



WITNESS STATEMENT OF DENNA HEALY

I, Denna Healy, say as follows:

- 1 My family story starts in July 2013, when I was 16 years old. The day seemed like any other normal school day, except that I woke up a bit late. I thought that was a bit strange because Mum would usually come in and wake me up.
- 2 When I woke up, I remember hearing crying coming from my parents' bedroom. I got out of bed and walked down the hallway to their room. When I stepped into the room, I saw my mum standing next to the bed, crying hysterically and shaking uncontrollably. I then noticed a plastic bag with letters in it on the bed and found an envelope with my name on it. I opened it and Dad's wedding band fell out of the envelope. The letter said something like *"Sorry Denna, sorry I won't be there to see you do your debutante, see you get married, and have kids"*... A lot of it I can't remember too well as I think I tried to shut it out.
- 3 After I had read the letter, I found myself standing in the kitchen in kind of a daze. I distinctly remember my sister screaming. My sister was 14 at the time. I had no idea what to do - I didn't even know if my dad was still alive at that point. I spent that day just trying to keep myself together while also trying my best to look out for my mum and sister as well, especially as I was the eldest child.
- 4 During the day we were calling the police and the paramedics to get their advice and keep them updated. I remember the police shut off the freeway exit, where they were stopping every car getting off the freeway to check for him. Three hours later, my dad walked through the door. He drove home the back way and came back to the house on his own terms. Once he was inside and we saw him, overwhelmed with emotion, he was taken to hospital. I was grateful that he willingly agreed to go to hospital; we had the police there just in case he refused to go.
- 5 I went back to school the next day. Looking back now, I can't remember how I did that, but 16 year old me just felt like it was the only way I could cope. School was some sense of normality in a week where my life had been turned on top of its head. My sister stayed home for a few weeks.
- 6 The week before, I was worried about what 16 year olds normally worry about – what clothes I'll wear to that party, what friends I'll catch up with on the weekend.

My family's journey

My dad

- 7 I don't think we had an inkling that my dad was suffering beforehand. I remember he used to be on his phone a lot, but he kept saying it was work-related. It turns out he was gambling on his phone the majority of the time. He was always able to put on a brave face: people at the footy club say that he's always so happy and friendly, and anyone you ask that he works with would say exactly the same thing. I definitely believe he was a master of disguise – perhaps he knew how to wear a mask so well he got to the point where he just didn't take it off anymore. That day that I woke up in July 2013, I had no idea whatsoever how things would turn out.
- 8 My dad was in hospital for about three months, getting different care as his mental health progressed and increased. His support began in the psych ward and then he was taken to an inpatient home when he was ready and healthy enough.
- 9 Dad has been taking antidepressants since 2013, alternating between higher and lower dosages, depending on how he is going.
- 10 We found out in 2014 that my dad had experienced childhood trauma. That played an integral part in my healing because for the whole year since he tried to take his life, I kept questioning myself – asking myself what ifs, what if I had picked up on his behaviour, what if I'd known? The moment I found out about his trauma, it felt like I could give a part of that back to him and be like this isn't mine to carry around anymore.
- 11 My dad's eldest brother also experienced childhood trauma, but my dad's parents didn't believe him and kicked him out. When he was on the streets, he turned to drugs as an escape with a group of other young people. He eventually caught AIDS from the usage and passed away a few years ago. I am sharing this because I believe there is a link between Dad's gambling addiction and his relationship with his family. He remembers that the only time his dad spent quality time with him one on one was when he took him down to the race track to bet. I think my dad must have found a sense of comfort in turning to gambling, especially when he was feeling at his worst.
- 12 My dad also went through with court proceedings in relation to the trauma he had experienced in childhood. I honestly really see a lot of strength in him.
- 13 Now Dad's got a stable job and has found some hobbies that he likes to do. He is quite open now when talking about his mental health; back then he would bottle up his feelings and used gambling as a way to deal with the flashbacks. He is now in a much better space and is quite open to speaking about his mental health.

