

BREAKING THE SILENCE

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Time to shine the light on our unseen stalker

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. The bush is the last bastion of the bloke. But it doesn't stop with the men. There is that almost traditional stoicism where country people have faced challenges on so many levels – drought,

floods, fires, as well as all the other pressures of life and work in the bush – and survived. It's a stoicism which, while strengthening, can also silence – many feeling too ashamed to open up and ask for help. Especially when it comes to mental health. But nine locals from Echuca-Moama and surrounds have decided to break the

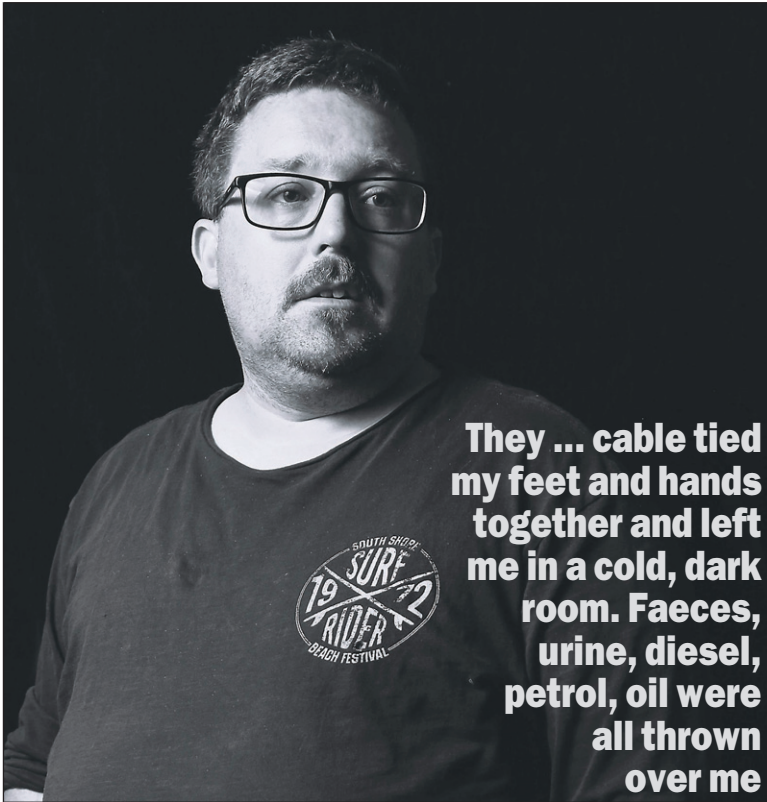
silence, sharing their stories of heart-break and hope if it means others will feel they can also speak up. These are their stories. ■ If you or someone you know needs help now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636. If it becomes a crisis go immediately to the nearest hospital or phone 000.

Last-minute call saved a life

ROCHESTER'S Chris Roberts knows he's here – talking, breathing, smiling, living – because of a single phone call seven years ago. Because it was that single phone call from a friend who saw the warning signs that literally stopped him in his tracks as he was heading to the river to end his life. After enduring abuse in the army and a bitter divorce which left him fighting for his child, Chris felt isolated and hopeless to the point where he saw no way out. “A lot of what happened to me in the defence forces, nobody believed,” he said. “They went through an initiation when I first joined. “I was taken away from life for three days, they put a hessian bag over my head, stripped me to my jocks, cable tied my feet and hands together and left me in a cold, dark room. “Faeces, urine, diesel, petrol, oil were all thrown over me.” The first in a string of traumatic incidents – including the loss of too many dear friends who went away to war and never came back – Chris felt he had no choice but to stay silent,

gagged by peer pressure and the prevailing army culture of “suck it up and move on”. It wasn't until 11 years later, when he left the defence force and began working as a bus driver, that he realised something was up. “First thing in the morning I'd be getting tired and wanting to fall asleep,” he said. “So I got myself checked out and that's when they diagnosed me with depression.” The diagnosis rocked him and Chris suddenly had to begin adjusting to meds, while also self-medicating with alcohol. By the time 2012 came, Chris' marriage had dissolved and he was thrust into the murky waters of the court system as he battled for joint custody of his daughter. His mental health spiraling out of control, Chris struggled to see a light at the end of the tunnel, and decided to end his life. “There can be a bad stigma about people who want to commit suicide, that we're selfish and don't care about others,” he said.

