

Warning message: [\(00:00\)](#)

This podcast series will share personal moments of connection and deeply felt experiences. If anything you hear has a triggering effect, please reach out to someone who can help keep you safe. Or remember you can find lifeline at any time on 13, 11, 14.

Graeme: [\(00:19\)](#)

A lot of people ask about depression, how you catch it, or, where did it come from? I don't have the answer to that. And from all of my reading and work with people, I don't think there is a clear answer. Fantastic documentary on SBS on insight and one on male suicide. And the question was asked of one of the men, uh, what made you do it? And he said, I didn't want to die. I just want to stop the pain. And with that, they panned through the audience, and there's a whole lot of people nodding, including me watching the show, that's how it affects you.

Beverley: [\(00:56\)](#)

Welcome to lifelines, holding on to hope, a podcast in which people who've suffered dark times share the stories of survival. Graeme Holdsworth has helped build some of Australia's most prestigious buildings. Depression, however, caused him to lose his career, reputation and marriage until he finally decided it would be easier for everyone if he was no longer around. Graeme, now at Grandad, explains the strategies he's learned to keep himself alive while daughter Liza and mate Simon Coffin, remind everyone of the importance of support.

Liza: [\(01:32\)](#)

When I think of good memories with dad when I was little, it's being down the beach or being at the snow. And being at the beach, I used to love watching him on his wave ski because of the massive waves out the back. And you're a little kid and you see your dad flying down these waves. And I just thought he was the best in doing that.

Graeme: [\(01:52\)](#)

I was the first person in my family to ever go to the university. Uh, so I've, I finally got into architecture and completed the course and graduated as an architect. It made my father very happy. Yes I got married very early. Uh, in fact, uh, my final year at university, I was married and plan to have my first child in the first year after graduation. Thats how confident I was that someone desperately about to employ me. I had three children from the first marriage, they were actually six years apart. When I first started as an architect, I found out that the person who had the best job was the client. Uh, so I got interested in the process of building rather than wanting to be a designer architect. What happens at the front end before an architects

employed, and what happens at the tail end when the building's finished and has to be commissioned, occupied, sold on or whatever the process is.

Graeme: [\(02:49\)](#)

So I headed off towards the development industry and I worked for a couple of major developers for a long time and then ended up starting a project management practice on my own. And that led to me being involved at a fairly young age on a major development that somehow ended up a success. And for some reason I got some of the credit for that and therefore that set my path in my future career. From then on, it was large project after large projects getting larger along the time, I kept putting my hand up and saying, can I have a small one? But no one would trust me with a small one. So the sorts of things I worked on was the Crown Casino. That took five years of my life in charge of the process there, right up to the construction. Uh, I went to Sydney for the Grollo group and did number one Martin Place, which is the Sydney GPO, a Macquarie Bank headquarters in the Western Hotel, uh, Convention Center. Not just Jeff's Shed part of it, but the new part of the convention center. So that's the sort of scale of projects that I was project director of. I really love my job. Uh, I love the processes. I love the people, the involvement, the excitement of it, the intensity, especially the larger ones. They can turn into 24, seven jobs without you really knowing. The people are fantastic. And the approach that we used to have to it, which was a collaborative approach. Everyone worked together for the success of it, reminding ourselves that the buildings themselves needed a champion. So we have to make sure the building was the best we can do for it. Um, it was great work. Partly because of the work and the fact that we were married early and a whole lot of other reasons that marriage broke down.

Liza: [\(04:42\)](#)

Their divorce wasn't very amicable. I would say it was a bit messy and I think just with little kids you just sort of get caught up in it all. And um, my dad had met someone else and started sort of a new beginning with her and that kind of hurt us I guess, or me. Um, so it was harder to see him to know that he'd moved on to someone else. When you say little. Um, so I didn't see him for a long time

Graeme: [\(05:11\)](#)

And I met the most beautiful lady who was in the sort of business we were in. She was the solicitor for a major firm that was working in some of the projects that I was working on. Uh, we fell in love and that was the end of it to me again. Um, there was one child from that marriage. My wife was involved in planning issues and we had that in common. There was local community work. Uh, we set up a group here that looked after inappropriate development in our own suburb. Uh, I did some work for planning policy for, for one of the

political parties. Uh, so we, we were active. Together we took on, uh, the saving of the Abbotsford Convent, which was designed for a, or they tended out for, for, for high rise housing. Uh, in fact my ex wife got a pro bono award for the work she did there for saving it.

