

10 YEAR PERSPECTIVE

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Commissioned by R U OK? and
authored by Alan Woodward



RUOK?TM
A conversation could change a life.

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A conversation could change a life

R U OK?'s vision is a world where we're all connected and are protected from suicide.

R U OK?'s mission is to inspire and empower everyone to meaningfully connect with people around them and support anyone struggling with life.

R U OK? is a public health promotion charity that seeks to encourage people to have conversations that can help others through difficult times in their lives. Our work focuses on building the motivation, confidence and skills of the help-giver – the person who can initiate a meaningful conversation with someone who is struggling with life.

R U OK? contributes to suicide prevention efforts through fostering personal connection and building the capacity of informal support networks – friends, family and colleagues – to be alert to those around them and be able to identify signs of distress or difficulty.

While there can be barriers to reaching out and offering support, by keeping it simple and breaking down the conversation into manageable, everyday language, people are empowered to believe, 'I can – and should – do this'. The premise of 'you don't have to be an expert to ask R U OK?' is something often repeated in communities across Australia. Asking "Are you OK?" is something we can all do.

Many across the nation attribute the success of R U OK? to its simplicity – a message that cuts through and can mobilise large numbers of people to become more engaged in suicide prevention.



1. Ask R U OK?



2. Listen



3. Encourage action



4. Check in

The unique characteristics of R U OK?

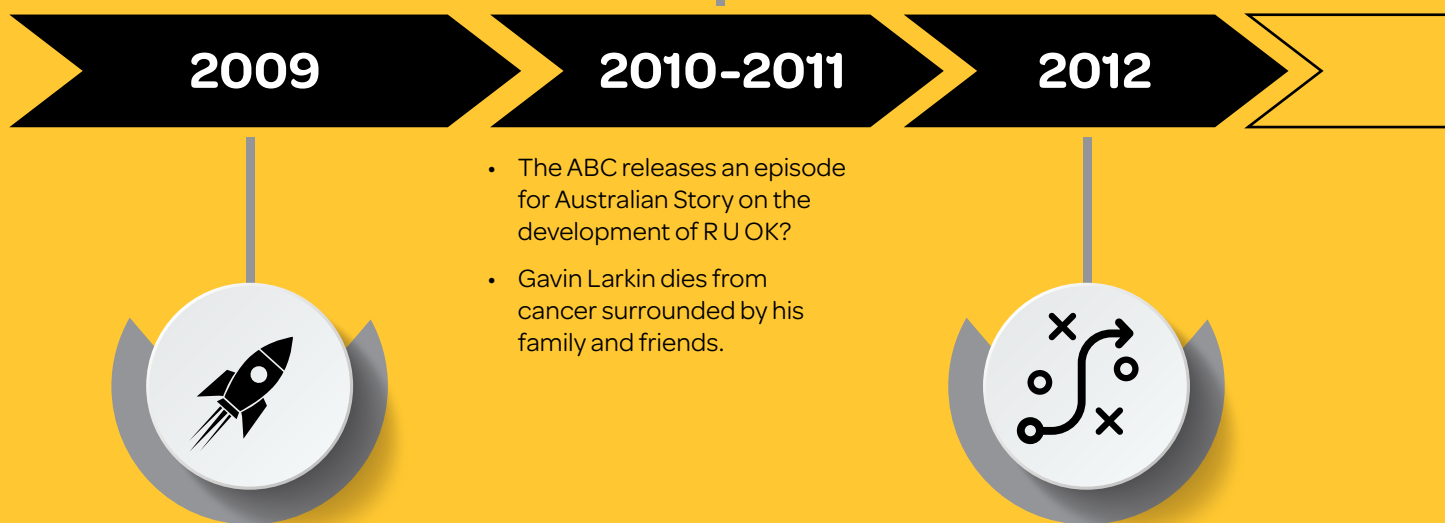
A simple strong message that cuts through		
R U OK? A conversation could change a life.		
Authentically reflects people's life experiences <p>The work of R U OK? is informed by the experiences of those with lived experience of suicide and mental ill health.</p>	Focussed on purpose and values <p>It is not asking for anything other than a person's time and willingness to support others.</p>	Relevant to schools and workplaces <p>Long term behaviour change needs Australia's young people, schools and workplaces to engage with the message.</p>
'Scaffolding' for the service system <p>R U OK? helps people navigate a conversation through its 4 Step Conversation model, and signposts to existing support services when the conversation becomes too big.</p>	Individual and social change <p>R U OK? provides people with a sense of hope that by connecting through conversations they can contribute to suicide prevention and make a difference in the lives of those around them.</p>	Quirky and distinct <p>R U OK? nudges all Australians to look out for each other in creative, hopeful and vibrant ways.</p>

R U OK? milestones

- In August R U OK? is launched by the then Minister for Health, The Hon Nicola Roxon MP
- The inaugural R U OK? Day. Supported by the STW Group, Jack Thompson, Hugh Jackman and Naomi Watts it captures the nation's attention.
- The first R U OK? at High School toolkit is created and schools begin to make R U OK? Day part of their annual calendar.



- R U OK? releases its first strategic plan.
- A scientific community is formed to help formulate an evaluation and impact measurement framework for the organisation.





*In the time it takes to have a cuppa,
you could change a life.*

The late Gavin Larkin, R U OK? Founder.

R U OK? was started by the late Gavin Larkin OAM. Gavin, an advertising executive, had lost his father to suicide and passionately wanted to do something to prevent others experiencing this loss.

Gavin was collaborating with TV Producer Janina Nearn on a documentary to raise awareness, but he soon realised the documentary alone wouldn't be enough. To genuinely change behaviour Australia-wide, a national campaign was needed. From this realisation, and with Gavin and Janina's expertise and passion, R U OK? was born.



- A new R U OK? at Uni campaign is developed alongside new materials and resources for workplaces.
- R U OK? produces materials and resources for primary schools
- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group is formed and the 'Stronger Together' campaign is released.

