MENTAL illness is hard to recognise – even in close family and friends — because it is an invisible illness.

But, all-too-often, it is also silent.

Almost half of all Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

But despite widespread efforts to tackle deep-rooted stigma, many, tragically, will still have to battle feelings of shame and failure when opening up about their struggles.

This is no truer than in rural and regional areas such as Echuca-Moama.

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The suffering of others would prove too much for Stephen.

IKE countless farmers across the region, Bamawm’s Stephen Hawken knows the hopelessness of facing another day without rain, another month without money and another year buckling under the weight of ever-soaring water prices.

But it was witnessing the sheer despair of those around him that left him on the dunes of hopelessness.

“Because it doesn’t matter how hard they work today, it doesn’t matter how good the cows milk – there’s no way known they can make this work,” he said.

“It’s this feeling of being at the bottom of a well and you can’t climb up and the harder you try, the deeper the hole is getting on you.”

“My hometown has been decimated by a man-made drought.

“Watching family and friends suffer, you can see it in their eyes, you can hear it in their voice.

“They’re always in tears, and I know I’m doing this for them. Probably making them suffer the most as a person.”

Although his struggles began after a messy divorce and his farm being devastated by floods in 2011, Stephen said his mental health reached rock bottom last Christmas when he was suddenly estranged from his two middle children.

Always a fighter, he knew something was up when he started running in the cold, dark, dark room.

“I don’t want to suffer, I don’t think this is a weak thing, I don’t think people who suffer from depression are weak at all.

“Let’s do something about this. Let’s not be ashamed to open up and ask for help.

“Because it doesn’t matter how you gotta do, that’s what you gotta do.”

Months down the track, Stephen is learning to care for his mental health, finding his feet in Echuca-Moama, watching for any warning signs.

“Reaching out for help is a sign of strength,” Stephen said.

“It shows you’re making a decision that you don’t want to be like this.

“I want to suffer, I don’t deserve to suffer.

“I’m a father, I’m a grandfather, I’m a husband, I’m a son, I’m a farmer – I’m all these things.

“And I’m good at them. I have a lot to offer.”

