written and performed.

A third paper was on Bob Herbert, who had his play "No Names... No Pack Drill" performed by the Regional Theatre Company in Armidale. I saw the same play with the Sydney Theatre Company starring Noni Hazelhurst and Mel Gibson, and thought it was fabulous.

Since moving to Armidale, I've been learning a lot about the history of the local theatre scene, so I've also done a paper on the regional theatre companies around NSW.

I always seek honest critiques from people I trust, and I found the local librarians to be a particularly excellent source of advice.

My Australasian Peers

Adrian Kiernander, Professor of Theatre Studies at UNE, introduced me to the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies. ADSA hold annual conferences where people from all over Australia and New Zealand come together to mingle and share papers. The first ADSA conference I attended was held at the University of Sydney. Everyone was welcoming, and many interesting papers were presented.

The 2022 ADSA conference, the first one since COVID, was held in Auckland, New Zealand. We were all keen to see each other in person again! I based my paper on a play I performed in a while back, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* by Patrick White.

Thankfully, my NDIS funding paid for this trip, as well as for my support worker, Dan. We had time to take a bus to visit Hobbiton from Lord of the Rings and to WETA Studios in Wellington, where we saw the armoury of weapons from the LotR fight scenes. WETA Studios also did "Thunderbirds Are Go!" and my worker took some pictures of me sitting in Thunderbird 2.

All up, it was a fabulous trip, and I couldn't have done it without Dan!

Working In The Field

Once I earned my Honours, I mentioned to Professor Kiernander that I had hands-on experience doing research for Lorraine Stacker when she wrote her historical book "Penrith: Makings Of A City."

Turns out Adrian had an educational grant for a project about Australian plays that focus on masculinity, and he offered me a job as a Research Assistant. My work ended up contributing to the books "Men at Play: Masculinities in Australia since the 1950s" and "What A Man's Gotta Do: Masculinities in Performance" written by Adrian Kiernander, Jonathon Bollen and Bruce Parr.

By the end of the study, I had collected a pile of paper the height of a chair! When I delivered my research to Jonathan Bollen, he said, "See that? You made that!"

This was quite an achievement, and I really enjoyed it.

Support

I receive one-on-work support with Flourish Australia workers like Chris Riley, and I also attend various group activities at the Armidale office, such as coffee group and going on bus adventures. Armidale is right in the middle of an area called Waterfall Way, and I think I've seen every waterfall by now.

I see a psychologist in town, I have people come around to help me with cleaning my house, and I get singing

lessons from a local community organisation, where we practise songs from Australian musicals.

David, my brother and my next of kin, takes me to appointments when I need to see them, and is just there for me in general.

Council Alumni

When I started serving on Flourish Australia's Community Advisory Council, I was still attending the organisation's day-to-day living centre at Penrith. I had an excellent experience with the Council, and if I could go back for another term, I would do it in an instant! I think everyone who is eligible for the role would greatly benefit from having a term or two.

Adelaide

In 2023 I visited the latest ADSA conference in Adelaide at Flinders University. The theme was Archives, Artists & Absences. My travel, accommodation and other costs were funded through my NDIS package, including my support worker, Dan, the same guy who accompanied me to New Zealand.

We were on the 6:30am plane from Armidale, and we changed at Sydney for a flight to South Australia. We caught a tram, had lunch, and saw some historic sights.

Oliver Olds, Regional Manager of Flourish Australia Armidale, suggested I should see Amie Verrell, the Regional Manager of Flourish Australia in Adelaide, while I was down there. We got on a train to

Salisbury and it was only a short walk to the Adelaide office. It was fabulous meeting Amie. She showed us around this Flourish Australia service, explaining what they do there and what they provide to the people they support, and I met their whole team. We discussed the value of being grounded as we walk a recovery journey, reminisced about my time on the Community Advisory Council and how I support Flourish Australia's vision, and how the organisation is just one big community.

It was a really fantastic trip and I've already started writing a paper for the next conference in 2024, about cabarets in Armidale in the 80s and 90s. Cabaret shows were big in their day and were often satirical, light-hearted and political.

My Goals

I've been thinking about doing my PhD in Theatre. Due to the Honours I earned, I can apply to do my PhD at UNE. I'll require support from my network, but my doctor has faith I'll be fine.

My other goal is to get my academic papers published in a journal, particularly in Australasian Drama Studies. Getting published would make it easier to be accepted into a PhD. I actually submitted a paper about regional theatre festivals to a journal a while back. They encouraged me to work on it some more and try again. So I'm going to do what I can to change their answer to a yes.

Wish me luck!



ABOVE: Graham and support person Dan, searching for Hobbits. OPPOSITE: Graham Seaman visiting Flourish Australia at Salisbury, South Australia. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CHRIS RILEY.

National Pet Day: CELEBRATING HUMANKIND'S BEST FRIENDS

By Grant J Everett



ABOVE: Lulu the tabby when Kylie adopted her as a tiny kitten PHOTO FROM KYLIE

National Pet Day on April 11th is an opportunity to celebrate the companionship and unconditional love pets provide, as well as how they lower blood pressure and cholesterol, decrease loneliness and stress and improve mood, and they even have a positive effect on heart health (healthdirect website).

The National Institute of Health's Human-Animal Interaction Research Program in the US has been studying the many benefits of owning a pet for some time. According to "The Power of Pets" paper on the "News In Health" website, many animals can serve as a source of comfort and support for people who are suffering physical pain, experiencing a physical illness, or managing a mental health issue. Flourish Australia sites such as Buckingham House have arranged for therapy dogs to visit so that the people who access services can experience the positive feelings interacting with a friendly, calm dog can provide.

Pets can also help children to develop emotional and social skills, and there have been indications that

having a dog in the classroom can assist students who have behavioural issues, ADHD, or those who are on the autism spectrum.

