

# Address to Defence Mental Health Speakers Series

*The Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson, AO, Australian War Memorial*

*The Board acknowledges the potential sensitivity of publishing articles on the subject of mental health. The intention is to increase awareness and understanding of its extent within, and impact on, the ADF and Australian society more broadly. However, should individuals be adversely affected by anything in this article or the following one, they are strongly encouraged to seek appropriate assistance and support from any of the services listed at the end of each article.*

You don't realise what you are learning when you are learning it. I have found in my life that I learn something every day. It is often in random moments of quiet revelation, when I least expect it, that the most significant things that have transcended, transformed and shaped my own thinking and attitude to a variety of things have come. The power of it is in the story.

We thought we managed it alright, we put the awful things out of our minds. But I am an old man now and they come out from the places where I hid them every night.

Those are the words of Jim McPhee. He was in the First Field Ambulance in World War 1, a stretcher bearer at Gallipoli, Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Flers, Villers-Bretonneux, the Amiens offensive and Passchendaele.

Albert Jacka, in the Hall of Valour at the Australian War Memorial, was one of the bravest of the brave. Victoria Cross recipient, as well as Military Cross with Bar. But there is no doubt that after

the artillery bombardment at Pozières, Jacka suffered and suffered seriously from post-traumatic stress. His very close friend told Jacka's biographer that even the sharp closing of a biscuit tin would start him shaking uncontrollably for hours. On one occasion, when the media came to talk to him about one of his actions of heroism, Jacka told his mate to 'tell them I am dead'. He died at the age of 39. Early and young as a consequence, in no small way, of the psychological traumas he carried through his service to our nation. It contaminated his personal and business relationships and had an enduring and negative impact on him.

We recently commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign. The 'ragged, bloody heroes' as they are called. Literally heroes in our lives, who defended our vital interests in the gripping struggle at Kokoda. The official military historian, Dudley McCarthy, gave a clue to it many years ago when he said:



It is the story of small groups of men, infinitesimally small, against the mountains in which they fought. Who killed one another in stealthy isolated encounters on the edge of a track that were life to them all; of warfare in which men first conquered the terrain, then allied themselves with it to kill or to die in the midst of great loneliness.

In 2000, one of the survivors, Sergeant Jack Sim, who had been a shop assistant from Ballarat, and is sometimes pictured just staring into an empty space, into the camera barrel, remembered that:

Some prayed, some swore with fear. But you would not show it in front of your mates. One of the boys got shot fair between the eyes right beside me. It was a perfect shot. Terrible to be afraid but it was the brave ones who were afraid that still kept going. That's what they did you know. Scared bloody stiff but they still kept going. They were so young. I loved them all... [Then, almost an afterthought, he said] ... [n]obody went to that war or any other war I suppose that was not injured mentally, if not physically.

For my part, I grew up in Launceston in northern Tasmania, in a little suburb called Newnham. In my 13th year, my father took me for a walk down the street. He said 'son, have a look at the houses in the street'. My father was a marine chief steward, who worked for a shipping company called Hollermans, on a small ship that plied between Launceston and Melbourne. It seemed an odd thing to say but he continued:

Your mother and I do not have any money; we do not know powerful people. The only way you are ever going to live in a better house than the one in which you are growing up is if you work as hard as you can at school.

Several months later they sold the house and moved to Adelaide. They could not afford to live in Hobart at the time; they wanted to live in a city where there was a university, in case one of their children might have the opportunity to go. The paradox is that today there is a university campus at Newnham, the University of Tasmania. My father then lost his job and was unemployed for almost two years.

When I was 14, my mother was trying to console me about things that I had been involved with. She said that in the end, your life is going

to be determined by the people and the causes to which it is committed. While it didn't make much sense at the time, I said to my father later in my life that there is never a better place to live and grow up than one in which you are loved and wanted. The paradox is that we tend to take for granted the things that are most important in our lives: families who love us and give meaning, support and context to our lives. Friends, I mean real friends, who are there when you need them.

The other thing we take even more for granted is our emotional resilience. When my father was emerging from his unemployment, I asked if I could go back to a Catholic school. My mother was a devout Irish Catholic but my father was an Orange Lodge Methodist, who typically did not even talk to each other in 1957. I had been at a very good government school but felt something was missing. So I spent two years with the Jesuits, although my father went to the school three times before they accepted me. I learnt four things from the Jesuits that have informed everything I have done since. They told me pretty much every day, not directly but reinforced in many ways, that four things were essential for your resilience and success.