Graeme: [\(06:08\)](#)

So it was those sorts of things that kept us busy and occupied. And the scale of work I was doing got bigger and bigger. Crown was in the middle of that one, going to Sydney for two years. So, uh, number one Martin Place, that could have been a work related problem because, uh, I went there on my own and I commuted on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Uh, and our son was only four or five years old. So I don't think that helped the relationship. In the last couple of major projects I was working on. I started to notice there was something strange happening. It attacked me and sort of layers, uh, a bit like putting on weight. You really don't notice it until someone says, Gee's you've put on some weight. Uh, and that was what happened to me. I started to withdraw a lot more. I started to self doubt a lot more. Uh, I, my management style started to change so that rather than talk through problems, I start disputes and yell at people and apportion blame where we'd never done that before. There, there are two sides to the construction industry the way to manage. One is to manage by fear. You yell at everyone, call them incompetent, useless, uh, and every mistake. And the other side is that to accept that what you're doing is, is a one off. Uh, it's a prototype using standard elements in it, but they've never been put together in no time, way. And on big ones that run fast, someone's going to make a mistake. We always do. And I was going to make mistake. So at the start we got together and said, right, let's open up about mistakes early. Let's work together. Let's make sure we can solve them before they become real problems. And at the worst what can happen. Bit more time and a bit more money, but at least we'll be open about it and people will know it's coming. I notice a change with me when I became a lot more like a site, the management style that I did tested so much, uh, going in, yelling at people, apportioning blame, withdrawing from the process. Um, it, it wasn't me.

Graeme: [\(08:17\)](#)

One of the first signs that there was something wrong with me was when I started to withdrawal. Withdrawal is a very large part of the process of people who are depressed. I'd withdraw from social occasions. I wouldn't go to work socials, uh, all the institute dinners and lunches and gatherings I used to go to, I used to be part of, used to be active in those organizations, I now withdrew from, I send someone else along, I wouldn't bother to go. And I, I noticed that there was the anger, but I knew there was something really wrong when I became unreliable. You know, I can be on site, I could be at a consultant's office, I could be in my own offices. Lots of places I can be. So I'd say I was on site, but in reality I was at home, struggling to get out of bed, struggling to

leave the house, just total loss of vitality.

Liza: ([09:11](#))

I think my, my brother Darcy, he's my half brother, dad's, um, son from his next relationship. He was at school and he's teacher I think knew my sister or something like that. And she was said that he talked about us in class and it just sort of hit me in the heart. I was like, Oh, you know, I didn't want him to think that we don't want anything to do with him I guess. So I just called up Dad and, and Michelle and I, I think I just took Darcy bowling a few times or just caught up with him occasionally. And then they were looking for someone to be his nanny and I was doing some studying at the time. So it just sort of worked. And then I just, I actually lived next door and I'm looked after Darcy for a year and dad was there. But in hindsight now, he wasn't very available. And I took that on, I guess that he wasn't available for me, but now I know that he just was sort of suffering in his own depression at that stage, which I didn't realize

Graeme: ([10:15](#))

After I'd noticed there was a change. I was actually visiting my GP, some other matter, and he said to me,

GP: ([10:22](#))

What's wrong with your Graeme? You're not your chirpy self, you haven't even insulted me this morning like you usually do?

Graeme: ([10:29](#))

And I finally said, well, I don't know. This is something happening. Yeah, I'm not who I used to be.

Graeme: ([10:36](#))

So he organized another meeting and we had a longer chat. Uh, and then he sent me off to see a, he's friendly psychiatrist, and out of all of that, it became very clear that I'd been hiding desperate illness, uh, that I was severely depressed. And I'd been hiding it partly, by not talking to anyone about it, including myself and using some avoidance techniques, I was drinking a lot more than I was, that was part of the anger came from that.