This day is observed with many pet-friendly events, adoption drives, and fundraisers for animal welfare organisations. Shelters and veterinarians will run special promotions and educational opportunities that encourage people to adopt the many fur-buddies who are currently awaiting a loving fur-ever home. Pet owners are encouraged to show appreciation for their pets with special treats, more playtime and cuddles.

More than 60% of Australian households own a pet, one of the highest rates in the world, demonstrating a close and valued bond.

Fur child

For many pet owners, their furry pal is more than just an animal. They treat them with the same love and attention you would a child. These "fur-children" can fulfill our inherent need to nurture small, cute things, especially for those of us who don't have human children. Kylie feels this way about her beloved tabby, Lulu.

"I always grew up with dogs, but my old housemate had a cat that adored her. I was touched by this, as I did not know how loving cats can be.

"A friend of my housemate shared a photo of a tiny kitten called Lulu who needed somebody to adopt her. Lulu had been heartlessly dumped, but thankfully she was found and rescued. I took one look and knew I needed her! The day we picked her up, I thought she was the most precious thing I had ever seen. Lulu slept on my lap on the ride home, and we've been inseparable ever since.

"She is my fur child and medicinal kitty. She brings me joy every day and a reason to get out of bed."

Where can I learn about adopting?

Countless dogs, cats and other pets are waiting for adoption in shelters, and many of these facilities can only hold an animal for a limited time before putting them to sleep, so, it's best to adopt a pet rather than go through a breeder or a pet store. The RSPCA is a good place to start if you want to do some research into becoming a pet owner.

www.rspcansw.org.au



Choosing Sobriety, Choosing to Feel

By Rebecca Keevers

After three previous attempts to give up my substance use over a ten-year period, I decided in 2020 that December 31st would be my final drink. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired and not wanting to wake up, and I knew I was way overdue to make some major life changes.

Getting sober meant attending AA meetings, wellness retreats, healings and workshops. I also found it helpful to see a psychologist and psychiatrist and to rely on my support network. I did anything and everything I could to stay clean for that first year, and I resisted the urge

to use by simply removing myself from certain social situations.

After three years sober, I feel healthy and alive again, and I get up most days at 5am to hit the gym or to do a sunrise walk with my one true love and bestie, my rescue dog.

I am very loud about my sobriety, especially on social media, because I believe the more you talk about it, the greater the chance you'll help others in their own battles. As the feeling of being sober is so much better than being hungover all the time, I know I will never go back.

In April 2024, I will be telling my sobriety story at a mental health forum.

The nature of addiction

I started drinking at 15. I had a rough childhood with a volatile and controlling stepdad, and I was only 8 years old during our first time in emergency housing. I was immediately addicted to the way alcohol numbed the pain I was carrying in my head and my heart. Being sexually assaulted at 16, while I was out drinking, was yet another experience I chose to numb.

By 17 I was abusing substances every day. As alcohol brought out a lot of anger, in my early 20s I started taking harder drugs more and more instead of drinking, but that involved nasty comedowns that would hit me harder and harder as the years went on. As a result, on weekends you'd find me getting home at sunrise, still wearing the same clothes from the night before.

All up, I battled substance abuse for 30 years, and there were countless nights where I would find myself in strangers' hotel rooms or houses trying to stay high. I didn't care about the danger I was putting myself in, because going home to sleep only meant that I'd wake up feeling horrible.

My friends and family would often go looking for me, having no idea where I'd gone. I didn't care about their concerns, I just wanted to be numb at any cost.

A new chapter

I just completed a certificate in Holistic Counselling to become a qualified life coach, and I'm looking into further studies so I can work with people in their recoveries. Best of all, I am going to foster a child. I gave up my own chances of becoming a mum in my 20's due to alcohol and drug use, so this is really exciting.

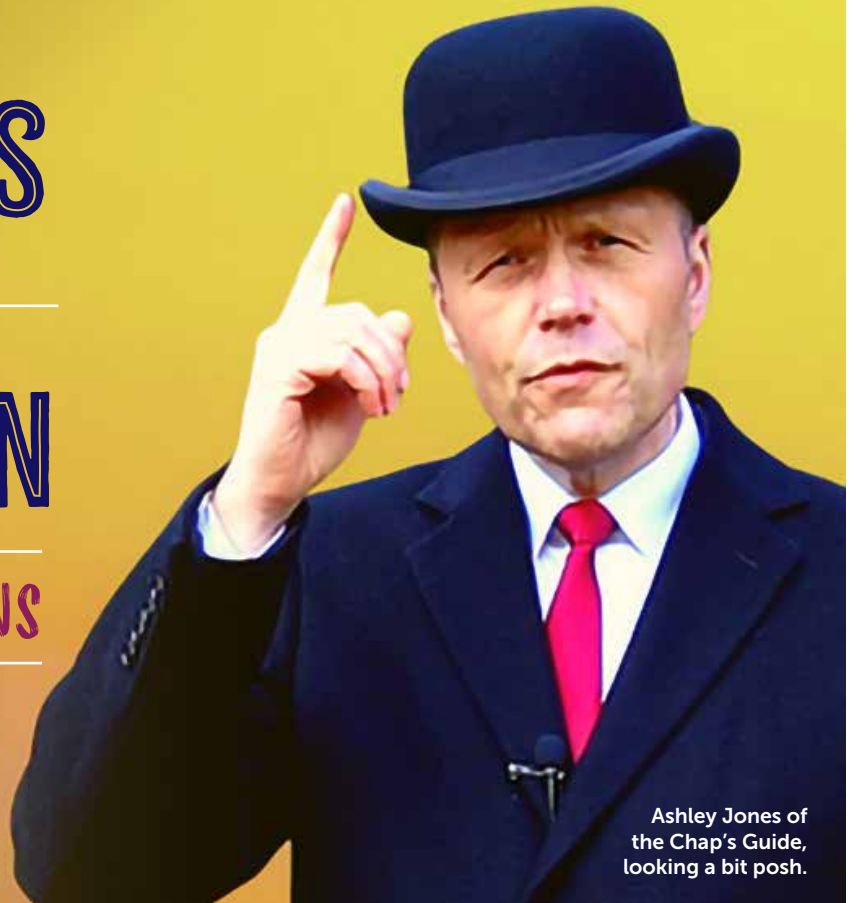
During year two of my sobriety, I also started a sleepwear business, Sleep Fearlessly. There are affirmations printed on the pajamas to empower people in their recovery journeys. I have had lots of encouragement from my family and friends with my business.