“Deep down inside we do care – but we feel we're no good for them. “But that phone call reminded me I have too much to live for.” Realising how close he'd come to death, Chris immediately sought help, reviewing his meds and meeting with several psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors until he found ones that worked for him. He also began engaging in exercise programs and volunteering at the local brigade to stay active and connected. Years down the track, Chris is now living in Rochester with his wife Jenny and children Jessica, 13, Maddison, 6, and Blake, 4 – as well as his beloved assistance dog Abbie. They're now packing to move to Mansfield for a fresh start – the next step forward for Chris in life that, while marred by hardship, is dominated by hope. “I used to use pain medication and alcohol to deal with my depression but now it's my kids, my dog, my wife and the fresh air – as well as all my treating doctors,” he said. “There's a time where I will leave my kids behind, that's natural life. But I want to see as far as I can with my kids and my kids' kids.”



The suffering of others would prove too much for Stephen

LIKE 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 them that left his mental health in tatters, until he knew he had to seek help. Before it was too late. “So many (farmers) are battling 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. “That's probably what makes me suffer the most as a person.” Although his struggles began after a

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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 on autopilot, his wife Cheryl largely taking over running the farm as he struggled to find purpose. Stephen knew he needed help – so he reached out to a close friend who gave him a number to call.

“The one thing I couldn't do was talk to my own wife,” Stephen said, tears in his eyes. “It almost felt like an admission of weakness. “And it's not, I don't think this is a weak thing, I don't think people who suffer from depression are weak at all. “My wife had to be told eventually but I had to strike that first blow with somebody else. “And if that's what you gotta do then that's what you gotta do.” Months down the track, Stephen is learning to care for his mental health, and he's keeping an eye on farmers around him, 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 don't 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.”

Stories by Charmayne Allison
Photos by Cath Grey

BREAKING THE SILENCE



When a word can prove a sentence

LIKE far too many women, Moama’s Sharnee 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, Sharnee 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 appointments 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, Sharnee believes 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, Sharnee 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 heavily involved with my kids, it was very hard for me to suddenly put myself first and focus on that,” she admitted.

“I did a lot of internal stuff for myself and had unbelievable changes happen because of that.”

Reflecting on her journey, Sharnee said it was crucial people didn’t feel guilt about struggling with mental health after a life-altering illness.

“It doesn’t matter what treatment we’ve had, whoever has been through a cancer or another significant life change – we’ve all had to sit at a doctors and be told that’s what we have before even knowing what’s going to happen,” she said. “And we’ve all had to go home and tell our loved ones. No-one should ever feel any guilt about that.”

Four or five months later I fell in a hole – because you don’t come out the same person that you went in

The mystery of Molly’s life

WHEN Echuca’s Molly 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.

Has been, ever since she was the tender age of 12.

“My Poppy was really sick and in intensive care in Bendigo and we also had a bit of family problems going on at the time,” she reflected.

“I came back from seeing Poppy in Bendigo and sat in my classroom and I was just shaking.

“It was a panic attack or anxiety attack but I didn’t know that was what it was. I was just sitting and shaking, sweating, I couldn’t concentrate and I eventually went out of the classroom.

“That was the first major thing that happened.”

As time progressed, Molly felt her anxiety grow, her hands shaking even when she was at home.

“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 medica-



I was so young and in school they didn’t really talk about mental health as much

tion and directed to see a psychologist.

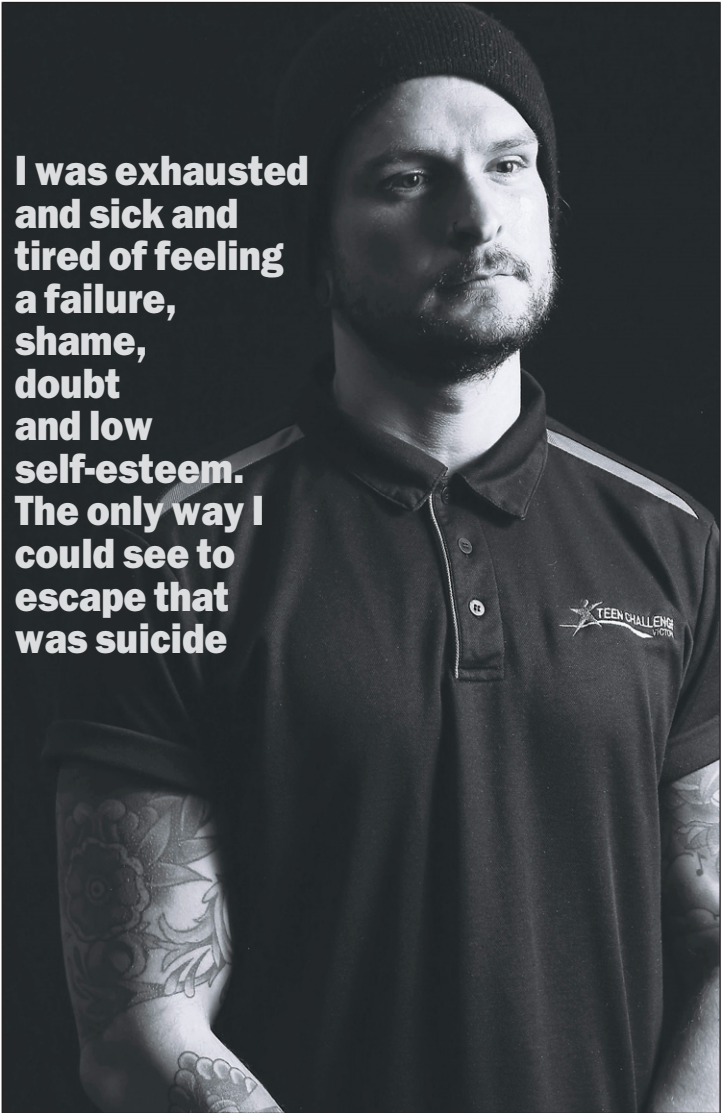
But gradually her anxiety spiralled to the point it morphed into depression and she was put on more medication.

