

I am a social worker in the Geelong region, an ambassador for Eating Disorders Victoria and a survivor of family violence and sexual assault. My life has been very challenging at times and, unfortunately, often made worse by the actions of the mental health care system. I am fully recovered now from the effects of trauma and abuse and now lead a happy and healthy life. I am one of the lucky ones. For me, my traumatic experiences manifested themselves in a number of psychiatric disorders; anorexia nervosa, severe depression, severe general and social anxiety, complex post traumatic stress disorder, other specified dissociative disorder Type 1B, and later, a substance use disorder. I have fought for years to overcome the stigma of these diagnostic labels. With the exception of complex post traumatic stress disorder, I felt that these labels implied that there was something inherently wrong with me and who I was as a person, rather than focussing on the strength and resilience I showed in overcoming a highly traumatic childhood. While I began seeking support for my mental health at age 13, I was not accurately diagnosed or treated until the age of 24. Until this point, no one had asked or considered the impact that the abuse I experienced as a child had had on my mental health. Instead, I was made to feel like the way I functioned and was surviving was “wrong” or a “problem”, rather than as an understandable response to what I have experienced.

I received most of my “treatment” for mental health conditions as a child. I was highly traumatised by many of the things that happened to me, particularly experiences of involuntary hospitalisation. It took me until last year, seven years after my last discharge from hospital, to fully process the memories of these events. Fortunately, I now no longer have nightmares, flashbacks or negative beliefs about myself in relation to what happened while I was in psychiatric hospitals. However, there will always be some long lasting impacts of my experiences. For example, I remain scared of small spaces and I have lost trust in doctors, nurses and other health professionals. Every time I go to a hospital I am still on edge and reminded about the things that were said and done to me as a child. It is my hope that by sharing some of my experiences, I can help be part of the process of change, so that no other child or adolescent has to go through what I went through in an attempt to recover from a mental illness.

I first reached out for help with my mental health when I was 13, when I became actively suicidal. With many negative things happening in my life, bullying at school and being completely socially isolated, I felt I had nowhere to turn. Life seemed completely and utterly hopeless. I had a few failed attempts at counselling as I didn't feel very supported or understood by the school chaplain or peer worker I was sent to. In fact, the peer worker I saw said the following to me “I talk with other people in your class and they are going through far worse than you.” He based this on the fact that I was talking about not having any friends. What he didn't know, was that there was more going on for me than just stuff happening at school. The peer worker and school chaplain also never asked me how bad my symptoms were. If they had checked in with me, they would have discovered that I regularly thought about taking my life by suicide. Instead, I left feeling like my issues weren't as important as other people's and that I was stupid for feeling the way I did. I stopped trying to seek help for a few years and that idea about taking my life got stronger and stronger as the years passed.

Despite another few attempts at getting some support (and again feeling misunderstood, patronised and dismissed), my depression continued to go untreated and undiagnosed until I was 16. By this point, I could no longer cope with how much I hated myself. I felt chronically different from my peers, continued to be bullied, had been sexually assaulted and thought that there was something fundamentally wrong with me. Eventually I learnt to turn my confusion, hatred and anger inside. This led to me developing anorexia nervosa. For a while, things were going well. Starving myself gave me something to focus on. I got positive attention from peers because of how much weight I'd lost.

Food and weight loss became an overwhelming obsession that helped me block out everything else that was going on in my life. Fortunately, some small part of me deep down knew that what I was doing was dangerous and unhealthy. However (as a current volunteer for Eating Disorders Victoria) I can not stress enough how rare this is! It is more common for people with eating disorders to hide their disorder and not be proactive in seeking help. Therefore, the fact that I was brave enough to ask for help at the age of 16 makes what happened to me even more disturbing.

The first person I saw for help with my eating disorder was a school counsellor. She looked me up and down and stated that “judging by the state of you” my eating didn’t seem to be much of a concern. She based this on the fact that I wasn’t yet underweight and didn’t “look” like I had an eating disorder. What she didn’t know (or ask) was that I had lost over 15kg in the space of 2 months and had no intention of stopping. However, she was concerned about my score on a depression test. This was the first time someone had actually given me something like a K10 and realised that I had suicidal ideology. She advised that I see a counsellor at Headspace in Geelong. I took myself to Headspace where again I tried to reach out for help with my eating disorder. The counsellor again looked me up and down and told me to “go home and try and eat a bit more then”. She also minimised conflict with my friends and said things like “have you tried just not talking to them” which (as a youth worker myself now) I feel is completely unrealistic advice for a teenager. I stopped trying to seek help after that.