My mum and sister

- 14 I'm so proud of my mum and her journey. It took her a few years, but last year, she took the time for herself to start seeing a counsellor and I'm now seeing immense improvement in her. For years, she kept saying to me that her kids are her priority, but she had to find the space for herself amongst all that too. I feel like she has found that now.
- 15 I remember that my sister and I came in once when Dad was in hospital. I specifically remember Mum having to literally carry her out to the car – she was completely beside herself. My sister did not stop crying for the whole two hour drive home. For a while there, she had this innate belief that she could have done something to stop him from wanting to kill himself. She also believed that her texts saved him, that she stopped him from going through with it.
- 16 My sister was suicidal at times when she was in year 11. She was self-harming and she didn't see her place in the world anymore. It was quite difficult in the sense that, similar to my dad, she had a tendency to bottle up her feelings and didn't really want to talk.
- 17 I remember Mum rang the triage number on a night that things were getting quite serious. Mum took my sister into hospital and they admitted her for the night. She was taking antidepressants for a while, about a year and a half. She felt like she was able to go without other support, but she eventually went to headspace to get professional support. In terms of her schooling she dropped a subject, but I remember Mum saying to me, "*I don't really care about one less subject if she's still going to be here, I just want to keep her alive.*" The one big positive that has come from all this is how we've stuck together and supported each other.

Our experience with the mental health system

My family experience

- 18 I saw many different aspects of the mental health system with my dad. When he was in the psych ward, I didn't enjoy going in to see him, as it is quite a confronting environment. There were other people banging their heads on the walls and some people were screaming too. I did find some comfort and relief in seeing him however, it helped me know that he was still alive and still here. I still had hope because he was getting looked after and was in the right place.
- 19 When Dad was in the inpatient home, they spent a lot of time doing wellness activities like yoga and meditation. I loved seeing how the inpatient home was such an open space and how he could connect with other people safely in that environment because they were monitored. After Dad left the hospital, there were a few phone calls to follow up,

even to Mum as well, which was really good. I also noticed when he was in hospital that Mum would get regular calls from them asking what was going on and how she was doing. When he was discharged, we took him to the local GP and got him a referral to a psychologist.

- 20 However, my family experienced a number of barriers to accessing the mental health system. The main barrier was the cost of accessing services. My family literally had two dollars left in the bank at the time my dad tried to take his life. We had our mortgage paid off at the time, but he actually dug into the mortgage and his super. Even over the last few years there has been a stage where we have been trying to pay it all back. My mum received some help from Centrelink and also some family assistance too. From my own experience, this support is often not enough. I found that the Medicare deducted price of \$80 for a weekly session was quite challenging at times with the psychologist I was seeing for a while.
- 21 Further, my mum had a lot of trouble finding the right services for her. She spent nights just googling various questions such as: support for a partner to someone who has an addiction. She really struggled to find that information.

My own experience

- 22 I can wholeheartedly say that on my recovery journey, my school counsellor was a huge support for me.
- 23 In terms of my experience back then with the mental health system, I think it was about two weeks before I could sit comfortably in the school counsellor's office and even try to start talking to them. I was holding so much anger, frustration and confusion within my heart and body in regards to my dad that I didn't even know where to begin. I just knew that I didn't want to remain in that state – it was eating me up inside.
- 24 I was so grateful that the school was patient with me and allowed all the sessions to continue, because I saw that counsellor for about three years up until I finished school. I recently found out that now they're only offering a maximum of six sessions - I know for me it took about four or five before enough trust was built for me to start opening up to that counsellor. I truly see that as a step back. Reflecting on my own journey, I probably would have just said I'm not talking. It just makes you feel like you don't matter, especially if you are just passed from person to person.
- 25 I still occasionally access counselling, but more on an as needed basis. Access Consciousness has been a game changer for me. Access Consciousness is a set of tools and techniques to help you focus on your knowledge about yourself and the world around you. This is something that I was introduced to by my Reiki practitioner, who

is now an accredited Bars practitioner, and is also my mum's friend. After a few sessions of having my Bars run, my mum and I completed a day course with this friend and we are now both accredited Bars practitioners. It is lovely being able to run each other's Bars and have the tools to enable each other to be more grounded – both within life and also within ourselves. It has provided me with lifelong skills, and has taught me the power of choice and how to release what is not mine to carry.

