

# Listen, speak up and be a mate to help get ahead of a crisis

**BRAD CROUCH:** *Chris, for starters, can you put the state of mental illness in Australia in some context?*

**CHRIS BURNS:** I think the key statistic is that each day, eight Australians lose their life to suicide, and six are men – and each day, 82 men in Australia call an ambulance because they have thoughts of, or attempted, suicide. We've got to stop waiting for the crisis, we have to get ahead of the crisis and realise this is not just a clinical issue, this is about the community coming together. At a time more Australians are connected to the internet, we have never had a more disconnected community. Our focus needs to be on how we build a strong, compassionate and resilient community to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of all South Australians.

**BC:** *What are the main mental health challenges?*

**CB:** 45 per cent of Australians will experience diagnosable mental illness in their life; about 50 per cent of that will be related to anxiety and depression. Those sorts of illnesses are best treated in the community, not in hospital beds. Wellbeing is impacted by social determinants – does the person have a roof over their head, a job, a strong family and community support and are they physically well? All those factors come together to define the wellbeing of our community.

**BC:** *What are the warning signs people can look out for?*

**ANDRIS BANDERS:** Sometimes it is hard to know what's happening to you – you feel a wave of emotions and are not quite sure what tag to put on them. Often you notice you are not doing things you would normally do or as people expect you to carry out your responsibilities, so sometimes a concern is how people interact their emotional crises with substance abuse – drugs and alcohol. It's not uncommon for people to self-medicate. If you notice you are drinking more, that may mean your mental state is not where it should be. Watching those behaviours – and also finding people you can talk to, people you can trust and expressing

The shock death of much-loved football star Danny Frawley has shaken the AFL world, stunned the wider community, and put a stark spotlight on mental health. Health Reporter **BRAD CROUCH** sat down with South Australian Mental Health Commissioner Chris Burns and three of his community advisers – Brooke Fogden, Adan Richards and Andris Banders – to discuss warning signs and how to help

those things about your doubts or downness, becomes really important. If you are a mate who has a person in that condition, sharpen some listening skills, give them space and time to talk. Silences happen in those conversations but are critical because silence signifies safety – they are hearing you.

**BC:** *Socially, with masculine stereotypes, how difficult is it for a man to go up to a friend and say 'I need to talk?' – and also for friends to say to a friend 'We need to talk because I am worried about you?'*

**BROOKE FOGDEN:** There is generational change. My father would have just said to me "harden up, grow a thick skin", but that is now slowly changing; within my generation, we are showing our emotions a bit more. The big word these days is connect-

edness but we are becoming disconnected. With social media, we are actually not talking face to face with people, we are doing it through social media, emails, texts. Face-to-face, you can actually gauge if they are struggling or they are a bit different to normal. Community is very important and that's what I have tried to create at Millswood Bowls Club, which is that sense of community and somewhere you can feel comfortable, a safe haven to open up and talk about anything you want, which is fantastic and we need more of it (former SANFL player and House Rules contestant Brooke Fogden is a Bowls SA mental-health ambassador).

**BC:** *Is the potential bullying and loss of face-to-face contact due to social media a concern for the mental*

*health of young people in particular?*

**ADAN RICHARDS:** It's a double-edged sword – young people also talk about the protective nature of social media so there are parts that are not all bad; it can be used for good. Disconnection is the key point, though – that's not just a social-media problem, that's a broader social problem. It's not just that people have phones now, it has a lot to do with how complex our world is overall.

**BC:** *What would be your message to a young person who is struggling with mental challenges?*

**AR:** As Andris said, it is important to find people you trust, that you can talk to. I find it hard to think of a proper substitute for that – and people who really listen. That is a problem we need to address as a community, the discomfort around discomfort. What happens when someone is in crisis, what happens if a work colleague comes in crying – how can we deal with our own discomfort and learn to listen rather than offering an immediate solution.

**BC:** *Is there a temptation for people who ask "Are you OK?" to listen for the moment then wash their hands and say "well, I've done my bit?"*

**CB:** Yes, there is a lot of awareness but that's not translating into action. First thing is, don't just walk up to someone and ask "Are you OK?", first get them to somewhere safe where they feel comfortable to have a conversation. Take them for a coffee and maybe say "I noticed you haven't been as engaged lately,

is everything all right?" But then it is how to have the conversation that flows from there that is not judgmental, and knowing what the next action is. You can't just let the conversation end, you have to go down that journey with them and make sure they get the care they need. You need to put someone in a safe place and know how to have the conversation with them then know where to get the next line of support.

