2022 Mental Health Month ACT Community Ambassador

Yenn Purkis (they/them)

I am a passionate advocate for people with mental health conditions and/or disabilities, and those who are trans and gender divergent.

After having a psychotic episode in 1995 related to illicit drug use, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. At the time, I was homeless and a recent ex-prisoner. I also have generalised anxiety disorder and depression, as well as autism and ADHD.

I spent ten years of my life in various institutions: hospitals, residential mental health services and prisons. It took me a long time to accept my diagnosis, but I have become (mostly) OK with it.

I am now an author and public servant—and I still have schizophrenia.

In 2016, I co-authored The Guide to Good Mental Health on the Autism Spectrum and am writing a new book about my experiences as an autistic person with schizophrenia.

I was named the 2016 ACT Volunteer of the Year, received the 2016 Australian Government Volunteer Award and 2019 ACT Chief Ministers Inclusion Award, and have been a finalist for many other awards.

I am living proof that a person with schizophrenia (and all my other diagnostic labels) can overcome great challenges to lead a good life.

Of course, my journey has been very challenging, but I have learned to have the motivation and determination to overcome prison, drug addiction and homelessness to have a good life. (And become a ridiculous overachiever!)

I feel like I am now in a place of acceptance and insight, which is lovely. However, I also know I will likely get unwell again in future, so I keep taking my medication, even on the occasions when I doubt that it actually does anything!

My story demonstrates that you can't make assumptions about a person's life journey based on their mental health.

There is a lot of stigma and misunderstandings around schizophrenia and psychosis. I had to work hard to overcome the stigma within myself and realise it's not a shameful secret. You would be surprised at how many other people have mental health conditions and are going through the same thing.

I feel that, by being open and proud about it, I am hopefully making a difference for others.

When I am struggling, I keep myself busy and have lovely friends and family who support, value and respect me. I also access the NDIS and public mental health services.

I have become quite good at asking for help from clinicians and mental health services. I have realised that there is no shame in asking for help when you need it. Going to hospital is not a 'failure'; it is a positive because it means you are getting help.
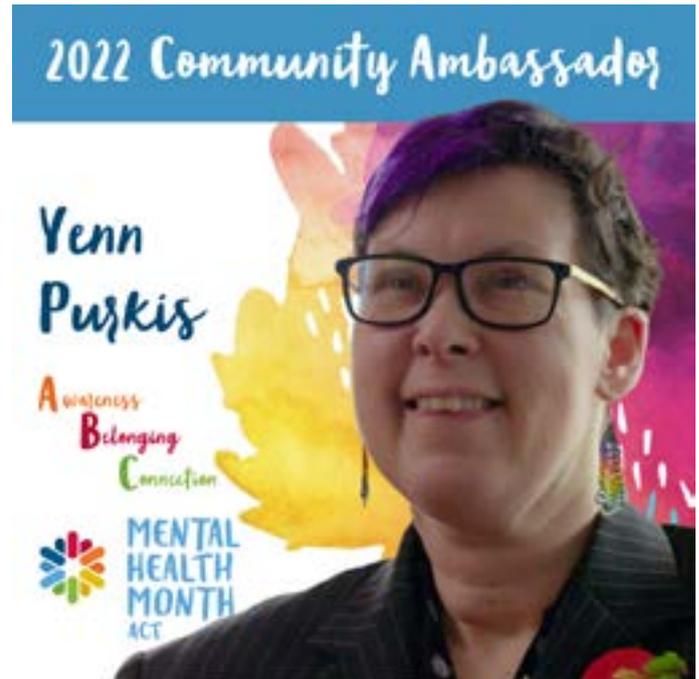
I've done a lot of research about my diagnosis and feel that knowledge is power in this space. It helps me understand how I'm feeling and stand up for myself.

Many clinicians still do not understand autism and mental illness, and there are misconceptions about what people with schizophrenia are capable of. Life can be very challenging for autistic folks accessing support for mental health. We need greater education and understanding.

The same is true of people who are trans and gender divergent, who can really struggle in accessing mental health supports, especially in inpatient settings which may only be set up for 'male' or 'female' patients. There is also a lot of bigotry around gender diversity, making it hard for people to access support for fear of being discriminated against.

My positive attitude definitely makes my life easier, as does my level of insight.