

# Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health

## **Purpose:**

The purpose of this submission is to report to the *Senate Select Committee on Mental Health* about my experiences with depression, and to give some recommendations for improving the recognition of the illness in society and improvements to services available.

## **Background:**

1. I am 34 years old and I have lived most of my life in Canberra.
2. From a young age, I often felt very lonely, and that life was not worth living. I always imagined what it would be like to run away. I constantly suffered from bouts of flu, bronchitis and colds all through my adolescence.
3. I was embarrassed to talk to counsellors at school. I used to spend all my free time at the library, because it was very hard to stay at home.
4. When I moved away from home to attend university I found it very hard to cope with everyday life. I finally gained the courage to approach the counselling unit and broke down in tears. After several sessions, I was prescribed by a doctor with some anti-depressants which had terrible side effects. Since then I have always been resistant to taking medication, however, I have sought help from psychologists whenever I find it hard to cope.
5. Soon after, a psychologist mentioned that I should get out my anger and tell all my family that they had hurt me. In doing so, I offended some people that I cared about and now I haven't spoken to some of my siblings for years. I don't believe that I can blame my depression on anyone, and that was the worst advice I have ever received. It tore my relations with my family apart.
6. Five years ago I spoke to a psychiatrist, who was not very sympathetic. I am reluctant to ever see a psychiatrist again because this experience was not helpful.
7. I have attended some day service programs for managing depression at hospital. I found that these services seem to help manage the depression a bit, but nothing gets rid of the depression. It keeps coming back when I least expect it.
8. It has been difficult to keep a job, and sometimes I get very confused and overwhelmed. I feel that society does not want or accept me.
9. I recently joined the Mental Health Foundation's "*Depression and Anxiety*" support group. The meetings are held outside work hours. It does not cost me anything, and I find that the support received from the group has been good. This has helped me a great deal to finally understand the illness, because I have met many people who are living with depression. I now realise that I am not alone.
10. I find it hard to tell anyone that I have depression, because they don't understand. Some employers have given me a very hard time at work when I have trouble getting along with people, and I have felt bullied and harassed

when they have tried to make me “snap out of it”. This has led me to resign from several good jobs, and that always leads me to feeling depressed again.

11. I called the Mental Health ACT once to ask for help, but they said they couldn't help me if I wasn't contemplating suicide.
12. One time when I tried to take my life I called Lifeline. The service was engaged for hours and could not get through to speak to anyone. Eventually I called the Poisons information centre and they helped me get treatment. At this time in my life I realised that I did have a problem. I was visited by a caseworker in hospital who was very supportive and gave me some referrals.

### ***Issues:***

13. Most people in society (including depressed people) don't understand the illness.
14. Many health professionals, including psychologists do not offer sound advice, to help those with depression. They can damage a person's recovery by giving the wrong advice. It is important that depressed people realise that they need to 'shop around' for the right help. This can be very expensive, especially if the depressed person cannot work.
15. There are insufficient services available to depressed people. Psychologists can offer some support to depressed people, however, they are expensive and they can give inappropriate advice.

### ***Recommendations:***

16. The 'stigma' of depression by society needs to be addressed. Children should not feel ashamed to visit counsellors if they are feeling lonely and isolated. Perhaps addressing the problem at an early age can prevent it become a life long problem.
17. If someone is suffering depression, then they should be allowed to take some time off from work to get their life back together. This could be for a month or so.
18. Support groups offered by the Mental Health Foundation offer depressed people the ability to network, come to terms with their illness and to find out how to treat the illness. I would hope that these groups become more available to all people in Australia and that these groups remain free, so that no one is excluded.
19. An investigation needs to be made into the inability of some mental health services to meet the demand. It is little point having a service if it is not available when it is desperately needed.