The Living Stories – Belinda & Chris’s Story [Video Transcript]

[Text on slide] Yarra Ranges Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands. We pay our respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging, who have been, and always will be, integral to the story of our region. We proudly share custodianship to care for Country together.

This video contains material and discussion relating to mental health challenges that may be triggering for some individuals.

If you or anyone you know is struggling, you can reach out to one of the helplines below. There's always help available.

Lifeline 13 11 14
Beyond Blue 1300 224 636
Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
QLife 1800 184 527
13YARN 13 92 76
MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78

[Chris] One thing about suffering from depression is that you're not alone. There's people out there.

[Belinda[ Chris and I met in the acute psychiatric ward at Maroondah Hospital when we were both patients there. It was a bit of a surprise for me to find myself there because I'd never even considered myself to have a mental health issue.

I'd had postnatal depression, which had morphed into pre-menstrual depression. But that was being treated with antidepressants and other medication I was on from a Jean Hailes Centre trial.

I just thought that I was just like every other working mum who was juggling kids, and work, choir, and church activities, the relationship with my then husband, and trying to keep it all together day to day. But what I didn't realise was that I was like the metaphorical frog in the pot of water on the fire and I just hadn't realised how close to boiling point I'd got, I guess.

So one day I went to see my GP to get some sleeping tablets to help me get to sleep at night, and instead of coming out with a script, she asked me to give her my car keys and called the CAT Team.

[Chris] The CAT Team never went to Belinda because it came to me the night before. I had decided that I was really at the low point and decided to try to end it all. I didn't see any point going on.

My neighbour didn't like the noise of the car, so she came out and turned it off. And I sort of came to with a lot of blue and red flashing lights around the place and ended up in Maroondah Hospital with Belinda. ‘Cause the CAT Team took me in.

I was born into pretty much poverty. My dad was a qualified boilermaker welder, but he couldn't get work doing that, so he had to work in the mines. And we lived in a poor area. I didn't know we were poor because everybody was. Then my dad decided that we needed a better life, so he brought us all to Australia.

I lived with them for a while, but it was just like surviving. I didn't really get I didn't think I was getting the love that I should have been getting. So when my sisters left home, they left home early. I left home at the same time. I didn't want to be the oldest kid, I was the only boy.

So I joined the Navy at 16 and when I got to Lewin, I thought, oh, maybe home life was a little maybe it wasn't too bad. There were a lot of other things going through the Navy. The culture is to drink a lot and smoke a lot, work hard, and play hard, they call it. So I did. Peer pressure, I guess, made me do that.

I was only 16 or 17 at the time and it just got worse from there. And then my mum died I felt sad, but I didn't grieve that much. I don't know, maybe something wrong with me. And then I got married just before she died. I had three kids and then I had a fourth kid who didn't survive. All these things come to a head. They're all like, getting to me now.

And then I was still on alcohol, I got out of the Navy, I got onto drugs. That didn't help my mental stability. I should have asked for help, but I didn't realise it then. I didn't know that that's what should have happened. I should have asked for it there and then. But education wasn't around, so I didn't know that. And so I went further downhill. And then I come to the time when I tried to kill myself and the neighbour stopped me.

[Belinda] It's really easy for us to normalise the experience of mental illness. When we're with a new group of people, it often starts with someone asking, “Hey, so how did you guys meet?” Some people meet when they're on holidays. Some people meet at work. We met in an acute psychiatric ward at a hospital. So, how more normal can you get than that?

[Chris] We used to meet in what was called I think it might have been a common room. It was kind of like where we ate and where we rested and that sort of thing. I really liked her. I knew from the beginning, from the first time I saw her, that I liked her and wanted to go further. Took her a little bit longer, but I convinced her.

[Belinda] In those early days, it was great having someone else who just understood without having to say anything. We took turns being each other's carer, depending on who was struggling the most on any particular day. But it's been so good to do it together.

I did do some career counselling because for a while, for quite a long time, I wasn't well enough to work any more than part time. And I went back to study and did a Diploma of Community Development and worked in a number of community services jobs for a while. Doing in service professional development led me to discover a whole lot of other things which helped me to manage my depression.

And so things like, first of all, being true to myself, being who I am. Really early on in my relationship with Chris, we decided that we wouldn't try to be anybody other than who we actually are to make the other person like us better. And that, for me, was a real revelation. Having come out of a relationship for over 20 years with somebody where I was always trying to make it work.

I need lots of sleep, including afternoon naps. If I have a lot to process, I need natural light, especially in winter, so I don't cope well in working in rooms where there's no windows. The other thing that I started doing was the veggie garden, the fruit trees. So now I grow lots of the food that we eat.

One of the worst periods was when my kids had to live with their dad because I couldn't get affordable housing for the three of us to be together. So having secure housing is really important for me.

In the foyer of our house we've got a beautiful painting that we got on our honeymoon, which shows two people surrounded by light, and both Chris and I came from such a dark place. It was an image that really captured our imagination when we saw it, because when we're together, it's like there's light back in the world again.

When I got sick, I was actually conducting three choirs at the time. I had Yarra Valley Singers, I had Children's Choir, and an Aboriginal Children's Choir that I was working with. And I really felt like I let a lot of people down when I ended up in hospital and then I was too sick to be able to take them again when I came out.

And after three years, Chris gave me for Christmas a big blown up image which had actually been created for the publicity for Choral @ Montselvat. The designer of the publicity that year had put me in the publicity surrounded by all of the choral groups I was associated with. And I got that image for Christmas and it really sparked an interest in going back to what I loved doing.

The manager from Yarra Valley Singers approached me and they asked if I would be interested in coming back the next year. And I was so grateful for being given another opportunity to work with them.

[Chris] I joined the choir so I could cope with my depression and also so I could spend more time with Belinda. I got into their social scene, which I quite enjoyed very much. They are very social bunch of people. I also now run their footy tipping, which is quite a bit of a buzz for everybody. And I sing a little bit, or I try to.

[Belinda] In the early days, I used to get woken up at night when Chris had dreadful nightmares. I felt so helpless because all I could do is wake him up to pull him away from whatever he was dreaming about and then cuddle him until he went back to sleep again. But thankfully there's less and less nightmares now and it hardly ever happens now.

He used to be on opiate based painkillers to help him deal with the pain from some of the injuries he had from when he was in the services. It's really hard to watch somebody in withdrawal. He used to take them every winter and then withdraw every spring until eventually he decided that was just too hard. So we bit the bullet and put in a hydrotherapy spa.

[Chris] It's hard to be a friend to somebody who's depressed, but it's one of the kindest, noblest things that you could possibly do.

There are a lot of people in the RSL that are in the same situation as I am now. I still suffer from depression, but I treat it with medication. And that's something which stops me from wanting to kill myself ever again. I hope I never get there again. And these people, they're in the same boat and we can talk about it. We all talk about it and we joke and laugh, but they all talk the same language and we all know what we're talking about. And that's why I go to the RSL. It's an outlet. It's a place where I feel I don't have to show people that I'm tough by being putting up with this mental illness. I don't have to be soft with it because they're all the same. It's all the same.

The point of this whole conversation is ask for help early. Don't wait till it's too late. I know it's hard to do. It is hard to do. It's the hardest thing to do when you've got depression. But there's a lot of people out there with it. And there's a lot of people that sympathise with you. They know the pain. So talk about it.