

Sharon

I was asked that I share my Kaiyu story. Let me begin by saying that in my early adulthood I was lucky enough to achieve academic success and have a pretty high powered, highly specialised job for over ten years. In fact, for a while there, I thought it couldn't get much better!

I know now that here was lot's bubbling just under the surface of my success and in retrospect, its not surprising that I had such a big fall! Actually, the floor opened up and I fell through it down to the core of the earth (can it get any lower than that?)

I knew nothing about mental illness except what I had studied at University and come up against as a maternal and child nurse-not much! I was also pretty intolerant of people with a mental illness.

So it was a terrible thing when it struck me and I include my family in this as well. My mother is a nurse with over 30 years experience and even she could not cope or understand that it couldn't be fixed in a hurry, She also had trouble being able to get information about me or communicate with my psychiatrist because of the confidentiality laws. I was too sick and too screwed up to be able to help with this.

I found out about Kaiyu Clubhouse when I was drowning in a freezing, black, stormy ocean. I couldn't see or work out how to save myself and suddenly a ship with lights came up beside me and hailed me abroad.

For a while there, all I could do was hold on to the deck. As I rolled with the movement of the ship on the waves. Imagine nails scraping down a blackboard and that was what it was like on the deck of the Kaiyu ship for a while.

There was a Captain called Lawrie, and couple of crew called Mel and Kate. They had big smiles and warm hearts. However, at the time the life rafts were a bit holey and the ship was taking on water.

Mel and Kate jumped overboard in the only safe, life raft but Lawrie stayed at the wheel even though he had holes in his shoes. In fact I don't really know how Lawrie didn't get frost bite!

Anyway after a while a pirate threw some tubes of silicone onto the ship to plug the leaks and Lawrie's shoes. And a couple of new ship's mates came aboard.

Gradually the ship sailed into calmer weather. By this time I was starting to put my own bandaids on. I had got better enough to think about going forward again

and giving myself some new challenges. I was still pretty seasick but I started with small steps and gradually increased them when I felt able (or frustrated!).

Actually my first step was pretty gigantic! I enrolled at a college in Sydney to study a Graduate Diploma of Counseling. The catch was that I had to catch the train to Sydney one full day per week for lectures and workshops. The challenge was to deal with my agoraphobia, panic attacks and social anxiety enough to do it.

What I did was to break the day down into small steps eg 1) get up with the alarm 2) get dressed and have breakfast 3) drive to the station 4) park the car in a certain spot 5) buy the ticket 6) wait on the platform at a certain spot away from everybody 7) get on a certain carriage in a particular seat 8) keep breathing 9) take a Valium 10) get to Wyong 11) next Gosford 12) next the Hawkesbury and so on until I got home late that night. I never let myself think about the next step until I had achieved the present one. And on the train the greatest motivator to keep going was the fear of getting off at a strange or unplanned station. So when the panic got unbearable sometimes, what stopped me from running was the fear of what would happen if I got off at an unknown station. I have to say that the panic attacks never did stop until I got off the train 2 hours later and they continued up until almost the end of my study nearly 2 years later. Imagine being on the train coming home through the Hawkesbury during the bushfires when I could see the flames out the window and the smoke was in the train carriage. I rang mum on my mobile and talked to her all the way until the transmission cut out near the river. I was terrified and will never forget it. I also panicked if someone (especially a man) sat next to me on the train.

But it didn't all finish on the train – I sweated all day in the group sessions and always felt that I was breathless. Often I felt that I couldn't get any clean, fresh air into my lungs. Amid this was my need to also re-learn how to concentrate, read, study, communicate with people, and write essays. When I started I couldn't read one whole page of a reading. By the end, I had enough confidence to write my own opinion and find a reference to agree with my thoughts instead of doing the safe thing and writing what other people thought.

For a while, when I was studying I had a break from Kaiyu because there was a bit too much doing on at Clubhouse for me to cope with, and also going to Kaiyu reminded me of my mental illness and the bad memories when I was at a stage of meeting new challenges and going forward. It was also a bit like when there's a water shortage, you have to ration the water. I was still too weak to remain positive if I kept being reminded of my negatives. So this was a time when I distanced myself from anything that I was afraid would pull me back.

I had a really excellent lecturer about 12 months ago who challenged me to

believe that my opinions were worthy. He was the beginning of a new huge step where I started to believe in myself again. Not long afterward I started my fieldwork with Anxiety Disorders Alliance. This was a huge learning curve and great new challenge for me as I had to start up from scratch and run a Parent Support Group in Lake Macquarie for parents who have anxious children. When I started my fieldwork I was still pretty dependent on others to help and guide me, but pretty soon I had to stand on my own two feet.

It was about this time that I felt ready to re-enter Kaiyu – even though I was really scared! I had 2 thoughts – first, I thought that I had something to offer people at Kaiyu and second, I was nearly finished studying and scared of going backwards into the depression if I didn't fill my time. So this time it was a give and take relationship. I also applied for some jobs with Kaiyu but couldn't get over the barriers.

Anyway, after six months of job seeking on my own (I really wanted to get a job off my own back), I just recently got a 4 month contract at the Australian Red Cross Regional Office in King Street. I now have this huge long title – Regional Community Services Co-ordinator – which just means that I am overseeing 2 local programs. The first is the Good Start Breakfast Club where we feed a healthy breakfast to children at disadvantaged schools and the second is the Cosmetic Care Program where volunteers are trained (by me) to go into aged care facilities to give hand massages and finger nail care to aged people as well as have a chat.

It's a really busy job (and I'm always looking for new volunteers) but I have a wonderful boss who is very supportive and encouraging. She even asked me what hours I would like to work so that I didn't get too tired or stressed! And I'm learning heaps of new things and meeting some very interesting people! I was even paid to go to Sydney for two days for training!

To top off this wonderful month, I even graduated! My friend and I went down to the graduation which was at the University of Sydney in this amazing auditorium with a huge painting along one wall. I felt quite tearful during the graduation and walking up to receive my degree was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life! It was an amazing feeling walking down through the audience with my new degree in my hand.

I feel like I'm now at a turning point in my life, and I've been thinking a lot about the influences and the characters in my personal journey. One of them has to be Lawrie – an amazing man who I consider as a friend and a mentor. I feel that the worst thing for clubhouse was when Lawrie moved to Mayfield. That steady, warm, interested, friendly contact that clubhouse members had every day suddenly had to be shared and I wish I could grab him back and say "Mine!" He has this

amazing ability to enable people to stand on their own two feet – even when they think that they don't know how.

I know that I've rattled on a lot with my story, but it's all been a bit like having a chat when I've written this tonight. And I really don't know what to leave out because, in my mind, it's all so important. But what I think is equally important is that Kaiyu members can share their stories of personal struggle and triumph in the newsletter like Jacki and I and Doug. I have felt strengthened when I have read other people's stories and even moved to tears and pride when I heard Jody speak at the AGM. Keep up the good work everyone at Kaiyu and let's get some sharing happening!