

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 phone lifeline at any time on 13 11 14.

Pete: (00:20)

I had a plan to be probably one of the greatest endurance athletes that we could see. I never probably would have been or close to have been. But to have that goal of trying to succeed at things that other people would never succeed at.

Beverley: (00:36)

Welcome to lifelines, holding onto hope. A podcast series in which people who've reached a dark place in their lives, share their stories. Anyone who's been an athlete, knows how lost you can feel if you have to quit. You lose your fitness, goals, sense of achievement and even your sense of self. Here, Pete Wilson shares the lows he faced when he was forced to give up endurance running. And the highs of having mates. John Foster and Jess Wood who kept him on the right track.

Pete: (01:06)

I grew up, um, I suppose in a little, not a little town, Coogee was always a big, big center of I suppose the beaches in the Eastern suburbs. I was born and raised basically in Coogee. Grew up quite a fit family. My mom was a high level tennis player. Dad was highly successful, rugby league player, very work focused and training focused. I had a younger brother. We were both very, I suppose immersed in sport in general from everything from nippers at a very young age to rugby league, swimming, board riding, surfing, running, I suppose you name it, we sort of had a crack at everything. I looked around and I seen this little event out at Kurnell called the the Kurnell Sprint series and I jumped into it and I bought a, bought a bike that didn't cost me that much money. I bought a pair of running shoes and I could always swim. So swimming and running was never an issue to me. Over there you swam 500 meters, you rode 20 k's and you ran five ks. And after the first one I was, everyone was talking about iron man Foster and Hawaii iron man. And to me that was the pinnacle of everything I needed to do. This short sprint triathlon stuff just didn't seem to me. There was obviously something bigger.

Pete: (02:28)

I come home and I still remember coming home after only my second triathlon and I said to mum, Oh, I think I've, I'm ready for the next triathlon. She said, what are you talking about? And I said, well, these sprint one's just, they just don't cut it with me. And she said, well what are you going to do?

And I said, I think I'm going to do an iron man. And she said, what's what the hell's an iron man? I said you swim 3.8 ks, you're ride 180 then you run a marathon. And she said, no one does that. And I said, yeah mum, they do. And she said, well, you're bonkers and your dad will think your crazy.

Pete: ([03:00](#))

So I trained my butt off for about 18 months and I remember turning up at Foster was probably the first time in years and years and years that I'd actually, I suppose shed a tear for anything. And it was, believe it or not, it was to start iron man triathlon, which is you know what I mean, if I said that to anyone these days, I cried starting a triathlon, they'd probably laugh their head off at me. I ended up doing about seven and then the last one was sort of, it was probably my worst ever performance and it really, it was up at Port Macquarie and it really broke me, like I was so despondent with, I really thought I had it dialed in at that, at that race. Um, and I got off the bike and I was just over it. And I think to that day, I'd never even got on that bike again. I sold it within about a month and look for something else to do.

Pete: ([03:53](#))

And, all of a sudden an email come through from a mate of mine. He said, oh, have you ever seen this? And it was uh, the Runners World and I still remember the article and it had the top 10 toughest foot races in the world. And had them listed and there was a race called Badwater. There was a Sahara 250 k race. There was the Gobi race, 250 k's. There was Atacama 250 ks. Uh, there was Leadville trial, hundred mile race, any way they were all listed. And I looked at it and I emailed my mate back and I said, this is, this is us. I said, let's, let's get ourselves to China. I said, I don't think any Australians ever been there. There might be one. I mean there was actually one at the time and I said, let's just get there for next year's race.

Pete: ([04:38](#))

We signed up, we had no idea what we were doing. Absolutely none. We turned up our backpacks look like they were going on a day trek they were that heavy. It, it was really like we were going camping. And we turned up and I remember the finishing the first stage and we finished like 10 overall out of 200 and we were like, all right, we've got to get some of these crap out of our bag and try to get involved in this race properly. So that was sort of the start of what became, I suppose a longterm term endurance racing not career. I never call it a career because I didn't make any money out of it. I did it for the sake of looking back now. Like I did it for the sake of my mental health and stability to sort of be away from everything. But yeah, it was, it was a start of an incredible journey that lasted a long time.

