



Maddy's story

Maddy 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](#).

I think about the R U OK? Conversation that saved my life every single day. It was the most important conversation I've ever had.

In Defence, we talk a lot about resilience, but I've learned that resilience doesn't mean pushing through on your own. The bravest thing I ever did was speak up and admit I wasn't OK. If I met someone today who was in that position, I'd tell them: it gets better.

Back then, I was a Loadmaster on the C-130s, loading and unloading cargo and passengers, conducting airdrop operations, supporting paratrooping activities, responding to in-flight emergencies and flying with the aircraft. It was an exciting job, and I loved it.

A lot happened in the year leading up to that conversation. About six months earlier, I started struggling with my mental health. I reached out to **Open Arms**, a veterans' and families' counselling service, and started seeing a psychologist. At that point, I hadn't told anyone at work what was going on. From there, things got worse. I was only sleeping three or four hours a night; I'd stopped eating properly and I started having suicidal thoughts.



Around that time, I had a major assessment. I'd always been confident in my role and had progressed quickly when I first joined the unit, but I failed it. When they told me, I laughed, which was completely out of character. By then, I'd been having suicidal thoughts for about three weeks. I'd confided in someone outside my Chain of Command, and they alerted my Flight Commander.

When I returned to my home base that afternoon, the Warrant Officer sat me down and gently asked, 'are you OK?'. I told him I was. Looking back, I think I genuinely believed I was OK. I'd been in that headspace for so long that it had become my normal. He looked at me and said, 'I don't think you are. Are you considering suicide?'. That was the moment I told him yes.

Saying it out loud was an enormous relief. For the first time, I didn't have to carry it on my own anymore.

Someone else knew, and someone was there to help. A short time later, my Flight Commander came into the room, and the two of them sat beside me



Maddy with a defence colleague.

They helped me speak to the Chaplain and organise doctor's appointments so we could put a treatment plan in place. I took more than a week off work to spend time with my family. Unfortunately, I didn't tell the doctor the full extent of my struggles or the reasons behind them, and I didn't fully understand them myself. All I wanted was to fly again. Within two months, I was cleared to return to work and training. I thought that if I was back at work, everything would be fine, but it wasn't.

I think it's important for leaders and managers to understand that experiences like this don't just disappear. They become part of someone's life. They might not affect them every day, but they're still there.

When they realised I was still struggling, the Warrant Officer sat down with me again. He told me I didn't need to prove anything to myself or anyone else. There was no pressure on me, and if there was anything else I wanted to do in Defence, the Squadron would support me 100 per cent. In that moment, I realised that if I didn't make a big change, I wasn't going to be around to see the other side of this.

I decided to move into engineering, and it turned out to be the best decision I could have made. My Flight Commander, my Commanding Officer at my previous unit and my new Commanding Officer changed my life. I'll never be able to thank them enough for the support and opportunities they gave me.

One thing that really stood out was that, even though I was a Corporal and they were many ranks above me, every conversation felt like I was simply talking to another human being.

Looking back, it's almost like all my biggest fears came true. I failed that assessment. I struggled with my mental health. I changed careers. All the things I was most afraid of happened, and I came out the other side. I've also realised that every setback can have a silver lining. I'm now in a job that I absolutely love. It suits me, I'm genuinely happy, and I'm surrounded by incredible people.

If someone seems a bit off, I notice it. I might not bring it up straight away, but I'll keep checking in. And if it continues, I'll absolutely have a conversation with them. I notice those changes much more now because that's what I needed back then. I needed someone to care. Now I get the chance to be that person for someone else.

The biggest lesson I've learned is simple: make time for people. Make space for people. Listen to them. Just be human. There is a time and a place for rank, but not in an R U OK? Conversation. The best thing you can do is get to know your people and meet them as another human being.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

I thought being resilient was pushing through on my own—but real resilience was speaking up... and saying 'I'm not okay.'

Maddy, Airforce

R U OK?
A conversation could change a life.