- 26 I use both Medicare and a mental health care plan to help access mental health services. A mental health care plan, however, only provides you with ten sessions for the entire year. It means I have to consider: how do I best space out these sessions? Psychologists are also very expensive. Even on a mental health plan, I remember seeing psychologists in a suburb near where I live and it cost approximately \$210 per session.
- 27 I went to psychologists for a few months before and after the passing of my Grandma a few years ago. She was diagnosed with bile duct cancer. I used some of the ten sessions on my mental health plan to prepare myself and also saved some sessions for once she had passed, as I wanted that extra support throughout that entire time. I also cut all my hair off into a short pixie cut in memory of Grandma, and ended up raising \$3,000.
- 28 I've still got my self-care flower, which I have actually had since I was 17. I created it with my counsellor in a counselling session at school. It is literally a big flower that I have printed out, and each petal represents a different section of self-care, including Creatively, Physically, Emotionally, Mentally and Spiritually. Over the years, as I've grown and changed, I have added new activities to each petal. On days when I can't think of what I need, I have a look at the flower and think, what petal do I feel like I need? There are things in the petals such as playing with the dog, going for a walk around the lake, watching a movie, writing a Spoken Word piece, having a nap, things that make me happy.

My personal journey

My role as a carer

- 29 I became an official young carer at the age of 16. After my dad tried to take his life, I was also looking after the household as well as being an emotional support for my family. This was especially true in the first few weeks because Mum was dealing with my dad in hospital and her best friend who was taken that week as well, only two days after my dad tried to take his life. I spent a lot of time helping to get my sister to school. I was really lucky that at the time my sister was at the same campus as me. There was one specific letter my dad wrote saying, "*You're the rock of the family.*" At 16 and a half, I took that very literally. There was a period of time where I forgot about myself for a while.

- 30 It reached a point about two years ago where I realised that I was choosing a lot of partners who were really destructive. I had a real fixer mentality; I'd try to fix them as well. Eventually, it got to the point where I ended up just burning out. I had a partner at the time and it was a toxic relationship which made me think of my mum and my dad. I felt like I was trying to give all that I could but that it was not doing anything. I ended up completely bawling my eyes out and realising, it's about choice too. I sat down at my lowest point and thought to myself: okay, I support all these people but what am I actually doing to help myself? That was a real turning point for me. I started getting the help that I needed and making time for myself.
- 31 That's where I'm at in my relationship with my dad now as well. I'm supporting him, but I know that ultimately, he has to choose that for himself too. To a certain extent I have to constantly take a step back and reflect on my support of him. To remind myself that it's not my responsibility. I constantly try to do my best in guiding him with questions like, have you seen this program or this support? How does this feel, how does that feel for you? I continue to prioritise helping my family and I feel like I'm in a much better space because of it.
- 32 I do still tend to monitor his behaviour at times, but not as excessively as I used to. I remember my sister and I used to go through his phone at night when he was asleep to see if he had been on gambling websites. Sometimes we would find that he had. When we would approach him about this, he would lie about it as he did not want to break the trust he was trying to rebuild with us all.
- 33 Now, I believe I have to take a step back in order to rebuild that trust with him. Instead of constantly thinking that he is lying or doing something that he is not actually doing. Last year he had a moment where he gambled \$10 when he was feeling really stressed, but he took the time to share that with us. Because he let us in, we told him how much we appreciate when he is open about choices that he makes. When we know how he is going we can actively take steps to help support him too.
- 34 We all live together still and are now relating much better as a family. I actually wrote my dad a letter last year saying all of the things that I wished I had gotten from him when I was 16, and all the things that I was sorry that I couldn't actually give to him that I realised he needed from a daughter. I left that letter on his bedside table. In that moment, I was thinking about my older self, what I want my relationship with him to be like and reminding myself that I can choose where we go from here. I remember the next day after work, he came into my bedroom and he had tears in his eyes. He sat down next to me, gave me the biggest hug and just said I love you.
- 35 Since then our relationship has been so much better. When I first started counselling, I was carrying so much emotion and had so much anger towards Dad because I just didn't

