

2022 Mental Health Month ACT Community Ambassadors



Dinukshi Kapuruge (she/her)

I am a young Sri Lankan–Australian woman. I am extremely passionate about being the best I can be for myself and others, and uplifting people around me. This drew me into studying psychology and working in the mental health sector.

At work, I help young people with moderate to severe mental health conditions to work towards their goals for positive wellbeing. In my personal time, I do a lot of volunteering and advocacy, including sharing my lived experience of mental health as a speaker and facilitator in ACT schools and community organisations. I also contribute to research initiatives such as public co-design for the delivery of mental health services, and to resources to encourage conversations around mental health.

Sadly, I've found that mainstream health initiatives sometimes aren't always appropriate or accessible for young people or those of us from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD).

There are also real cultural and social barriers within the community to seeking help. Many young people from CALD communities like me do not often see people who look like us in community mental health campaigns.

That's why it's so important for me to share my story.

From a young age, I felt like I was a very reactive, sensitive person, but I had a hard time approaching my family when I felt overly anxious or stressed. We never really spoke about mental health in my household, especially not in a positive way. It was and still is considered shameful in my community to tell 'others' about mental health problems.

When my sister or I tried to tell our parents things that were stressing us, like issues at school or with friends, they would often respond that they had struggled so much more in their day. I'm sure that's true, as they grew up in a developing country afflicted by civil war and made many sacrifices to start a new life in Australia.

As appreciative as I was of these struggles, and although their intention was likely not to be hurtful, it did cause me to internalise a lot of painful feelings and diminish my mental health concerns (burnout, anxiety and panic attacks). In some ways, I thought it was a positive thing that I was very introspective and self-reliant from a young age, but at other times it felt quite isolating.

As I grew older and experienced some hardships, I realised just how much these unaddressed mental health concerns impacted me. I also realised I was finally in a place where I felt independent and motivated enough to take steps to improve my wellbeing.

Since I still was not comfortable going to my family in the first instance, I did what felt right for me and scheduled a call with a free Canberra-based mental health service. They put me in touch with resources for my situation until I felt ready to see my doctor and get referred to a psychologist.



I am thankful that I reached out for support when I did, but I know many people in my position don't get help soon enough. Because of stigma, children of immigrants often don't seek care until they are experiencing a full-blown mental health crisis, which can further complicate treatment. For example, feelings of anxiety and trauma tend to increase when bottled up for so long and can interfere with daily life a lot more in the future compared to if coping strategies were learned earlier.

I eventually told my parents about the steps I was taking to better my mental health. Although there are some things they still do not understand or agree with about how community mental health supports work, I think it was helpful for me to inform them, so they know how to best support me at home or with accessing these services.

One of the most important things I learned is that taking steps to build a support network for yourself is essential in taking control of your mental health concerns. The recovery phase only begins once you start telling people, whether that's your family, trusted friends or other accessible community supports. Having these supports in place will help you if you go into a bad place again, which happens from time to time in everyone's mental health journey.

I know it can be difficult to reach out at times, especially when there is lots of stigma in your community, but your mental health experiences are your own, and they are valid. Everyone deserves to have support through this. If that is your family and community, that is great, but if that doesn't seem like an option for you, it is better to seek help from someone else instead of giving into the narrative that mental health is taboo and suffering in silence.

In this day and age in Australia, that way of thinking does not hold up. There are great, credible services in the community that can offer confidentiality for you to just chat about what you are experiencing and find the most suitable supports. As more and more people from diverse communities come forward, we can all understand more what mental health and ill-health looks like for us, which helps ensure that resources can keep up and become more culturally relevant as well.

I greatly advise everyone to learn to identify signs that you aren't doing well and discover what self-care looks like for you, so that you have some first-line strategies in place for when you become distressed. It's actually really empowering to realise that you can manage certain stresses yourself!

When I am in a particularly rough period, I keep a weekly schedule as best as I can. This helps me reduce worrying about the future and prioritise activities that will improve my wellbeing. Scheduling regular exercise is something that particularly helps me as it uses up some of the nervous energy and tension that can make it difficult for me to concentrate and leave me exhausted.

I have found that a good rule for me is to plan at least one thing that makes me feel accomplished (such as exercise or reading a chapter of a book) and one thing that is fun and brings me joy (like calling a friend or having a relaxing bath) every day. Although I feel like I need to plan this now, one day I hope it becomes a habit that increases my long-term wellbeing.