**BC:** *Telling someone they may need to see a doctor is a big step – is that where you first need to build trust?*

**CB:** Absolutely, and it may take a number of conversations, and you may bring members of their family or colleagues in. But if you feel it is so severe, you may need to say "I need to get you to a GP". The default should not be "You need to go to a doctor"; things are best dealt in the mental-health space in the community surrounded by people who care about you, family and friends. History has shown if you keep it in that environment, things can be brought back down again. Going straight to the doctor can heighten the situation.

**AB:** Even when people go to a doctor, they may not be clear how to proceed so sometimes other services can help. You also can bring an advocate to the doctor. Twenty-five per cent of households in Australia are single person and loneliness is one thing people complain about and can lead to emotional crises, so there is some community responsibility to have a look who is living near you and say a few words to them, check out what's happening with them.

**BC:** *There's stress in rural areas and the pub may be a source of community but is a difficult place to open up about mental health. Your thoughts?*

**AB:** Alcohol is a depressant so that won't help the mood scenario, though there may be some connectivity. People in rural areas suffer most due to lack of services.

**BC:** *We talk about mates helping mates – how critical is that mateship in a rural area where your trusted friend might be miles away?*



**EXPERTISE:** SA Mental Health Commissioner Chris Burns, second from left, with his community advisers Brooke Fogden, Adan Richards and Andris Banders, who all work in the field. Below, AFL legend Danny Frawley.

Main picture: TRICIA WATKINSON

**AB:** It is very important, and doesn't necessarily mean male mates, let's include female mates. The suicide rate of two women and six men a day suggests women may have a better grip on the emotional thing. So maybe getting them to help explore the discussion could be useful. Mates are key, and what they do as well – they may have to drive a friend to the city to see a psychologist, which is a big leap.

**BF:** I was in the country and a man asked "who helps the helper?" He is a mainstay of the community, someone people turn to for advice, but who helps him? He takes on a lot of responsibility and it is affecting him. He feels if he goes down, they are all going to go down. Some guys in the country have someone they look up to and respect and might say to that person: "I'm struggling" and that can be a lot to take on. There is a lack of resources – when it comes down to one untrained person, it can be a load.

**AR:** That's where professionals play a role, when mates are getting burdened, but the distribution of services in rural areas is sparse. Accessing services can be tough.

**BC:** *Anecdotally, it seems women have strong friendship groups they open up to and have support, more so than some men, who may keep stuff to themselves. Can men learn from women?*

**CB:** Absolutely they can. Women will look each other in the eye and there is no barrier to what they will talk about. Men are reluctant to look each other in the eye and talk about those taboo subjects. We have to break down that stigma and the discrimination around it.

**AB:** Sometimes the clinical system can be traumatic for the person – you are going to have some intense feelings. There are also tools such as emotional CPR (emotional-cpr.org) which are circulating.

**BC:** *The buzzword these days seems to be "resilience". What are your thoughts on how to build that so people can cope with the stresses of everyday life?*

**AB:** Some of the wellness programs talk about a range of things, for example self-awareness – look at what you're eating, talk to yourself, know when your warning signs are starting to emerge. When I was younger, learning to talk to my own anxiety

was a key thing for me. Not feeling that it is bad or evil or wrong, it is just what is happening. That is one of the problems – people judge mental-health issues so severely, and that's why some of the stigma emerges.

**CB:** Ninety per cent per cent of brain development occurs before the age of five. So before they even go to school, that's when you have the opportunity to impact the resiliency of their brain and their mental health. A total of 50 per cent of mental illness onsets before the age of 14, 75 per cent before the age of 24. So if we're not working on that first 25 years of a human being's life to build up their resilience, the opportunities are missed. We can't wait until they are out in the workforce before we start thinking about resilience.

We've got to be dealing with new parents, with kids in schools, with younger people in tertiary education.

**AR:** We talk about self-care, self-talk and stuff like that and I think that's definitely important. When you have people in your life that you trust, it gives meaning to the bad stuff, because you can talk about the bad stuff in your day. That's community.

