

The things to get you through :

Ideas and stories from young people who have been through mental health struggles

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A Dulwich Centre Foundation Project

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This document includes ideas and stories from young people living in a psychiatric in-patient unit about ways of getting through the toughest of times: 'We know just how easy it is to get lost in life. We hope these documents offer one way for others to find a way back.'

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Introduction

We are a group of young people (aged 16-30) and we made this document while we were living in a psychiatric in-patient unit. In this document, we have collected many of our ideas of how to get through the toughest of times and we hope these might be helpful to others.

At first, we didn't realise we knew things that might be helpful to others. When we came to the unit, many of us were going through the hardest times of our lives. And we knew it was often the hardest of times for the people who care for us too: our mothers, fathers, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends. In fact, we often found a way to keep going for them.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to see that we do anything to make our lives better or to get through the turmoil and suffering. Sometimes we have nothing to say about how we are getting through or coping. But when we were given room to not have to talk, and when we found some space to listen to the little steps others did to get through, then we tentatively started to see or imagine our own small steps.

The group facilitator would scribble our words down and slowly our stories and wisdoms were made into the documents that are included here. These documents have been important for us during times of turmoil. When we read them it helps us to remember we are on a game of snakes and ladders and that we will always land on a ladder sooner or later!

We've been helped by the stories of others, and now we hope our ideas of what we do to get through the toughest of times might offer a spark for you. We know just how easy it is to get lost in life, as well as how easy it is to forget all that we know about finding a way back when we are lost. We hope these documents offer one way for others to find a way back.

We'd like to start with a couple of things that capture our hopes for sending this document out to others:

'I think it is good to use the skills I've learned to help others who are having a rough trot.'

'I'm not sure if my friend would even be alive today if I didn't help him out. I like to think that our problems aren't worse than others who don't have a diagnosis of mental illness. They have problems as well. We hope the ideas in here are helpful for everyone.'

PART I:

Special knowledge and skills we've developed along the way

Breaking down these walls: Skills in asking for help

We are young people who know about hard times and we'd like to offer the following words about what we have learnt about asking for help. This is a project that many of us are trying out day-to-day. We hope these words will assist others who want to find more ways to ask for help when life gets kind of hard to live.

They might like it, they might get a boost

Some of us spoke about feeling we will be a burden to others if we ask for help. We have ways of dealing with this worry.

One of us said, 'I've been very afraid when I'm in a bad spot. I don't want to bother people. I don't want to call and be a pain. But I have come to realise that some people can feel quite special that you turn to them for help, that they are your trusted person. This idea can get rid of the fear that I'm bothering them. If I put myself in their shoes, I think they might like it, they might get a boost.'

Another one of us said, 'Sometimes I'm worried about being a burden to people. So even if they ask me how I'm going I lie; I say "yeah I'm good," or "no, that's fine". But I'm kind of learning to express how I'm feeling.'

Others of us are trying this too:

'When I'm hurt or mad with my friends, I usually don't talk to them for a couple of days. However recently I said what hurt and my friend apologised straight away.'

Another of us said 'The first time I had a panic attack I felt really bad to ask for help. I kept apologising. The next time I asked my best friend for help but she's got her own shit going on. And so I thought I should ask people who are there to help, I should ask them for help.'

I think about my brother

I know that if I do not ask for help it can be an endless cycle going around. That helps me to ask for help. And I think about my brother; he's fifteen and going to school and got his life in front of him. I think of how what I'm going through is affecting him. I guess it is my care for him that keeps me searching for help.

I can live for them

We were talking about this last night. We were talking about the people who love you, who care about you. You can do it for them. I've made a list of all the people who would be affected by anything happening to me. I make this list when I feel desperate. So if I can't live for myself at those times, I can live for them. Then my love for others is stronger than my desire to leave this world.

Breaking down these walls

My story since I was fifteen or sixteen is partly of not being able to connect with people who could help me. Not that I haven't told people how I'm feeling because if they ask me I'll tell them, but actually asking for help is totally foreign to me. What I've become best at is doing things on my own. I've fought tooth and nail. I used to be a pretty heavy drug user. I used every day. But I put them down on my own. And I've got some really good friends, but mostly they know what I've gone through after I've gone through it. It's a long time pattern of mine. I may have put down substances, but there are horrors that haunt me every night. I think the happiness of two years without using has been very, very slim. But really I get worried that if I reach out it will be a weakness. That's it. So the skill I want to gather is 'breaking down these walls'.