ABOVE: Rebecca Keevers, giving a talk about her journey. PHOTO BY REBECCA KEEVERS

STANDARDS FOR GENTLEMEN

WITH HIGH EXPECTATIONS

By Warren Heggarty



Ashley Jones of
the Chap's Guide,
looking a bit posh.

Here at Panorama, and indeed at Flourish Australia we have a saying: High expectations lead to a high standard. Low expectations... well, we don't really have a saying about those, except that they are not very motivating. Many people find that if they have high standards of self-care it can contribute mightily to their recovery journey.

At the moment, there seems to be a growing interest in self care for men and so there is a proliferation of advice on the internet that is often channelled towards one end: getting you to buy some product. It need not be so. You may want to have general advice about a wide range of topics instead of the hard sell. Bearing this in mind, we would like to recommend to our readers some good sources of advice and inspiration which we have road tested ourselves.

The Chap's Guide, Life and sartorial skills

<https://www.youtube.com/@TheChapsGuide>

52,000 subscribers. 530 videos

'It's not about fashion...' says Ash Jones, the man behind the Chap's Guide, 'This (YouTube) channel is about looking and feeling good for men of all ages and how to get the most out of your budget.'

I tuned into the Chap's Guide by accident. In his charming Welsh-sounding lilt, he made a very strong case for looking after oneself and cutting a bit of dash. A former military man, he advocates keeping it simple, but high quality, and looking after it so it lasts!

I found Ash so inspiring I went out and bought an iron and an ironing board so I could try out his ironing and laundry tips! I studied his step-by-step guide to ironing and found it all eerily familiar to what my mother taught me all those years ago...

Some of his titles include 'Five Ways to Win More Respect,' and 'Five Military Habits that can change your life' plus advice about scents for men, ties, cravats, polishing your shoes and keeping a journal. It's all delivered with a sense of British humour, so there is no need to take it TOO seriously. But you might learn some worthwhile skills like I did!

The Art of Manliness; Reviving the lost art of manliness

<https://www.youtube.com/@artofmanliness>

www.artofmanliness.com

1.36 million subscribers 830 videos

Founded by Brett and Kate McKay, The Art of Manliness brings a new topic out every Friday that shows you how to be a better man. Some of the topics include how to be a better dad, social skills, fitness, relationships, career, and yes, Brett shows you how to iron shirts, too!

One of the great things about this channel and website is that the McKays regularly have special guests who are experts. Readers may have noticed over the years that Panorama has often referred our own readers to Art of Manliness podcasts on topics including 'Sisu' (the Finnish art of Resilience) and exercise.

Perhaps you have your own favourite sources? If so, we'd love it if you shared them with us at Panorama!



Generation to Generation

Why has Mental Wellness Declined?

By Warren Heggarty

University Of Sydney-led research shows that in the three successive generations up until the 1990s, overall mental health has been getting worse. Why is this so, and what can be done?

The Guardian newspaper quoted lead author Dr Richard Morris as saying 'the mental health of younger generations of people born in the 1990s and to some extent the 1980s is worse age-for-age compared to older generations, and they're not showing that upswing we typically see in those older generations.' The upswing he refers to is the improvement in mental health formerly associated with mature ages. (May, 2023)

Why is this happening and what can be done? In 2019, Jonathon Haidt and Greg Lukianoff released the book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, which looks at this phenomenon in America. They identified three great "untruths"

which they said had now permeated society. 1. Life's difficulties and hardships will weaken you; 2. always trust your feelings; and 3. life is a battle between good people and evil people. These three things, they claim, contradict basic psychological principles about well-being and ancient wisdom from many cultures. (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019)

What do our local experts think? The Guardian compared comments from two respected sources: Prof Patrick McGorry, Director of headspace and Orygen, and Dr Peter Baldwin of the Black Dog Institute. They are both very different and so the suggested ways we would approach the solution to this generational problem is also different.

Prof McGorry cited world 'megatrends' that show a tendency not to look after subsequent generations. For example, 1. The undermining of public education, 2. The transfer of wealth from younger

people to older people, 3. Climate change and 4. Social media. "...the bottom line is young people's lives and their futures are much more precarious." McGorry suggests tackling the four megatrends listed above, including greater investment in youth health services.

Dr Baldwin agrees that Social Media and the flood of social comparisons it brings is not good for youth and this is the one thing that makes the generations starkly different. However he also cited 1. The rise of "safetyism" which becomes a barrier to building resilience, 2. People becoming more sensitive to social distress and being exposed to opinions they disagree with.

If we take Dr Baldwin's position as a starting point, we might look at how we could increase resilience and decrease personal sensitivity (that is, raising personal confidence) in young people. If we take Prof McGorry's point and see distress over climate change as a unique pressure on youth, could we not compare this to the pressure of the nuclear arms race on generation X in the 1980s. Yet there was no 'Global youth mental health crisis' in the 1980s, which is how Prof McGorry describes the current situation.