Two months later, my mother approached me concerned about my weight. She stated that I looked gaunt in the face. A month after that, I was referred to the local eating disorder service where I was finally diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and severe depression. The psychiatrist and psychologist there advised that I go home and begin the recommended treatment program for anorexia, the Maudsley Family Therapy approach. With the level of conflict within my home (which wasn’t assessed prior to this recommendation being given), the intervention was nothing short of a disaster. Within two weeks of starting treatment, my mother walked in on me [REDACTED], attempting to hang myself [REDACTED]. I also had the first of many cuts on my stomach as I had started self-harming.

I was taken back to see my psychiatrist. I don’t understand the decision that was made around my care at this point. My mother had just found me trying to hang myself. Instead of referring me for psychiatric care, my psychiatrist transferred me to the children’s ward of our local hospital. I said I didn’t want to go. I was told I didn’t have a choice. However, I was not placed in a psychiatric wing of the hospital, just in the general children’s ward. The staff here knew how to tend to my needs medically. They ensured that I ate enough and started to put weight back on. They did not know how to manage my mental health. This is an extremely common part of treatment for eating disorders. There is a medical component (the need to respond to the person’s dire weight loss) and the psychiatric component (the mental health symptoms that are contributing to the eating behaviours). Commonly, there is a lack of integration between these aspects of treatment. As an ambassador for Eating Disorders Victoria, I continue to speak to patients who report similar experiences to what I am about to describe when they are admitted to medical wards for treatment of their physical symptoms.

I was taken to hospital by my parents highly distressed. I was screaming, hitting things and lashing out because I was so scared and didn’t know what was happening to me. I felt like I was being punished for being so sad. I had not eaten much for six months. My very first meal on the children’s ward was two weetbix, two slices of toast, a banana, a yoghurt, milk and a piece of fruit. I was told that if I didn’t eat it all, I would have a tube placed down my throat. I ate it. This was the ultimatum I was given at every meal for the next three weeks. Food had been my only way of keeping all my other overwhelming emotions at bay. Losing weight was the only thing that made me feel good

about myself. Without the only coping strategy I had, all the things I had been trying to suppress came up. I would cry and scream and shake on the floor of the hospital room. I would be rocking back and forward, hyperventilating, having a full panic attack. I would cut myself with anything I could get my hands on - self harm quickly became my new coping mechanism. The responses I got from some of the nursing staff on that ward have haunted me to this day. I was told to get off the floor when I was hyperventilating and "stop being so silly". I had no-one show me how to respond to all my overwhelming emotions differently or provide any support during mealtimes which were so challenging for me. I had a nurse just sit and babysit me while I ate, often just tuning out and watching the television while in the room with me. The nurses who did help me have stayed in my memory eight years later. They talked to me. Asked me about my interests and hobbies. Laughed with me. Treated me like I was a human being.

I became so overwhelmed on the children's ward that I eventually disclosed to my psychiatrist that I had an imminent plan to drink all of the hand sanitisers and any other chemicals I could get my hands on in that room in order to kill myself. A care team meeting was held where a group of around 15 adults (allied health professionals, nurses, doctors and my parents) decided what would happen to me. I walked into that room terrified, with all those faces turned towards me and the spotlight on me.

I was then transferred to a Youth psychiatric hospital. This was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. I was technically a "voluntary" patient because I "agreed" to go and signed the paperwork. However, I was told that I would be made involuntary if I did not agree, so regardless I was really made to go there against my will. I was transferred overnight. When I arrived, I had a GP poke and prod me with various tests (e.g. reflex tests, making me walk in a straight line across the room on a dotted line) and instruments and was then taken to a ward room. I began screaming and crying and rocking on the floor hyperventilating. I did not understand what was happening to me. I didn't know how long I would be there or what would happen to me while I was there. Again, instead of being provided with any comfort, support or strategies to regulate myself, I was told to "get off the floor and breathe properly" by staff.

