

Sharing our stories with you



PICTURE OF DAVID BY ZELJKO BATRICEVIC

In living colour

We know first impressions count but new research has found we come to a snap judgment about someone we've just met in the blink of an eye.

Psychologists at Princeton University in the US report we decide whether someone is attractive, trustworthy or likeable in just a tenth of a second. And even when we have more time to possibly change our minds, we mostly don't.

This is something that Mind Ambassador of Hope David worked-out for himself and didn't like what he saw.

At a touch over six foot tall and with a powerful build, David used to wear all black. His black shirts, pants and big boots were teamed with dark sunglasses. His look was finished by a full-length, pitch-dark leather jacket that almost swept the floor.

David looked far taller than he really was and kind of menacing. His appearance

threatened 'Don't come near me' and 'Don't mess with me.'

"I was angry, fighting with authority and lawless. I had heaps of attitude and ran amok," he says of the years he spent with symptoms of mental ill-health. He had been abused as a child and teenager trying to grow-up in state care.

"At 15 I was shown the door with a bag of clothes, nothing else, and told 'There's the door now bugger off.' I got hurt by authority figures and it just goes 'round in a circle.'"

On top of being deeply wounded and angry, David was not equipped for life on the outside. He calls himself a forgotten Australian. "I'm someone who grew up in government care and survived it."

Yet he's done far more than survive. Recently he decided to break the cycle and do something more with his life – a stunning move given he came to this turning point on his own. "If you are going to whinge you have to come up with an

alternative. And if you want something out of life you have to get it yourself and it's OK to get help from other people."

David became a Mind Ambassador of Hope which involves speaking publicly and candidly about his life to different groups, including the Victoria Police. He is also on the Mind Recovery College's Southern Campus Working Group and has taught courses. He also does public speaking for other mental health organisations.

David includes talking about why he is no longer all in black and how uniforms speak volumes.

"Wearing colours make me feel better and the darkness goes...it's like a cloud lifts," he says.

He tells members of the Victorian Police Academy that because of their very dark blue, authoritarian uniform they have to work hard to be respected. "It's about treating the public, whether they have a mental illness or not, the same way they want to be treated." **For a picture of how David looked in black, see page two.**



How David used to look in black

David says: "In black people wouldn't speak to me and I wouldn't speak to them, in black all I want to do is isolate myself."

About a year ago he started wearing some colour. "I bought a pink t-shirt and it started from there."

Now he dresses in nothing but colour – exclusively pastels and jewels – and he notices that people treat him differently.

Boost from puppy love

Did you know that Australia has one of the highest levels of pet ownership in the world? Around 36% of households own a dog and 23% include a cat as part of the family.

A number of studies have shown physical health advantages to pet-ownership, such as lower levels of risk factors for heart disease compared to non-pet owners, including lower blood pressure and cholesterol.

And many of us feel a benefit to our mental health from sharing our life with a pet – especially if we have been affected by depression or some other form of mental illness.

Cats, dogs, and other domestic creatures provide an unconditional, uncomplicated affection (unlike the complexities of human relationships). While this may not be how the animal actually 'feels' towards us, it is certainly how we perceive the relationship. This is strengthened by the physical nature of the bond with pets – imagine how many times a day you stroke your cat's fur or pat your dog.

Owning a pet is also a responsibility. Whether it's taking a dog for a walk, feeding, or emptying a cat's litter tray, having a pet provides a sense of responsibility, routine, and purpose to the day – all important things to take us 'out of ourselves' if affected by depression, for example.

As well as being good companions, pets can help us to make contact with other people. When affected by mental illness, it's common to feel cut off from other people or even unsure about making contact with them. Having a pet is a sure way to get talking to others, especially if you have a dog – there are few parks which do not have a group of regular dog-walkers who welcome anyone with four legs and their human companion.

Research also suggests the mental health benefits of pets for people going through troubled periods in life, such as widowhood or when recovering from a serious health problem. In the US, the Department of Veteran Affairs operates a Dog Therapy program to help returned service personnel who have post-traumatic stress disorder after tours in war zones.

Worrying about a pet's welfare can cause extra stress if you have to go into hospital, however. It's important, therefore to include pet care as part of a plan for if you or someone you care for becomes unwell and needs to spend some time as an in-patient on a mental health unit.

Reprinted courtesy Sane Australia sane.org

You can include how you would like your pets to be cared for in an advance statement – this is a document which outlines the kind of treatment you prefer in the event of an involuntary admission under the Victorian Mental Health Act. To get a template for an advance statement, call VMIAC on 03 9387 8317.

