

Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

By [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

I am a mother and I care for my 20 year old son who lives at home with me, my husband and our daughter. My son was bullied throughout high school ever since we moved from Melbourne to [REDACTED]. My son now experiences severe depression and just over a month ago he had a breakdown that resulted in him being brought home from work and he has not been well enough to return.

Since then he has been suicidal and is on a waiting list to see a psychiatrist. He has seen two psychiatrists previously, but both just prescribed him medication without giving any sort of diagnosis which could lead to meaningful treatment for him. It has been really hard to get proper help.

Currently our day to day life consists of me being too fearful to leave my son alone, for fear of what he might do to himself. I or my husband must be with him all the time to keep him busy and stop him thinking about killing himself. I just want a rest but I am afraid to sleep because I can't leave him for too long. I'm afraid he is going to kill himself.

My son keeps pleading me to get him help. He tells me that he doesn't want to die, saying "you don't know how hard I am trying to not do something, I'm really fighting it". I have nowhere else to turn, I am trying everything but there is no help available. It's just not right we can't get help.

We have tried going to the GP, who referred him to a psychologist but the next morning he was just crying saying he wanted to die again and again. I didn't know what to do. I have tried calling the help lines. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] spoke to him for 15 minutes, it did not help. **The Kids Helpline** was better, they spent 1.5 hours talking to my son, but they cannot refer him to clinical support. I called the mental health triage at the hospital to get help, they just told me to go back to the GP. The GP told me my son said he is still thinking about killing himself, but there are waiting lists everywhere so I can't get him the help he needs.

We tried HeadSpace but it doesn't seem like enough. He's been able to see a counsellor there, but they can't offer clinical support services so he doesn't have access to the extra support he needs. Previously, he was seeing a psychologist, but after 6 sessions the psychologist had failed to realise a key issue was my son's history of being bullied. You only get a total of 10 sessions, which is not enough anyway. You can't help someone in that time, he needs at least 20 in a year to speak with someone.

We tried going to the hospital when he was suicidal. It was packed, it wasn't a good environment for him to be in at that point, so we left. On the way home he asked to go to church where he laid on the floor and cried. My husband came to the church and took over so I could have a break.

The biggest problem is there doesn't seem to be any way to get help! We are so frustrated. There's all these lines to call and campaigns around suicide prevention, especially for young people but where is the help? I have tried everything we have been told to do and it seems like no one can help and we just have to wait. All the campaigns for youth suicide prevention seem like a lie.

With a physical injury, like a cut, you can see it, but when it's your mind, so many people don't understand. My husband struggles with this, he says what a lot of people say – that men are meant to be strong. My son's school was the same. As his mother, it made me feel like I hadn't done my job right and made him tough. But my son is not aggressive, he does not want to hit anyone back; he is a sensitive soul. Dealing with his school was so frustrating.

When my son was bullied at school, the school would say "he has to learn to be more resilient". It was always put back on him to cope, like it was his problem. I felt like they just ignored us. When my son was still at school he told the GP that he tried putting a belt around his neck, to see what it would feel like. I told his school this. The

principal said "as long as mum has got it under control it is okay". They didn't check in with me, I felt like they didn't care.

It is hard for me not to fall in a heap sometimes and take my own life. I think to myself, I can't do this anymore, I can't get help for him. I often feel like I am falling apart, but I can't afford to.

I have been lucky to find good supports with the team at ACSO [REDACTED] and the other mothers there. Though, I find it hard to open up about my problems. **As a carer I know I need help for myself, but I don't have the time for me.** My daughter is also starting to have issues with smoking marijuana again. She has a history of family violence that has impacted our whole family. But at this time my concern has to be keeping my son alive. It shouldn't be like this.

I want the Royal Commission to make the changes we need so people like my son can get the help they are asking for. Some areas that would make a big difference to my son and my family are:

- **Improved mental illness prevention programs in schools:** We need to do something sooner, in the schools, so it doesn't get to this point. Children need to learn about mental illness and where to get help, as well as skills like mindfulness, at school so they can get help early. We also need better supports within schools such as qualified and engaging school counsellors who understand the risks and when to intervene and provide additional supports.
- **Better community awareness:** People don't understand it is as big a problem as it is. When people haven't experienced it themselves, they don't get it. We need better awareness about real impacts mental illness has on an individual and their family. I want people to understand that mental illness and AOD problems happen to 'normal people' and good families. These conditions do not discriminate.
- **Support for families:** It is so difficult to navigate the mental health system on your own. It is hard to find the right GP who understands and all the GP's we have had have left. The ACSO team help, but it has still been difficult. It can be overwhelming explaining everything to a different person every time. Families need someone to listen and we need a break. I would like someone to be there for my son so that I could have a break, especially when he is talking about killing himself all the time.
- **Education for families:** ACSO have educational programs and activities for families which are really helpful. We also need something like this specific to mental health. Sharing information with family and carer's around what is happening, how to cope, how to support your family member, and how to navigate the system.
- **Better range of services and clinicians:** We need a hub or centre, a place where you can access services. Mental health issues are falling back on to the police and ambulance because we don't have access to the right services. It is difficult to find the right clinicians who you are able to connect with. With a maximum of 10 sessions a year half the sessions are often used up before you work out if they are the right person for you.

My son has a lot of strengths. Despite everything he finished year 12, he doesn't drink or smoke as he enjoys being fit and healthy. He used to enjoy playing soccer but many of his peers are now drinking and doing drugs. He wants help but he can't get it and that is the biggest problem.

Regional areas like ours need additional supports for people with mental illness and for families. It is so tough when it is your child in front of you saying they want to die, you have to switch off your feelings to listen but as a mother you are feeling everything!

To the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, we need action. My son feels he cannot get help. This is not good enough.