**BF:** That community side of things can help build that resilience, so you feel safe around people you trust and talk to. And it doesn't have to involve people at the pub – it can just be people sitting around, or in my case having a bowl and enjoying each other's company, which can help relieve your work's hard pressures or whatever. You feel comfortable, and inadvertently it's giving you a little bit of emotional support, and mental health and wellbeing because you are at a place you feel comfortable to talk. You can blow off steam, and you'll have friends around who will notice if you really are struggling or changes in your emotions.

**BC:** *Research linked to RU OK? Day noted some people who approached workplace managers about mental-health issues were told to toughen up. Is that acceptable?*

**CB:** I find it amazing the number of employers who don't know their obligations to maintain a mentally healthy workplace. It is exactly the same as their obligation to maintain a physically healthy workplace. There are too many employers out there who believe mental health is

not part of the workplace. What they don't realise is the productivity benefits of having a good, strong, mentally healthy workplace. (Consultants) PricewaterhouseCoopers said, for every dollar you invest in the mental health and wellbeing of your workforce, you'll get a minimum \$2.30 return. So the business case is there, the law is there, and there is a moral and ethical obligation.

**AB:** Many workplaces have employee assistance programs, so they outsource it and seem to think it's not their problem.

**BC:** *AFL great Danny Frawley seemed to have so many things going for him – loveable, footy support networks, family, dream job. Is it hard to see symptoms of people struggling if you don't look closely?*

**AB:** Some practitioners talk about the iceberg syndrome, where the good part is shining above the water level but the emotional complexity is hidden. But in Danny's case, it was known to his family and other people, these moods and periods of being down. But if you just look at the glistening of ice above the water, sometimes people just don't join the dots.

## THE KEY, FINAL MESSAGES FROM THIS DISCUSSION

“Don't wait for the crisis; be prepared to put your hand up and ask for help.”  
**CHRIS BURNS**

“It is not worth not talking about it; if you need a hand, go to friends.”  
**ANDRIS BANDERS**

“We all have feelings and irrespective if you are male or female, don't hold them in, let it out.”  
**BROOKE FOGDEN**

“Listen to your friends with your whole heart, don't listen with judgment.”  
**ADAN RICHARDS**

**IF YOU NEED HELP:**  
**LIFELINE**  
**13 11 14**  
**BEYOND BLUE**  
**1300 22 4636**

## THE LAST WORD

**WITH MARTY SMITH**



### MOUTHING OFF

(1) Tabloid headline: "Car accident makes woman write backwards". (2) Anagram: Barry Manilow – library woman. (3) From a newspaper ad: "Now you can borrow enough money to get completely out of debt." (4) Headline from the online satirical Australian newspaper The Betoota Advocate: "'It's quiet ... too quiet' says increasingly nervous NRL Integrity Unit". (5) In the Twittersphere: "Organic is a grocery term meaning twice as expensive." – US comedian Jim Gaffigan.

### INSIGHT

"God bless Australia – and please hurry." – bumper sticker.

### QUOTE, UNQUOTE

"A cannibal is a guy who goes into a restaurant and orders the waiter." – US comedian Jack Benny.

### KEEPING COUNT

**8407** – the number of universities in India in 2007.

### JUST A THOUGHT

To keep young, associate with young people. To get old in a hurry, try keeping up with them.

### REMEMBER WHEN

Today is September 14, International Drive Your Stud-baker Day and the 257th day of the year. There are 108 days remaining until the end of the year. On this day: **1945:** *I'll Be Seeing You*, starring US actors Ginger Rogers, Joseph Cotten and Shirley Temple, opened at the Regent in Rundle St, city. **1954:** "Don't buy carpets under artificial lighting if they are to be used in sunny rooms. You can easily be deceived in the colours." – from Useful Hints in *The Advertiser*.

**1982:** Princess Grace of Monaco died of injuries she sustained in a car crash near Monte Carlo.

**1989:** SAFM listed *Right Here Waiting*, by US singer-songwriter Richard Marx, as Adelaide's No.1 hit single.

**1999:** Damian Squire (Sturt) won the 1999 Magarey Medal.

**2015:** *The Chase Australia*, presented by Andrew O'Keefe, premiered on Channel 7 in Adelaide.

**2018:** US humourist Bill Doty tweeted: "I was so tired this morning that I almost went to the bathroom without my phone."

## TODAY'S THOUGHT

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.  
**2 Corinthians 3:17**