John: ([05:26](#))

He's always been fit, throughout school I mean he started running and, uh, he came to me one day and he'd be doing the running and he told me about, I think it was the, I'm not sure which one it was, but the first big run did. We started, uh, well, Pete started, I should say, Comedy for Kids and, uh, got me involved with it. And a, for one night we'd put on a special dinner and, uh, we'd have three comedians come that Pete would organize and we'd raise money for the door entry, the food, uh, that raffles the, uh, the silent auctions. And, that would get Pete over to wherever he had to go, the Gobi desert or wherever. And then the corporate sponsors would come on board for that. So we did that for about three or four years. Uh, and we raised, uh, Pete would have to confirm, but I'm sure it was about over \$300,000.

Pete: ([06:14](#))

I like being in, being in suffering. I enjoy that aspect of it, like a lot, a lot of people say, oh, why would you do that? Why would you, it hurts. It does this, it does that. But it's funny, I like sitting in your sitting myself in a situation that is really uncomfortable. It gets, I suppose me excited and it gets me ready for the next challenge. It, it allows me to be, I think who I am.

Pete: ([06:40](#))

I suppose the hardest thing I ever did was, there's a race across the Atacama desert in Chile. The place is a dry salt pan, flat as far as the eye can see. There's no vegetation. You basically start at, it's about 3000 meters above sea level, so you're already deprived of oxygen. Um, it was really, I still remember it, the temperatures were out of control the first night after the first day of racing, we got stuck in a windstorm that blew most of the tents over. You sleep outside because it was so hot in those tents with 9 other guys. And to this day, I still vividly remember the third day of that race and it was about 45 ks in the last 10 k's was up and down sand dunes. In the last couple of ks were straight into a salt flat up to your knees in bloody everything, and I remember finishing that day and literally walking across the finish line with two other mates and throwing my backpack on the ground and bawling my eyes out for 20 minutes and saying that's it, This is just, this is crazy what we're trying to achieve in this desert.

Pete: ([07:48](#))

The funny thing is I woke up the next morning, so charged and ready to go, that I probably had the next two days of a marathon on day four followed by a hundred k's on day five, the best two days of racing my entire life. I suppose if it's there and everyone says you can't do it, certain people want to do it. I like that, what's the word? Equation of being somewhere that's uncomfortable, somewhere that's away from phones and technology and TV and it was never about glory. It was always about, or just trying to adjust to what we're supposed to live in, but not being able to adjust to that.

Pete: [\(08:28\)](#)

Alaska is a funny one. Like it was, It was a race that no, there was only very limited spots. I was approached by the race organizer, basically got an email out of the blue and he said, do you want to come up be an Australian, have a go at this rock and ice Ultra 300 k's across Yellowknife national park. Yellowknife is obviously is famous for that TV show, Ice Road Truckers. The second day of that race, the temperatures got down to about minus 50, minus 55, which is not much fun out there at minus 55 you're dragging a sled, all your foods in there, your sleeping bag, anything else you need. Anyway, I got stuck in a, basically a white out with an Italian guy. Um, we had no choice but to bunker down I suppose for the next few hours and hope it passes. We were basically off course to the extent that we thought we were on the course. There was so much happening that we were so far off and it was only, it was so very fortunate that a guy, one of the organizers come past on a skidoo noticed us, picked us both up. Well, I had frostbite knows frostbite hands, frostbite feet, and upon more tests I realized that my heart had completely gone out of rhythm and to this day they don't know if it was the frostbite that had caused it, or ultra endurance racing that I'd done for years and if that had caused atrial problems.

Pete: [\(09:53\)](#)

Anyway, 24 hours later, I was back on a plane, landed in Sydney and within 24 hours I was in admitted to hospital to have the shock put back in the heart to regulate the heart beat again. Looking from that day, I was told, take it easy for a couple of weeks. Your heart will adjust, it'll go back to normal. Here's me thinking, that's fine, yeah I mean it's happened, It's out of the blue. Being so fit, it'll never happen again. Um, I was training about six months later it had gone out of rhythm again. I didn't do the operation. I got it basically put back in rhythm. And about 8 weeks later it went out of rhythm again. I was basically just training in centennial park running. This time I needed to explore options to fix this cause I didn't want a life of waiting for it to go out, and having to get it reset.