Try to write down my story

To be honest I don't really ask for help. I haven't got much out of the help I've received. And I've found that talking about it can sometimes mean I ruminate about it more. I think I reach a point where I've talked about it so many times, there's no value in exploring it more. I'm going to try to write down my story so I can have it available when I'm requested to speak. That will be a different way of breaking down walls.

We've all got our own ways.

We hope that you find our words about how to ask for help of some use!

What and who we find supportive

The following stories are about what and who we find supportive. When we talked about this together, we realised there were three themes that overlapped:

- how some people find ways to care but don't 'show it' too obviously,
- the importance of 'someone who doesn't judge',
- and the usefulness of humour.

Of course every story was different too.

He doesn't support me, he's just there

My best mate Brett doesn't put emphasis on his support. I know he'd do anything for me and I'd do anything for him, but he doesn't ask 'are you okay?' I hate people asking me if I'm okay. It can make me feel claustrophobic and it's like emphasising that you feel shit. He doesn't support me, he's just there.

She cares but she doesn't care

My best friend Sal is the closest thing I've got to a sister. She's the only person I can talk to comfortably, she's made it clear to me that I can talk with her ... she's trustworthy. She doesn't judge. She cares but she doesn't care, if you know what I mean. When I think of her I think of how nice it can be to have the option to have someone close and you can trust to talk with about stuff but that you don't have to. If I'm feeling shit she's like 'okay' and she takes me to the pub or something like that. She always calls me up to stay with her or to have dinner at her parent's place. She makes me feel okay for who I am including all my flaws. She supports decisions I make and respectfully supports whatever I decide. I think her actions speak louder than words.

He cares but doesn't show it

I think of my brother. Like I know he cares because whenever I want to talk to him he sets aside some time and he tells me that whenever I need to talk I can call on him. But he sort of doesn't show it. He understands when I'm going through stuff, yet when we talk it's often just humorous and it takes my mind off things.

She doesn't ask me over and over again 'are you okay'?

My mum is sometimes over the top with her support and that can be a good thing. When I talk to her she might be over the top but I know that she cares. She knows me really well and knows how to help me when I am really upset. She doesn't say much and doesn't ask me over and over again 'are you okay'?

It's going to be okay, we're going to get through this together

It's important that someone understands. My mum's been there since the beginning and she has been through some similar things as me. She's very easy to talk to, she doesn't judge. And I've never heard her complain once about my problems, she's just been really supportive. She nods and she says, 'It's going to be okay, we're going to get through this together'. Then it's like we are team.

Knowing the right things to say

I have a friend who lives overseas, but he's always checking in on me. It says a lot about our friendship that he's not here and yet he's one of my closest friends. He doesn't judge. I could tell him anything I've done and he'd be like 'okay'. With a real friend they know the right things to say. He also offers humour. A lot of people can be very serious, but sometimes humour is good and things can be pretty funny.

I prefer people who are genuine

I think about my best friend Jess. I like her because she distracts me from everything. I practically live at her house. It's weird that we get along, it's probably because we're so different. She doesn't understand things, but I like that because she doesn't pretend to understand. I prefer people who are genuine, like her.

Ways to speak about difficult things and hurtful events

When really difficult or hurtful things have happened, it can be hard to speak about them. Here are some of the ways we go about talking over difficult things and hurtful events.

I prepared them for what I would say

I knew they might go into shock, but I wanted their affection, not shock, so I prepared them for what I was about to tell them. I made things very clear, very structured. I said, 'This is how I'd love you to react and appreciate about what I have gone through but I do realise that may not happen'.

I start with the smallest of steps

Sometimes I go to say things but I freeze. So I use baby steps and just start with the smallest details. Like I spoke about something irrelevant, but it was about my level of stress with my job. It was a way in.

I planned how I would do it

I told them the truth, but I planned how I would do that. I minimised or condensed the story.

I think of what I'm saying as just words

I detach from any emotion of what I'm saying. I think of what I'm saying as just words. The more I say it in my head, the more I have numbed myself to it – it ends up being just words.

It can't get any lower so what have I got to lose?

I think I can't get much lower than where I have got to. So I think 'what have I got to lose? Just speak.'