The first is commitment. You consistently apply yourself to the things in which you believe. You don't give up. It is one of those qualities in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial—endurance. The second is conscience. Every single decision you make has a question under it and that is 'what is the right thing to do?'. The Jesuits said to me there is no such thing as big or small decisions, they are all important. Every single decision you make in your life has consequences for you and for others. As the 17th century Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant said:

In this context, every human being is an end unto himself and not a means to be used by others. Respect for the humanity of others will be found in respect for your own humanity, and morality is freedom.

What that means is that if you believe you are doing the right thing, and have considered it and consider it to be so, you are free. Free of many things, including those that contribute to emotional ill health.

The third thing I was taught was compassion. It literally means to share another person's pain.

Almost all of human suffering and misery comes from people who make themselves the centre of their own lives. What is important in life is not to know what people think. You can ask the people you work with every day what they think about a particular issue. What is far more important is to be imbued with the imaginative capacity to understand how they think. How does this person form his or her worldview? What are the things that impinge on this person's thinking, what are the things that shape his or her life, and how does this then shape their attitudes. That is essential not only if you want to change the attitudes of other people but also if you want them to support you in achieving a common objective and, in turn, if you want to support them.

The fourth thing I was taught is courage. Whatever you choose to do, nothing is achieved without taking a risk. When I left school, I didn't know what to do. I was good at economics, so I thought I would do an economics degree. At the end of the first term, I thought this was not for me, I was either going to end up an accountant or a public servant! You can imagine writing to my father at sea and explaining not only that I had dropped out but that I didn't know what I was going to do. I got a job in a department store selling doors and curtain fittings. Later, when I was out knocking on doors and kissing babies in politics, with angry women answering the door, I could at least disarm them by talking about the curtains!

I thought a lot about it and it seemed that the people who seemed happiest in life were those who spent their lives in the service of others. I subsequently decided I wanted to be a policeman. However, by the time I applied, they said I was too old, so I applied for medicine at Flinders University and was accepted. Now, at that time, I had a sister who was a year younger than me, and a brother who was a year younger than her. My sister was going out with a young boy about my age but, after a few months, the relationship ended as my sister had decided it was time to move on. Then, at a party, he said to her, 'If you don't come back I will kill myself'. She of course said, 'Don't be so stupid'. A week later, he killed himself with an overdose and, a week later, she tried to do the same and almost succeeded.

I was only 20 at the time and our whole family was thrown into a world that was completely

unknown to us. The immense trauma and impact was beyond any capacity I have to explain but I remember it as if it was yesterday. In those days, services and support and awareness of this stuff was extraordinarily rudimentary. We were living with the remnants of an age where there was a certain stigma associated with mental illness and, certainly, with people who took their own lives or attempted to do so. It was the stalwart support of a Jesuit priest, counselling my family, that got us through. But those events completely changed the shape of our lives.

Simultaneously, my younger brother—who had been a shy, quiet boy, going to the same Jesuit school—had got to his mid-teens and started to manifest anti-social behaviour. The first instance was when he was found by the police riding a motorbike at the age of 15, without a licence, on the wrong side of the road. He then drifted into the bikie culture of the 'one percenters'. I was at university studying my guts out and had two part-time jobs, and couldn't understand why my brother was engaged in a whole lot of extremely anti-social activities. He would disappear for months, then turn up at home and my parents would welcome him in. I used to say to my father, 'Why are you doing this? You know what he is doing'.

My brother would bring elements of the life he was living to their home. But my parents never locked him out. They never said anything that was—I realise in hindsight—damaging to him in the longer term. It wasn't until 1984 that my brother called to say he had shingles. He rang a couple of months later and said he had shingles again. Getting shingles twice is a significant concern. I said to him, after strongly advising him to get further medical testing, that 'You might have that new disease, AIDS'. Anyway, suddenly his life turned around completely. He became a vegetarian and was going off to Thailand to spend time with monks. Finally, in 1990, he said to me, 'I've got AIDS'.

In the early 1990s, I had been running two medical practices in Tasmania, had gone through the leadership of the AMA at both state and national level, and made the decision that I could not get any more done unless I went into parliament. So I sold my house in Hobart and moved to Sydney with my family and, in 1995, stood for pre-selection. That was character building and a test

of my emotional resilience, especially when you turn up in Sydney, never having lived there and coming from a Labor background, to challenge the sitting member in the safest Liberal seat in the country. In the middle of that, my brother was dying.