Pete: [\(10:44\)](#)

So I was placed under an incredible guy, professor Mark McGwire. And he performed what they call an ablation or cryoablation surgery where they basically freeze some scar tissue into the conductivity valve of your heart. Like Mark explained it to me, I wasn't the first athlete to have this problem, he'd dealt with rowers and cyclists and runners and every other sport that involved, I suppose, long heart rate periods. He said, look, I wouldn't do anything crazy in the meantime. It's pretty harrowing for someone who knows how to put their body through torture and enjoy that torture. So to have it taken away was pretty, it was pretty damning at the time. It really

shook me to my knees that I had to adjust to a life that didn't involve pushing myself to the limits. Between that time I had the operation, a lot of things happened in my life at that time. I got married, mum had dementia at the time and iot had just started to kick in.

Pete: ([11:46](#))

I got a phone call from one of the neighbors next to where mum and dad live. And they said, oh, have you rang home today? I said, no, no, I haven't rang home. They said, ah, we've been trying to find your dad and we haven't seen him. And it turned out that he was basically having a stroke all day at that time. So yeah, the outcome for dad wasn't good. We spent that Christmas, um, at the hospital. Dad eventually passed away from the stroke and some other complications. And eventually about eight months later, like you said, got a phone call that mum had passed away that night in the nursing home. Like losing both parents like that. There was, there was a lot of things that happened that really threw me down a bad path.

Beverley: ([12:30](#))

Pete's life descended into a roller coaster of intense emotions. He was grieving, he couldn't run and he was struggling with his marriage and his mortgage. To add to the stress, He started a new job. However it was here he also found the comfort of a kind friend Jess. Initially from a rural town, she'd seen others take their own life. Perhaps that's why she didn't ignore the warning signs.

Pete: ([12:56](#))

We had a great working relationship. We obviously two different complete roles, but we were really getting on with what we were doing. I think at the time, that team that we had at Bernardo's made a difference. Like it was a great team. We were all very close, but she became a great, I suppose shoulder for me.

Jess: ([13:15](#))

Obviously we spent, you know, 35 hours a week together in a workplace. Um, we were all of the assumption that everything was fine. It was happy. Um, he, you know, he loved his wife and everything was fine at home.

Pete: ([13:29](#))

It was a lot of changes happening in my life that I, I don't know if I wanted to be involved in or I need it out from because they weren't in my control or that life that I had was no longer available. I remember sitting there and I was in such a state at work. I'd written notes before and knew that this was sort of going to be it. I'd played it out in my mind how it was going to happen. I'd structured the whole day. I was going to go home, have an argument, cause an

argument, fight over something that was there to be fought over, leave the house, drive to right near the lighthouse. Um, I doubt this would have been a good ending. That was the plan for the whole day. Anyway, a lot of the, um, the friends at work had seen the state I was in, I think

Jess: ([14:28](#))

he, he didn't want to be at home, so going to work was probably the safe space. And during that day, and it was a Friday, um, he made a couple of comments to some of his, you know, team and immediate team. And one of them had said something to me as well and I took him next door to the cafe for a coffee and I think it was probably, you know, mid afternoon. He just, he just looked like a different person. His face was drawn, he lacked color, he just, he just didn't seem okay. And he was talking about some, you know, fairly dark type of thoughts that he was having. And for whatever reason I asked him to just hand me his phone. Um, and I just opened the text message that was to me and I flipped on the location tracker. Um, I don't know why, I don't know what made me, made me think to do it, but I just had this gut feeling that something was off.

Pete: ([15:35](#))

I can only speak from my experience, but that day it was a blur, not a blur in such that I didn't know what I was doing, but a blur that I knew exactly the line I was going to take into this. I went home, caused a fight, jumped in my car, I was driving and got to Bondi and basically sent a text to Jess and said, sorry, but this is the way it has to be. That was all I said, not expecting a response. Got up, parked right near the lighthouse, not knowing if anyone be around or what was going to happen.

Jess: ([16:14](#))

And I often gave her another one of our friends a lift home, cause she lived in on the direction home. And it was towards the end of that time when, um, she was finally getting out of the car, that I got a text message from him and I kind of briefly looked at it and read it. Um, and at first glance I thought it was in reference to not being able to leave the house. I thought potentially that there'd been some sort of argument or, or something to that effect, and he, he'd remained at home. And then as I was driving off, I kind of looked at it again or I responded and I didn't get a reply. I think I said something like, oh, that's okay, don't, don't stress about it. And when I didn't get a response, I kind of reread it in a different context. And I thought to myself, that's a cry for help. That actually wasn't about not being able to leave the house. It was more about not having the fight left.

