

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.

Beverley: [\(00:20\)](#)

Welcome to lifelines, holding onto hope. A podcast series in which people who've reached a dark place in their lives share their stories. Imagine if you will, a fine dining establishment, quiet courtesy, calm and crispy ironed cloths. The wine is chilled and so is the atmosphere. In the kitchen however, it's a different story where temperatures and tempers can rise in seconds. Mal Meirs has worked in some of the world's best restaurants. He knows better than most, the daily scrutiny, pressure and judgment, that chefs are subjected to. He's turned his experience into something very wonderful, but if it hadn't been for crucial phone call to his best mate, Nathan Dwyer, his story could have ended very differently.

Mal: [\(01:15\)](#)

I grew up, uh, in Colandra on the sunshine coast in Queensland. I had a pretty good, uh, childhood, played a lot of cricket, a lot of sports, definitely did a lot of, lot of schoolwork. The intention was to be a veterinarian when I left school, until I figured out that I couldn't actually stand the side of a blood or anything, and I passed out twice in the operating theater. So when I realized that being a vet wasn't going to work out, I sort of was a bit lost for what I would do. Um, I just sort of went through the motions, finished, finished my year 12. Um, and then I relocated to Sydney just to figure out something. And I did a tafe course, uh, for hotel school and that was where I fell into cooking. I met a chef while I was waiting to get my, my textbooks and then I started working in a, in a, in a kitchen as a kitchen hand. The passion and everything that I found when I, when I started cooking, it was just like, it was always meant to be there.

Mal: [\(02:18\)](#)

I had a little bit of experience with, um, cooking when I was 10 working my parents fish and chip shop, but none of that really ever clicked. It was sort of like a, a memory I'd forgotten. Um, I was a bit put off by the, um, the apprentice system initially and I didn't think that I was able to sustain a livelihood with the low pay that apprenticeships are bought. But I mean that was just a couple of years of working as a kitchen hand before I really got bitten by the bug and bit the bullet and took on an apprenticeship and then, you know, started me on to the path where I am now. I've worked at Il Goloso, Cruise Bar Pendolino, Bistro Guillaume, The Square, The Bella Luce Hotel, Trocadero,... as a new person going into an industry where you're always learning and it's ever evolving and there's always new things happening

somewhere. You just, you don't even know where to start. It's one thing to be taught how to, to prep something or, you know, to cut a carrot carrot a certain way. But there's so many little things that you don't really get told so many things around you. There's, you know, there's hot and there's sharp and there's, there's all these elements that is sort of, you know, as a 17/18 year old kid, sometimes people are signing apprenticeships younger than you just, you don't even know how to hold yourself, let alone be concerned about the, the Quail that's been in, in for 20 minutes and you, you know, you've got to check because you're worried about, you know, cutting your carrots and the onions on the stove. It's just, it's a multiple like tasking thing as well. There's so much that you have to be able to manage all at once. And you know, for someone who's green it can be very tricky.

Mal: ([03:55](#))

I left from a little town, I'd moved to Sydney. You know, I had a few new friends but not that many, no real family like you know, Call Mum and dad once a week just to touch in and yeah. You know, the, the learning curve of how to hold yourself in the kitchen was pretty, pretty steep. Not to mention, you know, trying to figure out how to, how to actually be an adult. Well, I probably didn't do that for another, at least another five years anyway. Um, it was just sort of, you know, being, being away from home, you know, no real rules to follow other than making sure that my bills are paid. I didn't really know what I was dealing with. I just sort of took, took everything as it comes and made decisions as they were, as they were happening. I never really planned for anything, you know, just sort of tried to make the best of what I could