Graeme: ([11:03](#))

So in the end of the day, uh, there was a client who was probably the client from hell. who really wanted to run a project but didn't know how to. And I confronted him and I told him the way he should approach the project and let people who know something about it, do it. I did it in the style that wasn't me, and I hadn't prepared for it. I hadn't organized the politics. I hadn't organized the people surrounding me for support and so forth. And to tell you the truth,

I'm not quite sure what I said. But when I went back to the desk, the people around me said, oh, there's a message, pack up your desk, your contract's been canceled. They want you outta here in two hours. So whatever it was, I got the message across. And that, that initially I thought, oh, well yeah, bit of misjudgment on my part, never been sacked before, new experience, roll with the punches.

Graeme: ([12:00](#))

But in reality it's part of the change in me has been this self doubt. And this really gutted me. It proved all the things I've been saying, You're useless, to myself. I've been telling myself, you're useless, you're a fraud, you're no good and you've conned your way into this, you're going to get caught out sooner or later. And there was proof I'd been caught out. I'd finally been. So yeah, I was far from well and far from rational. After I was removed from, from, from the project. Uh, I then had real problems getting back into the business. Part of it was because of my age, because I was early sixties at that stage. So I had a long career and there was lots of young kids snapping at our heels. Secondly, because the position I occupied, only very few people had experienced to fill that. So there's a fairly small cartel of people who knew, and they, but they knew exactly what had happened to me. I knew why I wasn't in a job and they knew I was suffering from mental illness. So the stigma that was was difficult. But the third and probably the real reason is my self confidence wasn't there. I just didn't want to try anymore. Uh, it was a self defeating attitude. You're not good enough, so don't bother. And it was interesting. A lot of people in my profession gathered around me, offered me other positions, offered me assistance. But part of the withdrawal process, you knocked them back once and they try again. They ask if they can do something, you knock them back the second time, maybe try again. You knock them back the third time, you don't hear from them again. And then you end up saying to yourself, See, no one loves me, No one wants me, I can't get work. Uh, I don't have any contacts, You're not trying. And they've given up offering

Simon: ([13:51](#))

I met Graeme through one of my bike shops, I had at the time may be three bike shops in Melbourne, and I met him through the one in Richmond, we're just around the corner from where he lived. Yeah. Look, I started to realize he wasn't doing so well when we had been to a few functions or birthday parties or parties or whatever, that he's at his house. And then, uh, it was made known to my wife and I that him and his partner weren't getting along very well at all and he definitely didn't cope with that very well. Uh, and then they relatively quickly started, I guess over 12, 18 months, I can't remember the exact timeframe, but, um, you know, seemed relatively quickly became quite a negative relationship. And I think he may have been, you know, definitely adding fuel to the fire by drinking and, and so on. But yeah, it was, it was, it

was well known to me that he was not in a good place within his relationship at home. And then that, that deteriorated quite quickly.

Graeme: ([14:56](#))

My second marriage was a very happy marriage, it was a happy marriage for me. Now I'm not quite sure of the tail end of that had been all that happy for, for my wife. Uh, she had lived through the changes in me that I really didn't notice. And they'd maybe gone on for three or four years slowly. Um, the two years away in Sydney didn't help the matter. Uh, and reality, there was no real appreciation about mental illness, about depression and no real acceptance that it was a real illness and serious illness. Uh, so that was difficult. Uh, there was never really time to talk about the problem. The more bizarre my behavior and irrational behavior became, and it did and I must've been difficult to live with, the less we talked about it.

Simon: ([15:55](#))

It took me by surprise a little bit, he was such a strong success, strong, strong male successful male in society had done so much, achieved so much, done, you know done so much for others. Um, throughout his life, and still done a lot of great stuff and had achieved a lot. Called upon, you know, lots of staff and big building projects and all sorts of stuff. And I was, I was I guess the long and short of it is, I was really surprised and taken back that a person of that, that, um, mindset and stature in society could end up in the situation he was in, where he was mentally so unwell

Graeme: ([16:33](#))

After I'd been removed from the project and my marriage had broken up and I was suffering very badly and I started to have suicidal ideation. I actually had come to the point where I thought I should act on it. I thought I'd be better off, not there. Everyone would be happy. I'd be less of a burden to people. Um, and in fact it was an irrational thought that it was logical and slow. It wasn't agitated, it wasn't out of anger or as a, as, as, as a rushed event. Uh, and uh, I planned it. I left a note, I got in my car, I put on a song that had some lines in about feeling hollow and that's exactly how I felt. Absolutely hollow, there was nothing in me, there was nothing left in me. Uh, and uh, I went to our holiday house and I sat at our dining room table and in a very orderly fashion wrote, five or six suicide notes.

