

## MEDIA RELEASE

**The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA) is calling all Australians to overcome the debilitating impact of stigma for people living with schizophrenia.**

**Figures now show around 230,000 people in Australia have schizophrenia and when you include families, a staggering 1 million people are being impacted.**

**Tony Stevenson – the CEO of MIFA – says it is utterly shameful that the average life expectancy of somebody in Australia with schizophrenia is now just 54 years old and he says the life expectancy of people impacted by this mental illness is going backwards.**

**People with schizophrenia are 12 times more likely to die from suicide as the general population and MIFA says people with schizophrenia suffer massive stigmatisation. It highlights it's a total myth to believe people with schizophrenia can never recover: in fact between one in 7 and one in 3 will recover with the right support.**

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia is bluntly warning that Australians who have schizophrenia have now become amongst the most socially marginalised and stigmatised people in Australia.

Tony Stevenson – the CEO of the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA) – says a massive number of people are impacted. Around 230,000 people in Australia are estimated to have schizophrenia. When you include families helping these people, a staggering 1 million people are now being impacted.

MIFA estimates less than 50% of Australians who have a serious mental illness are actually getting treatment ... which the organisation says is obviously very alarming.

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia is urging people who have mental health issues to reach out and get the help they need ... highlighting that there is significant support out there from GPs and specialists ... for people with schizophrenia.

MIFA points out people with schizophrenia severe disadvantage in this country and:

- Are 12 times more likely to die from suicide than the general population.
- Die up to 19 years earlier than the rest of the population – a huge figure.
- MIFA says it's utterly shameful that the average life expectancy of somebody in Australia with schizophrenia is just 54 years old.
- The life expectancy of people impacted by schizophrenia is currently going backwards.
- 22.4% of people with psychosis – almost 1 in 4 – reported feeling isolated and lonely and a staggering 13% reported having no friends at all.

People with schizophrenia can and do recover. At least 1 in 7 people with schizophrenia fully recover; some studies report that as high as 1 in 3 or 1 in 2 people fully recover from schizophrenia. Factors that play a very important role in influencing recovery from schizophrenia include having strong family relationships, treatment adherence, supportive therapeutic relationships, and access to community support.

But Tony Stevenson says that Government funding for mental health services, including for people with schizophrenia are grossly inadequate to enable people to recover. Mr Stevenson says that a minimum of half a billion dollars needs to be released by the Federal Government to help families across the nation impacted by schizophrenia, and other people living with mental illness, to get the support they need. He says this chronic treatable illness is simply not getting the attention it deserves. MIFA highlights Government policies are creating gaps in support for families and individuals.

Tony Stevenson said, "People with schizophrenia suffer huge stigmatisation. 68% of people with psychosis have not participated in any social activities in the previous year ... citing experiences and fear of stigma, social anxiety and mental illness as barriers to their participation."

Tony Stevenson highlighted that it is a massive myth to believe people with schizophrenia have a split personality ... because this is simply not true. People with schizophrenia have one personality ... People with 'split' or multiple personalities have a different condition, called Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Highlighting the positive action people can take, Tony Stevenson urges anybody with mental health issues to contact the free service MiNetworks and phone 1800 985 944 to speak to somebody close to their local community who will be able to connect them to local support services. People can also use the website [minetworks.org.au](http://minetworks.org.au).

Schizophrenia Awareness Week will run nationwide from Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup> to Sunday May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Tony Stevenson said, "It is absolutely shameful that people with schizophrenia are 12 times as likely to die from suicide than the general population. We all have to do more as a community to support people with this complex condition."

"It is also a disgrace that people with schizophrenia die approximately 19 years earlier than the rest of the population. It is simply appalling. Over 37% of people with psychosis report facing stigma or discrimination."

"We are a very advanced country and yet the reality is we have a major chronic disease where far too many things are going backwards. It is just not good enough. We can actually reverse the trends. We want people out there talking about their mental health because treatment is available for mental illness."

Tony Stevenson said, "Smoking is also a big issue around schizophrenia. Many people with schizophrenia smoke and this issue needs tackling. The national smoking rate sits at 13%. With schizophrenia, it's around 66%. We obviously cannot afford to ignore statistics like this."

"People also need to be aware that there appears to be a relationship between schizophrenia and drug use. Long term investigations show a heavy use of cannabis may precipitate or worsen the symptoms of schizophrenia."

Tony Stevenson added, "There are so many myths around schizophrenia. Our role is to eliminate those myths. Many people with mental illness actually have a good quality of life. Put simply, schizophrenia is a complex brain order that affects the normal functioning of a person's brain. It actively interferes with the person's ability to think, feel and act."

“Some people actually recover altogether. For others the illness may be prolonged. There is so much fear around this topic. We have to remove that fear. We are highlighting that a variety of medical and other types of support are available and they work.”

MIFA says if members of the public are concerned about a family member, they should absolutely step forward and seek help. Signs that someone may have schizophrenia include thought disorder, social withdrawal, hallucinations, lack of motivation, delusions, lack of insight, inappropriate responses and impaired thinking and memory.

Tony Stevenson added, “As part of our awareness campaign, we very much want to pay tribute to the enormous number of carers around the nation doing such incredible work – usually unpaid. So many people in the community are doing such positive work to help people with this complex mental illness.”

To get support, simply ring the free number – 1800 985 944 – or go to [www.minetworks.org.au](http://www.minetworks.org.au).

### **Justin Heazlewood**

I grew up as an only child in the early '90s in regional Tasmania. It was a good time to be a Carlton supporter but not a great time to have a mum with paranoid schizophrenia. We never used the words 'mental illness'; Mum was either 'well' or 'sick.' When I say 'we' I mean me and Nan and Pop (plus Blossum the cat). That was my team; my support network. I never called them that, but I called them up when Mum wouldn't stop crying.

The rest of the time, it became my job to say 'Get up Mum!' – all day, most days. I didn't know what else to do. No-one was looking out for the well-being of 12-year-old Justin. I never told a soul at school and even though the neighbours knew, nobody knew how to help.

If you find yourself caring for someone with schizophrenia, know that there's plenty of information about services and support available (even in Burnie, Tasmania – they have the internet now!). There's no point burning yourself out for the sake of someone else. Like they say on planes, you have to fit your own oxygen mask before helping others. Carers need all the self-care they can get.

Talking about mental illness is good oxygen. It's pertinent that my family never used the scary 'S' word to discuss Mum's health. It reflects both a lack of understanding and the denial everyone was in. There's no reason why it has to be a secret. If Mum had a visible disability and I helped her around town in a wheelchair, I'm sure the situation could have involved more support for me because my position as a carer might have been recognised.

It's the hardest thing on earth, watching the person you love break in front of your eyes. Schizophrenia originates from the German word meaning 'split mind.' As a child I was torn in half. I had to save Mum while protecting myself. Getting angry at Mum also hurt me. Her pattern of getting well and falling sick broke my heart over and over again. The best thing I can do now is show people that someone with this illness can be a lovely, warm, funny person most of the time. Maybe when they hear about someone with schizophrenia, they'll think of the very real, very wonderful woman my mother is – and in turn that might humanise the haunting, thirteen letter word, which is good for scrabble, but little else.

*Justin Heazlewood's memoir Get Up Mum (Affirm Press, \$29.99) is available in all good bookstores and online from 21 May.*

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