

NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH

OPINION

## *Why I'm worried about suicide in Australia (by a former political leader who personally knows the risks)*

By John Brogden

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1

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There is almost no other country in the world where I'd wish to live with a mental illness. Yes, there is still not enough funding to match the rights, opportunities and expectations that we have for our mental health, but there is more funding almost every year from state, territory and national budgets.

Fifteen years ago, aged 36, near the top of my career and a step away from being premier of NSW, I tried to end my life by suicide. I wanted to die. I didn't reach out for help. I thank God every day that I didn't complete my suicide.



John Brogden is the chairman of Lifeline.

In a favourite song, Powderfinger sings: "These days turned out nothing like I had planned."

I am a 51-year-old man with depression and suicidal ideation. I live with these illnesses every day. Note, I say with them, not through them. I am medicated daily and probably will be for the rest of my life. I see my psychiatrist every fortnight. I try to look after myself physically through exercise and diet. I was not a big drinker, but I haven't drunk alcohol for 15 years.

I have learnt to know myself better – what works for me and what doesn't. What gets me depressed and what people and situations I must avoid. I am chief executive of a property development company and chairman of Lifeline Australia. I volunteer at our local surf club and with a few other charities.

I'm not normal. What the hell is normal anyway? But I live a fulfilling life.

Mental illness is on the public agenda in a manner unimaginable 15 short years ago. It is spoken about openly, regularly and almost always responsibly.

We are in a battle for a steady and sustained reduction in suicide in Australia. On this measure, we are failing.

More people die by suicide than in road accidents every year. Eight Australians will die by suicide today – six men and two women. Suicide rates in rural Australia are still higher than metropolitan areas. The suicide rate of Indigenous Australians is double that of the rest of the population.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has tasked Christine Morgan, chief executive of the National Mental Health Commission, to drive a whole-of-government approach to suicide prevention. Expectations are high with the commitment from Morrison towards a suicide-free Australia, and from Premier Gladys Berejiklian for a 20 per cent decrease in suicides by 2023. They are genuine and they have made public statements against which they will be measured.

The new challenge is what the COVID-19 pandemic means for suicide. And what will it mean?

The early facts are encouraging. In Victoria, the state hit hardest by the virus, the coroner released figures last month showing a small decrease in death by suicide between January 2020 to August 2020. I hope this means people are getting the help they need and stopping short of suicide.

This is evidenced by a 25 per cent increase in calls to Lifeline during the pandemic. A day after Easter, our calls had peaked at their highest ever: 3200. That's a call every 30 seconds. Two things helped the volume of calls to drop after that – JobKeeper and much lower infections and deaths from COVID-19 than anticipated.

But over the past weeks, daily calls to Lifeline are back over 3000. This week they reached their highest in our 57-year history: 3326 in one day. This is not a record we want to keep breaking.

Thursday is World Suicide Prevention Day. As we emerge from the pandemic, the one sure thing is we are walking straight into a worldwide recession. The mental health pandemic will last much longer than the physical pandemic. When people lose their jobs, they can lose their family and their homes. They risk losing their life.

Just as JobKeeper has literally been a lifesaver over the past six months, when and how it ends will have major consequences for mental health and suicide. The dislocation of bushfires and the pandemic has been enormous and the scale of the trauma for many is yet to land.

So, governments need to be prepared with significantly more funding and resources for mental health and suicide prevention after COVID-19. To their credit, governments have provided critical funding during the pandemic which has made a real difference. As the pandemic comes under control and as a vaccine is made available, funds for physical health must be turned to mental health.

But let's not be lazy and simply ask governments to meet the crisis. Businesses need to look after the mental health of their staff. Companies doing well need to increase their donations. Financial institutions need to genuinely put customers first.

And communities, through schools, sporting clubs and other local touchpoints, can do more to put their arms around families and individuals in crisis. Food parcels. Petrol money. Counselling. A kind word.

We all play a role in preventing suicide.

**John Brogden is the chairman of Lifeline and a former NSW opposition leader. Call Lifeline on 13 11 14.**