



Emma's story

Emma is a member of The Department of Defence's Defence Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF).

CONTENT WARNING: This story features content that some people may find distressing. If you or someone you know needs support, please reach out to [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14) or one of the services listed [here](#).

My husband and I have built a beautifully chaotic life together, moving around Australia with Defence. My joy comes from the little things: campfires in the backyard, the laughter that echoes through our home, and the everyday moments that bring our family together. My life isn't perfect, but it is full of love, purpose and meaning.

I'm a mum of four and work in project management for Defence. I balance these roles while managing my own mental health challenges. There are times when everything feels incredibly heavy, chaotic and disorganised. I live with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and I have survived suicide attempts and experienced suicidal ideation.

I'm sharing my story because I want others, particularly in Defence, to understand why it's so important to build deep relationships where we understand each other's warning signs and regularly ask, 'are you OK?'.

Ask the question, even if it feels uncomfortable.

Silence and avoidance are often more harmful than getting the words wrong.

Emma, APS

RUOK?
A conversation could change a life.

About four years ago, I experienced a recurring PTSD flashback and became suicidal. While I had experienced PTSD flashbacks before, this time I felt completely out of control. Unfortunately, I couldn't contact my usual support networks, including my husband, who was out of range on a Defence project. I began to feel completely trapped in my own mind, terrified by how unsafe my thoughts had become.

Eventually, I got in touch with a colleague in Defence. Over the phone, she stayed with me, speaking calmly and clearly while calling an ambulance and finding a way to contact my husband. What mattered most was that someone took me seriously when I told them I couldn't keep myself safe. That day, I was admitted to hospital to receive psychiatric treatment. That experience completely changed the way I think about connection, vulnerability and checking in with people early.

During the times I felt most unsafe, what helped me most were those who were willing to be present without trying to immediately fix me.



The signs that someone isn't doing OK vary from person to person. I pay attention to what someone isn't saying: the subtle shifts – withdrawing, becoming quieter, changes in behaviour or tone, exhaustion, irritability, or simply not seeming like themselves. It's about consistency, following up and remembering details. I often make notes in my phone about little things someone has mentioned because I want them to know I listened.

I avoid the phrase, "Let me know if I can help," and now encourage others to avoid using it too. Instead, I offer practical ways to show up for them. "I'm driving past today – leave a load of laundry on the front step and I'll pick it up," or "I made an extra lasagne, so I'll drop it off later today for you." It still gives them a chance to say, "No, thank you," but it doesn't put the burden on them to put up their hand and ask for help.

Someone may worry about whether they can trust you or whether you're going to escalate something up their chain of command. But when someone genuinely feels cared for and trusts you, they're more likely to open up and understand if you need to involve professionals or escalate concerns to keep them safe

R U OK? Conversations are especially important in Defence. There's often a culture of pushing through, and many people convince themselves that others have it worse or that they should be strong enough to manage alone.

I know from experience how important it is to check in regularly and ask, 'are you OK?'. Everyone deserves that check-in before they reach crisis point. We shouldn't wait until someone is visibly falling apart to ask if they're OK. Genuine care and support should already be the baseline.

I want people to know that support is out there. There are people willing to sit with you through the tears, the pain, the grief, the anger, the loneliness and the chaos. They're not going to disappear once you've received help. They'll celebrate with you when you're doing well, but they'll also stay beside you when you're not.

My message is simple: you're not alone, and there is hope.

The people who care about you may already be in your life, waiting for the opportunity to support you. That's why I believe in the power of an R U OK? Conversation, because these conversations can change, and even save, a life.

You don't have to wait for things to become catastrophic to deserve help - your struggle matters before it becomes a crisis.

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