



Mark's story

Mark 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](#).

One of the happiest moments of my life was becoming a dad for the first time. Two years after my eldest son, Dane, was born, I played in a premiership at my local football club and held him in my arms as I received my medal. It's a memory I will cherish forever.

Dane passed away while my wife was 16 weeks pregnant with our third child. Losing him changed me. I found it hard to be the partner and parent I wanted to be, and that's been an ongoing journey.

I miss Dane so much. We have four children and three are with us today. There's a different kind of love there, and there's a piece of me that will always be missing. Since losing Dane, those memories at the footy club and the family photos from that day have become incredibly precious. They're moments I now share with our other children.

I've still had many happy moments since then, but the grief never really goes away. It's about learning to manage the feelings that arise.

Some days, the waves of emotion are bigger than others. What I've learned is that having people beside you makes those days a little easier.



One day, my daughter, who was 12 at the time, asked me, 'Are you OK, Dad?'. I gave her a nod, trying to be the tough dad and put on a brave face. She looked at me and asked, 'Are you halfway happy, Dad?'. For her to recognise I wasn't quite myself, even before I could admit it, was incredibly powerful. She told me it was OK to be 'halfway happy', just not for too long.

Last year, I went through an incredibly dark period. My wife checked in, listened, offered kindness and eventually said, 'I think we should call someone. Let's get some extra support involved.' Having someone show that level of care brought me back to earth. Just knowing someone genuinely cared made all the difference.

From those experiences, I learned it's OK to reach out, be vulnerable and be authentic. People understand - whether they're 15 or 65. They can often see what you're going through before you can, and they're willing to help.

Today, I work in Defence in Resource Recovery and Waste Management. I'm fortunate to work with people who are supportive and understanding. Once you build genuine connections, it becomes much easier to open up. I've had colleagues stop me at work and ask, 'Are you actually OK?'. In those moments, I've been comfortable enough to say, 'You know what? No, I'm not.'

I've also been incredibly fortunate to have my immediate family, football coaches, teammates and colleagues beside me. If my football coach noticed I wasn't my usual self at training, he'd come over and put his arm around me. That simple act would completely change my mindset. Just having someone reach out, ask if I'm OK or notice changes in my behaviour has meant more than they'll probably ever know.

Asking someone if they're OK isn't about correcting them or having all the answers. It's about listening, being present, holding space and helping guide them towards support.

Breaking down your own walls can help others do the same.

“ Because when people see it's safe to open up, they start to open up too. ”

Mark, APS

It could be asking whether they've spoken to their doctor, a loved one or someone they trust. Don't be afraid to start the conversation. Just be prepared that the answer might not be what you expect. Remember, it's about them, not you, and sometimes you need to sit in discomfort to help someone out.

I remember someone more senior than me saying something in a meeting that raised concerns for me. I sent them a message afterwards asking if they were OK. We'd never spoken before, but that simple check-in opened the door to a conversation. We spoke many times after that, and I was able to help connect them with support. I was also able to help them provide support to others down the track.

When it comes to mental health, it doesn't matter who you are, what rank you hold or whether you're in the services.

Outside of the position, the rank or the uniform, we're all human. Having the courage to say, 'I've noticed something. Are you OK?' can mean more than you'll ever know. If you're going to ask, be willing to give someone your time, your kindness and a non-judgemental space.

The same happened with a mate of mine who was dealing with grief. I simply asked, 'Hey mate, how are you going?'. He called me afterwards and we talked through some dark moments he had experienced. He ended up in tears because he genuinely wasn't OK. Since then, I've kept checking in. More than anything, I understand the importance of simply being there for your mates.



Mark with defence colleagues.

Sometimes it's more awkward when people avoid the issue altogether. A friend I've known for 20 years recently asked me direct questions about my son. She didn't dance around it. She asked what had happened, how it had affected me and how I was really going. I appreciated that she wasn't afraid to ask. It was nice to talk to her about it because her understanding of what had happened was different from what she had believed for many years.

As someone who has lived with depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), prolonged grief and suicidal thoughts, I want people to care enough to ask me those questions.

I don't need people to fix me. I've got doctors and psychologists for that. I just want people to be kind, authentic and genuinely care enough to ask if I'm OK.

I still receive professional support today, and I'm completely comfortable with that. It helps me understand myself better and continue to grow. That's why promoting conversations like this is so important to me.

Sometimes what looks like a small issue may be a sign of something much bigger. If someone seems a bit off, asking if they're OK might open the door to a conversation that changes their day, or even their life.

Through my own experience with grief and loss, I've realised that everyone's journey is different. No situation is worse than someone else's; there's just a difference in how you manage it.

The important thing is to open up, be vulnerable and remember there are people who care about you.

No matter what your situation is, there's always someone who will support you, and there's always someone who loves you.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

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If you feel like someone's not quite right, trust your gut and reach out.

Even a simple message can open the door to a really important conversation.

Mark, APS