Mal: ([04:43](#))

starting in the kitchen generally. You know, you look at starting at 9:00 AM. You're in there prepping for lunch service. So you've got a three hour window to get everything ready for lunch, possibly doing, you know, 120 covers for lunch. And then by the time lunchtime service winds up, you know, you could be looking at 2.30, 3.30, um, and then you've got that window until six o'clock when you've got to get the rest of the Mise En Place done, which is, uh, a chef term for, for your prep, everything in its place. Um, and then, you know, you're doing it all again. And then depending on the size of the venue, um, what you're doing, how long it takes to clean down, how intense the clean down is, you know, you can be getting out between 11.30 and one o'clock in the morning. Those hours were a lot longer in London, you know, getting to work at like 10 to seven and then leaving most of the time it's 12.30 /1 o'clock just to get the train or get the tube home and then your home for probably three, three hours and then up again to go again. But you know, that was the expectation of a working week for a chef. So I basically lived and breathed and ate, drank, did all of those things. It was just all cooking. You know, I was told

that you need, you know, two bs when you're an apprentice to learn more about cooking. And that's Beers and Books. To have as many beers with your friends, uh, you know, to talk, cooking, and then read as many cookbooks as you could. So over my career, I've been lucky enough to, you know, travel the world and gain experiences and skills a bit of everywhere.

Mal: [\(06:20\)](#)

So I started my apprenticeship in Sydney at a little trattoria in Haberfield called Il Goloso, which is really great for learning the basics of Italian cooking, which, which was my passion for probably the first four years, five years of my, um, my career. And then from there I moved briefly to, um, Cruise Bar on the Sydney Opera House and then to Pendolino, which was at the time, you know, the best new restaurant, best new Italian. I'm really doing groundbreaking things, uh, with fresh pasta and all that sort of stuff. Still a leader in that field. And then from there I finished up my apprenticeship and I, um, was offered a job in Melbourne and then I was there for probably just over a year, um, before I took the leap and did what most Australian chefs do and went to London.

Mal: [\(07:16\)](#)

Yeah, it was a good time but just the, the kitchen I found myself in was the one that sort of all the guys who I idolized here in the industry, had done their time at, um, and it was one of those military style kitchens. Sort of yelling got the best out of everyone and they broke you down and then you know, they'd completely break you down and they might put you off back together and then they break you down again. And then I just started hating cooking.

Mal: [\(07:47\)](#)

The day I cut my, cut my hand, I've still got like the, the scar there where it didn't heal properly. I came in an hour later than what I was supposed to, but I wasn't really supposed to technically start for two or three hours, but just everyone came in early because that's what needed to be done. And I was so exhausted that I slept in another hour and I got to work in hour late and somebody had taken my peeled presentation shallots, like talking like perfectly peeled and turn down, you know, 150 of these little onions and chopped them up for sauce. When like I confronted them about it. They're like, no, no, no. Like you should like if you were here early, you, you would've had your shallots in like as if like it was my fault. So then obviously being behind the eight ball like, brand new turning knife, like trying to peel artichokes, obviously no one wanted to help either because, you know, I decided that I didn't need to come in at the same time as everyone else and I cut myself pretty much to the, to the bone and then it's, yeah,

Mal: [\(08:50\)](#)

a bit of masking tape and put a glove on and carried on with it. Appear to, you know, get ready for a Saturday night service.

Mal: ([09:04](#))

The whole moving around thing with, over my career had a lot of positives, but also the negative, I guess from taking from that was that I never really settled myself, never allowed myself to get really a good body of, of friends. After that initial high school period when, you know, I left home, I just, I just start getting, you know, a good support group around me again and then I'd, I'd move to another state or to another part of the world. You know, I'd start from scratch again. Yeah. Trying to, trying to fit in with new groups of friends, you know, in new workplaces, you know, often with different, different demographics. It was just before I'd, I'd finished my apprenticeship, you know, I was lucky enough to be going home regularly because I had braces. I had seen my dentists. Um, but it was also really hard to see my family start to fall apart. You know, you're, you're not there at all really. And then every six to eight weeks you have to go home and you sort of, you just see the distance, I guess, grow between your mum and your dad. And then, um, it was, I think, uh, I feel like it was around my 23rd or my 24th birthday. Um, I'd gone home for the weekend, I'd perfectly timed a, a dentist appointment, so I was home for my birthday. And, um, I guess that was, that was the point at which I, I knew I could see that it was, that it was over and it was, yeah, it was really quite, quite distressing to see my family completely break down in front of me. But it was also that realization that it was actually happening. Um, and then to see my dad who I'd never seen cry in my life, um, so vulnerable, um, was quite hard. Um,