In their book, Haidt and Lukianoff counter the three 'great untruths' with what they see as the wisdom of experience. Firstly, we can be supported to work through struggles and hardship and become stronger at the end of it. Secondly, it is important to regulate our emotions and temper our feelings with reason - with consideration for others. Thirdly, rather than divide the world into warring classes, why not seek 'common humanity' between ourselves and our opponents. It's all easier said than done, I guess!

WORKS CITED

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 May, N. (2023, November 28). *Successive Australian generations suffering worse mental health than the one before study shows*. Retrieved from The Guardian Newspaper: www.theguardian.com

ABOVE How can we stop the apparent decline? PHOTO BY BRFC FROM PIXABAY

The NDIS Review Final Report:

Putting People with Disability Back at the Centre

By Grant J Everett



“Our Final Report: A Guide For People With Disability And Their Families 2023” is an independent review of the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme). The purpose of this report was to find ways to improve the experiences and outcomes of people with disability who access the scheme by consulting them, their families and support people on how they find the process, whether good or bad.

The Report’s 26 recommendations aim to create a new, more accessible system that supports the 2.5 million Australians under 65 who live with disability to get what they need, with a focus on making the scheme sustainable for years to come.

They consulted as many people with disability and their families as they could.

Creating this report involved the input of 10,000 people: almost 4,000 submissions, interviewing over 1,000 people with disability, and 2,000 hours of listening to

people’s stories, ideas and feedback. Submissions came in from all areas of society, including people with disability who are also First Nations, Culturally & Linguistically Diverse, or are part of the LGBTIQ+ community.

The Goal

Access to the NDIS is meant to be based on the impact a person’s disability has on their day-to-day life. Everyone should have access to quality services that meet their needs, to explore what works well for them.

The NDIS was designed to be an interconnected system of support that prevents people with disability being excluded from mainstream services, like health and education. Keeping the voice of people with disability at the core of how the NDIS operates has always been the goal. This requires mainstream services to be more accessible to people with disability, and for genuine partnership and commitment from all Australian governments.

These changes will be put in place with a careful transition over the

next five years, with all levels of government working with the disability community and services.

Obstacles identified

According to the Report, people with psychosocial disability continue to experience lower levels of community participation and employment than other people who access the NDIS, with more complex needs requiring a coordinated approach between the NDIS and mental health services.

Some have reported that the NDIS has not supported people with psychosocial disability all that well, and many people with disability reported that accessing NDIS support was complicated and confusing. Thankfully, there are many services and organisations who can help with this process, including Flourish Australia.

What the report recommended

The authors of the Final Report concluded that the only way to get the NDIS working the way it was intended is for all Australian governments to work closely with

people with disability, their families, and services. They also maintain that choice and control is so important for people with a psychosocial disability that when they access NDIS support they should be actively involved in designing and implementing what form that support takes.

This includes maintaining a sharper focus on recovery, early intervention, complex care coordination, registration of providers, and foundational support, with the aim to develop mental health reforms that better support people with ongoing mental health issues.

Flourish Australia can help

People with a mental health issue should feel confident when accessing NDIS support. If you or someone you care for is managing a mental health issue, you can contact Flourish Australia for more information about how we can help with applying for the NDIS. We can support your decisions and help you to find service and support providers that are right for you.

Would you like to know more?

The Final Report is available online. You can also find the Final Report and supporting analysis on the NDIS Review website, as well as factsheets, videos and many of the submissions.

www.ndisreview.gov.au

OPPOSITE: This Report will directly affect literally millions of everyday Australians and their carers and support people.
PHOTO BY STOCKSNAP ON PIXABAY

The NDIS Review 2023 Final Report has 329 pages with 26 recommendations to be implemented over the next 5 years. According to Bill Shorten, the NDIS Review Final Report had three overarching objectives:

- To put people with disability back at the centre of the NDIS
- Restoring trust, confidence and pride in the NDIS
- Ensuring sustainability for future generations.



WORLD AUTISM DAY 2024

By Grant J Everett

World Autism Awareness Day is an opportunity to make sure Australian services and society are doing all we can to include people with autism.

With the appropriate support and a culture of acceptance, people who are neurologically diverse can enjoy the same opportunities as anyone else, leading full and meaningful lives as an integral part of their community. All Australians enjoy the same human rights and fundamental freedoms, and respecting the inherent dignity of each other is at the very core of fostering an inclusive and caring society.

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that manifests during early childhood, irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status. The rate of autism in all regions of the world is high, and people with autism still face a lot of stigma and discrimination. The term "Autism Spectrum Disorder" refers to a wide range of conditions and characteristics, but people with autism are usually characterised by their unique social interactions, non-standard ways of learning, keen interests in specific subjects, and inclination to routines. They may also face challenges with typical communication and have very particular ways of processing sensory information.

"There is a lot of discussion in the media about Autism as if it's a bad thing," said Flourish Australia Community Advisory Council Member Kristy Mounsey. "I love being autistic! My special interests, which include art and social justice, bring me great joy. I believe diversity should be celebrated in all its forms.

"I hope that things are better in schools for autistic kids now, as I was bullied for being 'weird.' The older I get, though, the less worried I am about what people think of me.

"It has always been challenging to navigate grocery stores and airports and things like that, but I wasn't diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome until I was 39 years old. Being able to put a name on what I was experiencing means that I can now seek specific support. Getting NDIS funding, in particular, has really helped me to live independently.

"I'm in such a good space this year that not only will I be serving my first term on the Council, but I am also going to achieve a dream of mine by studying social work at university."

ABOVE: Kristy Mounsey, Community Advisory Council Member
PHOTO BY KRISTY

Veteran Suicide

Lived Experience and Prevention

By Warren Heggarty



The suicide statistics for defence force veterans are bad. For males, it is 26% higher than the general population. For females it is more than four times that! What causes it, what can we do about it and how do we prevent it in future?