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IKE far too many women, Moama’s Shannee McCoy has had to sit in a doctor’s office and hear the horrific words: “you have breast cancer.”
Unsure what the future would hold, unsure if she’d even have a future, she then had to return home and tell her family before being plunged into the bewildering world of chemo and doctor’s appointments as her body battled aggressive stage three cancer.
When she was finally given the all-clear, Shannee thought her battle was over. But it had only begun.
Four or five months later I fell in a hole – because you don’t come out the same person that you went in,” she said.
“You’re in a cocoon while you’re going through it. You’re in a safe place of appointment and people supporting you and telling you where you need to be and what’s supposed to be happening. Your days and your weeks are all planned for you.
“But when it’s over you’re just left. Not in a mean way. It’s more that you’ve got to try to find yourself – but the new person you are.”
Looking back, Shannee says she put a barrier around her feelings while she was going through treatment.
“I think I was trying to take care of everybody else,” she said.
“But eventually I got to a place where I couldn’t move forward by myself anymore and I went to the hospital and saw a counsellor.”
In addition to seeking mental health support, Shannee began making changes in her life.
Like moving out of the house that, while filled with happy memories, had a dark cloud over it from that treatment period. She also began journaling, yoga and meditation.
“Having five children and being a mum that’s young and in school they didn’t understand what was going on at the time,” she reflected.
“When a word was suicide I couldn’t fake a smile. I was exhausted and sick. I was on and off medication – be another tragic suicide statistic. I couldn’t pretend anymore. I couldn’t say, ‘I’m okay,’ because I was so physically and mentally ill.”
But gradually her anxiety grew.
“You’re in a cocoon while you’re going through it. You’re in a safe place of appointment and people supporting you and telling you where you need to be and what’s supposed to be happening. Your days and your weeks are all planned for you.”
“I didn’t really know what was wrong with me because I was so young and in school they didn’t really talk about mental health as much,” she said.
Her mum took her to the doctor, where Molly was diagnosed with anxiety, given prescription medication and directed to see a psychologist.
But gradually her anxiety spiralled to the point it morphed into depression and she was put on more medication.
I was so young and in school they didn’t really talk about mental health as much. It’s played a massive role in my life and it still does,” she said.
“I’d sit in my room and would hate going anywhere. There’s been times mum’s had to force me out of my room and I’d be in there crying,” she said.
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Sharnee began making changes in her life.
“I did a lot of internal stuff for myself and had a lot of therapy,” she said.
“I would just have breakdown after breakdown, even when sitting down and doing nothing.”
But seven years on, the 19-year-old has learnt how to handle her mental health.
In addition to psychology, she’s been on and off medication – although she finds she feels better without it.
Exercise has been the biggest thing – it’s rare to see Molly in her gym gear, because Molly’s not just running, she’s running for her life.
The faster she goes, the further she gets away from the demons that have plagued her since she was 12.
Still plague her every day.
“It’s played a massive role in my life and it still does,” she said.
“I read simple things like answering phone calls, calling people and I can’t anywhere by myself and stuff, that makes me so nervous.
“Even with work, I work every day and still get anxious before I go to work.”
I went to the hospital and saw a counsellor.”
Sharnee’s thoughts about what might save her sanity and his life.
And in the subsequent years he began to make small steps towards restoration.
From smaller changes, such as altering his diet and attending a gym to the crucial, big-ticket ones including opening up about other things about his emotions and – biggest of all – repairing his relationship with his parents, who he’d struggled to forgive since discovering the truth about his father.
Ryan said his newfound Christian faith played a crucial role in this healing.
He was just 24 but life’s short journey had taken Echuca’s Molly provides a lesson for us all.
Tyne Bruns walks into a room, she’s all ease and friendliness, her infectious smile quickly spreading to those around her.
It’s hard to imagine that sometimes, for her, just walking into a room is a struggle, her hands shaking, mouth going dry, heart beating a mile a minute.
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Echuca's Sarah Vickers was sitting in her hospital room, holding her newborn baby – and crying.

She'd been crying for days. Days which were supposed to be the most joyful of any new mother's life but which were, for her, a living nightmare.

"I didn't want Jazmyn in my room, I didn't want her near me. I didn't feel that she was my child. I'd be super emotional, I'd be standing over her cot, screaming for no reason," she said.

"I'd go near her and she'd cry and I'd be like 'well, what am I doing wrong.'"

Things only deteriorated when they went home, the subsequent six months torture for Sarah.

"I'd sleep through the night and not hear her crying, I'd be super emotional, I'd be standing over her cot screaming for no reason," she said.

"There were signs there but I wasn't willing to accept something was wrong." Sarah felt deep shame and inadequacy as she struggled with new motherhood.

Made worse by the pressures she felt from others around her.

"You never know if you're doing the right thing. And I was scared, I was constantly scared that I was going to hurt her, that I couldn't look after her," she said.

"Unfortunately there's still a stigma that you need to be perfect."

"If you feel something's not right, just ask for help. Don't be ashamed, just makes everything better."

"I'd had a really bad morning and it was difficult to grasp why I was still crying."

"And did something she'll never forget – but wishes she could."

"I'd have a really bad morning and afternoon with Jaz," she recalled.

"It was a slow progression, but through talking to other struggling mums Sarah began to heal."

"I started to realise I could do this, I am a good mum, I just need that little bit of help to get me through," she said.

"Years down the track, Sarah says being a mum to Jazmyn has been the best thing in her life."

"There have been times where I've wanted to walk away," she admitted, tears in her eyes.

"But there were times I'd look at her and she just makes everything better."

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"But there were times I'd look at her and she just makes everything better."

"If you feel something's not right, just ask for help. Don't be ashamed, just makes everything better."

"I didn't want her near me, I just could not cope," she said.