Jess: ([17:16](#))

So, having not been from Sydney, I wasn't exactly sure around some hotspots

in um, in relation to suicide. So I quickly called the person who I just dropped off whilst continuing to drive in the opposite direction. And I asked her where, where this place was and, and was this location I was seeing him at was, was that the place? And I said I have a really bad feeling. I tried to call as well as she tried to call his phone and got no answer. I could see that location wasn't changing. Despite the fact that you know, both of us had worked for a welfare organization. We really weren't sure what, what to do in that situation. When you know, when you are worried that someone's life is at risk, like what do you do?

Lifeline: ([18:12](#))

Lifeline crisis supporters can also provide advice to people who are caring for someone in emotional distress. If you are with someone who is not okay, please call lifeline on 13 11 14. If life is in danger, please call triple 0.

Pete: ([18:31](#))

put the keys in the car, put the phone in the car, turned it off and walked over to the fence and basically sat at the fence and walked back and forth for a good half an hour to an hour. And eventually I was sitting on the bench, still contemplating what was happening. The next step I'd already been back and forth, back and forth, not knowing, I don't know what was possessing me to see what was next.

Jess: ([19:05](#))

So, I kept driving. I'm not sure how many potential red lights I ran at the time. Um, and when I arrived there, I spotted his car and my heart was going through my body. The adrenaline was pumping and I jumped out of the car and I switched the light on my phone and I headed along, along a path of trying to find him. And it wasn't, you know, it was no more than 50 meters in. And I spotted him sitting on a bench. He, if I was to describe what it was like, he was in a catatonic state. He, he was rubbing, running his finger around the label on his cap over and over. And he just burst into tears when I arrived there.

Pete: ([19:59](#))

Yeah, I remember it still, Jess walking around the corner with a torch and she was there and she was the only one that knew I was there except for obviously one of the other girls at work that Jess was with at the time before they come up to save me But, I think about had it to dragged on any longer. I doubt this would have been a good ending. In fact, I know 99%, it wouldn't have been a good, a good ending because I was so jack of waiting, I was over it, I think it was becoming a test to see if anyone would actually turn up. And they did. Yeah. Thank God they did.

Jess: ([20:48](#))

Um, I just threw my arms around him and, and I don't even know if I said anything to be honest. Um, and then we talked about where I could take him, um, that he was going to be safe and, and I said, I want to take you to Johnny's house, um, because I know that you, you will be safe there.

John: ([21:11](#))

It was actually a call from Jess, uh, that alerted me, mainly to the how severe the issue was with Peter and what he was going through. Um, and that's when he was attempting to, to you know, end his life.

Pete: ([21:26](#))

And we sat, I still remember we sat there for, I don't know, I'd still, it's a blur how long we sat there for. But next thing I know the, um, there was two young constables turn up from Rose Bay police station.

Pete: ([21:46](#))

Looking back, you sort of think, you know what I mean, what, how bad would it be for these people to turn up and, it could have been their first job. Like and how would that be for someone else? Like what would that do to their, their life?

Jess: ([22:03](#))

The police at this point, um, arrived and, um, then they, uh, took Pete to, to the hospital, um, to do, um, obviously an assessment or something to that effect. And, he was released later, that night.

Pete: ([22:22](#))

I don't think my mates knew at the time. I don't think anyone knew at the time what I was battling with.

John: ([22:30](#))

You know, all the red flags come up and basically it was like, well, okay, we need to come together for Pete. And uh, as a lifelong friend and a brother, it was like he should come and stay with my place because he wasn't having, he was having difficulties at home. Um, so it wasn't easy for him. But yeah. So we, we spoke and Peter agreed to come and stay at my place and stayed here for about six months.

Pete: ([22:51](#))

I suppose if anyone could paint a picture of their best mate. Yeah. I suppose if you could draw a best mate, Johnny would be the one you'd draw. We sat here, we, you know what I mean, we did so many different things. We Watch football. I remember one night we, Johnny said, what do you want to do, and

the Roosters were playing the Rabbits and he's a mad rooster. And we got out of \$400 bottle of red wine, filled it up in plastic cups and ate it with 20 dollar pizzas. And I think that sums up, um, you know, I mean what we were, and we're still brothers. We didn't have to do much. I suppose we, we just laughed like it was always will be. Um, it's just, yeah, he did so much me.