Molly grappled with what was

happening in her body and brain, still too young to fully understand.

“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.

Speaking up, about how our men need to learn — about opening up



I was exhausted and sick and tired of feeling a failure, shame, doubt and low self-esteem. The only way I could see to escape that was suicide

HE WAS just 24 but life’s short journey had taken Kyabram’s Ryan Grace to his bedroom with a power cable, his makeshift noose, in his hand.

And in no doubt he was about to end his life.

Since he was 16, when he discovered his dad was not his biological father, he had struggled with feelings of failure, shame and low self-worth.

To the point where life seemed too painful to keep living.

You wouldn’t know it to look at him – in fact, he’d make sure you didn’t.

Like far too many men and women, he’d become an expert at hiding his inner struggles – always the life of the party, he’d be the one out partying until dawn.

Until he’d arrive home, exhausted, and would burst into tears.

But one day and one charade too many, it became too much.

In a devastating series of events, he lost his job, then his apartment, then all his savings – and had to move back home with his estranged parents.

Left alone one night, the “kettle boiled over” and he decided to end his life.

“I couldn’t pretend anymore. I couldn’t fake a smile. I was exhausted and sick and tired of feeling a failure, shame, doubt and low self-esteem,” he said.

“The only way I could see to escape that was suicide.”

In the middle of his attempt, Ryan had a sudden change of mindset and realised he didn’t want to be another tragic suicide statistic.

“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 not 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 dread simple things like answering phone calls, calling people and I can’t go anywhere by myself into shops and stuff, that makes me so nervous.

“Even with work, I work every day and still get anxious before I go to work.”

But Molly has found talking about her mental health to be the biggest healer.

“Try and talk to someone, go to the doctor, anything,” she said.

“It’s important, otherwise it just gets worse.”

As he comprehended what he had almost done, how close he had come to death, Ryan curled into a ball and wept.

It wasn’t a complete healing – but it was a turning point that might save his sanity and his life.

And in the subsequent years he began to take 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 with others 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.

“Just because I found God doesn’t mean my life just started working out,” he admitted.

“But I slowly discovered God’s not about perfect beings that live perfect lives in a perfect world. He wants people just as they are.”

Now 31, Ryan has made a career of talking about feelings.

A far cry from the young bloke who never opened up.

He is now a counsellor at Teen Challenge, a 25-bed men’s alcohol and drug live-in rehab in Kyabram, where he’s encouraging other men struggling with mental health to speak up.

“People don’t follow titles. They follow courage,” he said.

“When men speak up about mental health, it doesn’t matter who you are. Other men will follow.”

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Mum disconnected from birth

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 just could not cope,” she said.

“Emotionally I’d look at her and feel detached. I didn’t feel that she was my child, nor did I think she felt anything for me.

“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

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

hurt her, that I couldn’t look after her,” she said.

“Unfortunately there’s still a stigma that you need to be perfect.

“I had all these people tell me ‘you’re not doing it right’, they’d shove her in one side then shove her another way and I’d have four different people telling me how to put her to sleep.”

She and Jazmyn were at her cousin’s son’s christening in Warrnambool when Sarah reached breaking point.

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

“I’d had a really bad morning and afternoon with Jaz,” she recalled.

“I was sitting on the couch and my dad said something to me and I literally picked Jazmyn up, threw her at him and stormed out of the house.”

Thankfully her father caught Jazmyn.

But Sarah’s aunt, a nurse who had seen the entire tragic scene unfold, ran after her.

“She sat with me and said I think it’s time we do something. So when we came home from Warrnambool mum and dad got me straight onto the doctors,” she said.

Sarah was put on medication and began attending a post-natal depression group at Echuca Regional Health.

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 then I’d just look at her and she just makes everything better.

“If you feel something’s not right, just ask for help. Don’t be ashamed, don’t be afraid, you’re not the only one going through this, there is help and it will get better.”