Mal: ([11:01](#))

so yeah, like that was, you know, a big, a big, I don't know, I guess was a big thing to happen, you know, and then having to, to fly home, you know, 24 hours after that, um, and not be able to stay was it was pretty hard. Um, and then, you know, I week latter my little sister ran away from home. And yeah, my anxiety was pretty out of control. Um, I was, you know, in a new job, um, doing like a new cuisine. So it was really like a really, really steep learning curve. It was a great environment. But yeah, just the steepness of the learning curve, like it was French cooking, very old school, very classical, everything in pans, it's very hot. Like I remember having to memorize the dockets as they were coming in and talking about four different steaks, the cuissons. So, you know, you've got five times five different multiplications of things that you have to remember off the top of your head and you're doing, you know, a hundred covers. So there was a lot of like nervousness, a lot of like, I've burned myself really bad. Like not paying attention, you know, I'd spend Friday, Saturday night before it's busy service, I'd have to go to the bathroom, I'd be physically ill just due to that anxiety. So it was at that point, I sort of

realized that like the anxiety would lead to, to anger and it was sort of unlocking a side to me I didn't really like. And then I was also heavily leading into like the drinking side of the things. And it just, I just didn't, it was, it was ruining my career. I could see the see, the start of it. So I went to, um, went to a doctor to say, you know, like, this is the problem that I'm having. Like, you know, and then to to that, I was, you know, you need to exercise more, stop drinking coffee, like, don't drink any alcohol. Um, you know, if you're taking drugs, don't take drugs either. Like now I don't see them as that unrealistic, but to tell, you know, a 20 something year old who's working, you know, 9:00 AM till midnight most days of the week, um, that he needs to exercise more. When you're on your, on your feet for 15 hours a day. I know it's not an exercise, but it's certainly doesn't make it easy to go for a five km run after and like, you know, not to drink coffee. It's just like, well I could tell you where that opinion went straight, straight, straight out the back door. Or the other option was just to medicate myself and um, I wasn't, I wasn't willing to do that at all. So I did try and exercise a little bit, but I couldn't, couldn't give up black coffee or anything like that cause it just, you know, for, for me that was my only way of surviving a 15 hour day.

Mal: ([13:44](#))

Until about six years ago. I still didn't really have any sort of balance in my life. I was still trying to throw it, you know, the kitchen sink at cooking. It still hadn't dawned on me that I needed to, to have some sort of release outside of that. And I guess it all came to a head when I'd taken a job after finishing up like quite a good job, feeling a little bit lost and it turned out that it was just sort of all, you know, when someone tells you what you want to hear and I didn't really want to deliver on it. They just want, they just needed somebody that they thought they could fill the shoes that they needed and filling. So, you know, I was in a job that wasn't really that great for me. My relationship had been on and off for the better part of, you know, I think four or five years. So I had this perfect storm of, of all the wrong things, sort of not going right in my life. You know, the, the, the thing that I love the most and the thing that I thought was gonna I was just going to throw everything at, wasn't going well for me. You know, I started hating cooking and then my home life wasn't that great either. So, you know, it just led me to, you know, drinking more and, you know, resorting to drugs to sort of find this release. And then, you know, it all sort of came to a head and became too much one day and I just, you know, I had that, that I think it's, I sort of visualize it as this, this, you know, this small window where everything aligns and your brain tells you that it's the right thing to do.

Mal: ([15:20](#))

And I mean, that five minute period felt like hours and I just, yeah. I was just, yeah. Sitting there contemplating everything can, I was lucky that when I

picked up the phone that day,

Mal: ([15:36](#))

To call my best friend

Mal: ([15:39](#))

That he answered

Nathan: ([15:40](#))

Nathan speaking.

Mal: ([15:41](#))

Um,

Nathan: ([15:42](#))

G'day, how are you?

Mal: ([15:43](#))

And Yeah, I guess, uh, you know, had he not answered, I don't, I don't know where I would be right now.

Nathan: ([15:49](#))

It was about five o'clock in the morning. I generally don't even keep my phone on, so for some reason it was on, but, um, yeah, he called. No I really had no idea. Um, generally he kept his cards pretty close. So, I guess, which I assume most people do. Especially I guess males. we don't like talking about that sort of stuff. But no, not until um, everything I guess unfolded, was when I found out.

Mal: ([16:19](#))

I Dunno. I think I just just told him, you know, that I was, you know, lost for, for what, you know, was going on and that I didn't know what I was, what I was living for and I just wanted to end it.