John: ([23:46](#))

Um, it was sorta difficult, like we mentioned before to, you didn't know what to say at the start and you wasn't sure what was going to start him off, but it, just being there for Peter allowing him to know that there was a space that was here. He could come and be quiet. He could go to his room, you know, if you want to talk, he could talk and yeah Peter opened up in his own time and uh, we just grew from there and he was able to, yeah, to fix himself actually. Yeah. With the help of others. And some, you know, and some uh, professional help. But uh, yeah, he, he did most of it himself.

Pete: ([24:22](#))

I now sit with a psychiatrist I have a lot of faith in. To me the relationship I have with Gordon is, um, I think he'd miss me to be quite honest. I think, um, it's like a dad, I suppose. I can literally ring up and somehow get an appointment the next day in someone who is as high profile as Professor Parker is unheard off, but he goes out of his way to see me. Um, yeah, I think without him, without, I still remember it vividly when Gordon said to me that he said, I should go down to the retreat and obviously money is an issue at that time. And um, Gordon and my heart surgeon paid for it. I got a call, I got a call off my heart surgeon the next afternoon, He said, Oh, we've paid your bill, you can go next week. And I sat and bawled for hours.

John: ([25:26](#))

His partner, now Jess, she's amazing and she could see the subtle differences that maybe started to occur.

Jess: ([25:33](#))

I don't antagonize the situation. I know that when he's in that kind of, you know, uh, low that it's easier to just be there and support, don't take anything personally that's potentially flying around. And then come back 10 minutes later and be like, do we think maybe, um, that was a bit of an overreaction. Um, so I think the relationship was born out of friendship and awareness.

Pete: ([26:02](#))

I think people who are highly talented, need to know that it's, that helps out there. I think we're all, the one thing that we do all have in common is that we are looked upon as, first of all athletes, not first of all, human beings. And I think that's a bad stigma to put on someone. Like at the end of the day, we're

all human being that obviously a CEO can do a CEO's job, a nurse can do a nurse's job, but an athlete to me does a different job. Unless you're a full time professional athlete, you still have to pay the bills. And I don't think to me, we look at certain levels of athleticism properly. We need, myself I needed an outlet to do what my brain wanted me to do mentally. And I don't think we're able to pull ourselves back and accept help. It's, you're so tough, interior wise, that spitting something out is a hard job to do. And I think we need to educate and more and more athletes who get to the point where, you don't know what to do with your life. Like we all can't run forever. We can't swim at the Olympics forever. We can't ride our bikes in the Tour de France forever. There's so much, that stops that moment you say you are retiring or your injured, that you'd need the training and the purpose to be able to say, I need to be able to ask for help. And wherever that comes from a friend who asks that to that athlete or comes from the athlete itself, but I think 90% of athletes will not, or, don't want to show how fragile someone can be.

John: ([27:50](#))

Oh, we all would have been affected. I would have been such a great loss. Um, from growing up with Pete. I mean, Pete's got friends that are in different groups, it's so diverse, He's got surfer friends, uh, loud music or rock music or whatever he likes, that, that hardcore music, you know. Me and the Coogee boys. There's just so many diverse friends that everyone would have been affected because he's always been there for everybody else. It's like we do here, we look out for our friends first and ourselves.

Jess: ([28:18](#))

I love his generosity. He's the kind of person that will go and buy lunch for a homeless person on the street or will go and buy groceries for somebody's mum or you know, stop someone in the street and ask them how they're doing or checks on his mates. Um, and, and to me that, that just shows the, the size of his heart. Um, and the fact that I get a part of that, um, I think is, is, is special.

Pete: ([28:58](#))

I think a lot of people struggle with the fact that unless an illness is visible then they don't know it's there. And I think that's a real concern for society these days. Is that we have a lot of days where, don't let me, I don't want to put this the wrong way, but you know what I mean. There's RUOK day, which does an incredible job, but why is RUOK day not every day of the year.

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

It really is hope and connection that can make a difference to someone. It's that human intervention at that pointy end of crisis that can pull someone back from thoughts of taking their own life and and send them on a different path.

Pete: ([29:40](#))

I've always had love of the ocean, but I never realized how therapeutic it is, till now. I now if there's no surf, I will dive in with my flippers and hand plank, even if it's underwater for 20 minutes. The last few months got back into running with a couple of plans to I suppose, complete the story. Yeah, I mean, my kids are incredible. Yeah. I love what I do now.

Beverley: ([30:11](#))

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.