Become more comfortable with myself

I don't want anyone else to worry. It is enough that I might be unhappy, I don't want others to be unhappy on my account. Speaking to those closest to me is hardest because these are the people I most care about, the people I most do not want to see upset or worried. Also I worry that people might find the whole story abhorrent – if I hate these things about me, why wouldn't everyone else? They'd hate me ... It doesn't seem fair to unload that upon someone else. The task for me is to become more comfortable with myself and my own limitations, and then I won't have so much of an issue with projecting myself to others. If I accept myself, naturally, I will expect myself to be accepted by others.

Sending text messages

Quite a few people found texting useful for different reasons. One person said, 'If I have to tell someone something, I send them a text message and I write something like "I have to speak with you about something". So when I see them the next time they bring it up. That makes it easier to start the conversation and it also means I can't back out of talking about it.' Another person had something different to emphasise about the usefulness of texting: 'I write it out in a massive long text. I edit it; I change it to make it exactly what I want to say. This protects me from a reaction that I might not like. And it also means I don't have to talk about it the next time I see the person I texted.' And another person said, 'I also write out a big long text so I'm not there for the initial reaction. If the person wants to know more they can come to me and I'll tell them.'

Telling others saved me from having to tell my parents

I think I have to have faith in the person that I'm telling. Once my parents understood what I had been through via others including psychologists and psychiatrists. It saved me from having to do it.

Printing out a dialogue with a counsellor

Talking to some people is easier than talking to other people. I had to have a conversation with my parents and didn't know how to do it. I asked my friends how to do it and I didn't get any good ideas. It took weeks for me to find a way to do it. But eventually I printed out a conversation I had with an online counsellor and left it for them. The questions my mum had were answered in the printed out dialogue.

A letter when there are nerves

A few people have mentioned letters or writing. One person said, 'What I have done is written a letter and I found it useful. This was because I felt really nervous and I couldn't really think through how I wanted to word it and what to include if I was to speak. I gave them the letter and they read it afterwards. I had to wait a whole day to get a response and that was a bit nerve wracking.' And another person said, 'Sometimes the emotion is not so good. If I'm angry with someone and start telling them how they have affected me and they then comfort me, I find it hard to keep talking about it. I think a letter is a good idea. When I think of something I just write it down and eventually I give it to the person and it helps them to understand it better.'

Waiting for the right moment

I think I have to wait for the right moment. I might plan on sharing something but then when I am with the person I sometimes realise that it is not the right moment. I don't force myself to say things even though I planned to.

Looking and feeling my best

I try to look my best and feel my best so I don't get pulled apart.

An event has happened I need to report it

After the event I cry, I get angry and stuff. Later I try and think about it. I tell myself, 'If you had a broken leg, you'd call an ambulance; if there was a robbery you'd call the police'. So I think, 'Even though I'm feeling this embarrassment, an event has happened I need to report it'. That helps me to not feel ashamed. And sometimes I tell someone in authority so then I don't have to tell others myself, they can tell what happened on my behalf.

Tell a health worker

Sometimes it is easier to tell a health worker because if it goes badly and I don't like their reaction I won't have to see that person again. This is not the case with friends and family, I might not like their reaction and I still have to see them for the rest of my life.

Minimising guilt

I used to hide things to the ends of the earth. I think one of the reasons for that was because I felt guilt – like I was complaining or didn't deserve to feel bad. For instance when I think about others in very poor countries, I can feel undeserving. One way I have dealt with that is by telling myself, 'You can't help the situation you're born into'.

Shame hates an audience

The thing that keeps me from talking is shame. And one thing I know about shame is that it hates an audience. So to be with people who've experienced something similar and have a willingness to be open helps with shame.

I rapped it to my parents

One thing I do is write songs. I wrote a rap about what was going on for me. I rapped it to my parents. It was just my experience. It can't be right or wrong.

Being labelled makes it tough

Being labelled makes it tough. If you've been labelled the messy one it can be hard to talk about the hard stuff.

Take a deep breath, blurt it out, exhale

I think of it like ripping off a band aid. You take a big deep breath, blurt it out, exhale ... and then ... actually talk.

I know what his reaction will be

Better out than in I say. If you hold it in there's only so much you can take before you bust. I find I need a deep relationship to talk. The one person who knows the most is someone I've known for a while. And because we've built such a strong relationship there's no boundaries; I know what his reaction will be, it will almost be a non-conversation. I know that he is going to take this and run with it. When you trust someone it's easier.

Understanding

I find it easier to talk about difficult things one-on-one and it helps if the person asks questions rather than me just having to talk. It also helps if the person I talk to has understanding; an understanding of how tough it is, or an understanding of what I've been through.