2013-2016

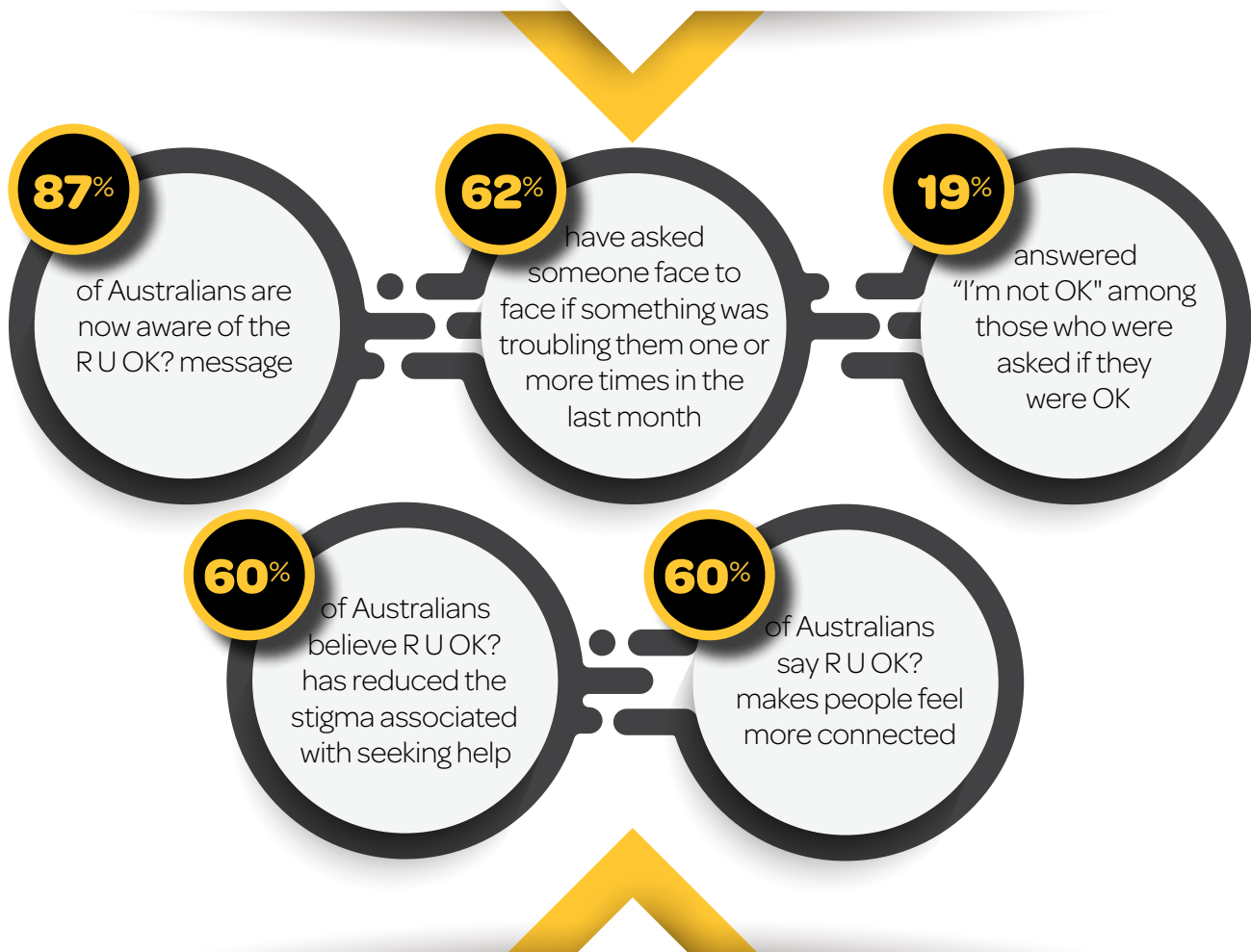
- R U OK? moves from a one-day-a-year approach to focus on yearlong outreach and education activities and campaigns.
- R U OK? bus tours visit regional towns and cities across Australia.
- R U OK? delivers free open source toolkits and resources and merchandise to help schools, universities, workplaces and communities share the message.
- R U OK? release resources that help workplace management to learn how to effectively navigate an R U OK? conversation.
- R U OK? release campaigns targeted at the legal and fly-in fly-out industries.
- R U OK? and the TrackSAFE Foundation collaborate on Rail R U OK? Day.

2017-2019



R U OK? impact

Those exposed to the R U OK? campaign are up to six times more likely to reach out to someone who might be experiencing personal difficulties compared to those not exposed to the campaign.¹



R U OK? as a brand is perceived to be relevant, compassionate, for ordinary people, trustworthy and very well-known

Source: 1. Ross, A.M., Bassilios, B. Australian R U OK? Day campaign: improving helping beliefs, intentions and behaviours. *Int J Ment Health Syst* 13, 61 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-019-0317-4>

R U OK? in the future

R U OK? will continue to equip people with the skills and confidence to support those who may be struggling with life. We will work with and alongside other suicide prevention and mental health organisations to ensure that when a conversation becomes too big for friends and family that pathways to appropriate services and support are available to the help-seeker.

2. Social connection

R U OK? is part of the social fabric of Australia. At the time of writing, 87% of Australians are aware of R U OK? and a fifth of Australians actively participate in some form of R U OK? activity throughout the year.

Former CEO of R U OK? Brendan Maher describes the public health promotion as the “first line of defence” in suicide prevention. In stating so, he is reflecting on the importance of equipping people from all walks of life to be alert and responsive to those around them who start to struggle with life’s challenges. This is essential for suicide prevention because Australian research evidence suggests that around half of those who die or attempt suicide do not access professional health services in the period prior. Critically, the research also shows that vulnerable people may disclose their distress to other services or people around them – people who may be best placed to notice changes, shifts in mood or demeanour, and make the offer of help.² This situational opportunity for picking up on a person’s distress and responding is the core R U OK? message: “A conversation could change a life.”