"I didn't want Jazmyn in my room, I didn't want her near me. I didn't feel that she was my child. I'd be super emotional, I'd be standing over her cot, screaming for no reason."
The detective who missed the real evidence

OTTAS Paul Harrison can still remember the moment his world came crashing down.

It was when he found the body of a little girl lying limp in the grass, 30m from where her intoxicated parents had smashed their car into another moving vehicle.

After seven years in the navy, 18 years in prisons and attending more than 30 crash scenes in the CFA, he thought he’d seen it all.

But nothing would haunt him as much as the innocent face of that little girl, still seared in his memory, still bringing a tremor to his voice.

Although it wasn’t until 20 years later when a friend began to persistently ask him, ‘are you okay?’ that he even acknowledged how much that moment had affected him.

“I was angry, self-medicating with alcohol and I’d gotten to the point where I sort of didn’t care anymore, literally, about anybody or anything,” Paul said.

“I was lucky enough to have someone ask me if I was okay. I probably bit her head off at the time, but she didn’t give up.”

“I ignored the signs and they were there,” she said.

“I was unravelling. But I didn’t understand why.”

One day he went to a job where himself and a colleague had to sort through 1700 child pornographic videos – we had to grade them from one to five.

“The police do everything they can to help you to manage. But of course, I had a façade that I’m right, I’ll be able to manage this.”

“But then this one video came up and I remember I had a reaction I couldn’t control. I just looked at it and gasped.”

It was like she had been hit with a sledgehammer, the breath knocked out of her lungs.

After a quick break she went back to work – but something had shifted, broken.

“When the job phone would go, I’d feel sick and I’d go to the bathroom. I had unbelievable diarrhoea at work because I was so anxious and nervous,” she said.

“A lot of people are deceived or have been murdered seem to be wrapped in tarps or covered with a tarp. So anytime I saw a tarp anywhere, I’d feel like being sick and get heart palpitations.”

“I was so anxious and nervous,” Paul said.

“I got to the point where my thoughts were both homicidal and suicidal.”

“But I struggled to open up to anyone about it – a lot of people could lose their jobs, their security clearances and even worse, their families for admitting that.”

It wasn’t until three years ago Paul made the ultimate price by losing a career he loved.

“I had done probably hundreds of warrants with paedophiles, child pornography, child and sex abuse,” she said.

“Seeking help is a strength, not a weakness.”

Educate yourself about the signs of stress and don’t think you are above it all, don’t think you are superwoman, because I did, and I paid the ultimate price by losing a career I loved.

“I was unavailing. But I didn’t understand why.”

When Narelle was diagnosed with PTSD, it was like the blinkers came off.

“The first question I asked was, ‘what is that?’” she recalled.

“When he explained it to me, I can remember going ‘yep, yep, yep’ in my head.”

Narelle went to see a local doctor and psychologist, without whom she doesn’t believe she’d be in the healthy position she is today.

She also, eventually, made the heartbreaking decision to step down from her dream career in the police force.

“I was lucky enough to have someone ask me if I was okay, I probably bit her head off at the time, but she didn’t give up. If she had, I certainly wouldn’t be around today.”

It was at this time his marriage of 29 years unexpectedly collapsed.

“Going through an event like that while on that type of medication, I think it’s very irresponsible if you’re not dealt with very carefully. And I felt I was irresponsibly dealt with,” Paul said.

“I went to a GP and psychologist and was put on antidepressants – and while these treatments worked for many, he said they left him feeling cold, numb and dangerous.

I was lucky enough to have someone ask me if I was okay, I probably bit her head off at the time, but she didn’t give up. If she had, I certainly wouldn’t be around today.”

Educate yourself about the signs of stress and don’t think you are above it all, don’t think you are superwoman, because I did, and I paid the ultimate price by losing a career I loved.

“Make the call. Call anybody who is willing to listen. You don’t have to do it alone.”

“Don’t just leave it at that. Listen to the answer. Make your own step forward and say yeah, I’m struggling.”

Educate yourself about the signs of stress and don’t think you are above it all, don’t think you are superwoman, because I did, and I paid the ultimate price by losing a career I loved.