understand what was going on. Being able to finally release that was a huge gift. I also believe he carried so much guilt around with him too, as he was unable to be there for any of us at that time and for a while after too. Looking back now, I think I was really looking for that, especially in the sense of a romantic partner. Now with the growth I have had, I realise and know that no other person can fill that space. It was a huge learning for me.

My work

- 36 I'm personally travelling quite well now. I've been choosing to make lots more time for myself. I've tried to stay in that mindset of choosing for me as well. I've travelled and I've realised that I can still be there for the people I care about, but ultimately, I've got to be there for myself too.
- 37 I'm beginning to go into the mental health field, which I've been working towards for a few years now. I did my Diploma of Counselling at Estrada College, which I hadn't heard about before I actually applied for the course. It was an 18 month course which I completed in January 2018. I was also involved in a lot of volunteering work last year which gradually turned into paid gigs.
- 38 I'm currently a support worker at a foster care placement organisation. It's a casual job and I'm currently looking for more permanent work. Within the organisation, about 95% of the kids there have been sexually abused by their mother, father, uncle or someone in their family. The inductions have been quite intense, but the kids are so beautiful. I tend to remind myself that at the end of the day, they are kids and they deserve to have the opportunity to just be kids too. The youngest clients they have are twin three-month-old babies that are in foster care, but the age range goes all the way up to 18 years old.
- 39 I was also a part of the headspace Youth Advisory Committee in my area. That involved working with the group of young adults on my committee, and other Youth Advisory Committees, to help plan and run events for young people. We would also talk with the workers within headspace and sometimes the nurses, community engagement workers, receptionists and intake workers to see if they wanted feedback on our programs and to discuss that with them. I ended up leaving the committee after four years – I was grateful for my time there but I had other opportunities I wanted to take the time to explore more.
- 40 I've also been involved with Satellite Foundation. I didn't hear about Satellite Foundation until I was about 19. I only found out about them after I had finished school and had progressed quite significantly on my own recovery journey. In this organisation, a lot of the young people who are a part of the foundation are actually young carers and have someone in their family that has mental illness. I co-facilitated a photography workshop

in Shepparton with young people a few months ago and also had the privilege to lead the discussion circle on one of their camps, which was so beautiful.

41 I've been looking into facilitation work too now that I have finished studying for the time being. I am in the process of deciding what avenue I would like to study more within the mental health sector.

42 I actually got my first proper facilitation job quite recently. It's with a company called Flourish Girl - they are passionate about empowering young women. The job involves going to different schools around Victoria, and sometimes interstate, working with young girls. I met all the women I'm working with recently at our first community gathering for the year.

43 It all feels so surreal to me - I've been working towards facilitation for years, it's always been a goal of mine. I've been following the Flourish Girl organisation and also their founder Mandy Dante on Instagram for years now, always thinking to myself, wow, I wish I could do this sort of work. Mandy started off as a speech pathologist when she was inspired to begin this organisation. I love how she has this niche of helping young people gain confidence! It's aimed from primary school age all the way up to high school. Mandy also runs mother daughter camps as well, which I find incredible.