Nathan: ([16:40](#))

I was sorta just basically trying to calm him down. He was pretty wound up as you can imagine. Um, and just everything sort of snowballed I guess. I was just talking about how. how we'd would miss him and how important it is to everyone. And all the good things he's done and it's not that bad. Like you got a pretty, pretty awesome life. Um, I didn't realise how, how tough his life had been, until he sorta opened up. Um, yeah, I think just being away from friends and family and he was doing stupid hours at work, like insane amounts of work

Mal: ([17:17](#))

to hear his, you know, him talking that to me, I guess that was enough. I can't imagine he knew what was on the other end of the line. Um, and it's, yeah, sort of. I think I just just asked if I was going crazy or not, I guess because I guess I just needed someone to tell me that I shouldn't do it.

Nathan: ([17:44](#))

I think that's probably what, what led to it all. But, the whole work/life balance. And then being away from everyone, living away from Brisbane, there wasn't a lot of people to talk to I guess. So we just kept um. Yeah, I just spoke to him as long as I could, and calmed him down and sort of, tell him its best to be here, I guess? Yeah, I didn't really know what to say at the time, but not a common phone call you get. So, yeah.

Lifeline: ([18:20](#))

No one should ever have to face their darkest moments alone. Lifeline is here to help. Please call 13 11 14 or visit lifetime.org.au

Mal: ([18:35](#))

my best friend called my dad and told him what had happened. I was on a plane later that day. I'm home just uh, you know, sort of be around my, um, my support group, you know, for a good chunk of time just to sort of get myself back on the earth I guess.

Mal: ([18:52](#))

So I went to a doctor this time, I accepted taking medication and it's different for everyone and it doesn't always work. But for me, that time in unison with seeing a psychologist, I found that that path works for me at that, at that stage. It was very liberating to be able to talk once, once every couple of weeks initially with someone who was completely free from my daily life. Yeah. Just to speak to somebody who didn't know me at all, who just listened. Did so much good for like my psyche to be able to, you know, talk about my feelings and not have to worry about what the person on the other end, um, was thinking. And just the fact that they were there for support.

Beverley: ([19:34](#))

Mal was advised he needed a hobby, a distraction from work. And to his surprise. He discovered another passion, ceramics. He now makes plates so beautiful. He serves his food on them.

Mal: ([19:46](#))

The whole ceramic sort of thing started a road where I would contemplate not drinking and not like medicating myself in that capacity because I wanted to be alert and I wanted to be creative. And I, I knew that if I did that then the next day I would probably spend most of the day in bed hung over. And that

led to me feeling more depressed because I'd wasted an opportunity to be creative. And that sort of was an unconscious sort of like decision. And now I realize that, well how beneficial it was just getting dirty and muddy and like covered in clay was just so therapeutic. And it took me away from cooking a little bit. It gave me that chance to, you know, throw something, through my eggs in another basket. And then whenever, you know, if I had a shitty day at work or whatever, you know, and I was able to go to pottery the next chance I got, then it sort of was the ability to let the foot off the gas and release some built up pressure.

Beverley: [\(20:44\)](#)

Mal decided to use his experience to help others like him, launching Food for Thought. A campaign to improve working conditions in the restaurant industry. He was supported by new girlfriend wine expert in Yoga teacher Kate Christensen.

Mal: [\(20:59\)](#)

That reaching out for help. I think started a chain reaction of me getting help, you know, on reflection, that since that point and then when I started to talk more about it, it just, it freed me more of that shackle, um, and gave me more strength to be able to tell my story more often. Um, and you know, there's probably not many people that don't know now, but certainly over like, the second and third years of food for thought, people were sort of wondering what the hell I was doing, um, and why I was throwing so much energy behind food for thought. And you know, what the reasoning was behind it.