Ideas for dealing with worry when it's carried by those who care for us

- *What do we hope for from those who care for us when they are being pushed around, sometimes heavily, by worry about how we are going?*
- *What ways do we effectively offer reassurance to those who care for us when they are being pushed around by worry?*

We want to share our responses to these questions here.

Discuss ahead of time the difference between a bad day and a bad pattern

It helps if people in my life know ahead of time at what point they should start worrying. So on some days if I start withdrawing it is just a bad day and I think 'don't worry'. But if it becomes a pattern it is different. So it helped to have the discussion ahead of time about what they can do if that pattern starts up. And it can be as simple as us working out that they can't do anything to make it better.

The 'everything's going to be okay' thing

The 'everything's going to be okay' thing helps me. I want my family to have that outlook for me and I want to have that outlook for myself. I don't want a sense of doom for my life. I want to take stock of what I have; the skills I've learnt, the relationships around me. I have to understand I have the capabilities to make myself happy. I know this will not be relevant for everyone but I have a little story about this. I was talking to dad about the 'everything's going to be okay' thing and as I was speaking a packet of cocoa fell out of the cupboard. I picked it up, cleaned things up and put the packet back in the cupboard. I turned to dad and said 'see, it's going to be all right'. It was like me saying to him I have the capabilities, I've got things under control, my illness doesn't own me.

I do want quiet

Actually to be left alone can help. I do want quiet. I can watch TV and then it can pass. I need space and I can wait it out. When mum gets upset it can frustrate me because I feel responsible for the upset, even though I know her upset is out of love.

A neutral response

It can be helpful for my parents to have a neutral response because there will be less or no guilt involved afterwards.

Going for a massage together

Mum can be an anxious person and I find that we can bounce off each other's anxiety on a bad day. So once a month we go and get a massage together. And we go for horse rides together. It distracts us both, it calms us both down.

Make you forget that you're having a bad day

My mum's panic fuels the fire. My sister understands the differences between having a bad day and when things are really bad. She does things that are humorous. She does things that make you forget you're having a bad day. I end up waking up laughing rather than screaming.

Understand I know how to fix the situation

It helps when they understand that I know how to fix the situation.

'That must be hard'

I prefer it when people say something like; 'I'm sorry you're feeling that shitty, that must be so hard, is there anything I can do?' And it helps if they don't try and fix it or give me advice about what I should do.

Now we will share our responses to the second question above; *what ways do we effectively offer reassurance to those who care for us when they are being pushed around by worry?*

Letting them know it is under control

Letting them know it is under control at the moment can help. And I also let them know that I will come to them if it becomes a bit bigger than that.

Not shutting them out

They hate it when I shut them out. I can say something like 'I'm feeling shitty but I don't really want to talk about it now. I can talk about it when I'm feeling a little less distressed.'

If I have a plan to get things under control

My parents seem to chill out a bit if I say 'I'm feeling shit and this is why'. They are also reassured if I have a plan to deal with things, or have it under control.

Not talking directly

Some of us prefer non-direct ways of talking. 'I do have a bit of a problem talking to my parents. After my first admission I had a "traffic light" system with them. I would wear a wrist band with a certain colour on it to let them know how I was going. If I was wearing the green one it said to them "I'm going well". If I was wearing the orange one it said, "I'm not going great, but don't worry". Actually I didn't use the red one. But if I wasn't talking and had no wrist band on we worked out that is when my parents should try and make contact with me.' Another of us mentioned 'I had a similar system with my parents, except with numbers. If I told them I was a three then all was good and if I told them I was ten then I needed to go to hospital. I find it sometimes helps to not speak directly about how I'm going.' And another one of us said, 'I have a spreadsheet for my family for when the urges come. It has been a helpful reminder. I can see patterns every day and I can plan with those patterns.'

PART 2:

Some things we'd like you to know

How we deal with feeling 'we're not enough'

Sometimes, when we compare ourselves to ideas out there about what a successful life is it brings a sense of 'failure' or 'not being enough'. We have gathered together a collection of stories of how we try to deal with this. This is an ongoing thing. Some of us feel that we haven't really been able to deal with this pressure of feeling 'not enough' and didn't contribute a story. But the following stories offer a start.

