

*feature story*

In case of fire



DO NOT use lift



Use the stairs



# Don't forget to look up!

Stacy's journey from *mental unwellness* to *mental wellness*.

Depression (twice), anxiety AND claustrophobia ... yay, lucky me ... NOT! Triple whammy and not necessarily in that order.

My first experience of mental unwellness began as young as 4 years old. A vague memory of being in Hyde Park with my mum and brothers playing at the Sydney Festival. I was going through one of those long, tent-like, colourful tunnels and remember getting in happily and very soon just felt "I had to get out". As a child I had no idea what this was and didn't say anything as it passed as soon as I was out of the tunnel.

My second experience at 7 years old was vivid and caused me to live a life of avoidance. I was at a hospital visiting a relative with my mum, waiting at the lift doors to go up to the relevant floor when I read the usual sign outside lifts "IN CASE OF FIRE DO NOT USE LIFTS". My 7 year old brain read *DO NOT USE LIFTS!!!* with a danger element attached to it. An intense, overwhelming juggernaut of fear enveloped me and I REFUSED to get in. My mother could not get me to enter so we used the stairs, which became my go to procedure for decades to come.

These experiences along with a few more distant memories were the catalyst of my life being compromised with claustrophobia. I lived my life fairly "normally" (well so I thought) with just

avoiding lifts at all costs. In essence, and in hindsight, it prevented me from achieving some of my dreams and goals because some of them would have taken place in high-rise buildings which I would have to use elevators, so I did not pursue them.

At 30 years of age, pregnant with my third child, the severity of my avoidance came to a head. My pregnancies were very difficult due to hyperemesis (a severe "all day" morning sickness, just like Princess Katherine endured, but I didn't have servants to take care of all my duties). During this pregnancy I was very ill with constant vomiting (sometimes up to 20 times a day) and with this particular pregnancy I also had insomnia. Imagine feeling sick 24/7 and only sleeping 2-3 hours a day plus vomiting for mostly all your awake time with no real rest or reprieve.

I was mentally and physically depleted and one night whilst attending to my toddler at a 3 AM wake up call, I had the most intense and frightening experience of my life - my first PANIC ATTACK!! BUT I actually had no idea what that even was back then. The intensity of the fear was crippling. I felt I was going crazy and had literally lost my mind. This was the beginning of my second and third phase of mental unwellness - depression and anxiety - and all while I was pregnant and with two other

young children to take care of at the same time.

All I can say about this time is that it was a HORRIFIC time of my life which should have been my happiest with a beautiful baby on the way. Not only was I pregnant, but I was also living out of my home due to house renovations. Not really understanding panic attacks and mental illness, the whole combination sent my life into a tail spin.

My journey into mental wellness began the very next day. I immediately went to a doctor with my husband and got all the information about what was happening to me and began the wellness steps. Doctor + diagnosis + psychiatrist + psychologist + therapy + medication. I also added my own research into the equation, so I could better understand what was happening in my mind, body and soul. I incorporated more prayer, exercise and drinking more water, as well as mindfulness after reading so many articles on my diagnosis. I learned so much about myself throughout this difficult journey, my inner strength (never knew I had it), learned to love myself and most of all that I could have a very fulfilling and rewarding life even with mental illness. It's only one part of me and I live with it, but it does not define who I really am. I have realised I am much more than any label. I live with depression/anxiety and claustrophobia, but now have the tools to keep it under control. I even get in elevators!!! I will NEVER go in skipping with happiness and smiling, but at least I do it!

For me, I exercise my mind like my body. If you stop exercising your body, you lose muscle. That

is how I also feel about my mind, I need to keep exercising it to keep it healthy and to best serve me in my daily life. Practicing my wellness steps and using the tools I have learned regularly is the key to staying as well as I can be.

At my worst moments, I felt like I was at the bottom of a dark well and I tried to always look up to find a speck of light, focusing in on that kept the hope alive for a better future. Eventually through all of it that light shone brighter and got bigger as I progressed forward in my health. I then managed to climb up that well, step by step with my support network, and finally get out. Such a difficult trek but so rewarding at the top, not to mention the view is sensational up there. An accomplishment like no other.

I am actually now using my personal journey in my work life. I have changed careers after thirty years of another career and now work in a mental health clinic where I try my best to support and help others through their wellness discovery. Who knew that something so awful could be so rewarding in the future, not me at the time for sure, but now know anything is possible.

Keep the faith and ALWAYS remember there is HOPE!! Please, please, please DON'T FORGET TO LOOK UP!!

*Stacy Christofa*

Consumer Consultant  
The Sydney Clinic

A person with long, dark hair is seen from the side, looking out over a vast field of tall grass at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that fills the sky and illuminates the grass. The person is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved top with a patterned cuff. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

*"I tried to always look up  
to find a speck of light,  
focusing in on that  
kept the hope alive  
for a better future."*

*- Stacy*





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