It has often been said that veterans may have great trouble adjusting to civilian life and that this contributes to the high suicide rate. Veterans develop vigilance behaviours in the military that keep soldiers safe. However, the same behaviours carried over into civilian life can look like jumpiness. Veterans can maintain the 'hypervigilance' of a war zone and even behave in a manner that looks to others like 'paranoia.' (Saunokonoko, 2023)

However it is not simply a matter of adjustment. There is pain from physical injuries, lack of sleep, unemployment, marriage breakdown, loss of family and children. In a 9News article by Mark Saunokonoko, a veteran describes the situation in this way: '... it feels like I'm no longer an asset, I'm a liability. I'm hurting everyone around me. Life for everyone would just be better if I'm not in it. And that's the point that veterans get to.'

It is deeply ironic and troubling that a person who has put their life on the line for others should succumb to such despairing suicidal ideation.

What can we do about this?

There are a number of protective behaviours that can help to reduce the risk of suicide, including:

- Staying connected to community, friends and family.
- Having someone to share concerns with, and to care for
- Maintaining good physical health
- Having a strong sense of self-worth and hope for the future; a sense of personal control; and resilience.
- Living in safe and stable housing; being responsible for others;
- Doing meaningful work
- Having enjoyable leisure activities
- Being able to pay for basic necessities like food and housing
- Having a sense of meaning, purpose, spirituality etc.
- Getting timely help and information, preferably before a crisis develops. (Life in mind)

How can suicidality among service people and veterans be prevented? After five years' study, Operation Compass (partnering with The Black Dog Institute and Oasis Townsville) released a report called 'Prevention through connection: supporting veterans to thrive when their service ends.' The report looks at a number of suicide prevention strategies for veterans in Townsville Qld. (Black Dog , 2023)

The trial adapted the LifeSpan suicide prevention framework to accommodate the lived experience of veterans in order to 'build a community safety net that prevents suicide.' This framework recognised that;

- Lived experience and peer support need to be emphasised
- Supporting others is a good way for a person to engage meaningfully with the community
- It is important to build relationships between Primary Health Networks and veterans organisations.

John Caligari AO DSC from Oasis Townsville said 'We've had significant success during the trial, especially with the #CheckYourMates campaign, GP training program, Health Pathways and the peer support workers...'

ABOVE: Australian Defence Force with a US LHD Landing Craft PHOTO SGT DANIEL WETZEL

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RIGHT: There are people who have no reason to be confident behind the wheel; and then there are people who wear really cool goggles.
IMAGE BY OPEN CLIP ART VECTORS ON PIXABAY

Confidence in Balance

HAVE YOU TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH?

By Warren Heggarty



We have all encountered people who are overconfident; and we have met their opposite, people who don't have enough confidence. In fact, the two extremes seem to be common among people with mental health issues. How can we find a balance in ourselves and perhaps help others find THEIR balance. Could humility be the answer?

Where do highly effective people sit on the confidence scale? Nuala Walsh writes 'as a behavioural scientist with thirty years in business, I've found the most brilliant leaders understand that humility brings business further, faster, with less fallout. But [such leaders] are rare.' (Walsh, 2023)

Overconfidence, according to Walsh, is the unjustified belief in the supremacy, validity and accuracy of your own ideas, without foundation. Yet the same thing can be said about Lack of confidence. An overconfident person might say "I'm a really good driver" despite a long list of traffic violations. A driver lacking confidence might say "I'm not a very good driver" despite having a clean driving record.

The overconfident driver dismisses their traffic violations as bad luck, or someone else's fault or the result of government revenue raising. "Sure, I speed" they say, "but because I'm such a good driver, it is perfectly safe."

The driver lacking in confidence will likewise be out of touch with reality. 'Oh I am a bad driver because I am dangerously nervous and so slow. I must be bad, because all the other drivers honk at me.' True, the only legal use of a horn is to warn of danger, but 99 times out of 100 drivers honk because they are angry and impatient. More likely this driver is careful and responsible.

Both drivers need to be open to feedback, and objective feedback will show that both of them are wrong about themselves. Neither likes to hear the truth because it makes them feel uncomfortable, because it undermines their self-image. The one lacking in self confidence may have had their self image beaten down by bullying or unsupportive parenting. They have had to get used to seeing themselves as 'a bit useless' because that way they avoid the wrath of their critics. In doing so they will rob the world of their talents and fall short of their own capabilities.

The overconfident one does not have the humility to admit their shortcomings. Instead of taking their time and learning to be good at something they merely 'fake it.' In the process they cause a lot of damage, not just through their bombast and boasting but through causing damage due to their incompetence.

People who lack confidence often come across as 'nicer.' They certainly seem that way. But is it really nice to knobble yourself and fail to develop confidence and skills that could be of benefit to yourself and others?

Sometimes we mistakenly see the one lacking confidence as being humble; but a humble person is one who simultaneously recognises their shortcomings AND puts their talents to the service of others. There is no need to boast or to put oneself down. So too, the humble person can give complements and receive criticism without feeling awkward. This is a balanced view and could be said to be a sign of true confidence.

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MOTHERS & BABIES CLOSING THE INDIGENOUS 'GAP'

By Warren Heggarty

The physical health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has long been a matter of concern, especially for those in remote areas. The health of new mothers and their babies can profoundly influence physical and emotional health in later life. Here we zoom in on how the 'gap' might be narrowed by reducing low birthweight rates in remote indigenous communities.

Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care Ged Kearney published an opinion piece in Women's Agenda on 12 October last year in which she raised two key problems that are twice as common for remote indigenous mothers and babies.

The first was low birth weight. Low birth weight increases the death rate of infants, it increases the amount of chronic disease and it increases developmental difficulties. The second issue was Gestational Diabetes. This can lead to high risk pregnancies which are more prone to complications, to miscarriage and still-birth.

'There remain stubbornly disproportionate statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and their babies compared to non-indigenous mothers and babies,' said Assistant Minister Kearney who is an experienced nurse.