Source: 2. Nicholas A, Pirkis J, Rossetto A, Jorm A, Robinson J, Reavley N. Suicide Prevention Research and Campaign: Integrated findings and recommendations. The University of Melbourne, 2017

R U OK? is about the man who, having lost his wife, starts to falter in his confidence and outlook on daily living. He may even have become clinically depressed – but he doesn’t know that. One of his mates knows he is going through a tough time and following his awareness of the question, he picks up the phone and asks him: “Are you OK?” It isn’t a ridiculous question because the R U OK? campaign is underway that week, so everyone is encouraged to have these calls. The man is struck by someone else caring enough to call him. “No, not really,” is his answer. They chat for a while and look up the R U OK? website for help connecting to professional support services.





R U OK? is also about community empowerment. It encourages taking responsibility for others as a social value, tapping into the Australian cultural norm of “looking out for your mates.” In doing so, R U OK? boosts community optimism that something can be done to prevent suicide and that ordinary people in everyday ways can make a difference to support their loved ones and colleagues. This is vital because research evidence tells us almost 50% of Australians believe that only mental health professionals can engage with a suicidal person.³

Then there is the social capital creation that R U OK? supports – the building of social values around positive conversations and compassion to strengthen our willingness to disclose to others and seek help when times are tough. This fostering of ‘connection’ is a vital social infrastructure for the good of all. The importance of these connections for suicide prevention is highlighted in the WHO Report on Suicide 2014:

“A sense of isolation can often occur when a person has a negative life event or other psychological stress and fails to share this with someone close. Compounded with other factors, this can lead to an increase in risk for suicidal behaviour.”

Thus, R U OK? provides a necessary component of the overall Australian strategy for suicide prevention and boosts the protective factors for maintaining people’s mental health and wellbeing. It does this with an authenticity that is profoundly Australian in character, bringing the goodwill of Aussie mateship to tackle a difficult topic while unifying the wider community towards action in ways that are relevant to the modern world – most critically R U OK? picks up on people’s basic desire for connection and care and reinforces this with messages, tools and tips and open access to resources that show how.

Source: 3. Nicholas A, Pirkis J, Rossetto A, Jorm A, Robinson J, Reavley N. Suicide Prevention Research and Campaign: Integrated findings and recommendations The University of Melbourne, 2017.

3. What is R U OK?

R U OK? is a harm prevention charity that uses health promotion to encourage people to have conversations that help others through difficult times in their lives. It is focused on the help-giver: the person who can initiate a meaningful conversation by asking R U OK?

R U OK? uses communications, marketing and consumer health education as well as community engagement techniques to achieve its purpose.

It relates to suicide prevention through fostering social connection and building the capacity of informal support networks – friends, family and colleagues - to be alert to those around them and be able to identify signs of distress or difficulty. This creates a stronger first point of contact to address and de-escalate distress. It also demonstrates that others are there to help, therefore countering notions of isolation and aloneness that can foster suicidal thoughts.

The Goals of R U OK?

- 1 Boost our confidence to meaningfully connect and ask about life's ups and downs
- 2 Nurture our sense of responsibility to regularly connect and support others
- 3 Strengthen our sense of belonging because we know people are there for us
- 4 Be relevant, strong and dynamic.

A range of community activities occurs under the R U OK? brand and message. In addition to the annual national day of action - R U OK? Day in September – R U OK? conduct a well-established annual tour that reaches rural, regional and varied communities across the country. Additionally, targeted audiences are engaged through open source, resource-based campaigns e.g. R U OK? At School, R U OK? At Work, and a campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: Stronger Together.

R U OK? is supported by ambassadors, experts and spokespeople who lend their voice to amplify the R U OK? message for the cause of enabling greater social connection through conversations and compassion - helping one Australian to help another. The voice of 'lived experience' surrounding struggle and recovery has been a strong feature of the R U OK? identity.

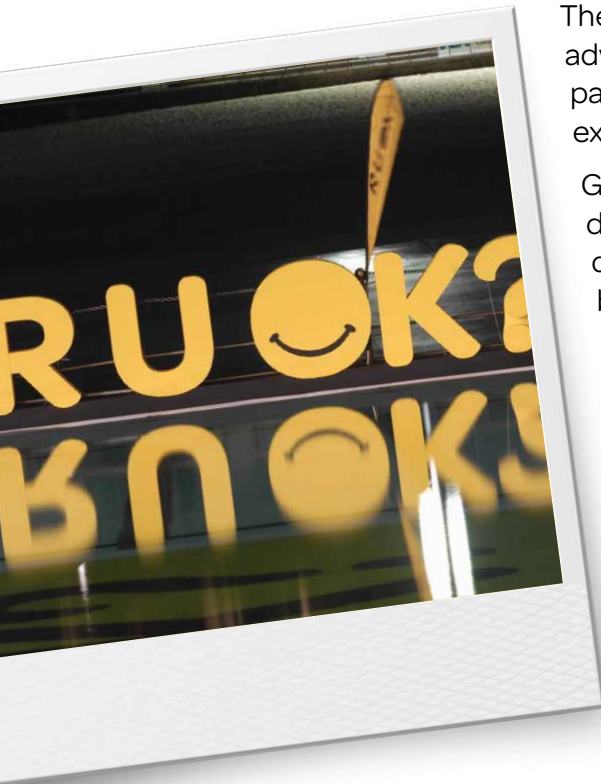
R U OK? has grown to be a national charity that receives considerable support - raising funds on the basis of engagement with individuals, businesses and communities to invest in specific campaigns and resources for mass population and targeted populations. The Commonwealth Government contributes some financial support, however the majority of funds for R U OK? comes from corporate sources, trusts, foundations and community donations.



4. The R U OK? story

4.1. How Did R U OK? Start?

In August 2009, R U OK? was launched in Canberra by the then Minister for Health, The Hon Nicola Roxon MP. Among those present were representatives from media and advertising, charities and service providers in mental health and suicide prevention and a handful of supportive politicians.



The launch was led by R U OK? Founder Gavin Larkin, an advertising executive who had lost his father to suicide and passionately wanted to do something to prevent others experiencing this loss.