However, the hardest job I ever had was Minister for Defence [2006-07]. I regarded it as my responsibility, first and foremost, to care for everyone within the organisation. I also came to realise that while the uniformed people, who wear the uniform and for whom we have the highest respect, are quite rightly honoured by our nation in all kinds of ways, increasingly our civilians deployed into these operational environments take very similar risks. One such individual said to me, 'If I got killed in Afghanistan, I won't be on a bronze panel or a Roll of Honour or anything of the sort ... [although] they might name a pond after me'. Therein is just one of the challenges that our nation and Defence is going to have to come to terms, in terms of respect and recognition of those who serve alongside those who are wearing the uniform.

I would also add one other thing. I have two children from a previous marriage and a 25-year old step-daughter. I went through the agony of divorce—and agony is the only way to describe it. I remember sitting in a cabinet meeting and there was a discussion about child support arrangements and divorce and so on, which I found quite offensive. I realised I was the only person in that room who had been divorced. I said to the person leading this conversation, 'Do you really think that any person actually gets married with any intention other than making it succeed?'. Therein is just one example of how people can be insensitive to and ignorant of the feelings of others.

But I married again and have been for 18 years. However, a number of years ago, my son's mother called and said our son is missing. We reported him as a missing person. That was our introduction to two years of the worst time I have ever been through. The only thing that has ever kept me awake was worrying about my son. It was a hailstorm; we were introduced to a world of rave parties, drugs and people you would not want your children associated with. I drew on what my parents did with my brother, and what I used to say to my patients. I would say there

are a small percentage of people who are genetically programmed for self-destruction. Most will come though the other side, so don't say the things you feel like saying. Restrain yourself and, a bit like the prodigal son, keep welcoming them back.

Just prior to that, I had a bizarre experience. I had been Minister for Education for a few weeks and took the senior leadership of the department for a retreat at Bowral. I had been thinking about the vision for the portfolio and wanted to get to know the senior leadership who would have to enact the policy. I was driving back to Canberra with a very senior person. I asked him what he was going to do that night. There was a pause and he said, 'I will probably spend most of tonight looking for my daughter who is a heroin addict'. He said to me, 'You get to the point where you think "if they are alive, I am in front"'.

Three months later, that was me. I would get home at 8.30 at night, then go around all sorts of places into the early hours of the morning. My son was arrested on one occasion and I thought, 'Well this is it, the media and all that'. I was worried for him. Then it all stopped as quickly as it had started. I had confided some of these things to very good friend—and that is something else, you do need to share some of this stuff, you cannot just carry it all around yourself. You need to have people and relationships, and you need to nurture relationships such that you can share these kinds of things. My friend owned some nursing homes and gave my son a job. It had an in-built pecking order, in fact it was a bit like the Army. My son discovered gardening, got a landscaping apprenticeship and never looked back. Today, I am immensely proud of him and what he has achieved.

Turning more specifically to the subject at hand, there was a study done by the Victorian Centre for Adolescent Health in 1999 called the 'Gateway Study'. It was a study of 2600 year-8 students over a 3-year period. Forty per cent of that cohort could not name a single person who knew them well; that is, to know who is my best friend, what is my pet's name, what is my favourite music, that kind of thing. A quarter could not name a single person they thought they could trust. Not a parent, not a teacher, not a family friend, nobody. That cohort is now in their late-20s or early-30s.

We often focus on mental health among our Defence and former Defence personnel. But it is often not understood in a context where today, the leading cause of death between the ages of 15-44 is suicide. More people are dying from suicide than from breast cancer, pancreatic cancer and liver disease. Something has happened over the space of a generation where we have reduced the toll from disease and accident but have had very little impact on that exacted by despair. Eight suicides a day, one every 10 days, in the ACT: anxiety, phobias, panic attacks, affective disorders, depression, alcohol, drug use, PTSD from a variety of causes, and suicidal ideation.

There have been three things found to build resilience in people's lives. One is that in the formative years, you need to have a stable and loving relationship with at least one adult, preferably a parent. Often, and one of the things I have learned the hard way, is that often you need to say 'no', if you are a parent in particular. And if you are not a parent and you have a partner that you love, you sometimes have to say 'no': such as, 'No, I am not going to this event, I am going to have a night off'. I have forced on myself at times that I have to be home to have dinner. Even if you go back to work afterwards, that is something worth doing. The people who care about you, and about whom you care, need to know that you really do care and you don't just say it.