Graeme: ([17:37](#))

Now I've still got them and I read them back, they were very rambling and somewhat illogical, but the sentiment was good in all of them, even though badly expressed. And I addressed them, put them in a nice little pile. And then because I was trying to, I don't have the real answer this, I think because I was trying to be orderly and not cause too much of a problem, so I knew that was

going to be a problem. Uh, I use the land line there to ring my own phone, I'd never taken my own phone with me, to say if anyone's looking for me I'm under the verandah at the holiday house. And, and that was, the next thing I knew was I was being saved by a couple of policemen. The reason for that is that back in town, they had tried to find me, they'd been to the holiday house, and I wasn't there. But they had hold of my mobile phone so when they got the message, they knew what to do. So the circumstances in my survival, coincidental if, if anything, and I'm very pleased with those two policemen to who ended up saying, I think they're opening words was: I guess your surprised to see us here. And I was,

Lifeline: ([18:53](#))

Through connecting with others we can hold on to hope. To speak to a crisis supporter. Please call 13, 11, 14, 24 hours, seven days a week.

Liza: ([19:06](#))

It broke my heart, you know, it's very sad. Um, my reaction straight away was just to help him because, um, my step mother wasn't there to help and my brother was still young, Darcy, and Dad didn't really seem to have anyone. So my first reaction was just to help him. And that's pretty much what I did from that call, I think. Yeah.

Graeme: ([19:37](#))

Uh, slowly, slowly with the help of my psychiatrist and, and the other interventions of going into, into care, um, I got better. The interesting part of that, going into a psychiatric institution isn't the greatest place in the world to be. Um, probably the last place you'd want to be. But the one place you really feel safe. Uh, and every time I was feeling really, really bad, I put my hand up and say, take me back in. Uh, and the compassion of the people there, the safety, even, even the inmates, they understand there's a, there's a link in there that sort of institution is, is, uh, an overwhelming feeling of everyone looking after each other.

Simon: ([20:29](#))

I didn't go into the hospital, you know, sort of, um, making as if everything was going to be all roses. I would go in and visit and talk about his treatment that he was having. And he was having treatment that, you know, some stuff like getting his brain zapped on a weekly basis. I think it wasn't at one point, um, all sorts of different sorts of treatments and, um, which I was unaware of, I guess to a degree. And I was concerned for how it was, how he was going with it. But in saying that, like the thing that was, um, he was never, around me when I visited him. He was never, yeah. Obviously it wasn't overly happy a lot of the time, but he was never really miserable and talking about wanting to kill himself

Graeme: [\(21:19\)](#)

During the process of my illness. Uh, I've tried a lot of anti psychotic or anti depressant drugs. Uh, and I've also had three rounds of ECT, electric convulsion treatment. Both of those are very successful for most people. Uh, the, the range of anti depressant drugs is huge, and every one of them can help other people in a different way. Unfortunately, they just didn't work for me. ECT treatment can be, have a resounding success with a lot of people. Uh, and there's some terrific stories about that, but in my case, it did no good at all.

Liza: [\(22:01\)](#)

So he was down at the, in the hospital for a while, so that was just going and visiting him as much as I could. Um, and then I moved in to his house with him, back when he was on a lot of medication. You know, that, that's hard to understand how bad he's feeling at those moments. But, um, I don't think I really have asked him how, like, what it was like. I think it's just more knowing that it's not a quick fix and just, all you can do is hope.