Gavin was collaborating with TV Producer Janina Nearn on a documentary to raise awareness, but he soon realised the documentary alone wouldn't be enough. To genuinely change behaviour Australia-wide, a national campaign was needed. From this realisation, and with Gavin and Janina's expertise and passion, R U OK? was born.

Also present at the launch was Michael Connaghan, then Group CEO of STW Group (now WPP AUNZ), the media and advertising company for whom Gavin Larkin worked and a personal supporter of the R U OK? initiative. Mike became Chairperson and remains in the role to this day. Also present was Graeme Cowan who had survived his own experience of suicidality and mental health struggles. Both saw the potential of R U OK? as a vehicle to amplify messages of prevention and hope to the community.

Initially, all Gavin knew was that he wanted to 'do something' for suicide prevention. He was deeply troubled by his father's death by suicide and the period of time building up to it. He had noticed his father had withdrawn and become isolated and often reflected on whether he could have done something to reach out to his father.

"The emotions that you go through after an event like this are incredibly dramatic and raw. At the time, I described it as an emotional rollercoaster. It's critical that anybody who is around those people who have lost somebody reaches out and asks R U OK? and keeps checking in on them. Similarly, the people who have lost somebody are sharing what they're going through with people they trust and love, and that they are also looking and asking for help."

The concept and messaging for R U OK? was not just an advertising slogan. The people involved in its development also had profound personal experiences of struggle and knew the value of compassionate support from others. R U OK? can be regarded as a campaign – or movement – that has been born out of people's lived experience with suicide and with the struggles that are felt by all of us as we experience life's ups and downs.

"The R U OK? concept tapped into people's emotional side," said Janina Nearn, former TV producer/former R U OK? CEO. "It got a response because people understood the need for the message: everyone can have a hard day."

4.2. Key Milestones in the R U OK? Journey

Year: 2009

The inaugural R U OK? Day took place, coordinated by a small, passionate team who delivered the event alongside their full-time existing jobs. The support of STW Group and the agency's associated contacts in media and advertising to promote the day was invaluable. A television commercial featuring Jack Thompson pushed the campaign into the public eye while support from high-profile celebrities such as Hugh Jackman, Simon Baker and Naomi Watts provided endorsement and amplification to a mass mainstream audience.

Despite this high-profile show of support, the media were more reluctant to run stories about suicide prevention than anticipated. The R U OK? team had to educate the media to gain their support and reached out to journalists giving them stories on prevention and hope. There had never been such an approach taken with Australian media before on, what was thought of then as, the 'tricky topics' of suicide and mental health.

Another challenge was the somewhat fragmented existing services for suicide prevention. Gavin Larkin and the R U OK? team met with representatives of many organisations, all of whom were trying to reach out to the community - separately. The establishment of R U OK? as a campaign could support the work of these services by connecting and coordinating community action.

"R U OK? is not trying to be all things to all people. It is not trying to replicate or replace the services and programs for suicide prevention: it is there to work with them. This emphasis on the conversation and the action that everyone can take – to make a difference – keeps R U OK? grounded." – Graeme Cowan, Psychological wellbeing expert and R U OK? Board Member.

Barbara Hocking OAM emerged as another key supporter in the early stages of the campaign. At the time, Barbara was the Executive Director of SANE Australia, a prominent mental health and suicide prevention charity. Barbara proved to be a vital link to the Commonwealth Government for funding and a point of credible leadership within the wider service sector to obtain their cooperation and support.

During this period, the important answer to 'what should I do if someone is not OK?' was formed and the R U OK? 4 Conversation Steps (Ask, Listen, Encourage Action, Check In) were created to further equip and empower Australians to meaningfully connect with someone they might be worried about.

High schools nationwide became early adopters of the R U OK? message, adding R U OK? Day to their annual calendar. This led to the first 'R U OK? At School' toolkit with activities for high school students to educate them about the values and value of peer support.





Gavin Larkin, R U OK? Day 2011

Year: 2010 and 2011

The 2009 campaign resulted in around one quarter of Australians becoming aware of R U OK? – a remarkable achievement for a first-time public health campaign. Australians had started to engage with the message and across all demographics conversations were beginning with people asking: R U OK?

The 2010 campaign took place within an optimistic environment underpinned by Government and a groundswell of support. Sadly, this period was running in parallel with the progression of Gavin's illness and that of his son with life threatening cancer. Gavin died in September 2011, just one week after the third R U OK? Day.

Not long before Gavin's death, the ABC produced an episode of Australian Story about the development of R U OK? and the tragic circumstances that its founder and his family now wrestled with. Gavin's passion for the power of a conversation was shared with millions of Australians.

Year: 2012

R U OK? drafted a formal statement of its purpose and began to unpack the evidence for its contribution to people's wellbeing and to suicide prevention. Independent consultant and former CEO of Beyond Blue and Lifeline Australia, Dawn O'Neil, provided much valued guidance and the first strategic plan emerged. The focus on the help-giver was reconfirmed, knowing that the help-seeker would benefit from building the motivation, confidence and skills of those who may make the offer of help.

A Scientific Advisory Group was formed with external experts in mental health, suicide prevention and social policy to advise on an evaluation framework and ongoing data collection to measure the effectiveness of R U OK?