Kate: [\(21:37\)](#)

So Malcolm and I met when we were working at Tonka. He was the new chef on the block. And of course it takes a little time for everyone to scope out the new kid on the block. I wanted to learn more about food from him. And he was into foraging and I really found that fascinating. I wanted to learn more about that. And then he showed signs of particularly Riesling, wanting to know more about wine. So I think it was even just before we started dating and those sort of flirting stages, trying to impress each other. He said, look, I'm doing a dinner. It's for mental health awareness and I'd really love you to come along. And I said, yeah, of course. Let's get a couple of work people together. We'd love to show you support. Um, and me being the wine snob that I am asked, so what wines will be on offer? And he showed me the offering. And at that stage, his focus was definitely more on the food. Outstanding food with the wine was lacking a bit in that department. And I said, oh, would it be okay if I brought my own wines? And I don't think he was offended by that at all. I think, um, it was perhaps the little nudge that he needed in that direction to realize, oh, there's more than just chefs in this. There's a whole industry and there's a whole contributing platform of what we can offer, um, for these dinners. So

we as a group, there was about five or six of us came to his, um, dinner, at the beer de lux venue and I was really impressed and I was, that was the first time, I think one of the first times that he actually shared to the event, to the audience his personal story. So I was able to, to hear that firsthand.

Mal: ([23:09](#))

Well, I guess, I guess, um, for me, I fell into cooking like a lot of people and one of the things that like, where I went wrong, I sort of did what most people, a lot of people do and I turned to alcohol. Um, and then that can lead to drug use. Um, it did with me and I'm not afraid to say that. And that was sort of my way of dealing with it. And then for, for years it was like really bad anxiety and all that sort of stuff. It sort of spiraled out of control until I hit a really bad point 6 years ago. And that's where when I did reach out to say goodbye, I realized how much support I really had. And I was really lucky that my friend answered the phone that that morning. Um, because yeah, I might not be here now.

Kate: ([23:55](#))

And so I felt like he felt comfortable as well to bear his vulnerabilities in his sides. So I think really early on I was quite aware that this was something that came with him and that was part of him. But I think that didn't change anything for me. In fact, it made me feel like he's endearing personality and what he was trying to do from those low low points in his life by helping other people through this dinner. And me being exposed to that very early on was, um, really quite remarkable

Mal: ([24:26](#))

Food for thought came, came about as a way of, a creating a conversation, b sort of highlighting the fact that there was an issue in our industry especially, but just generally that no one was speaking about this thing that was killing eight people a day. That was that affects millions and millions of people. Um, we wanted to do something where we could raise awareness, you know, to the hotlines to help lines. Um, and the fact that there's so many people that are going through the same thing, um, and that it is okay to speak about it. And especially in hospitality, it's the sort of, you know, get on with it attitude and you know, where if you, if you don't need to go to hospital, you just like, you push on and you put a, you tape your hand up, like I worked with a broken hand for three weeks before I went to the hospital. Like it's just that sort of thing. If you're not dying, like you just get on with it. So it was, it was really about articulating that it's okay to not be okay and that you're not the only one going through it.

Lifeline: ([25:24](#))

You can give hope. Donate to lifeline today at lifeline.org.au

Mal: [\(25:33\)](#)

The general thing for a food for thought event, is depending whether or not it's a canape party or a sit down dinner. Initially it was bringing together young industry professionals that were on the up. Um, and really focusing on what a group of, of individuals could bring together and fighting a cause that was bigger than any of us. But now we sort of realized that was pigeonholing it. And because there's such like, you know, mental health doesn't discriminate. It was silly for us to just try and do it on our own. And by harnessing the industry as a whole. Now food for thought aims to show support throughout the industry. You know, from the big head chefs, you know, the best restaurants in Sydney, you know, down to like, you know, a sous chef and, and below that, you know. All of them become affected by mental health.

Mal: [\(26:19\)](#)

Like they either know somebody or that they might be going through it themselves. So we thought it's about realistically showing, you know, a united front. So the kitchen hierarchy 10 odd years ago it was directly run by the head chef. You did what you were told and that was it. And if you didn't like it and you sort of were on your way. That sort of mentality has definitely changed. You know, you actively need to be looking after your staff to be able to keep them, you know, whether or not that's providing the right environment for them so they feel safe, inspired and educated. Or it can just be, you know, the work life balance. You know, it's so important for chefs to be able to have, or for anyone really to have that work life balance because you will get so much more out of your chefs or your staff by just, you know, providing them the opportunity to be able to disconnect from whatever it is that they need to do day to day. There'll be fresher and then more, more vitalized when they, when they come to work. I guess with my chefs, you know as well as encouraging them, you know, not to be in at work when they don't have to be, seeking hobbies, doing all that sort of thing. I guess another thing that I was lucky enough to learn from my partner, is the ability to take them out of a situation and sort of calm them down. And one of the ways that we do that is a circulatory breathing exercise.