Graeme: [\(22:36\)](#)

They put me back into the hospital and they we're going to wean me off the cocktail of drugs I was on and put me onto an old one, part of the old period. Uh, so they weaned me off my cocktail in the first week. I remember the psych come in and me saying I'm cured. And he goes what do you mean? I said look my hands don't shake anymore, don't have any chest pains the Zinging sound in my head's gone, my stomach feels fine it's not, I don't have all those knots in it the whole time. He goes: uh, its the side effects of all those drugs. Yeah. That's what happens, there not major, but that's it. And the problem is if we don't put you on something, there's a chance you'll go over the edge of the cliff again. Yeah. Straight into deep depression. And he said to me, because I had read widely about my illness, that if I was going to suffer from it, I was going to know about it. So I created quite a library of works on it. And he said to me, have you heard about acceptance and commitment therapy? It's a doctor called Dr. Russ Harris, who's written a book called the happiness trap. And I said, yeah, I've got that, but I've never read it cause I thought it was one of those self help books again. And if I picked up another self help book, that led me down a dead end, I didn't want to be there. And he said, well, why don't you try it? So I came, when I got out of the hospital that time I came, I pulled it out of the shelf and I picked it up and started reading. And the light bulb went off, finally I had an answer. I understood, I could understand the process. I could see a way out of it. And now I'm a devotee of acceptance and commitment therapy.

Graeme: [\(24:12\)](#)

Acceptance and commitment therapy works on the process that all emotions

are real. And one of the problems of mental illness is one of avoidance. You don't want to feel bad, so you're trying to avoid it. Avoidance techniques can be drugs or alcohol, uh, going off and doing weird and wonderful stuff, but not confronting it. Being afraid of the feeling. Acceptance and commitment says, accept it, it's there make room for it, look at it. Give it some shape, give it some color. Uh, breathe through it importantly, uh, and in the end of the day, watch it. It'll change and it doesn't last forever. Nothing ever does. Uh, so that's the one of accepting your feelings don't try and avoid them. The next one is to deal with thoughts. Uh, the key to it is, thoughts are just words in your head. They're random words, uh, they're meaningless, They're not true, although some of us believe they are, they're not right, although most people believe they are, because we thought it, it's either got to be true or right. The philosophy of accept is, it doesn't matter True, false, right or wrong, only one judgment, helpful or not helpful. If they're not helpful then move them on. And there's a whole lot of exercises and putting, imagining a stream with leaves on it and putting your thoughts on them and letting your thoughts flow away. And we all know thoughts come and go. They are going out on a regular basis. Acknowledge it, move it on, don't get hooked on it. Uh, and if you do get hooked on it, then have some real skills of that stopping and ruminating. And that's part of the process is developing a skill to stop ruminating. And the key to all of that is mindfulness, to be in the present.

Graeme: ([25:56](#))

Uh, because we all go, oh, my life's been terrible. Look at me, I'm sick. I've lost this. I've lost that. We remember all the bad parts of our past, and then we just automatically transfer that to the future because of that it's going to be like that forever. So I'm going to be miserable and sad and lonely. Uh, so what the heck? The simple practices. What about now? This moment, you know what I'm doing OK now. Yeah, I'm with friends and I'm out and the suns shining. That's the answer to, life is about a whole lot of moments. One moment to the next moment, to the next moment. So its about stop looking into the future, stop living in the past. Be in the present, be aware, be now and mindfulness practice gives you that meditation, uh, without all the restraints of, of meditation.

Graeme: ([26:50](#))

But being me, once I found it, I took it on. I, I've found myself in seven day meditation classes with five days of noble silence and up at four in the morning and meditate through till nine at night. Um, a bit brutal. Uh, but every time I start to get lazy, they'd bring me back into line. It's part of the, the process, uh, of, of getting, well, there was a lot of emphasis on neuroplasticity being able to, to rewire your brain, to be able to, to get the neurons to work, to stop the old habits and create new habits. And just by doing it. And part of that process was if you learn something new, that people of my age still have an

ability to learn. In my case, I decided the piano because I have hands that probably, and fingers are probably, should never think of playing a piano. A very large, some people say one of my fingers would land on two notes, uh, and the idea of on hand doing one thing and the other hand doing something else while you, you read, uh, some hieroglyphics on a bit of paper, I thought that's a tough process. Uh, so I took up the piano. I remember once my daughter was here and I was beating away on the piano and she came up, she said, we think we worked it out. We think you're playing Imagine by Lennon. And I said: very good, that's what I am playing.

Graeme: ([28:21](#))

Part of the problem of mental illnesses is once you start the downhill spiral, your physical health usually follows you down. A bad food, bad sleeping, too much alcohol, lack of exercises because you're not up, you don't have the vitality to do it. So as your mind or mental health spirals down, your physical health spirals down to, and all of a sudden you discover you have a lot of physical complaints as well as mental complaints.