Congratulating myself on the small steps and pretending I'm top shit

There are some days that I don't want to leave my room because I don't look how you should look and I feel I'm not good enough. I still really struggle with that. Sometimes on those days I can pretend that I'm top shit, and I can almost believe it. It can be legit. When I'm having one of those days where I'm not feeling good enough, I think it's the best feeling in the world to get up and dressed and out of the house. Then I congratulate myself for the steps I have taken. I think it's so important to congratulate ourselves for the small everyday things; 'that's so good you got out of bed', 'that's great you got out of the house today'. Sometimes we can feel like we don't deserve it but it's treating myself with as much kindness as I can.

Not conforming to society is not going to hurt me that much

Something that I think is very important to do is to try not to impress people because at the end of the day you're the one who's got to live with yourself. When I think of the ideas I have for what is success, I don't know where they have come from. Like my parents have told me you don't have to do anything, just do what makes you happy. Now I realise that not conforming to society is not going to hurt me that much. For example I didn't finish high school and I hated myself for that. I told myself I was really fucking stupid and felt like I was letting everyone down. I know I am not stupid and I now know that school was just not going well and it was best to leave. There wasn't any socially sanctioned option of other ways for a high school education. Back then I hadn't heard of TAFE [an alternative to high school education]. Now I go to TAFE and it's working out so well. If I had to say something to myself back then it would be 'chill the fuck out' (and 'listen to your parents!').

Do what you're comfortable with and what you want to do

I have a couple of stories about being a musician around success. These stories are about my music auditions for high school and uni [university]. When my parents and I went to the audition for a performing arts school we sat in the auditorium. The principal addressed us all. He stressed not to make this audition and selection into the high school the end of the road and that it is very tough to make it into the school, with 900 people auditioning for 50 places. When I heard that I changed the song I was going to play at the audition, something I was more comfortable with. I got my ukulele and played 'over the rainbow'. I played my song and I got in. A few years later I got a call up for an audition to the University of Melbourne. My parents drove me down there as they like Melbourne. It was a big deal for us all. When I was there I heard that the uni chose two songs to perform. Songs I'd never heard of. They only offered me about 90 seconds in my audition. I received a simple 'no' in a text from the university to let me know I didn't make it past the audition. For me, the lesson is to do what you are comfortable with, do what you want to do, otherwise you won't give it your best.

If I start noticing these things I wake up

I think of all the people I've seen who don't qualify as 'successful' and I think, 'If others can be comfortable with not qualifying, then so can I'. And when I think of the popular girls at my school I think it's such a shallow way to live. I think it is fine to line up with these ideas of success, but I have learnt to ask myself questions like, 'Am I doing it for myself?' and, 'Why do I have to make others comfortable?' If I have to change myself for people, I don't think it is worth it to be with those people. It is easier said than done, but if I start noticing these things, these ideas of popularity or success, I wake up.

I let people help me

Halfway through my last year at school I got sick. At the end of the year my friends were going to schoolies and were generally celebrating. I felt so alone and thought that I'd be doing nothing for the rest of my life. I lost all my friends – and I've never seen them again. It was such an awful time of my life. Yet I got into TAFE and I was really good at practical things. I started to re-build my life. I think that the skill I used to make it to this place was accepting my support networks. Initially I said, 'No, fuck off'. Then I let people help me. I built up a support network of people. When I don't get out of bed in the morning, a person in my support network can knock on my window and make me get me out of bed and take me to TAFE.

What was I thinking?

I was never in the popular group. When I got to university I thought to myself, 'What was I thinking, who cares about people who are fake?'

Skills in dealing with social media

Sometimes the constant comparison available from social media can make us feel inferior or not valued. It can feel like getting swamped! We've developed some ways to deal with social media so it works better for us ...

Sometimes it's good ... sometimes it can destroy you

I've used social media for good things. I had an illness through high school and I really struggled with it. Through social media, my friend linked me up with someone who had the same illness. It was very good. But at other times it can destroy you; 'you don't look good', 'you haven't achieved that' ...

Balancing life up

It's all about balance to me. You can have all these things in your life – Facebook, Snapchat, whatever – if you have friends in the real world. I think for me it's about balancing it up, so it's not just one medium.

Time away from it

I spend one hour away from all technology and do something to make sure I can't access it if I am going out. And sometimes if I'm not feeling okay I just switch it off.

They must be wasting so much time

I tell myself, 'They must be wasting so much time constructing themselves like that on Facebook'.