'Despite the efforts and significant amounts of funding from successive governments, we have seen virtually no change in those shocking statistics,' she said and then went on to advocate the Voice to Parliament as a remedy. (Kearney, 2023)

Statistics (2016) from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare compare the rate of low birthweight among various population and geographical groups. The Australian average is 7% of all live births. Indigenous people score the highest at 12.5%. People (indigenous and non-indigenous) in remote areas score about 11%, and people in low socioeconomic groups about 8%. (AIHW, 2016)

Premature and multiple births aside, low birth weight is caused by many factors. Mothers below 16 or above 40; chronic illness of the mother, infections like malaria, poor nutrition, tobacco, drugs and alcohol. Smoking is associated with a rate of 12.9% low birth weight rate. The causes of gestational diabetes are not so clear although obesity is thought to be a factor.

According to a feature report by AIHW the particular factors that most affect indigenous populations are 1. Mothers being underweight, 2. Smoking, 3. A lack of antenatal care. (AIHW, 2022).

The report says "In the decade to 2019, there were reductions in rates of smoking during pregnancy among

Indigenous women living in non-remote areas (from 50% in 2010 to 42% in 2019), but no significant change in remote areas (52% in 2019). Maternal underweight is also more common in remote areas.' Clearly, access to antenatal care is also going to be more challenging in remote areas as well.

Indigenous mothers in cities will be less likely to smoke, less likely to be underweight and have greater access to antenatal care. The report recognises that as tobacco is a 'modifiable' factor, a concerted effort at reducing smoking in remote areas will bring the indigenous low birth rate down significantly.

Of course, there are other factors involved as well, but being able to identify causes in this way shows us that the problems are not so mysterious and unsolvable as they may seem.

ABOVE: Reducing smoking can really make a difference to Indigenous health.

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Are Insurers Out of Step?

Mental Health and Insurance

By Warren Heggarty

'We feel insurance industries are out of step with public sentiment, and indeed, consumer expectations' Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman told ABC News. A few years ago, Panorama told the story of Mel who was initially refused loss-of-income insurance because of her mental health history. Five years later, ABC Triple j Hack news reported the case of Belle Grati who was similarly denied insurance. (Medhora, 2023)

The Anti-discrimination Act allows exemptions to insurance companies in some cases. Insurance is about risk and sometimes risks may be considered too high to insure. To give an example, some occupations are risky to the extent that no insurer is willing or able to take that risk on.

Employers then have to put money aside to cover their 'own risk.' The insurer may invest the money so that it earns interest but they do not make a payout when things go wrong.

So an insurer is allowed to decline to sell insurance to someone who is deemed to high a risk. They could alternatively sell it at a higher premium. Having a history of mental health issues is often considered to be a sign of too high a risk.

In the case of Mel that we reported, a bank had given her a loan to buy a house. Prudently, she wanted to insure her income in case she had another period of illness, but she was declined. The case revolved around whether there was reasonable evidence and data that supported the insurance company's assessment of the level of risk. Mel contested them and they backed down.

In Belle's case she was declined when she revealed psychological treatment following a sexual assault and a recurrence following her mother's death. Triple j journalist Shalailah Medhora quoted Ellen Tilbury from the Public Interest Advocacy Centre saying 'insurers lump all of the different types of mental illness in together. They don't differentiate on the severity or the circumstances of the individual's experience... and then they'll assume that they are at greater risk of mental illness in the future.'

Ms Tilbury says 'We're not sure that they have robust data and evidence that they're basing their decisions on. And if they don't, we think that could be discrimination.'

Given that people today are more open about talking about mental health problems and that prevention and early intervention should bode well for the long term, one wonders how insurers will be able to continue feeding the stigma in this way. If what Ms Tilbury says is true, the insurance market will surely shrink and might even disappear before long!

The process insurers use to assess risk is not made clear and insurers are reluctant to reveal their methods, although in their public comments, they do claim to look at individual circumstances. In the case of both Mel and Belle, women with good incomes and professional careers were initially knocked back. Things might start changing when more people contest these decisions, when more people tell their story and when insurance companies adapt to a world where reduction in stigma means that more people are receiving help.

ABOVE: Storm approaching! Risk is at the heart of insurance. Some things are deemed to be just too risky to insure. But are insurers being fair to people with a history of mental health issues? Long tailed glossy starling PHOTO BY WARREN HEGGARTY

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4 Things I LEARNED FOR A Healthy Mind

By Jessica Kuo



I feel that if you have a lived experience of mental health issues, maintaining your mental hygiene is rather important and impactful. This has definitely assisted me to recover and get back to living my life. But what is mental hygiene?

Dealing with emotions

Feelings of burnout can be caused by stress from work, studies, relationships or finances, and this build-up of pressure can lead to emotional breakdown if nothing is done to deal with it. If things are getting on top of you, I suggest noting the source of where this pressure comes from. Some people might benefit by keeping a journal to identify their worries.

I deal with my emotions by keeping track of what my worries are and what triggers an emotional response. Sooner or later, I spot the pattern of how my moods swing, or how my thoughts might not be correctly aligned with what's actually happening.

What emotional stability tells us

Emotional stability is so important, but rarely talked about. Emotionally stability involves developing coping mechanisms and strategies for managing stress and pressure. People with good emotional stability often have great resilience in life and know how to manage their emotions. Aspects of emotional stability include developing your coping skills, practicing self-awareness, and exercising mindfulness.

Avoid self-sabotage

People who constantly deny themselves or don't have much self-confidence are more prone to self-sabotage. Feelings of self-doubt and self-blaming can spiral into self-sabotage if they are not dealt with properly. I find practicing self-care and mindfulness helps me to be consciously aware of the health of my mind before mental health issues arise.