Year: 2013 - 2016

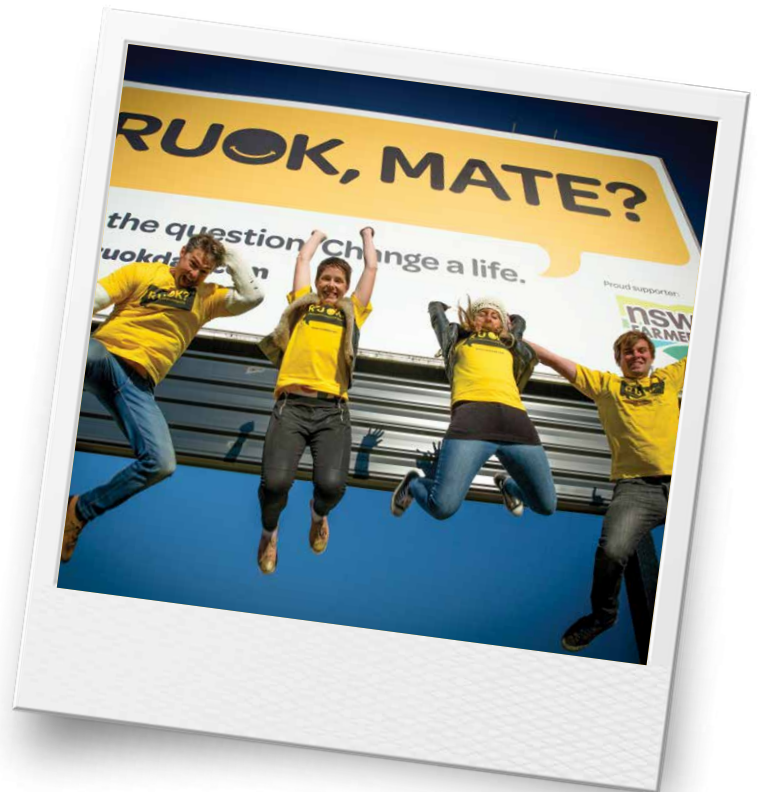
In 2013, Brendan Maher became CEO following executive roles at Lifeline Australia. The small office team consolidated into a stable structure with capabilities to manage campaign activities, sponsorship and stakeholder relationships.

A shift of emphasis occurred to move the campaign from a national day of action, to one of year-round outreach and education. This was to be delivered through a calendar of events, an ambassador program and communications across owned and traditional media platforms. The social media and website activities for R U OK? grew substantially from this point on.

One way this shift manifested itself was through the nationwide R U OK? bus tours which visited towns across Australia. This grassroots approach spread the R U OK? message throughout rural and regional Australia, fostering local champions who would authentically share the message with the people, peers and leaders in their communities.

The impact of R U OK? was being maximised by mobilising social action rather than generating activity from a central perspective. This was reinforced through the provision of open source (free) resources and toolkits and the production of a varied range of merchandise all in the brand's bright yellow to symbolise the sense of hope and empowerment that R U OK? aims to engender. Local towns and support services used the R U OK? visits as an opportunity to promote existing early intervention and help-seeking pathways to their community. The success of the bus tours led to further nationwide tour campaigns that continue to this day.

Workplaces began contacting R U OK? for industry-specific campaigns. These became a core focus of the year-round efforts and focussed on building a culture of early intervention, connectedness and referral to available services such as Employee Assistance Programs. Resources were created for management to learn how to effectively navigate an R U OK? conversation, and targeted campaign settings were funded by the corporate sector and focussed on occupational setting such as legal and FIFO (fly in, fly out).





Years: 2017 – 2019

Industry-specific R U OK? campaigns grew during this period, including

Rail R U OK? Day, R U OK? at Uni and further adoption of R U OK? at Work. This ability to tailor R U OK? for occupational groups contributed to a significant boost in the campaign's reach and workplace dimension.

Primary Schools began using the R U OK? resources to reinforce the message that you are never too young to learn how to look out for a friend.

In 2018, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, the 'Stronger Together' campaign was developed. Led by an R U OK? Indigenous

Advisory Group and an Aboriginal owned and managed creative agency, the campaign demonstrates R U OK? is relevant to all Australians including first nations peoples.

The '4 Conversation Steps' remain core to all R U OK? resources and evaluation measures show steady increases in participant help-giving intentions and behaviours. As awareness and participation grow, more people are asking 'What do I do when someone says, "No, I'm not OK"' which is an encouraging reflection on ten years of long-term behaviour change efforts.

People are moving past their fear or reluctance to ask without being confident of what answer they will hear. Their interest in educating themselves on how to have a conversation with someone they're worried about is taking R U OK? and generational change to a new level in early intervention efforts and community capacity building.



4.3. What Are The Unique Characteristics of R U OK?

Simple Strong Message That Cuts Through

From the beginning, R U OK? offered a different approach to suicide prevention. While services and professionals were formal and clinical in their language about suicide and seeking help, this campaign was a simple, strong message that would cut through. It demonstrated that we can all contribute to suicide prevention.

If the R U OK? question got people's attention, the tag line that followed really strengthened the campaign: **A Conversation Could Change a Life.**

Importantly, the tagline does not state or imply the prevention of suicide, it is far more inclusive. The emphasis is on changing the situation for a person who is struggling with life's ups and downs. Many people relate to the need for the support of others during tough times. Furthermore, R U OK? reaches more broadly with its message because people do not have to be suicidal or living with a mental illness to benefit from the call to action.



"We intentionally chose the strapline of R U OK? Day being 'A conversation could change a life' because it actually is the one thing all of us can do to make a real difference. Getting connected, staying connected is the best thing any of us can do both for ourselves and anybody that may be at risk. That said it's not just about those at risk, we want everybody in Australia right across the spectrum of society to just reach out to the people in their lives that they care about and essentially let them know that they do care by asking R U OK?" Gavin Larkin.

Authentically Reflects People's Life Experiences

R U OK? can be understood as adding a layer to the efforts of preventing suicides in Australia and helping people from all backgrounds to make a difference. In the years since R U OK? started, greater attention is being given in suicide prevention to the importance of personal connection with others and efforts to de-escalate the trajectories associated with 'negative life events'. This is being reflected in Australian studies that have highlighted the place of 'stressors' in suicidal behaviour.

For the R U OK? team, focusing on reaching out to people who were struggling made sense because their work is based on the experiences of people.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many people who become involved in R U OK? activities and fundraising are motivated by their own experience of loss through suicide and their desire to do something positive for others.

The juxtaposition of the cancer illness that resulted in Gavin's death with his work on R U OK? must be noted. The person so driven to find ways to prevent the death of others was experiencing a threat to his own life and that of his dear son at the same time. This only further motivated Gavin and those around him to make R U OK? work. One observation is that the experience of pain became an undercurrent of R U OK?