Perhaps it is not that impressive

Often when I've done something that others think is impressive, I see it as not that impressive. I try to remember this when I think that someone else's life looks really impressive.

That's just a moment in time

I find it useful to think 'that image is them at their best', or, 'that's only a moment in time, there are many other moments in their life where things are perhaps not going so well' or even 'that image someone has created online is often completely filtered'. And sometimes I remember I have to take Facebook with a grain of salt. People are only portraying themselves in a fantasy land.

Organise Facebook page

I take 'annoying' people off my newsfeed.

Beneficial to not worry about what other people are doing

I think because I don't have Facebook I'm able to do things for hours and hours; like watching the sunset for example. The main reason I choose not to use Facebook is because I have heard all the things that happen on it. I thought it would be beneficial to not worry about what other people are doing. And I like being by myself. I like doing my own thing.

Better to act with people in the real world

I would like to use Facebook less because for me it's better to act with people in the real world than on Facebook. There's a huge difference between a virtual world and face-to-face. Yet I know that Facebook removes some intimacy. It removes a presence, and presence is intimacy. And sometimes I feel like a bit of distance can be good. So it works both ways.

PART 3:

We are not the problems we experience:

Our unusual ways of talking about Conflict, Anxiety, Alcohol & Despair

Many of us have lots of difficult things to deal with in life. Sometimes it is hard to just name one or two, it's like there can be too many things going on. That's when an overwhelmed feeling can push into our lives. In this next section, we share just some of the difficult things we deal with. We imagine conversations with them, we find things to say back to them, and we write letters to those difficult things. We write letters saying what we think of the difficult things and what kind of relationship we want to have with them in the future.

We like to imagine that these things aren't us. Even though we can be tempted to think that all we are is the despair we experience, or the sense of being overwhelmed we are getting swamped by, if there is one thing we hope to convey by sharing some of the following stories it is to give you a sense that you are not the difficult things or problems you experience!

Conflict can't hang around if people speak directly: A short interview with 'Conflict'

Conflict, what do you do to people's lives, to people's relationships?

I create tension, upheaval, awkwardness, things become fiery and I set people on edge. I get people to say hurtful things or blurt things out in anger. In fact anger is my best friend. I get people to say things that they wouldn't normally say – hurtful things like 'you're ugly' or 'you annoy me'. Sometimes I change relationships forever. And I can cause major regrets. When I get between countries I can put guns in children's hands, I can create child soldiers and cause death.

Why would you do this? What are your purposes, what are you trying to achieve?

I really like it when I can control people, when people get scared to do what they want to do or say what they want to say. I want to separate people, break up families and friendships.

What are some of your tricks?

Hmmm. I'm not sure I want to spill the beans on this ... I'll let you in on a few of my secrets. I tell people that they have a better point; that they're right and they just have to tell the other person. And I stop people from listening by making them rant and rave. I also get people to think the most negative thing about the other person, never anything positive about why the person acted in the way they did.

What makes you strong, what do you see people doing that makes you excited?

I love it when people compare themselves to each other. And I really like it when people start noticing the differences between them and even start to say that some ways of being or doing things is worse than others. When groups form a group opinion against a smaller group or just one person – that is great, especially if they gossip!

What threatens you; makes you weak? What do you see people doing or saying that you really don't like?

I really don't like it when people talk about things after they have had a fight. I really hate it when I see good communication like calm talk and people discussing their opinions calmly. You know sometimes I see people stepping away from a conversation where I'm starting to do some good work and I get so disappointed. They step away to avoid me it seems. And when they come back they try their best to see what they were talking about from the other's point of view. They say things like, 'If I was you I would feel like ...' And they don't blame the other person. And I really can't stand it when they even apologise! And I really can't hang around very long if people speak directly with the person they have had a disagreement with. If people refuse to revisit a fight and move on, well that really annoys me.

Letters to Anxiety

The following letters were written by young people to Anxiety and were in response to the questions:

- What have you come to understand about Anxiety?
- What do you think about Anxiety? What is your attitude towards it? Do you have a sense of when you first held this attitude?
- What kind of relationship do you plan to have with it in the future?

*Dear Anxiety,
We have gotten to know each other over the last couple of years now and we know each other well. You understand my fears and know when I'm feeling vulnerable. This however does not benefit me when you strike. This has led me to understand the power you have over me. Going two weeks without a visit from you seems like a miracle. I hope that one day soon I will be able to call you a distant friend, only meeting up every now and again.*

Dear Anxiety,

I understand you're trying to help me, trying to prevent me from getting hurt. I feel you can be a little dramatic in the way you express this. When considering even the extent of the things you should protect me from you could learn to maybe express yourself in a way that would help us negotiate a resolution without you being so rash and controlling. Maybe with a little understanding and consideration between us we could learn to live together.