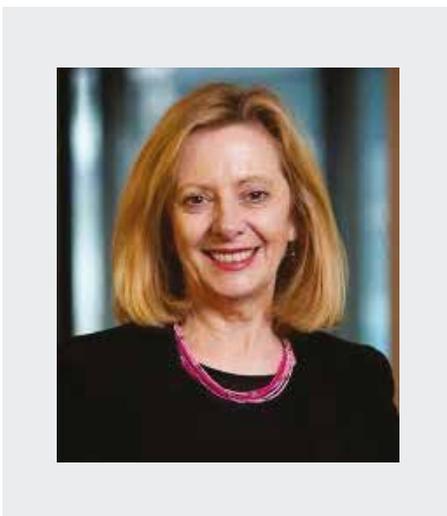
Tips on managing anxiety (without medication or meditation)



- 1. Know your triggers.** Behaviour that's out of character for you (e.g., eating too much, worrying about one thing over and over) could be a sign that you've a problem you may need to be tackling. So ask someone for help with the problem.
- 2. Exercise.** No need to flog yourself, try a gentle walk in the park, a bike ride or a kick of the footy.
- 3. Understand fear.** It is natural to feel fear but it will not, of itself, harm you. We are usually fearing the unknown and once we realise this, we often feel better.
- 4. Spend time with positive people.** You would have read this before, but avoid those who are "toxic", you know, the ones who make you feel bad about yourself.
- 5. Take some time out.** This might be a day off or if you can, a week. And see if you can do something with this time that you really want to do, not what you have to do.
- 6. Have something to look forward to.** Plan to have a really enjoyable activity in the future. And when you've done it, plan another one. Try your best to stick to these plans.
- 7. See small things as achievements.** You made a cake? Pat on the back. You set out to walk around the park and did it, another pat on the back. You picked up that phone and called a friend you have not spoken to for ages, well done.
- 8. Eat as healthily as you can.**
- 9. Music.** Listening or making music is great therapy.
- 10. Set yourself a goal and take small steps to get there.**

From lifehack.org

Introducing the new Mental Health Complaints Commission Victoria



Complaints Commissioner Lynne Coulson Barr

Introduced with the new Victorian Mental Health Act, the Mental Health Complaints Commission is where you can take any concern or complaint about public mental health services in Victoria. It is an independent body.

You have the right to speak up and have your complaint heard and your privacy will be protected. You can also talk to them if your complaint is about not receiving a service you feel entitled to. Even if it's not something they are able to deal with, they will help you find the best person to talk to and help you.

You can contact them to discuss your concerns and options. They may be able to assist you with raising your concern with the service without making a complaint to their office.

Consumers as well as anyone acting on behalf of a consumer and any person with a genuine interest in the well-being of a consumer can make complaints.

To make a complaint, you can
Telephone (free): 1800 246 054
Email: help@mhcc.vic.gov.au
Fax: 03 9949 1506
Level 26, 570 Bourke Street Melbourne.

You can make a complaint in any language, just call and request an interpreter.

Recovery is a journey



Mind Ambassador of Hope Michael writes:

When I was diagnosed in 1993 I went to hospital in Dandenong and in three months, because of the medication, I put on 25 kilos. I just wasn't doing anything.

I went back to footy training (I'm also a fan of Collingwood) and I also went back to playing squash. When I started footy training it was so hard, I was swimming in sweat...it was so tough.

By 1995 I lost all the weight I'd put on.

I was in and out of hospital between 2003 and 2009 but I have forced myself to play squash on the medication. It has been hard, but I am still playing and last night I played five games. I lost, but I don't mind.

Since 2009 I have been well. That was the last time I was in hospital. I have been homeless in the past but now I am living in my own place and I work and I also am an Ambassador of Hope for Mind. I feel like now I have finally put it all behind me.

Now I like to go for walks around the town where I live and I am playing squash a couple of nights a week, and I am on minimal medication.

I have been a Mind client in the past, but I have not had Mind services for well over 12 months.

I really like having my own place to live. I live in a flat behind my mother's place.

I have got a cat called Emma. It was my neighbour's cat and when they shifted 25 kilometres away with Emma she eventually came back here and I found her on the door step. I asked my neighbour if I could adopt her and they said yes. She's happy living with me and sleeps on the couch. But she doesn't get along with Mum's dog Presley who is 14 years old and barks all the time at Emma.

I've done a lot of public speaking for Mind. A highlight was the annual general meeting at the Darebin Arts Centre where I spoke before 300 people and I have also spoken on radio programs and to the Victoria Police Academy.