Strategies for managing emotions

Carrying out regular self-care is a great strategy for emotional regulation. Practice pleasant activities such as having a stroll, cooking a meal, showering, making a cup of coffee, that sort of thing. Anything that sets your mind at ease can help you manage your mood. I found learning relaxation techniques can prepare you in dealing with emotional pressure later on.

If you live with stress or have an unhealthy lifestyle, please listen to your body and do something about it. Whether it be talking to a friend or family member, seeing a doctor or changing your environment, we can all improve the way we view ourselves and get a clearer view of whatever situations we may encounter.

ABOVE:

Jessica Kuo, getting back to life after a successful recovery.

PHOTO BY JESSICA

RURAL HEALTH NAVIGATORS

Revealing Remote Disadvantage

By Warren Heggarty



The National Health and Medical Research Council has given a grant to Charles Sturt University to lead 'a world first study to improve rural mental health outcomes.' According to Charles Sturt University, 'it is the first international study using lived experience peers to help people with (mental health issues) navigate and access physical health services.' (CSU, 2023)

In rural and remote areas of Australia, it is often hard for people to access the services they need, due to the vast distances involved. Equally Well, an organisation which promotes the physical health of people living with mental health issues, says that '80% of people living with a mental (health issues) also have a serious physical health condition.' Yet they receive less, and lower, quality health care than they need. This problem is true of all areas, but it is particularly acute in rural and remote areas. (Equally Well)

According to the Equally Well consensus booklet, 'People with psychosis die between 14 and 23 years earlier than the general population.' Not only that, it may be getting worse according to Professor Russell Roberts of Charles Sturt. "Workforce shortages and limited access to targeted services

is increasing the risk of people living with mental illness in rural areas dying prematurely from preventable physical health conditions," he told the university's news blog. (CSU, 2023)

The Charles Sturt research program will be co-designed and led by people with personal experience of mental health issues and their carers from rural communities. It will involve researchers from nine universities.

Part of the project will be to 'support the existing rural mental health workforce to be trained as healthcare navigators.' Navigating the system is complex enough for anyone, but people in remote areas experiencing serious mental health issues have an additional disadvantage.

NSW Deputy Commissioner for Mental Health Tim Heffernan said, "Physical Health Care Peer Navigators are a specialised Lived Experience (Peer) Workforce who use their own journey of mental and physical health issues, and recovery, to support other people who are also embarking on this journey.' Tim, who is a widely experienced peer worker, is one of the four research team leaders.

"It makes sense that people in rural and regional Australia will be able to choose someone with experience to help them navigate their way

back to mental and physical health," Tim told the Charles Sturt University news blog.

One of the results of limited access to health care in rural areas is that people are less likely to seek help from a doctor in the early stages of a problem. We know that with mental health issues as well as for physical issues like cancer, early intervention can prevent problems becoming serious later and requiring hospital treatment.

Research recently commissioned by the National Rural Health Alliance shows how serious the difference is between town and country. 'As well as the gap in GP access, the research draws on data showing a huge difference in the number of ... medical specialists... from 189.3 ... per 100,000 in cities to 11.4 in small rural towns...' (Attwooll, 2023)

ABOVE: The Hawkesbury River valley near Windsor, New South Wales PHOTO: WARREN HEGGARTY

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Open Water Swimming is Good for Your Mind!

If you have learned to swim in a pool, swimming in the great outdoors is **EVEN BETTER** for your mental health. Research shows that any exercise, including swimming, can reduce stress, anxiety and depression.

People who swim tend to form close bonds with one another, which provides us with a sense of belonging. There are lots of little clubs and communities of swimmers as we saw in John Maraz' Winter Swimming article in Panorama December 2019. You can go to the beach on your own in Summer if you prefer.

Open water swimming can help you connect with nature. This gives you a dose of AWESOMENESS.

Water allows you to absorb yourself in a new environment. It has buoyancy, usually a cooler temperature, a calming sound, a salty taste, and above all, it moves rhythmically. Plus there are shells, and even fish! Of course, you need to acclimatise to moving water and be aware of rip currents and surf safety.

We have previously reported that being in nature is healthy for your mind (including 'forest bathing'). If leaves and trees don't do it for you, try sand and sea!

Check this article from Psychology today: 'Open Water Swimming is Good for Body and Mind' by Sally Augustin, 7 September 2023. WH

ABOVE PHOTO BY WARREN HEGGARTY.

Is Overuse of Medical Terms Disempowering?

Are we 'medicalising' our feelings more and more? Is this disempowering us from facing life's challenges? According to NSW GP, some researches think so.

Our feelings are usually temporary and useful states. Fear helps us run from danger and is replaced by relief when we are safe. Grief helps us withdraw to process the death of a loved one, and subsides when we learn to cope with our new situation.

Not so long ago, words like 'anxiety' 'depression' and 'trauma' were used much less. It seems that a side effect of getting people talking about mental health has been that some words are now used much more casually. This might not be a good thing.

In mental health circles, anxiety, depression and trauma have specific meanings, BUT they are also ordinary words. So where once people spoke of being sad they might now say 'I'm depressed.' 'Trauma' was once limited to life-threatening events, but today it is used to refer to any sort of adversity.

Long ago, doctors themselves used to 'depathologise' their language. When speaking to patients in 1974, I was prescribed medication for what the doctor called 'bad nerves.' Not obsessive compulsive disorder!

For more on this, see Michelle Wisbey writing for NSW GP (for Royal Australian College of General Practitioners) 'Are casual references to psychological issues impacting clinical care?' 19 July 2023. WH



Don't Worry, Be Unhappy...???

Why is it that some people 'do all the right things' yet continue to experience persistent depression? Arash Emamzadeh looked at some possible reasons for this in an interesting article recently.