Kind regards,

To whom it may concern,

You would have noticed that I haven't written 'Dear' and that's because you're not worth the acknowledgement.

I understand you're there to look out and protect me and you've been doing that for too long. It seems that when you're there I love that you're there and when you're gone I miss you more than anything.

But I realise you make me distant from the people I love so that you can come first above anyone and you never leave me. So at the same time I hate you because of how cruel, consuming and possessive you are to me. You stop me from enjoying life and make me always put things on hold, avoiding them to spend time with you.

For now and in the future I plan to respond to you as only an acquaintance or someone passing by. And when you're trying to fight back, I'll break it off.

Dear Anxiety,

Fuck you! You're a no-good, sly presence that sends me spinning. All you bring is negativity in the face of mortality. I'm gonna allow myself regimented sleeping and eating/drinking habits in the hope of never seeing you again.

Dear Anxiety,

You are an emotion that can make people feel nervous and powerless to make decisions or conversations.

Anxiety, you make me nervous and unsure. I hate it.

I'm not really sure how to respond to you other than to ignore you because there doesn't seem to be a cure.

To Anxiety,

You ruin people's lives, you have ruined my life and as much as I hate you for it I am scared to get rid of you. You comfort me in a way nothing else can.

You made me an outsider in my own life. You drove me to the end of the road where the only way to go was down.

I hate you, you are an asshole. But as much as I despise you, I can't imagine my life without you and that is what scares me the most.

I do not wish to get rid of you in the future but do hope we can come to an agreement as it is hard when you try to convince me that you are part of me.

Fuck you Anxiety.

Interviewing alcohol

Alcohol, what do you do to people's lives and relationships?

I get people to spend lots of money and make them forget things, like where they put stuff. I end relationships, as I get people to leave their partners if they use too much of me. I can make people very happy and give them a good time. But I generally don't stop there as I can start to change the atmosphere and make people angry and break things. I affect people's general health and they can often end up unfit or worse with liver problems. And one of the things I am most proud of is when I make people more anti-social over time and get them to spend less and less time with others. I like it when I isolate people.

Alcohol, what plans do you hold for people's lives, what purposes do you have?

Initially I try to help people; I try to make people happy, forget their problems and give people energy. But in the long run I'm out to destroy people's lives, which can be done very well if they let me into their lives.

What makes you strong, what do you try and exploit about people and what is happening in their lives?

I get into people's lives if they're down. I like it when people think they can't enjoy themselves without me. That happens especially at a party or a social event. Actually I like most organised events.

Alcohol what do you say to people, what do you try and convince them of?

I think my favourite is, 'You should come to me with your problems, don't talk to other people'. I also make promises like, 'I'm the gate to happiness'. And some of the other things I like to convince people of are things like, 'You need me' or, 'I'm just great'. And the one I use all the time is, 'Just have one more, go on'.

Alcohol, what do you see people doing or saying that makes you feel insecure, like the influence you want in people's lives is starting to wane?

Well I certainly don't like it if someone says, 'One will do me'. But you know what I really don't like? I don't like it when people talk to others about whatever it is that's troubling them. I really hate that and wish people would just come to me if they are stressed or worried or having a hard time. Why would anyone choose a person over me? I don't like that at all.

Well thanks so much alcohol, I imagine I'll see you at the next social event I'm going to! And thanks for letting a few of your tricks out of the bag.

Talking back to Despair – what some of us do

Please shush

One person knows it is not so useful to be mean to Despair as it will come back at her even more meanly. She would like to say to Despair, 'Please shush, I want to stay here to keep seeing my friends grow and be happy'.

Despair you make me stronger

Another person spoke about how Despair makes him stronger. He wants to say to it: 'Despair, you make me stronger, more resilient. Perhaps you don't realise that learning to live with the harsher side of life makes you appreciate and even recognise the happiness'.

People obviously like me

Two people spoke about how they respond to Despair's lies about no-one liking them, no-one caring. One person would like to say to Despair, 'No, fuck off, people obviously like me. I'm here for a reason.' And another said, 'My family tell me they love me'.