The second thing that builds resilience is to feel you are a part of a community where other people understand who you are and where you also understand them. Your identity is built by the relationships you have. As you know, we are all different. Some people are easier to like and get on with than others, and it is very tempting in life just to associate with people who have attractive personalities. One of the things I learned 20 years ago is that there is always a small group of people who do not fit in. They are the people you really have a responsibility to reach out to. How often do you find that once you get beyond a person who is not the most physically attractive, or may not have the most desirable personality, how often do you really reach out and get to know them, and then discover to your surprise there is actually a wonderful person there?

The third thing is to live in a society that gives meaning and purpose to your life. We seem to have created a culture where young people, in

particular, think they have nothing other than themselves in which to believe. When I was born, it was God, King and Country. For a lot of reasons, those things now have holes in them and not all of them are good. But too many young people, in my view, are embracing values for the society they think they are going to get, not the one they want. Mistrust, cynicism, detachment, materialism and impatience, instead of values for the world they want.

These are sweeping generalisations but, generally, your profession is a part of that solution. I say to young people that the values that are enshrined in the stained-glass windows above the 'Unknown Australian Soldier' are the values you need to look to in order to build a life of value and meaning. Increasingly, they are looking for and finding meaning in what you represent. 'The good and the bad', as Charles Bean said, 'the great and the small'. I have learned also that the Australian War Memorial is a part of the therapeutic milieu of the ADF's community of people. And I am looking increasingly for ways for this to be the case for the civilian side of Defence as well. One of the things we are planning at the Australian War Memorial is a feature on what Australia does to prevent war and to maintain and keep peace—both in terms of diplomatic and military capability—and what the civilian contribution has been.

In terms of this therapeutic milieu, one of the things I have learned is that I don't know what it is like to do what the military does, to be in an operation. As Minister, I visited Australians deployed on operations. But unless you have done what another person has done, even if you have the capacity to imagine their world, you do not really know. I often thought, 'What is it like to come back?'. Jim McPhee came back to Australia after the First World War. How was he supposed to explain to anyone what he had seen and been through? How do you do it today: you can't explain it to your own family, let alone the rest of the country.

In response to the Afghanistan exhibition at the Australian War Memorial, among the many letters we received was one from a Navy officer. It meant so much to me, I can assure you. He said, 'Sir, thank you for telling my 11-year old son, in words I never could, why his father has spent so much time away from home'. Among those we



interviewed was Dan Costello, commanding an engineer detachment in Afghanistan. He spoke very courageously about the death of Sergeant Brett Till, while disarming an improvised explosive device [IED]. Courage comes in different forms, and it takes a lot of courage to tell your story.

Dan Costello told us, 'It was Major Wakelin who gave me the confidence to keep going'. They had been escorting commandos into Helmand province. They had a convoy of Bushmasters and the combat engineers were out front, clearing IEDS. They had been up all night. Major Wakelin said, 'Mate, as traumatic as it is losing a mate ... there are 144 guys who need you and we have a mission to complete. I need you and your guys to get us to Helmand'. Dan continued:

I had to walk back to the front [of the convoy] to compose myself and get my blokes ... to keep going. I said "fellas, I am hurting as much as you are at this stage". I was crying in front of them as well. I said, "It is horrific what has happened, I cannot put your mind at ease but I am going back out in front to keep going. There are 144 guys behind us that are shit scared and they won't do anything without us. Who is coming with me?" Two blokes put their hands up ... and off we went. We kept going and we kept going all that night'.

Another of my heroes is Captain Nick Perriman, relating to the insider attack and death of Lance Corporal Andrew Jones in May 2011. Nick said:

Andrew was still conscious at this stage and I was trying to keep him conscious by getting him ... to tell us what had happened. However, he could not really speak, he was trying but I could tell it was taking a lot out of him. It probably took 15 minutes for my medic to arrive. That sounds like a long time. But he was two kilometres away and he ran carrying 30 kilograms to get to us. He could have won an Olympic medal for how fast he ran that day ... running through the Afghan dust, exposed, just to get there. He didn't say anything other than to get the combat first-aider to tell him what had happened. I looked down ... and I thought at that point that Andrew had died. I grabbed his hand and I said, "Stay with me Jonesy".

When he got back to Australia, Nick Perriman did something that in my view takes a lot of courage. He went and saw Andrew's family. This is, of course, what leadership is about. It is what the CDF and Service Chiefs and what all of

you do but it takes a lot of courage. Nick said of going to see the family:

I guess I didn't have to but I felt obliged to. I wanted his parents to be able to talk to someone who was right there when it happened. I wanted them to see me as the person who was responsible at the time and I wanted them to be able to ask me questions. It was the right thing to do. I remember I was very, very nervous. I don't know what I was expecting but when I got there, a lot of the family was there. It was not just his mum and dad, it was the whole family. Andrew's mum was distraught and his father was quiet and listened to what I had to say. He didn't say much but he was obviously still very, very much grieving. I look back on going to see them and I am so glad I did. I still talk to his mother today ... and she calls me now and then, and I am amazed at the strength of her and David and the rest of the family in dealing with Andrew's death and not allowing it to consume their lives. They have been really involved in the veteran community. Andrew's mum never blamed me. It was tough going to see them but it was the right thing to do and I am glad that I did.

