

MENTAL ILLNESS: BRAVERY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Transtorno mental: Enfrentando bravamente as adversidades

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ABSTRACT: Until recently, sufferers of mental health conditions faced not only the stigma attached to their illness but a critical lack of support in many Australian workplaces. Author James Hill has experienced the debilitating effects of severe mental illness. While fortunate to finally receive the help that allowed him to embark on a journey of recovery and return to employment, he quickly recognized the myriad of challenges that face mental health sufferers in the workplace, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industries. This narrative explores how the author has drawn upon his own experience to become a mental health advocate, working to create a blueprint for reform around workplace mental health. The paper follows how workplace programs of peer support have been successfully initiated, moreover, how a lived experience lens has been able to redefine workplace strategies and effectively deliver suicide prevention training and mental health education. By subverting conventional notions of masculinity and suffering that have long contributed to the epidemic of male suicides, the author continues to create realistic and sustainable change by openly using personal experiences to combat the stigma which shrouds the topic.

Keywords: Mental health. Stigma. Mental illness. Recovery. Lived experience.

RESUMO: Na Austrália até recentemente, as pessoas com transtorno mental enfrentavam não apenas o estigma associado à sua doença, mas também uma intensa falta de apoio em muitos locais de trabalho. James Hill, autor deste artigo, experienciou os efeitos debilitantes de uma doença mental grave. Embora eu tenha finalmente tido a sorte de receber ajuda que me permitiu embarcar em minha jornada de *recovery* e retorno ao trabalho, percebi rapidamente os inúmeros desafios enfrentados no local de trabalho por pessoas que tem um transtorno mental, particularmente em indústrias tradicionalmente dominadas por homens. Esta narrativa apresenta como o autor utilizou da sua própria experiência e militância para criar um plano de ação em saúde mental no seu local de trabalho. A narrativa descreve como os programas de apoio de pares

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foram iniciados com sucesso, além disso, como que a percepção de experiência vivida ajudou a redefinir as estratégias de treinamento de prevenção do suicídio e educação em saúde mental de maneira eficaz no local de trabalho. Subvertendo noções convencionais de masculinidade e sofrimento que há muito contribuem para a epidemia de suicídios entre homens. O autor continua a promover mudanças realistas e sustentáveis, usando abertamente sua experiência pessoal para combater o estigma em saúde mental.

Palavras-Chave: Saúde mental. Estigma. Transtorno mental. Recovery. Experiência vivida.

1 INTRODUCTION

The internal mental battleground that faces so many can easily go undetected. That was true for me, I had built a hardened exterior that was impenetrable. Stereotypical images of what men should be formed this hardened shell from a young age. The internal pride of showing no emotion pushed me further into the darkness until I reached a fork in the road. My story has taken me from a place of loneliness to a place of connection like no other. The development of a full-time mental health advocacy role has begun to smash apart the stigma surrounding talking about mental health and mental illness. Sharing my experience of mental illness, developing strategies, and providing education have helped so many navigate a path that was once dark and lonely.

From childhood, I had an ingrained view of what it meant to be a male in the world, mostly gained from the most influential male in my life, my Grandfather. He came from a tough generation that had fought in a war; humour was the only emotion I ever saw him express. I grew up watching superheroes who were strong brave males, always saving the day, shedding no tears, and who never gave up in the face of adversity. Toughen up, be strong, be a man were the voices that shaped me. After leaving school I began work in the electricity industry, I quickly established that anger and humour were the only socially accepted emotions displayed by males. For years I experienced internal frustration and confusion because I was living with an undiagnosed mental illness. Weeks of depression would descend upon me from nowhere, I felt alone and that no-one could ever understand how I felt. I couldn't understand why I felt so sad when there was nothing to be 'sad' about.

The crippling ever-present voice telling me I wasn't good enough, the superhero perception of always being the fixer never the broken, pushed me to