It is perhaps this raw human emotional connection with the struggles that so many people experience in their lives that has reinforced the genuine authenticity of R U OK?



Focused on Purpose and Values

R U OK? has never been conventional as a charity or community program. It is not asking for anything other than a person's time and willingness to support others. This reflects its roots within the private sector: the message and the way a person responds is all that matters. Nothing else gets in the way.

"R U OK is not just an organisation or a campaign. It is not just a charity asking for money. We don't ask people to do anything except look out for those in their world. It has developed into a movement,"

says Mike Connaghan, Former CEO WPP AUNZ (formerly STW Group) and R U OK? Chair.



"R U OK?'s success is also testament to the financial and resource contributions made by, what was then, STW Group (the largest media and advertising group in Australia and New Zealand). As CEO of the Group and a friend of Gavin's, when he came to me with the idea for R U OK? I saw the difference he wanted to make and backed him from the start.

"Notwithstanding the implications this workload and his illness had on his own business responsibilities, Gavin was relentless in his efforts to bring the movement to life. The Group supported, and continues to support, R U OK?'s overheads to ensure its streamlined and nimble model continues.

The relationship and history that the Group has with R U OK? is something very unique. I have seen many positive changes in the past decade as R U OK? becomes further ingrained in the vernacular of countless Australians. I am extremely proud of what has been accomplished."

Relevant to Schools and Workplaces

Long-term behaviour change needs young people, and schools have been paramount to the relevance of R U OK? across the country. Not only do students engage with the message but teachers and principals are creating a whole of school R U OK? culture and checking in on one another as colleagues. Children share their R U OK?Day efforts with parents, grandparents, etc. and the ripple effect continues in to communities.

Another feature of R U OK? success has been the engagement with workplaces. Purposefully, R U OK?Day always falls on the second Thursday of every September to extend and amplify World Suicide Prevention Day efforts on 10 September. Being a weekday, this has enabled the campaign to be brought into the workplace through staff gatherings, communications profiling workplace support services (HR, EAP, mental health benefits) and merchandise aimed at starting a conversation to remind staff of the importance of meaningful conversations. Importantly, the day provides the opportunity for leaders to share their lived experiences and/or profile professional support in a genuine manner.

Gavin Larkin's early words have reinforced the ability of workplaces to be places of helpful conversation:



"In the time it takes to have a cuppa, you could change a life."
– The late Gavin Larkin, R U OK? Founder.





‘Scaffolding’ For the Service System

R U OK? is a health promotion, not a service provider. It does not provide any direct support services to people. No counsellors, no support phone line, no treatments or therapy.

The strength of R U OK? has been its ability to encourage more Australians to have conversations with each other – something that is free to do. The challenge is that some people do not want to have such conversations; they might feel uncomfortable or might be fearful of what to do if someone replies, “No, I’m not OK.”

It was never the intention of R U OK? to be the sole answer to that statement. From the outset, the focus was to help people navigate a conversation through its 4 Step Conversation model, and to signpost to existing support services. The model enables help-givers to encourage help-seekers to approach those services.

“R U OK? wanted to get the person in the community to hold the hand of the person calling and using those services,” says Janina Nearn, former TV Producer/ former R U OK? CEO.

Brendan Maher, former CEO of R U OK? and current R U OK? board member, describes the role of R U OK? as “Creating the ‘scaffolding’ for informal supports enabling personal conversations to occur, while also providing information to prompt further action and seek help through existing services, when warranted.”

Two practical parts of this ‘scaffolding’ are:

- Resources for help-givers: showing how to have a conversation such as the 4 Step conversation guide, classroom toolkit, manager’s guide to asking, etc.
- Resources for help-seekers to help people ‘who are not ok’ find support services such as a dedicated website page, conversation cards, social media connections, etc.



Individual Action and Social Change

R U OK? has operated at two levels: the individual and the social group.

It has provided people with a sense of hope that by connecting through conversations they can contribute to suicide prevention and make a difference in the lives of those around them. It has strengthened people's confidence to have these conversations by promoting the art of being a 'good listener'.

"R U OK? fosters courage to be vulnerable with someone going through tough times – to offer real friendship. It helps you overcome the anxiety and reluctance to engage with others in these times," says Rebecca Lewis, former R U OK? Campaign Director.

In 2016, an initial review of the effectiveness of R U OK? by Australian researchers noted:

"R U OK?'s aims of promoting conversations between individuals and awareness of the mental health of others appears to be contributing to a greater willingness among individuals to talk about their troubles with others and a greater willingness to seek professional help."⁴

The importance of this approach was explored further by Christensen, H. et al (2018) in a paper which distinguished between campaigns that sought to engage with communities, their local organisations and services, from those that relied only on large scale media or publicity campaigns:

Source: 4. Mok K, Donovan R, Hocking B, Maher B, Lewis R & Pirkis J (2016). Stimulating community action for suicide prevention: findings on the effectiveness of the Australian R U OK? Campaign. International Journal of Mental Health Promotion, 18:4, 213-221.



For suicide prevention to be effective, communities (including health professionals, schools, community organisations, and frontline workers) need to be meaningfully included in the solution. Rather than viewing suicide prevention as an either/or solution, in which we focus only on community campaigns or only on health services, we need to recognise that community-based and health system strategies work hand-in-hand to create synergistic improvements. Galvanising the community as part of our suicide prevention efforts can save lives.

Quirky and Distinct

A part of the success of R U OK? has been tackling the taboo surrounding suicide by working outside of more mainstream sources of action delivered by government or other organisations in the charitable sector.

R U OK? is the product of a different outlook, boosted by the lived experience of those involved and those who tell their stories. It is focused on a basic proposition and efficient in its use of available resources for maximum impact. It is also a fundamentally creative venture – a vibrant and hopeful way of nudging all Australians to look out for each other, but with sincerity always present.





5. What difference does R U OK? make?

5.1. Individuals

R U OK? Founder Gavin Larkin said R U OK?Day is “the day to think about someone else”.