Kate: [\(27:38\)](#)

Breathing exercises are thousands of years old. It's getting more oxygen to your cells, more life into your cells. I find all I have to do is consciously bring um, my awareness and my attention to my breath and it changes my tone completely. Whether I'm in a situation where I feel like it's getting beyond, it's getting beyond me or I can't control or even the one to try and control it by simply bringing my attention to that breadth is where the weight in the wisdom of that lies. There's many different breathing exercises that you can

learn through studies of yoga and that can be practically so beneficial. But just the simple, and I find the simplest one is putting your hands on your belly and just breathing in for four counts and slightly pausing at the top of the breath and then exhaling for four counts. And just that awareness that that brings to that space and that oxygen that that revitalizes into your body into your cells, can completely disburse any anxiety or can completely change the tone of the situation or the mind set that you're in.

Mal: ([28:42](#))

You know, if I notice that someone's having, you know, really anxious time or they're having, you know, compounding mistakes and it's just sitting down and just simply breathing with them, you know, and I'll do it with them and count them out. We do the circulatory exercise where we, you know, we'll start at four and then we'll breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, and then out for four seconds. And depending on where we're at, we'll take that anywhere from four to eight, even up to 12 sometimes. And then just sort of sit and just talk. And generally by the time that exercise has finished, I find that, that change in that person has sort of completely like recentered them and put them back in their body and they're not really thinking in that emotional state anymore. And then they're able to go back and sort of just work themselves back into their day.

Mal: ([29:30](#))

Uh, it has been a really powerful tool to help you know, someone who's, might be dealing with something at home, um, to somebody who's just having absolute stinker. I guess the biggest thing to consider if you're worried about somebody, you need to make sure that a, you, you know, you've got to ask the question, but then you've also, you know, you've got to listen to what that person has to say. Um, you have to figure out a way of approaching the situation where you're going to, you know, you've got to consider their comfortable comfortability and you've got to provide them with support. And I guess the hardest thing to do, and it's human nature, is just to immediately problem solve. You need to be there and listen and be present with that person. Because if they do say that they're not okay, you need to be able to listen and sort of repeat back to them. That way they have a feeling of, like that you're actually taking on board what they're saying. And then I guess the big, the most crucial step to that is that you have to encourage them to get help. Now whether or not that's what my friend did, and uh, reaching out to family members, you know, advising them to go see, see the doctor or getting them to speak to a counselor, whatever it is, you need to sort of make sure that person gets that support. And then obviously I was, it's not that obvious. You need to make sure that you follow up with that person later on down the track because there's no point asking the question, getting them help and everything and then not checking back in with them.

Nathan: ([30:55](#))

Oh well he's completely open about everything now, which is awesome. That's obviously, that's helped with everything. Um, yeah, friendships I guess is strong as ever. Everytime we catch up, as you have the best mates, sort of just connect straight away again. Like it was, yesterday we saw him. Strong as ever I guess.

Kate: ([31:14](#))

His friend picked up that day for a reason, and now that was the knock on effect of the good work that he's doing now. So I had that opportunity not being able to come into fruition. It would have been, I would've, yeah, it would have been very sad.

Mal: ([31:26](#))

Um, the four important things to consider are to ask the question, listen without trying to fix them and encourage them to get help and then check in and make sure that they're okay.

Beverley: ([31:40](#))

Thank you for listening to holding onto hope. Lifeline Australia is grateful to all our interviewees. Who share their stories in the hope of inspiring others. We also acknowledge all of you who provide support to people in crisis and those on their journey to recovery. If you found this podcast helpful or inspiring, please share it, rate it, write a review, or subscribe wherever you download your favorite podcasts. If this story has affected you and you require crisis support, please contact lifeline on 13 11 14 you can do this at anytime or visit lifeline.org.au to access web chat every night from 7:00 PM to midnight. If it's inspired you to be a lifeline volunteer or to donate, please visit lifeline.org.au. With thanks to Wahoo! Creative for interviews, editing and production, and the voice of lived experience, which is essential in the development of our work.