Graeme: ([28:47](#))

The answer to get back up there is to attack both together if not attack the physical stuff first, start eating properly, exercising properly, getting your physical health together. And to me one of the values, the other thing about act is that you act on your values. If you, if you look at the things that are important to your family, friends, work, leisure, you name it, they're the things you value. When you're at your worst, look for one of the things you value and go out and do it. And to me it was that I used to be fit and healthy and now I wasn't. So that was one of my values. And I used to ride a bike a lot. I had a few bikes that were getting rusty in the corner. I pulled them out, go on them and started riding again

Simon: ([29:35](#))

We've had a shop ride that I've had as part of our stores for nearly 30 years and Graeme's been a big part of that for I guess the last, what are we here, the last 17, 18 years 19 years whatever it is. And uh, we, we've always sort of, uh, encouraged each other, giving each other a bit of a hard time with, if we don't turn up for the shop ride, sort of thing, we've got an amazing community, I must say, with that shop ride. And a huge majority of them, know Graeme. It's definitely, you know, a big, big part of that community thing that he, he really loves, and everyone encourages him and it's good to see him get along. So yes, cycling has definitely been a big, big, big part of, I guess his rehabilitation to to a degree. Yeah.

Graeme: ([30:31](#))

In my case I keep getting older and the kids I ride with keep getting faster so

I'm being dropped more often than I used to be. And there's some exhaustion and some pain and a bit of suffering in it, but overall there's some absolute joy in it. And getting reasonably fit again is a lovely feeling. And it was good, the comradery of that was an important part of withdrawal process, I was now going out and making contact again. And out of them, there were the social events and I started to go to, I made the decision that I'd never say no anymore as I had for years to say no to invitations to do anything. My first reaction in the old days was to say No, and think of an excuse, my current approach is, yes, go, and if it's not what you want, leave. But don't avoid social contact, community involvement, any of those sorts of things

Simon: ([31:20](#))

Graeme and I get along and he has become a bit like a father figure for me because I lost my dad when I was youngish I guess, as an adult. Um, it just works. It's one of those things, relationships either work and they don't and it happened to.

Graeme: ([31:35](#))

For anyone who's suffering from depression and anxiety, the one message I'd really like to give is one of hope. That there is a recovery. Suicide is complex but it can be solved. It can be eliminated. And depression and anxiety are common, but they can be cured. Uh, they can be looked after. Everyone should know. It takes time and it takes patience, there's no silver bullet. There's no quick approach to it. And if they persist and they get advice early, uh, help is the most important part, that's where I failed on two counts. One when I was first sick and on the second count was when I started to think about suicide. Getting help early is important. Strengthening your ties with friends, uh, making them understand your, your illness, starting a conversation, always difficult to start a conversation, but if you pick the right time and you do, then it's very helpful. And for the people you're talking to, my advice to them would be, listen, really listen to what they're saying.

Graeme: ([32:47](#))

Ask Open questions. How are you, what's doing with, how do you feel and avoid the, uh, I know how you feel, because you never do know how they feel. You can't feel their pain. Or I was like that and I fixed it and this is the way I did it. Your solution to your particular problem isn't their solution to theirs. But encourage them to seek help and to seek help early.

Simon: ([33:08](#))

I just turned up and I was just there for him

Graeme: ([33:10](#))

My middle daughter used to also ride, so we ran into each other in different

riding groups and then we started riding together again. Uh, and she met her boyfriend through riding and he was someone I knew. So there was, there became a connection, uh, and uh, and out of that a very strong connection. Uh, she is now, she and her partner now have two beautiful young children. Uh, that's part of the process. So, um, now a grandfather that can visit two of his grandchildren.

Liza: (33:41)

You know, I look at my kids and see their dad there and see their granddad there and I know they're not going to know what they're missing out on because they'll just be used w but it just makes me happy that they've got that family

Graeme: (33:54)

Now that I'm well and truly on the road to recovery or am well, again, I've discovered life is good, uh, small things that are important, uh, that you can enjoy.

Liza: (34:05)

I've always said that the things that I love doing the most that I've got from my dad. Like being at the beach or the surf club or swimming or skiing and cycling, so Yeah.

Beverley: (34:24)

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