Six questions for Mind client Sunyata

What does recovery mean to you?

Recovery means being well integrated within a living community.

How does art therapy help your recovery?

Being an artist and exhibiting my art simply means my 'voice can be heard'.

Does living in Cairns help your mental health?

Cairns is ideal for me as I have lived in India and Asia for over 7 years.

Can you tell us how it helps?

I suffered malaria before my breakdown so a well-connected community is very important, like the Mind PARC, Mission Australia, Homeless Hub; and Partners in Recovery.

Can you describe some of the good things about life in Cairns?

Even though I have only been in Cairns for a short time, I can see and have started connecting with the healthy arts community here and the variety of venues.

Is it important for consumers to speak up and break down stigma?

Having gone through a major 'breakdown' during the past 2 ½ years, it is refreshing to find more than eager people, friends, and professionals willing to listen and support me through the type of re-birthing we can (do from a) breakdown.





From little things... big things grow

What started as a small trip for two Mind clients in Nunawading, Melbourne (one an accomplished photographer and the other super-keen to learn) soon blossomed into an excursion for 15 budding snappers. Then, clients from Linwood PARC asked to join in and provided a delicious picnic lunch. Other clients contributed chocolates (vital for any activity) and those who knew about photography made information sheets with terrific tips on how to shoot from better angles, using depth of field and perspective. A true co-production. Here is some of the great work all our clients did during their visit to a garden in the city's Dandenong Ranges. One client was so inspired he enrolled in a University of the Third Age photography course.





Ripples by Sammy

A ghost sits at the end of my bed as I lay in a hotel hospital room. I've reached double-figure psychiatric ward admissions. Royal Park, Footscray, Sunshine, some place in the country, Werribee, Sunshine. Sunshine. I've been here more than a few times.

It's changed since my last admission and I've changed. The building has had a makeover and I am somehow wiser. It's like I've finally accepted my illness as part of me and am in control of all my crazy powers. That my disorder is in a way the deep well of my creativity. I look to the ghost and dip my eyes. It's not a scary ghost or really a ghost at all. The apparition is a memory within me, and the dipping of my eyes a bashful understanding that I'll be ok this time. That I'll make it.

I was moved to a shared room the night before and will be discharged once the pharmacist has made up my medication. Weeks earlier I had been lathered in sweat and grime after maddened thoughts. My thoughts not mine I disgraced myself demanding freedom from the unseen captors of my mind. I tore at them and myself in a purgatory of my thoughts. I faced the water contemplating any possible way out. The wind blustered voices to my end. My mood had been

swinging widely up and down after every interaction I had with people. I had lost all self-belief and felt my thoughts were not my own. I was thinking about thinking.

The ghost of my father didn't appear at the end of my bed until a few days after admission. A memory returned to me of when I was last at the Sunshine Hospital. The nurses had taken my belt on admission and I complained to my father about having to constantly lift up my pants as I walked. I was out of the High Dependency Unit and so was allowed to have a belt. We stood at the exit to the ward and my father began to slip off his belt. I objected and looked around to see a nurse watching us. My father insisted I take the belt and walked out – his hand holding up his trousers. That memory has troubled me for years. Not so much about receiving the belt but what the nurse must have thought. That what others thought of me mattered. It doesn't!

I began to think of the friendship I had with my father and recovered myself. With

the memory of our relationship I thought about my actions and his reactions. I'm not quite sure if it's disrespectful to use the memory of a loved one in such a way but I reckoned he wouldn't mind. My father was and is a release of my actions and words, not a mirror to my thoughts. I had faced him – my hand no longer holding up my pants. He walked away – his hand holding up his trousers. It all may seem a bit absurd but it worked. My actions and words a stone thrown into a pond naturally sending ripples unreturnable away from centre. I regained some balance in my head and found it easier to speak with people without shame. Without thinking later that I'd made a fool of myself. Without raging incessantly over something trivial. Sailing into the wind and not being swept ashore. My mind a sanctuary of ideas and feeling, not the misshapen reflection in an endless swelling brew. I am the water rippling outward and believe in all that is within me.

Contact the editor

If you are a current or former client of Mind and would like to contribute to the newsletter or be interviewed, please call Sally on (03) 9455 7991 or email sfisher@mindaustralia.org.au. Copyright reserved. For permission to reprint please write to the editor.



Supporting mental health recovery

Mind Central Office
86-92 Mount Street | PO Box 592 | Heidelberg VIC 3084
Mind Australia ABN 22 005 063 589
1300 286 463
mindaustralia.org.au
e info@mindaustralia.org.au



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