Perhaps, he supposes, it comes down to a greater willingness of some people to experience negative emotions. But why would this be the case? Emamzadeh suggests

1. Feeling undeserving of happiness
2. Fear of loss of control due to happiness
3. Having a goal other than feeling happy

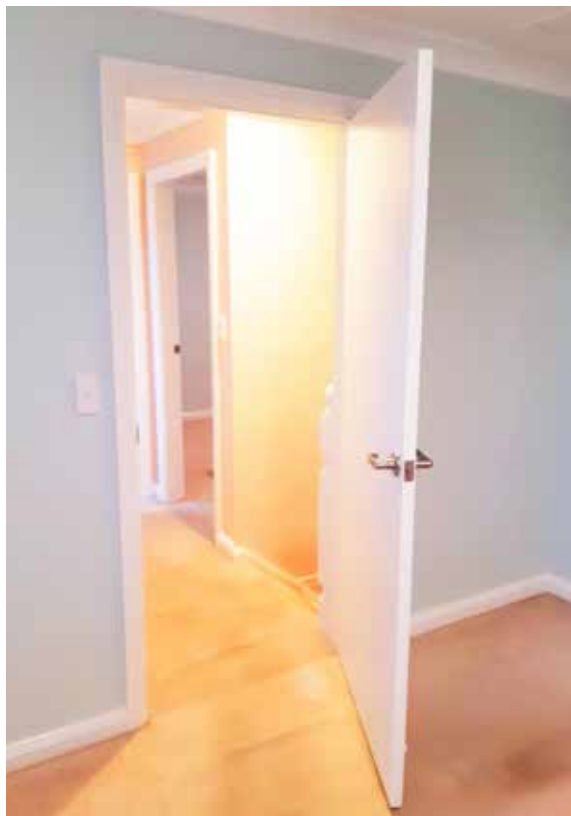
Some people also find negative emotions to be their comfort zone! In case this sounds unbelievable, I'll use my own experience to explain it. As a teenager, I alternated between periods of severe agitation and OCD and depressive numbness. Feeling sad and numb was not fun, but to me it was infinitely preferable to severe worry and agitation.

Even if a person values happiness, it may be that the potential for it to be taken away is unbearable. Perhaps the unwillingness to be happy is a defence against the potential loss of happiness?

These ideas are just speculations, but perhaps you can identify with some of them like I did! -Warren

Source: Arash Emamzadeh 'A surprising reason why depressed people do not get better' in Psychology Today.

ABOVE IMAGE: 'What Lovely Darkness' BY IRASONJA from PIXABAY



The local shopping centre is a good ten or fifteen minutes walk, through the industrial area with a lot of truck traffic and past the school.

So FOR ME, there were some negative points here which explain the cheap price. However, what is negative to one person may be positive to others. What if you WORKED in that industrial area. You could send your children to that school, and the estate even has its own small playground on an elevated position with views. Plus it is GOOD to have a ten or fifteen minute walk to the shops! Convenience can be unhealthy. You could put a tarp over the car! What a bargain!!!

Inspect the premises

Before we continue, a word of reassurance. Did you know that if you are overwhelmed by all the points you have to cover, you can engage a **broker** to handle all the details FOR you. Generally it will cost you NOTHING.

Does the premises have stairs? Can you manage the stairs?

Is there an elevator? How much do you have to pay for the elevator maintenance?

Is the property as safe as it can be from burglars. If not, can you AFFORD to make it so?

Does the property have any structural flaws? Dirty walls can be washed or painted over. But walls that are buckled or cracked might be a sign that the building is unsound.

Is the property in the path of a proposed eight lane super highway? Property inspection agents are a good idea because they can get onto this sort of thing.

Is the property subject to onerous environmental or development covenants that might prevent your full enjoyment of it?

Does it have an internal laundry? If not do you enjoy sharing laundry facilities with whoever your new neighbours will be?

There is a lot to it! So why not go online and search for 'property inspection check lists'

HUNTING FOR A HOME

Why Inspecting is Important

By Warren Heggarty

Before choosing a place to rent, and especially before you buy, learn a bit about inspecting and maybe even engage a broker! It will save you heartache later on.

Renting or buying in Big Cities is difficult, so people may feel pressure to settle for a bad deal. This only makes things worse for everyone. You owe it to yourself, your family and society to aim high.

If a property is selling or renting for a bargain price, there will be a reason. One property I looked at which we shall call The Crescent was a flat selling for the very lowest price you could imagine for a 2 bedroom with its own laundry and car space. Before jumping in, I asked myself WHY it was so cheap. Here are some of my observations of the location - without even going into the flat itself.

Inspect the Environment

It is directly behind a School, meaning there will be a lot of noise at various times of the day.

The car parking is not under cover and is at the front of the flats in direct sun, so it is not really any more secure than parking in the street.

It is part of a small estate built as low cost housing. The whole street is cramped and the ground is mostly concrete.

A major arterial road is only one row of houses away and you can hear the traffic from The Crescent quite plainly.

Just round the corner from The Crescent is a major industrial area. Here we find one of the country's largest motor auctions warehouses which means that cars will be coming and going.

ABOVE: Choosing a place to live is something that you should spend as much effort on as you can. Inspect before you rent, certainly before you buy. Consider the surroundings and amenities as well. PHOTO BY WARREN HEGGARTY

YOUR JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Every year 1 in 5 Australians will experience some form of mental health issue.

Flourish Australia provides mental health specialised disability employment services (DES) supporting people living with a mental health issue to access sustainable employment.

Flourish Australia DES locations:

Bankstown • Broken Hill • Caringbah • Cessnock • Harris Park
Hornsby • Liverpool • Maitland • Penrith • Seven Hills

To see if you qualify for our free service, please call us for a confidential discussion or visit our website for more information.

☎ (02) 9393 9000
✉ des@flourishaustralia.org.au
👉 flourishaustralia.org.au