I survived my experience in the youth psychiatric ward by using my default response - dissociation. I numbed out to what was happening and blocked out everything around me. I was discharged a week after admission where I went back home and my parents continued to try and feed me to get me to regain weight. I continued to spiral out of control with my mental health. The self-harm got worse and worse. The suicidal ideation got worse and worse. The counselling I was receiving was basically just me touching base every week and saying how bad things were. I do not recall being given any strategies about how to self-regulate or anyone debriefing me about how scared and traumatised I was by my experiences in hospital. My parents could not manage me in the home any longer because of how suicidal I was. There was constant conflict. My psychiatrist suggested that I be admitted to the adult psychiatric hospital in my home city. There were no beds in the youth psychiatric ward and the youth psychiatric ward was also far away. I wasn't made involuntary to the adult ward. However, I felt I had limited choice because I felt like my parents needed respite and I needed help. I agreed to be admitted, as, naively, I thought I was going into hospital to receive help.

I was admitted to the main ward of an adult psychiatric hospital at the age of 17. Within two days of my admission, I had seen things that have scarred me for a lifetime. I saw people crying and screaming in anguish on the floors. I saw people being dragged away and restrained by medical staff. I saw people self harming in front of me. I was offered illicit drugs by other patients in the hospital. However, what left me most scarred was the response I got from nursing staff. I had nurses come into my room and tell me I was lucky I wasn't born 50 years earlier because self-harm and suicide used to be illegal and I could have been charged with it. I would go up to the counter, just wanting to

talk to someone. I would wait over thirty minutes while nurses walked back and forward past me completely ignoring me (and other patients who were also waiting). When someone finally did see me, they wouldn't talk to me when I said I was anxious and needed help. Instead, the first response was to give me Valium which made me so sick and nauseous I would then spend the rest of the day lying down. When I said I didn't want Valium I was pressured and pressured by nursing staff until I complied and took it.

Eventually I was transferred off the main ward, as I think they wanted to protect me from a known paedophile and from some of the other adults. I was placed in the dementia unit instead. At the age of 17, my only company was with five elderly people with severe dementia and/or psychosis. I thought I was crazy. I just sat in my room, not eating, barely drinking, and exercising on the spot as much as I could. Nurses came in and just said things like "you really should eat. You're being silly". There was nothing to do in the hospital. Very few (if any) programs, few activities for people to engage in and most of our possessions were taken from us. In the end the decision was made to discharge me after three weeks because I had lost close to 5kg.

My parents had private health insurance and I was eventually transferred to a private hospital for an inpatient eating disorder program. My experience of this program was positive overall. There were day programs to attend. The majority of the staff understood eating disorders and there was help and support available at nearly all times. For the first time in my journey, I was given some strategies to begin to manage the symptoms of the eating disorder and I started to make some progress. I am lucky that my parents were wealthy enough to afford private hospital cover. If not, I don't know how I would have received the support I needed. I had six x 40 day admissions in this program and I do not believe I would be alive today without it.

There were times when my co-morbid depression got too difficult for the private hospital to manage, as they were not an acute psychiatric hospital, and I was transferred back to the adult psychiatric hospital. The two times this happened were two of the most traumatic experiences of my life. For the first, I was taken by ambulance to the hospital where I was entered through the emergency ward and was assessed by triage. I had a nurse at triage tell me that "you're young. You're only 17. Why do you want to kill yourself?". I had not yet disclosed to anyone that I had been sexually assaulted. She based her judgement of me purely on my age, dismissing how I was feeling and making me feel like I was being a selfish, moody teenager. I was taken to the dementia ward again. Here I began pacing up and down, highly distressed. I [REDACTED] (a desperate attempt to take my life). I was caught in the act. Rather than being provided with any counselling, de-escalation, comfort or help, I was grabbed by both the arms and marched to seclusion. While being locked into a small cell, I was told that I was "hostile" for yelling in fear at the nurses, that I was "being over dramatic" as I screamed and screamed in fear and began hyperventilating. I was forced to take medication I did not want to take. I was told that it would be forced down my throat if I refused to take it.

I recognise that I needed help and that I probably needed to be secluded for my own safety. However, what I take issue with is the following; at no point did anyone try and comfort me, explain to me what was happening and why, debrief with me afterwards, even ask me if I was okay or why I was so upset or what was going on for me that was making me feel this way. Since this time, I have been suicidal many times. All it has taken to calm me down and help me survive, is someone checking in with me, asking me what's wrong and just hearing me, helping me come up with a safety plan to learn to keep myself safe. None of this was offered to me that night. The default response was to lock me in a cell, drug me and allow me to scream myself hoarse for over an hour until eventually I fell asleep. I continued to have nightmares about being locked in that room for over 7

years afterwards. I felt like an animal. I do not feel that at any point I was treated with dignity, like a child (which I was) or even as a human being.