One day

One person speaks back to Despair when she is able by letting it know of her dreams, 'One day I will create the family I've always wanted, and through that my pain and hurt will fade.'

I'm the stubborn warrior

Two people spoke about how they remember or try to remember that they have got the upper hand with despair before and will in future. They also want to remind Despair what it has forgotten about their talents. One would like to say, 'I've beaten you this far, I can beat you again. I'm a strong talented person with a unique gift and I need to show it.' And another wants to say, 'You're stubborn despair, but I'm the stubborn warrior. And I will slay you.'

Staying in touch

Sometimes in life, turmoil, suffering and overwhelmed feelings can visit. And often they feel like unwanted visitors who will never leave, even when their company is getting everyone down. We hope that these stories we shared with you have reminded you of things you do to get through times when the unwanted visitors of turmoil, suffering and feeling overwhelmed seemingly never leave. And if the stories here did not remind you of what you do to get through, we hope that you were able to gather together some ideas for what you might try out to quieten the unwanted visitors in some way.

We know everyone has their own way of getting on in life, as well as their own way of dealing with difficult times. So we imagine even if you get some inspiration from the words and stories here, you will come up with your own ways of translating them into your life. The more stories we have available about ways of getting through, the more people will find some recognition and discover their own ways of getting through. And with more stories it will also mean that there is more likelihood that people will find a way of getting through that suits their style.

So, if you want to let us know what you thought about any of the stories, especially if any of them reminded you of what you do or gave you ideas for what you want to do, please write to us. You can write a letter to:

David Newman
c/o Hutt St P.O. Box 7192, Adelaide, South Australia, 5000
or via email: dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au
Just put 'The things that get us through' in the subject line.

Thanks. We would also love it if you could let us know of some of your own ways of getting those unwanted visitors to leave or at least quietening them.

About this project: narrative approaches

This project is based on narrative approaches to therapy, group work and community work. These approaches were initially developed by Australian, Michael White, and New Zealander, David Epston. Narrative therapy centres people as the experts in their own lives and views problems as separate from people. Narrative therapy assumes that people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives. The word 'narrative' refers to the emphasis that is placed upon the stories of people's lives and the differences that can be made through particular tellings and re-tellings of these stories.

Over the last decade, partnerships with practitioners working in contexts of profound hardship and social suffering have led to the generation of narrative methodologies that can be used beyond the counselling room. These have come to be known as forms of 'collective narrative practice'. Collective narrative practice methodologies do not require young people to speak in the first person about their lives and they emphasise the skills, abilities, hopes and dreams of participants. This ensures that these approaches do not 're-traumatise' young people. Instead, these ways of working create contexts for pride, the acknowledgement of 'hard-won' knowledge, and the celebration of 'goals' that young people have already scored in life. A special emphasis is given to the ways in which people who have been through hardship can contribute to the lives of others by sharing their 'hard-won' knowledge. This project is an example of this.

David Newman, a narrative therapist, generated the documents included here from the words of young people at a youth in-patient mental health unit. For more information about this process see Newman (2008, 2014).

Further information and references

Online resources

The following websites offer some options for the sharing of stories around mental health concerns and psychiatric survival. Some are simply blogs, one is a place of stories, and another is a place where one can upload your own story of 'psychiatric survival':

www.voicecollective.co.uk/

For children and young people who hear, see and sense things others don't.

www.mindfreedom.org/campaign/next-versions/i-got-better/

There are many ways to mental wellness – what's yours?

www.facebook.com/pages/Youth-Queery/400168840112758

Youth Queery is a support group for young LGBTIQ people (aged 16-24). The focus is on maintaining good mental health, making new friends and having a good time. It's a safe place to chat, ask questions and be yourself.

Information about narrative therapy

For an overview of narrative therapy approaches, see Morgan (2000), White (2007), Denborough (2014) or the Dulwich Centre website (www.dulwichcentre.com.au).

Collective narrative practice

For more information about collective narrative practices and projects see Denborough (2008) and the Dulwich Centre Foundation website: www.dulwichcentre.com/dulwich-centre-foundation.html

References

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- Newman, D. (2008). Rescuing the said from the saying of it': Living documentation in narrative therapy. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3:24-24
- Newman, D. (2014) Assisting young people to find their language through the language of others: Knowledge from an inpatient ward. *Dulwich Centre Friday Afternoon video presentation*, available at narrativetherapyonline.com/moodle/mod/resource/view.php?id=828
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.