Finally, I'd like to mention a couple of things that callers have said to Lifeline, which is one of those charities I do my best to try and help. Here again is part of the solution. One caller said:

Today was the day I was planning to take my own life. Instead, I chose to walk into the light. Why? Because someone reached out to me when I needed it. My lifeline is the goodness in people's hearts and the willingness of strangers to do extraordinary acts of kindness. It is just enough in my case to keep me here, thank you.

Another said:

I spoke to a crisis supporter tonight. She took me from tears and being convinced that no-one cares about me, to smiling. If I had sleeping tablets in the house I would not be here. She helped me realise I need treatment again for depression. Thank you.

And then another:

Thank you for taking my call when I thought no-one would. I have never been so low and felt so alone with no-one to talk to. Thank you for hearing my darkest thoughts, for staying with me, for reminding me I have reasons to go on. You saved three lives that night.



In concluding, I'll mention the brilliant ABC documentary that was broadcast in early 2016, *Afghanistan: inside Australia's longest war*. In the third and final episode, Sergeant S. from the Special Air Services Regiment, reflecting on the battle of Tizak—in which Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith was awarded the Victoria Cross—with tears streaming down his face, said:

To fail would be worse than death. To let down your mates in combat would be worse than death. I don't know why I get so emotional about this stuff but that is the essence, you don't let your mates down.

The other paradox is that the most powerful and fragile of human emotions is 'hope'. We all have to believe in a better tomorrow. Tomorrow is going to be better than today, next week better than this, and next year better than this one. Not so much for ourselves but for those we love, perhaps our community and our country. What most sustains hope is people—men and women who reach out in support of one another. That is the legacy that your uniform leaves us. It is everything at the War Memorial.

A life of value is one spent in the service of other human beings. It is people who reach out, as Jack Sim in the 39th Battalion did, even when gripped by fear. You don't let one another down. The other thing coming back to where I started is the things that are often most important in our lives. T.S. Elliot wrote of family love, saying:

There is no vocabulary for love within a family. Love that is lived in but not looked at. Love beneath the light of which all other love is seen. Love within which all other love finds voice. This love is silent.

What is most important is that you do not allow it to be silent. All of us have different lives; we are different people. Some have stable relationships, others choose to be single. Some have children, others don't. But the things that are most important to us, don't ever take them for granted. As Tom Wolfe said, 'Before you know it, it will be gone, whatever it is'.

The other thing is in terms of the workplace. Over the years, I have worked with a lot of people. I have worked with people I have immense admiration for and I have worked with people I do not like. I have even had a few that I detest. But they will never know that. I can proudly say

that not one person I have worked with would say, 'Nelson never liked me'. They never knew because, the way I see it in a workplace, you need to get the best you can out of everybody.

You have to inspire people, you have to give them vision in terms of where you want to go and what you want to achieve. You have to work out what people have to offer and then get them to give it to you in order to achieve it. Among the many things you have to do is to make people feel reverence for themselves. Make people feel they are important, even if you don't particularly like them.

*Dr Brendan Nelson—as a practising doctor, Defence Minister and now a public figure—has devoted considerable time and effort over many years to help people with mental health issues, including Australia's veterans. In addition to being the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Nelson is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University; a member of the Chief Scientist's Advisory Council; and Patron of Lifeline ACT, Trish MS Research, the Weary Dunlop Foundation, Soldier On and the NSW RSL. He is also an Ambassador for Legacy, the Invictus Games and the Defence Reserves Association.*

If you or someone you know needs help, call:

- Emergency on 000 (or 112 from a mobile)
- ADF All-hours Helpline on 1800 628 036
- Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608
- APS Employee Assistance Program on 1300 361 008
- Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service on 1800 011 046
- Lifeline on 13 11 14 or <https://www.lifeline.org.au>
- Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or <http://www.beyondblue.org.au>
- Headspace on 1800 650 890
- Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
- Mensline Australia on 1300 789 978
- Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

## Notes

- 1 This is an abridged and edited version of a speech delivered at the 'Defence Mental Health Speaker Series' in mid-2017.