Current CEO Katherine Newton explains that R U OK? taps into the desire of most people to help those in their world – if they can be shown when and how to lend support if someone says, “No, I’m not OK”. In this sense, R U OK? gives people a sense of purpose and participation in the mental health and wellbeing of others.

Research commissioned by R U OK? consistently shows that most people feel they ‘should’ or ‘definitely should’ ask a seemingly troubled friend, relative or colleague what is troubling them. When people have asked the question many report feeling worried but also calm, hopeful, and kind.

R U OK? encourages people to ask how someone is feeling rather than staying silent. In doing so, trustworthiness is being fostered in relationships because of the demonstrated willingness to talk about tough things. This has an immediate and longer-term benefit enabling people to seek help and reach out for support when they are facing difficult times.

R U OK? is an aid to reducing stigma through its efforts to normalise talking about life’s ups and downs and can be seen as a contributing factor in decades of work to help people consider their attitudes and behaviours towards someone going through a tough time, including mental illness and/or suicidality, now that it is well positioned within the Australian vernacular.

5.2. Community

The message and the activities associated with R U OK? can be run by individuals or in communities; as social events, workplace programs or to complement mental health literacy and Public Health Network activities.

Many communities and networks nationwide organise R U OK? events throughout the year. Sadly, some communities will host an event in memory of someone who has lost their life to suicide and in the hope of preventing further tragedy. Others will host an event to be proactive and foster a year-round culture of connection and peer support within clubs, workplaces or schools.



Case Study: Woolgoolga NSW

Woolgoolga on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales has created a major community event out of R U OK?Day.

Lisa Nichols, R U OK? Community Ambassador, tells how the event was born out of the community's desire to do more for suicide prevention.

"We first became involved in R U OK? about nine years ago when we combined R U OK?Day with the Lifeline 'Out of the Shadows' walk, which we were holding each year to remember those lost to suicide.

The R U OK? message is an easy one – although the question may be difficult to ask! The bright yellow colour of R U OK? is like sunshine – it is optimistic – we can do something."

Lisa says that R U OK? provides a way for people who are struggling to speak about suicidal thoughts and life's difficulties before things get too bad. It equips help-givers with the confidence to ask the question and have a meaningful conversation. This helps to reduce stigma and empowers people in the community with knowledge about how to reach out and support someone going through a tough time.

Local community services participate in the Woolgoolga events. Their presence forges closer links between services and the community and ensures people know where they can turn to for help if they need it.

The R U OK? events reinforce the reputation the town has for being welcoming to others. Through R U OK?, the social values of compassion towards others and building kindness are strengthened so that R U OK? becomes every day, not just one day.

5.3. Industries

One of the applications of R U OK? is to embed industry-wide adoption of the R U OK? message as a tool to promote peer support, suicide prevention awareness and a stronger supportive culture across multiple workplace sites and job types. The R U OK? message can unify people across an industry and create a shared language and understanding of what it means to be aware, alert and able to help others in a genuine, non-threatening way.



Case Study: Rail Industry

TrackSAFE Foundation is a national harm prevention charity that was established by the Australian rail industry to reduce incidents and fatalities on the rail network as a result of suicide and reckless behaviour. The rail industry employs thousands of staff, some of whom at any time could be experiencing personal struggle and distress. The rail industry also knows that suicidal behaviours occur on its networks – with tragic incidents having an intense impact on rail personnel. The rail industry wants to positively promote peer support while contributing to suicide prevention.

The first Rail R U OK? Day was held in 2015

“Rail organisations got behind the initiative from day one; however, in saying that, some rail employees felt it was a token gesture in the very beginning,” said Naomi Frauenfelder, former Executive Director TrackSAFE Foundation.

“But this has changed significantly, it is more of a movement now: it feels that rail organisations have embedded R U OK? in their cultures and that staff at all levels are embracing the initiative all year round. People are sharing stories of how a workmate has supported them or how they have reached out to others.”

She credits strong executive leadership, the formation of champion networks, and the continued promotion of R U OK? as the success factors.

“The congruency of the R U OK? message for the rail workforce is also key. People in the rail industry do experience exposure to traumatic events. They know the importance of looking out for each other. R U OK? is a message that everyone can grasp.”

Since the inaugural Rail R U OK? Day participation has grown exponentially from 6,500 to well over 70,000 in 2019 across Australia and more recently to New Zealand.

“Rail R U OK? Day is the largest initiative celebrated by rail and is helping to foster genuinely supportive workplaces across the industry.” said Frauenfelder.



Case Study: MATES in Construction

The building and construction industry in Australia experience higher than average suicide rates and this has led to the establishment of a number of programs to address worker wellbeing and the prevention of suicide. MATES in Construction is a multi-factor program that combines outreach to raise awareness with training and peer support structures so that any worker can get or give immediate help to a 'mate' who is showing signs of personal struggle.

MATES in Construction have formed a partnership with R U OK? and hold a 'Fly The Flag' event on R U OK? Day. Justin Geange, Brisbane-based Field Officer and R U OK? Community Ambassador says, "Lots of people on construction sites relate to R U OK? because it provides resources to help people have conversations. It's an easy partnership because R U OK? and MATES in Construction complement each other."

Culturally, R U OK? provides a message that fits with the 'old school – look out for your mates' attitude to working life. It is about connection with others and focuses on those who can offer help, rather than trying to tell people who are struggling that they should seek help. The focus on the help-giver is a subtle but significant difference in approach.

"It is important to show people what to look for, what to notice when someone is not ok," Justin says.

"The challenge, though, is that you don't know if the conversation will open up a can of worms and some pretty traumatic stories will come out. So being prepared to listen and encourage action at those times is an important aspect of the message."

Justin suggests this is why R U OK? works well in building and construction workplaces alongside MATES in Construction:

"R U OK? gets the conversation started and MIC provides the structures and supports for someone to get additional help if they need it."

Geange notes there has been a shift over the years and R U OK? is now seen as a message for every day of the year, not just for one day.