Sadly that’s how he chose to stop his pain that he was clearly living with every day

Collateral damage of taking secret pain one step too far

THERE’S one date Wendy McNish wishes she could forget, wishes never happened – but which will forever haunt her. It is February 8, 2016.

The day she came home to find her husband Ray after he took his own life.

And a day she never saw coming.

A dedicated local police officer, Ray had only just moved to the Rochester station and was loving his new posting in the tight-knit community.

His home and family life were happy, and while he’d admitted some struggles at work, Wendy felt he was working his way through it and looking to the future.

Until that horrific day that tore her life apart.

“It’s nothing you would ever want to happen to anybody else,” she said, tears running down her cheeks.

“Our entire world has been affected. Friends, colleagues, family. The ripple effect that goes out from this is enormous.

“It was difficult to grasp why somebody so outgoing and vivacious and funny could do what he did.

“But sadly that’s how he chose to

stop his pain that he was clearly living with every day.”

Looking back, Wendy can’t recall any major alarm bells.

“People can become very good at hiding what’s going on to make you feel at ease,” she said.

“Because when people ask ‘are you okay?’ they will have it sorted in their head how they’re going to respond.

“That’s what he did with me – our home life and relationship were brilliant.”

Suddenly left alone to battle intense grief, Wendy also had to endure endless flashbacks of the moment she found Ray.

It was in the depths of this nightmare she discovered hypnotherapy – and hope.

“Flashbacks, PTSD, all those nasty visions I’d had since I found Ray – they’ve been dealt with,” she said.

“I’ve been given tools to control my grief and emotion towards the loss of Ray and the circumstances.

I’ve been astounded at how rapidly things have turned around.”

Wendy believes these alternative treatments could be vital in emergency services.

“They need to look beyond psychiatrists and psychologists and counselling and try holistic and alternative methods of healing. Yes they will work for some, but not all,” she said.

Above all, she believes there needs to be greater mental health support for those on the frontline.

Because that could be the deciding factor between another police officer living or dying.

“There are so many areas where the culture in the police is one of stoicism and ‘hardening up’ and that’s clearly not working,” she said.

“Someone may be a long-term police officer whose been able to handle things – but they may wake up tomorrow morning and there could be a trigger that just flicks a switch in them and starts them on a journey they don’t understand.

“A lot of them are self-medicating with alcohol. Then there are others who are happy to put up their hands and say they need help.

“But when they do that and are questioned, or laughed at by their peers, what happens then, where do they have to go?”

READ SOME OF THESE STORIES IN FULL IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Stories by Charmayne Allison
Photos by Cath Grey

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Innocence amongst the carnage did it

KOTTA’S 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 will 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.

“Like most men, I didn’t want to talk about it,” Paul admitted.

“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.

“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.

“That’s the big thing – don’t just leave it at that. Listen to the answer. Make your own judgment on what you think is going on and persist with it.”

Joining the navy at the age of 18, Paul navigated the dangerous waters of bullying and sexual harassment for seven years before moving into defence security and later engineering for NSW prisons.

During this time he joined the CFA, where he attended the horror crash that would push his mental health to breaking point.

He went to a GP and psychologist and was put on anti-depressants – and while these treatments work 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

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 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 switch from anti-depressants to alternative therapies – and he hasn’t looked back since.

“Even now, I still struggle, don’t get me wrong. I can still be more reactive than I should be. But nowhere near the extent of three years ago,” he said.

Above all, Paul urges men struggling with mental health to seek help – whatever and wherever it may be.

“Women seem to have more guts and want to step forward and say yeah, I’m struggling. But to me, anybody should be able to do it,” he said.

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

The detective who missed the real evidence

AS A policewoman and detective for 27 years, Burnewang’s Narelle Fraser willingly waded, day after day, through the sewers of Victoria’s underbelly.

Working in the rape squad, child exploitation squad, sex crime squad, missing persons and homicide, she was daily immersed in the darkest, most twisted depths of humanity.

But knowing her actions were helping others, she loved every minute of it.

Until one day her mental health, which she didn’t realise, refused to realise had been fraying – suddenly snapped.

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

“One day I went to a job where myself 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 who are deceased 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’m a really social person, I love my friends and going out, but I found I was becoming



very withdrawn and insular and didn’t want to leave home.

“I was unravelling. 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.

Narelle’s PTSD triggers will never disappear – but she has learnt to manage them.

And living on a tranquil property in Burnewang with her husband and surrounded by friends, life is filled with hope.

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

“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.

“But I now know if I’d done something about it and sought professional help sooner, maybe I could still be doing what to me is the best job in the world.

“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

OF echucamoama MAGAZINE. IT’S OUT LATER THIS MONTH