believe I wasn't strong enough to deserve my place in the world. Deep down I knew something wasn't right, but my lack of education and naivety about mental illness served as the perfect barrier between me and the help I needed. I had reached rock bottom, I found myself sitting looking at the ocean wishing the waves would take me away and end the pain. It was at this point the biggest turning point of my life happened, a moment that would lead to change not only my life, but that of so many others. I reached for my phone, an advert for a depression and anxiety test was there staring at me. Subconsciously I knew the right thing to do was to take the test. However, I took the test from the standpoint of ruling this out, because 'people like me' didn't endure illnesses such as depression and anxiety. The test pointed me to professional help. I had reached a fork in the road, thankfully I chose to overcome my pride and reached out for help. My diagnosis of mental illness brought on feelings of shame and weakness, the start of a war that was going to require immense strength to win. My ability to be honest was silenced by the stigma surrounding the topic. I advised work that I had a physical illness and required time off, I found this far easier and less painful than allowing the shameful truth to pass my lips. Admitting to myself 'people like me' could have mental illness was the first hurdle to overcome, it was confronting, yet necessary. An inner strength had begun to form, opening the door to honesty, firstly with family, then friends, and finally my workplace. Each step was an internal battle, but day by day I was getting stronger. I found the more I spoke out loud about it the less hold it had over me. I reflected on that 'fork in the road' moment, questioning how many more people were unknowingly heading there?

A fire had been lit; a light had been shone in the darkness. I understood the barriers that stood in the way and something needed to be done. Thankfully one attribute I had clung to from my childhood superheroes was to never give up. I understood the signs of a developing mental health problem, I knew where to go for support and the barriers that stood in the way, I understood what interventions could be effective. My mission was to share this insight because I didn't want anyone else to find themselves in a position wishing the ocean would take them away. My purpose in life was now mental health advocacy. I began a volunteer role with the mental health charity Beyondblue (BEYONDBLUE, 2020), sharing my story in settings such as workplaces and social clubs. This vulnerability began

to open the door for audiences to comprehend mental ill-health and understand how to access support. However, for me this wasn't enough, I recognised that in the workplace there was still a stigma (SUPERFRIEND, 2019) surrounding the topic of mental health with a silence that needed to be broken. Together with an equally passionate colleague, a proposition was presented to our forward-thinking proactive CEO, to create a full-time position of Mental Health Advocate. Thankfully, he believed in this passion, and in his own words he "got out of the way". The position didn't come with a handbook, just the freedom to create a culture change. With more than 7500 employees spread across 1,852,642 square kilometres (QUEENSLAND, 2020) the task would be huge, but the purpose was simple, start a conversation that could save a life. Face to face connection with employees and sharing my story broke down so many barriers. Those who had once felt alone, as I once did, now had a partner who understood the challenges; someone to help them navigate the path. This peer to peer connection was bolstered further when our organisation assisted in a pilot suicide prevention program. MATES in Energy, which is the 'first empirically supported suicide intervention tailored to the energy industry' (ROSS et al. 2020) gave me the opportunity to deliver this education across the state, giving all employees the opportunity to attend. This formed the first stage of a strategy that I was enlisted to help develop. The second incorporates delivering formal mental health education from a lived experience perspective. This concept helps employees at all levels of the organisation recognise developing mental health problems and how to effectively assist. Moreover, spending time in all departments with employees personally, and having genuine empathetic conversations assisted me to understand the unique challenges faced within the workplace. This information helped develop a mental health risk assessment for the organisation, starting the formation of individualised departmental mental health strategies. The final stage of the strategy involves sharing an understanding about wellbeing, incorporating a concept I had developed named "MENS", standing for Mindfulness, Exercise, Nutrition, and Sleep. Four pillars that can give stability like roots on a tree, these have become non-negotiable aspects of my life, because just like a tree I never know when life will throw 'storms' at me. However, daily maintenance of these roots strengthens my ability to withstand the challenges living with mental illness can bring, and weather the 'storms'. My passion and

dedication of using my experiences with mental illness have built a connection like no other with people, earning me the Queensland Individual Contribution to Mental Health Award (Openminds Australia 2020,). Additionally, our organisation won the Queensland Large Workplace Mental Health Award based on the Mental Health Advocate role and implementation of the MATES program (Openminds Australia 2020). Furthermore, invitations to assist with national mental health projects, media interviews and keynote speeches on my experience have helped me turn darkness into a light for others to follow.

In conclusion, the stereotypical male image which was portrayed to me from a young age led to feelings of inadequacy. The lack of knowledge about mental illness and who may be affected served as a barrier to understanding how to recognise problems, and how to address them. The journey into the darkness where I felt alone was essential. All this experience was the kindling for the fire within. A fire that would bring light to so many others who didn't understand, who felt alone waiting for the waves to swallow them. The purpose of helping others fuelled the fire, the belief in this desire by an insightful CEO saw the creation of a full-time job. The Mental Health Advocate position can connect with employees providing a lived experience perspective, while additionally delivering educational foundations. Breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health by sharing a story, empowering others to speak up and connect with support has been the driving force. I know I am not a superhero; however, refusing to give up in the face of adversity is one attribute I am proud to have.

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