

Submission: Mental Health Inquiry
Productivity Commission
4 April 2019

I would firstly like to thank you for allowing people the opportunity to share our comments and submissions. I want to share my high school experience with a mental illness with you.

In 2008 during year 8 I was officially diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Having anxiety has affected me in many ways including panic attacks weekly; I had to take time off school because of how unwell I was and the many sleepless nights due to my racing mind. I found not going to school difficult as I loved school.

Even though I loved going to school, I was also getting bullied as well because I was different. The bully would spread rumours about me and told my friends not to hang out with me which made my anxiety worse and made me more isolated.

I wanted to move schools to be with my other friend that I went to primary school with, but this was when things took a turn for the worse.

I moved from a Public Secondary College to a Catholic Secondary College; I found the first term difficult as I found it hard to settle in as it was very different from old school. I didn't get a choice of what classes I could do. In my old

school, I could as classes were based on different interests and you got to choose what type of English, maths, science and art etc. you wanted to do.

I didn't realise at the time I was more of an interest-based learner, so it was hard for me to lose the ability to choose and have control over my learning.

During the start of term 2, I was diagnosed with Depression, and I often felt Depressed, had little or no mood or feeling at all. I was often fatigued, and I found getting through the school day quite exhausting.

Even though the school should have known I had mental health difficulties, anxiety and I was an "at risk" student from documents passed on from my old school and what my mum and I told them at my first meeting with them before I started at the school. I often felt that I was not being supported by most teachers. They hardly asked how I was feeling or how I was going.

However, I did feel like I had support from the Integration Aides, and I felt like they cared about me a lot. One of my friends also got me into an after-school homework club that she was a part of so I could get support to complete homework and any class work I was having difficulty with. I often struggled to finish my schoolwork, homework and I often had my work ungraded because I failed to finish it. This was all happening at a time when I was battling Clinical Depression and Anxiety, which often made me have little to no energy, and I often had a hard time concentrating and

thinking. My grades went from being good to being the worst they have ever been in my schooling history.

Which made me feel like a failure, and I was quickly losing my love of learning. All of these things made my Anxiety and Depression grow worse and have greater impact on my life.

I was often single out from teachers because I failed to complete work, I didn't join in group work, and I usually didn't join in in Pe class as I was often trying to preserve what little energy I had to get through the school day. When I was singled out, I was bullied because bullies knew I was very sick and used what the teachers said about me against me to intimidate me.

I was told about the things I couldn't do or things I was not good at more times then the times I was told about things I could do well and things I was good at.

This resulted in me having a very low self-esteem, self-image and negative talk and thoughts about myself.

I was feeling suicided and had suicidal thoughts due to what happened to me in year 9. In term four my family and I decided the best thing for my health and wellbeing was for me to drop out of high school. As my suicidal thoughts were growing each day and the chance I was going to act on my thoughts were becoming increasingly worrying.

We also wanted to give myself the best chance of healing from my experience, and we hoped that I would one day get my love for learning back again.

It wasn't long afterwards that I started researching about the education system and about how they support or didn't support students with a mental illness. I also researched abuse in the education system. I found and learnt about other young people's experiences and realise I wasn't the only person who has had a bad experience in education more specifically high school.

The following are some of the things I found out while researching mental health and abuse in the education system

- According to a survey done by the charity Beyond Blue in 2015 47 per cent of Principals and Teachers did not have the time to dedicate to achieving positive mental health outcomes.
- According to an article from the Sydney Morning Herald on the 8/4/2018 misconduct (not sexual) is on the rise in public schools. There was one case reported in 2008 to 12 cases reported in 2018 in New South Wales.

In the years that followed I decided to study Early Childhood Education and Care. I learnt about abuse while studying and I realised what they were saying about emotional abuse sounded a lot like how I was treated like in school. As I experienced isolation, degradation and the teachers and students bullied me.

My experience has inspired and motivated me to study and work in the education industry so that I can help and support students that are going through a similar thing that I went

through in High School. I hope I can help students have a more positive education experience than I did.

Even though I left it all behind as I got better thanks to the help and support, I got from many counsellors and psychologists, and I also started healing from my experiences. The following are things I struggled with in the years that followed due to my experience.

- I had negative self-talk that was hard to silence in the year that followed
- I thought I deserved what happened to me.
- I used to bash myself up and told myself that I was a failure because I drop out of high school and I wouldn't amount to anything or achieve my goals. This happened to me for eight years before I was able to quiet down the thoughts and replace them with more positive self-talk. The negative thoughts are now rare and only happen once or twice a year.

Since 2009 I have healed quite a lot from my experiences and My experience has inspired and motivated me to study and work in the education industry. I now work in a high school where I help and support students that are going through a similar thing that I went through in High School. I hope I can help students have a more positive educational experience than I did.

I have noticed while working in the education industry that students wellbeing and mental health are taken more seriously and there is more support for students.

However, I have also noticed a lack of knowledge that people working in the education industry have around mental illness and the effects it has on students and the student's ability to do well in school.

It is excellent that mental health in schools is becoming more of a priority and people that work in the sector are gaining more knowledge about mental health.

In the future, I would like to see in regards to students mental wellbeing all staff in schools have compulsory yearly training on mental health and illness and how it affects students they work with. I feel this will give people that work with young people a more in-depth knowledge and understanding of how mental illness affects students and how to it affects their learning. In regards to abuse and bullying, I would also like to see compulsory training around abuse in schools, how other teachers can report and the legislation around it. In the future, I would also like to see an inquiry done into the abuse in the education system so that we can all share our experiences. I hope more importantly that it will stop misconduct and abuse from steadily increasing and make the education industry more positive for all people that are involved in the industry.

Thanks once again for allowing me to have a voice in the mental health inquiry. I hope one day shortly we will start to see more positives and more understanding around mental health and illness, especially in the Education System.

References

Number of teachers fired from public schools on the rise

<https://www.smh.com.au/education/number-of-teachers-fired-from-public-schools-on-the-rise-20180403-p4z7k7.html>

We don't have time for mental health: teachers

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/we-dont-have-time-for-mental-health-teachers-20150501-1mxtk2.html>