MENTAL HEALTH MONTH ACT
Awareness, Belonging, Connection

## Courtney Chapman (she/her)

I'm a 32-year-old public servant working in human resources. Most people who look at me now wouldn't guess that I had an abusive upbringing that caused me significant trauma. My world was filled with fear and instability, which can be very harmful for a child.

As a teenager, I was often sad, fatigued, and fearful for what seemed like no reason at all at the time. I never felt like I fit in at school. I didn't 'get' the social circles and was often awkward and shy. This continued to escalate as time went on until I felt unable to be in public places without someone I knew.

I rarely wanted to get out of bed. I used to make excuses about not going to school and would often cry for what felt like no reason at all.



2022 Community Ambassador
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What I later learned was that I was experiencing severe anxiety and depression. But there was very little mention, if any, about mental health at school. We weren't educated on how to look after our mental health or what things we should be looking out for if we aren't feeling our best.

I was finally diagnosed with depression and anxiety at age 14 and prescribed medication.

After struggling significantly more over the years, I was also diagnosed with PTSD at age 19.

Sadly, a lot of people stigmatise PTSD as a diagnosis. When I was diagnosed, I thought it was something that only people in the military get, but I learned through therapy that lots of types of trauma can result in PTSD.

It also leads to suicidal ideation, something that again is very stigmatised and often not well understood. It can be completely pervasive and debilitating for the person experiencing it.

After my first suicide attempt, I was able to connect with a psychologist who validated what I had been through and helped me learn some coping mechanisms, so I didn't have to live a life trapped by fear.

But still being young and not understanding my warning signs, I ended up in the intensive care unit of Canberra hospital due to another suicide attempt at age 24.

That moment was pivotal on my mental health journey, as I was able to engage more extensively in therapy to help heal the wounds from my childhood.

Although I still live with three diagnosed mental health conditions today, I have been able to live a life I never thought would be possible with the help of therapy, medication, my support network and self-care.

I don't take this for granted and actively look after my mental health. I see a psychologist regularly, use meditation apps on my phone and read books about psychology and trauma so I can better understand what I have been through.
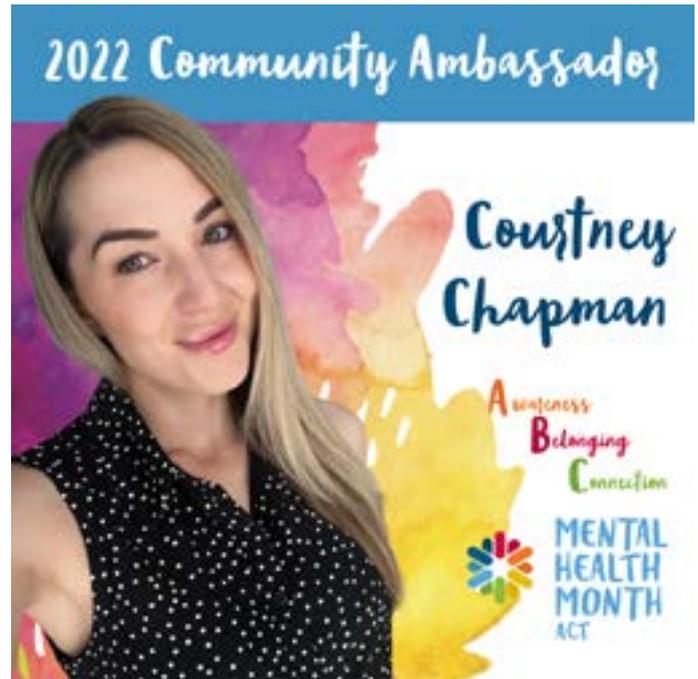
Exercise and nutrition are also important: we need to look after our bodies just as much as we need to look after our minds. And if I am having a really tough day, I try to slow things down and treat myself as I would if I was physically unwell: lots of rest, a warm bath and good food. We wouldn't treat ourselves with disdain if we had the flu; being mentally not at our best is no different.

While I don't have a 'classic' family unit to support me, I have surrounded myself with beautiful friends who have become my family network. I make sure that I spend time with people who uplift and support me. It can be easy to become reclusive when you are struggling with your mental health, but your support network is vital.

I also suffer from a chronic autoimmune disease called Crohn's, which has greatly affected my mental health over the years. I receive treatment every eight weeks at the Canberra hospital to keep myself well.

I used to consider my upbringing and subsequent trauma as a negative component of my life. While it has caused me to fight some very difficult battles, it has also given me a voice and a unique platform to help others.

I now find myself to have a bubbly and approachable personality, and pride myself on being able to connect with people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

It is so important to me that other people battling with mental ill-health know that they are not alone. There is help out there, and life does get so much better.

I volunteer with Beyond Blue and Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT) to raise awareness of mental health, reduce stigma and give people a real face to connect with.

I love endurance horse riding and, in 2018, I rode a 400km marathon for the charity LIVIN, and raised over $7,000 for mental health awareness.

Of course, I still find things incredibly challenging at times, but I've learned how to reframe what I have been through in a more positive way. I also know my warning signs and have learned what strategies to put in place before things get too bad.

For example, I keep a note in my phone of 10 things I can do for myself if I start to feel my mental health declining. They range from booking an additional session with my psychologist to walking my dog, calling a friend or buying myself a bunch of flowers. These are little things anyone can pop in their phone or write down in a notebook, so you can easily refer to them if you notice the warning signs.

One thing I'd say to anyone experiencing mental health issues is 'Don't be afraid to ask for help'. It can feel like the whole world is against you when your mental health is taking a turn for the worse. But there are incredible resources and organisations that exist specifically to help in these circumstances. You don't have to battle this alone.