44 When they posted a call out for applications a few months back, I instantly applied. We had our training on March 14. It was quite intensive training – it covered all sorts of topics from family issues, body image, all the way through to social media. What you present really depends on what the girls need on the day and we need to be able to adjust the day to match that. The training was an insight into the activities, skills, language (both verbal and body language) that Flourish Girl facilitators embody within sessions with young girls. It has provided me with more of an idea of how I will show up when facilitating and also how I can show up for myself every day. I've also been looking into and applying for lived experience roles as I really want to help people, particularly after going through what I have with my family and myself.

45 I have also been offered a volunteer spot at a family camp coming up in September with siblings, parents and kids. However, I expect this camp will be delayed due to the COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

46 I also have a program that I'm in the midst of editing, which I have been working on for two years now. It is something that I am immensely passionate about. It is targeted towards grades 5-6 in primary school and grades 7-8 in high school, and it covers stress, respectful relationships, body image, choosing for yourself, peer pressure, and social media. I've got numerous mediums I'll be creating which are the program itself, a book,

flashcards, and potentially an online course as well. I'll be taking it to St Luke's to pitch it because St Luke's funds positive mental health tools and programs.

Spoken word

- 47 I would also say that slam poetry, or spoken word, has been a huge part of my healing. Spoken word is generally delivered in a public space, where people gather to share and hear stories, songs, and poems - whatever people feel called to share. It's one big community gathering.
- 48 I first got involved in spoken word when I was part of the headspace Youth Advisory Committee. Two of my friends in the committee asked me *"have you ever heard of Spoken Word, do you want to come along?"* And I remember saying, *"I have no idea what that is, but sure - I am in!"* When the open mic spots opened up near the end of the night, I actually ended up doing a piece. Since then, I have constantly been coming back for more.
- 49 One night, I actually shared my family's story on stage. I was incredibly nervous, but at the end of the piece I was running on pure adrenaline. It really connected me with a lot of people. Where I live, there tends to be about one spoken word night a month with the company I go to. Littlefoot and Co also have open mic sections some nights too, which can really be anything you want it to be. I would describe it as life in motion.
- 50 I have also been paid for some Spoken Word gigs I have had which has been awesome. I have met some really beautiful people there now who are my friends and my community.

Aspirations for the future

- 51 My family and I would have benefitted from more knowledge around the various services available to all of us at the time, from mental health services to organisations like Satellite Foundation. It would be amazing if there was an online, centralised database for people who were looking for these services, to access and find carer support services, or even hotline numbers, depending on whatever it is you may be looking for at the time. It would be great to just look online and see all the different services in one website.
- 52 Sitting here in this moment, reflecting on where I have been and where I would like to go from here, I envision endless possibilities. Currently I am: working on my program for youth; dreaming of travelling to Tanzania when the opportunity arises; considering studying social work or occupational therapy to further progress my career; working out how to embrace creativity and mental health and how to merge the two together to utilise my skills and passion; loving my family and friends; and loving myself. I am choosing to show up as myself and for myself, each and every day. I am focusing on being present and embracing every moment.

- 53 When I consider what social changes will affect mental health, the first thing that comes to mind is consistent support and funding. Looking at the way mental health support and funding has been provided over the last few years in Victoria and Australia, I feel the way in which it fluctuates definitely impacts how vulnerable people receive, and in turn, respond to that system. If we are able to build, maintain and provide a consistent and strong support system for people, I think that will help maintain a healthier community as a whole.
- 54 I would also love to see them remove limitations on the amount of counselling sessions a person can access in schools and life in general. In an ideal world, there would be no limit to the amount of sessions a person of any age could access: in some cases, it can be the difference between life and death. As I mentioned earlier, when I was at school it took me about six sessions to begin to trust my counsellor and I know that it would be the same for many others too, whether they are younger or older. As humans, I believe we deserve the space, time and love to move and work through our emotions and experiences, at a pace that we are comfortable with. Human connection conquers all.

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