Case Study: Sensis/Yellow

Effective corporate partnerships have been established that assist R U OK? to reach more Australians in more and varied ways.

The relationship between Sensis and R U OK? is one example. This partnership started in 2015 when R U OK? Ambassadors were featured on the covers of telephone directories.

CEO John Allan says Sensis chose R U OK? as a charity partner, "Because of the simplicity of its message". R U OK? utilised the directories' reach and impact by featuring well-known identities on the covers.

With the help of Sensis and the Ambassadors, the 2015 R U OK? campaign was delivered into millions of homes.

After this initial success Sensis implemented the R U OK? message for its staff by educating them about the R U OK? 4 step conversation model. This was very positively received and led to further mental health and wellbeing training for managers and the provision of additional information and resources in the workplace.

In 2016 Sensis sponsored a rebuild of the R U OK? website (www.ruok.org.au) to develop the site as the sector leader for people to learn how to have a meaningful conversation with someone they are worried about. Sensis have since arranged for a 'Small Business Handbook' to be distributed around the country recognising the pressures that small business owners face and how to support them. A subsequent survey by Sensis business 'Yellow' has shown more than 70% of small businesses identify R U OK? as a source of information on how to help others.

"This shows that R U OK? can be a catalyst for change in all sections of Australian society," Allan said.

Allan says Sensis staff like how R U OK? addresses people who have been touched by mental health issues either personally or through a family member.

"Our workforce is a bit younger and a bit more technical in character, so maybe they see the R U OK? image as being a bit edgy. However, it's clear the R U OK? message resonates with people in the Sensis workforce and has a practical side to it that works well in reminding us to check in with others – especially when technology and social changes can leave people feeling lonely and isolated."

When people are asked what they think R U OK? is about, the importance of meaningfully connecting is often mentioned with people recognising they have a role to play in supporting those around them.

What do you think R U OK? is about?⁵

"Making it more socially acceptable to ask a friend if they are OK with the preconception of them not being a sign of weakness."

"Taking the time to check in with people and see if they are OK. Ask the question, don't assume."

"Asking a person who seems troubled if they are OK and if not ask if they would like some help."

"Helping people to be proactive about asking a person if they're OK and helping people to know others care."

"Suicide prevention through encouraging friends and family to ask are you okay."

"Encouraging people to ask those around them whether they are OK and if they need support."

"It's about being genuinely interested in other people who seem to need help by asking RUOK."

"It's getting everyone to ask the question, when they might not normally think to, and to let people know it's OK not to be OK."

"A reminder to us all to demonstrate our care and concern for our friends and colleagues."

Source: 5. Colmar Brunton, R U OK? quarterly trackers January-December 2019.



6. Challenges

R U OK? has found a home in the national consciousness with more than four out of five Australians aware of the campaign and one in five participating directly in an R U OK? activity. Having achieved a high level of awareness the challenge for the future is how to deepen the engagement people have with R U OK? and to remain relevant for the community.

Undoubtably there has been a positive impact in the early intervention space as evidenced by those who have been involved in R U OK? identifying the following:

- More willing to ask their friends about what's troubling them;
- More willing to tell their friends what is troubling them if asked;
- More willing to seek professional help for things that are troubling them.

This suggests the capacity of individuals and the community to provide informal support is growing.

To some extent, the more far reaching and effective R U OK? is, the less will be the burden on support services as issues are addressed through early intervention via increased community capacity.

However, linkages with the wider service system will remain a priority for R U OK? because in order to achieve positive outcomes for people in need (i.e. those who are 'not ok'), professional support might be required. For some people their mental ill-health and the struggles they are facing in daily life are more complex and continuing. The limitations of the current system are felt by those who cannot see a way out of their struggles and those who cannot access services.

As Australia examines the case for major reform of its mental health services and supports, the focus must be on the 'building' as well as the informal community care 'scaffolding' surrounding it. Improvements are needed for those people who are facing more complicated mental ill-health that will continue beyond a brief period of treatment or support. For example, some of the most common community discussion topics on R U OK? social media are around inadequate services and care. The service system must be designed to properly utilise the community capacity building that R U OK? effects, while at the same time building better pathways to higher levels of care for those who need it.



7. Conclusion

Many across the nation attribute the success of R U OK? to its simplicity – a message that cuts through and can mobilise large numbers of people to become more engaged in suicide prevention.

While there can be barriers to reaching out and offering support, by keeping it simple and breaking down the steps into manageable, everyday language, people are empowered to believe, 'I can – and should – do this'. The premise of 'you don't have to be an expert to ask R U OK?' is something often repeated in communities across Australia. Asking "Are you OK?" is something we can all do.

Without R U OK? the landscape would look very different. There is great value in demonstrating to the whole community that they can contribute to suicide prevention and then, importantly, showing them how. Suicide prevention requires the efforts of us all, not just professionals and experts. Through R U OK? an idea 'to do something' has become a cultural movement engaging all walks of life.

Suicide knows no boundaries. It is up to all of us to look out for those we care about and start a conversation that could change a life.

We can each take an immediate, positive step to help another person and in doing so be part of the solution, helping to create supportive communities that have a stronger, more collaborative approach to suicide prevention.





“This demonstrates that whilst the question is being asked, there is more work to be done to bridge the gap between thinking about asking, and asking.” said Katherine Newton, CEO of R U OK?

“There is a continued need for R U OK? as a public health promotion to maintain its presence and encourage Australians from all walks of life to reach out and offer support to anyone who might be struggling with life. It isn’t something to do because we are told to or feel unfairly compelled to. It’s simply the right thing to do.

“Relationships are a two-way arrangement. There needs to be trust and a genuine desire to help. If that trust or genuineness is not there, then people, staff, customers will see through that. For behaviour to continue changing, we must move past a tokenistic ‘How are you?’ that does not include listening to the answer,” said Newton. **“By giving people the time and space to answer honestly during a time of need, then in the words of our founder, we can aim to stop small things becoming big things.”**





A conversation could change a life.

ruok.org.au