



THE ART OF GOOD HEALTH

Most of us have, at some time, felt in low spirits. At one end of the scale, the cause might be a failed relationship, the death of a family member, problems at work, disagreements with friends, financial worries, health concerns, being a long term carer for another.

Or it might be as basic as tackling computer problems when a deadline is looming, being forgetful and feeling annoyed, coping with a child's tantrum or plain old Monday work blues.

It's easy to say, "I feel depressed" in these circumstances, but most of us bounce back.

But for many Australians, bouncing back is not that easy. According to the Bureau of Statistics, one in five Australians suffers a mental health problem each year. And there is no simple explanation or remedy.

At least help is at hand with the use of psychological services in Australia covered under Medicare to cover up to 12 visits to a psychologist and other allied health professionals. And GPs can prepare a mental health plan for people who need support.

Interestingly, there seems to be no major increase in the incidence of mental health in the Australian population, but the costs are growing exponentially. According to a recent report in the Sydney Morning Herald, when the Medicare scheme "Better Access to Mental Health" was announced in 2006, it was estimated to cost taxpayers \$538 million over 5 years, but the cost is already estimated at \$787 million.

But don't be misled by these figures. Each decade, the Bureau of Statistics surveys mental health in the Australian population, and in 2007 the rate of mental illness was similar to that in 1997.

What is clear is that, while there may not be a dramatic change in the incidence of mental health statistics, people are now recognising that they need help and that there is increasing acceptance that it is okay to admit to a frailty and seek expert advice.

The stigma associated with mental health issues is also lessening as people talk about mental health issues more openly and an increasing number of high profile people publicly declare their battle with depression and other conditions.

Liberal politician Andrew Robb is the most recent in a long line of public identities such

as John Brogden, Jon Konrads and others who have gone public.

This is a positive development, but what I would like to see are more stories from people 'in the street' who can guide, encourage and inspire ways for people to maintain and enhance their mental health.

The following words come from a retired Senior Police Officer, who was working in Forensic Crime. Admittedly, his experiences were extreme, but he discovered the restorative powers of creating art, an activity which is open to everyone.

"Day after day my life was consumed by killings – distress and gruesome sights of abused-torn and bloodied bodies until I finally began to put up emotional barriers that eventually led to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"I became deeply depressed – I felt rejected – ashamed – embarrassed and guilty for no apparent reason and did not want to mix socially or in any other way with anybody outside of my immediate family. I knew I had to be (social) to get better, in addition to the right medication and psychological care so that I could be stabilised. I had an interest in painting (oil painting) even though I had never picked up a paintbrush.

"Since I commenced painting in 2006, my art has become my inoculation for the rejections and stresses I have suffered over the previous years. Although I still have my off days every now and then, my art has helped me slowly cope with disappointments – rejections – depression and helped me to come to the realisation of self belief and confidence and a feeling of calm and comfort.

"This is not being Pollyanna but rather using the opportunity I have to channel my art and emotions to help stabilise my life ahead. I realise I still have a long way to go and may never completely recover from the gruesome emotional sights which are deeply embedded in my mind, but my art is one lifeline I believe I can no longer do without."

Margret Meagher is Executive Director of Arts and Health Australia which is convening The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing international conference in Port Macquarie in November 2009. Details telephone 02 6583 5040 or 0416 641 482, email info@artsandhealth.org or log on to www.artsandhealth.org