The second transfer to the adult psychiatric ward was also highly traumatic. Again, I was seen by highly insensitive staff at triage who told me I was selfish for saying I wanted to kill myself. Despite being actively suicidal, the triage worker took me from the emergency department through the back of the hospital to the psychiatric wing. I did not fancy being locked in a room again, so I took the opportunity to run. My plan was to run to the nearest train station [REDACTED]. My dad was there. He chased after me and tackled me to restrain me. He then helped march me to the seclusion area where I spent the next few hours. It is quite possible that I would have been able to run away and would have completed my suicide plan if he wasn't there. The triage nurse who had accompanied me simply stood back and stated "I knew that would happen." She did nothing else.

Back at the private psychiatric hospital I was treated much better but comments from some nurses still contributed to my sense that I was a monster. Comments such as "you should just look in the mirror and go and smile more. You're bringing everyone else around you down". Mid way through my treatment, I told my psychiatrist that I had been sexually assaulted. My psychiatrist's response was to ask "are you sure he meant it in a sexual way?" Being 17 at the time, traumatised and highly confused, I did not know how to answer this. My disclosure was never followed up on.

I recovered from anorexia at the age of 19. I think this was largely due to the support I received at the private psychiatric hospital. I began seeing a psychologist privately and slowly got better. Partly, I was motivated to recover because I never wanted to go back to hospital again! I never wanted people to make decisions about where to put me, never force me to take medication again or shut me in a room. The psychologist I saw privately charged \$220 an hour. Again, I was only able to see her because of my parents money. Medicare only fund 10 sessions per year for eating disorders and my parents were paying thousands of dollars for my recovery. This is not a luxury everyone can afford.

While I had recovered from anorexia, the impacts of my experiences in hospital continued to haunt me. I had been made to feel like I was less than human. The trauma and dissociation got worse, and the self harm and suicidal ideation never went away. This led to me being highly vulnerable in future relationships. Shortly after my time in hospital I met a man who was easily able to convince me that I wasn't worthy of care or support because of my mental illnesses. I was so used to being spoken down to, belittled, degraded and patronised in hospital that he was easily able to manipulate me and control me without my even realising. My trauma was further compounded when he raped me.

I continued to receive support for my depression and anxiety until I was 23, seeing a few different psychologists. No one considered the impact that my childhood, hospitalisation and abusive relationship had had on my mental health until I was 24. In the end, I self-referred to a worker specialising in family violence at the recommendation of a friend. Within a year of working with this person, I finally healed. I was sensitively guided and supported to process the traumatic memories (including those from hospital) and limit their ongoing impact on my life. I now am happy to report that I am free of the impact of any mental illness and am doing everything I can to support others going through hard times. I am a highly active member of the community and advocate for young people who do not have a voice throughout my various roles.

There are so many things that could have meant I am not here today to tell my story or be helping others. If my parents did not have private health insurance, I do not know how I would have received the support I needed to recover from anorexia. If there was not a clinic for eating disorders in my

own home town, I don't know how I would have accessed treatment. If my family hadn't been able to pay for my psychology appointments I do not know how I would have got through the initial stages of my recovery from anorexia. As a university student I was unable to pay for my continued psychology appointments as I needed far more than the 10 Medicare funded sessions per year to recover. In fact, I have only fully been able to recover from post traumatic stress disorder and my dissociative disorder because of linking to my free local family violence service. Before I received their support, my mental illnesses were still being conceptualised as a problem inherent within me, not as a response to trauma.

As a social worker, this is a response that i still see is very common. I work with young children in residential and foster care who have experienced significant abuse and trauma. They go to paediatricians, doctors and psychologists and commonly come out with a list of diagnoses (reactive attachment disorder, ADHD, depression, anxiety, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder etc). This does not help with their often already significantly poor self-esteem. While I understand there is a place for diagnosis (and that not every mental illness is the result of traumatic experiences), I think that in order to support people properly, our systems need to go much further in understanding how people's symptoms come about in the first place and how to stop people from continually re-entering the system. It took ten years for someone to even ask me what had happened during my childhood. All I can ask is that you take my story as the smallest example of how inappropriate care in the mental health system can compound a person's experience of trauma. I consider myself the luckiest person to still be alive today, happy and well, and able to give back to others. Statistically I am an anomaly. The recovery rates from anorexia are horrendously low. To fully recover from the effects of childhood trauma and sexual assault is also rare. Without a better mental health care system, this will continue to be the case.