

# **PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND ATTEMPTS**

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My name is Captain Ian Carter and I am a suicide survivor. On three separate occasions I have attempted or seriously considered suicide. For nearly 25 years, I felt I could not speak about my mental health openly or honestly. I now realise that finding the ability to talk about it is one of the main reasons I am still alive.

As a child I witnessed my father beating my mother on multiple occasions. I was once knocked unconscious by my father as I tried to stop him assaulting my mother, I was eight years old. He used to say some pretty nasty things about us back then. Hearing him speak that way was soul-destroying. At the same time a family friend could see I was struggling and showed me compassion. I did not realise it at the time but he was grooming me and eventually took advantage of that trust and sexually abused me. After that, I grew up fearing I would become a violent wife-beating paedophile like my father and "friend". I didn't want to be the monster everyone seemed to be telling me I would become; therefore, aged 13 I planned to take my own life.

At the age of 16 I joined the British army. I wanted to prove I was stronger than people realised. Once I completed training in 1997 I was posted to Northern Ireland and spent two years there followed by a couple of years in Wattisham. In late 2001 I left the British Army and moved to Australia with my first wife. I've had a couple of bad experiences with a couple of individuals. I was once sexually assaulted while in a foreign port but when I reported this to my superior, my story was not believed. On a separate occasion, I risked my life running into a burning home to check whether there was anyone inside. Despite there being many witnesses, my then boss said dismissively: "It's a very heroic story, it's a shame you've got absolutely no credibility!" I immediately took leave, went back to my house on base and again made plans to end my life.

Against this background, my personal life was crumbling around me. On my arrival in Australia, I had tried to live a civilian life but it wasn't for me. I decided to enlist as a reservist in the Australian Army. Things were not going well in my personal life and my first marriage collapsed in early 2009, just at the same time I lost my civilian job. So began a prolonged custody battle which went for five and half years. I went to great lengths to maintain my relationship with my kids, but roadblocks kept being put in my way. Just prior to commencing court proceeding I started thinking about ending my life again.

It sounds grim but the reality is that I did find a way through all of this. I did so with two essential tools - a supportive network of people who understood my experience and the realisation that talking about these things really helped. Talking to people helps you feel less isolated. When you feel less isolated, you feel less despair. You realise that you are not a victim but a survivor and your experiences do not diminish you, they make you more resilient.

I look back at myself during those low points and I find it hard to recognise myself. "Was that really me?" I wonder. I have come a long way. These days, I have a happy, fulfilling life, I am studying a Masters' degree, and I have a loving wife and two wonderful children. There are some people in my life who will never understand what they mean to me, for my sense of purpose and wellbeing.

I am seeing a more supportive service culture emerging, one in which people who risk their lives or experience hardship are believed and supported. We've got a long way to go and helping others through sharing my experiences is just one small step. Opening minds, opening hearts and importantly, opening discussion about mental health is vital to targeting the pre-cursors of suicidal ideation.