Dannii:

... from not wanting to be here to actually living a life that I now love. No matter what sort of trauma, no matter what sort of past, if you're willing to do the work and you're willing to reach out and put trust in somebody like Open Arms, your whole life can change. I think, again, what Open Arms provided to me is they gave me a holistic approach to my mental health and well-being. And they looked at all aspects of my life and they looked at the strengths. What we want to do is use those strengths, identify those strengths, and use them in recovery instead of using those strengths to fuel our disorders or our struggles.

Host:

Welcome to Open Conversations, an audio series where veterans and family members of the Australian Defence Force share their stories about accessing mental health support. The following audio piece contains discussions of CPTSD, eating disorders, and suicide, and may distress listeners. For resources or support, head to openarms.gov.au or call on or call on 1800 011 046.

Dannii:

My name is Dannii, and I am a daughter of a Vietnam veteran. As a child, I think it was really, really difficult for me and my brother. It was difficult in that we were always in this hyper vigilant state. My poor father had chronic PTSD from Vietnam, so he had a lot of mental health issues with his PTSD and he self-medicated for a long time. We didn't know when we came home from school what we would find walking in the door. What state would Dad be in? It was really scary. Would he be so drunk that he couldn't speak or talk, move? He was never violent, but he did self-medicate with alcohol, and to quite a significant extent and that was really scary.

Also, the continued flashbacks that would happen, it was also really terrifying to see that sort of shift. I would notice in his eyes and sometimes he would see us as the enemy instead of his own children, or he'd be reliving those traumatic events of Vietnam, whether it would be a news helicopter or the police helicopter overhead, or a car backfiring. So, it was a very confusing and scary time for us. And I think for my brother and I, we both came out of that as adults as well with our own mental health issues.

Initially, my dad did get support. And it was when I was maybe about, oh, I think I was 10 or 11, the Vietnam Veterans Counseling Service, which is now Open Arms, he managed to get some support through them. And he had been with them then for the rest of his life. My father did lose his life to PTSD when he was 58, and so that was obviously very sad and traumatic for everyone. He did get a lot of comfort and support from them through decades of support. But for myself, so as a child, I remember going to a couple of family sessions to understand the veteran experience. But it wasn't until I was an adult... So, I accessed Open Arms because of the... well, partly because of the trauma that I had as a child. And as a child, I was seeking some sense of control when my whole life seemed out of control because my family life... Dad, I just never knew what was happening. I was always hyper vigilant. I was always scared.

And so, I again, developed a severe and enduring eating disorder. I was in the Alfred Hospital in intensive care after my third suicide attempt. I'd been in intensive care three times over the period of two years when I was around 30. And it was that third and final attempt that I had the opportunity through Alfred Health and their psychiatric services to access Open Arms. There wasn't a lot of other support options. I had used all my money, funds from my work and various things, to try and recover through the private sector, and it just wasn't working. So, Alfred Health asked me the question, which I think is really important for professionals to know, to ask the question, "Are you a child of a veteran?" Because that's when Open Arms can be a referral pathway. We know the public sector mental health, it's really difficult to get support.

At that point in time, I didn't know that I was able to access this support. So, Alfred Health directed me and referred me onto Open Arms. And I tell you, I thank Open Arms for changing my life. I had been receiving psychiatric support for my eating disorder, depression, and anxiety and trauma for many years. And it wasn't until I accessed Open Arms and I spoke to a great psychologist... His name is Matt. Matt, if you're out there and you're listening to this, you changed my life. He allowed me the space to grieve for all those lost years and through my childhood years, those years lost with Dad and everything that happened. And he also gave me hope, and I think that is the biggest, biggest positive thing that any clinician can do, is to give somebody hope that you can recover, that you can overcome this. And he gave me the space.

So, that's a really difficult thing for a clinician to do. He held that trauma space for me and allowed me to tell my story, and he was really curious about me, not about my disorder, not about the past. We worked through those things, but he wanted to know me. And I think it was really that significant professional relationship that I could trust and I knew and I could place my fears with him, work through them, understand why Dad was the way that he was and why these things are happening to me now. I knew that deep down, that authentically he was there for me.

We spoke about quality of life. He said to me, "Dannii, you will get through this. We will work through this. You'll get a job. You will have your own place again," because I'd lost my apartment. He said, "You'll have friends again. You'll be able to live a good life." And I'd never heard these words from a clinician in a decade. So, it was that positivity and an acknowledgement of the difficulties that I had had since I was a small child that was really comforting to me and soothing to go, "Oh my gosh, somebody's listening. Somebody really gets me." And it was about finding, rediscovering that sense of identity that can be lost to veterans, to veterans' families, to children of vets. Through all this trauma you lose your sense of self sometimes because you are so wrapped up in the trauma and all these negative experiences that you actually lose that sense of self, and that stuck with me.

We developed that, and as we developed that, my traumas, my behaviors, my emotions, even my eating disorder lessened and lessened and lessened. It gave those things less strength as my healthy sense of self was rebuilt. And I thank Open Arms and Matt every day for that. And also, now that I am fully... I call myself fully recovered. I work as a mental health practitioner now in Victoria, and I account a lot of that to Matt. I thought, "If Matt can do that for me, I want to be able to do that at least for somebody else." So, previously I'd worked in business and I went over to work in mental health, retrained worked in mental health, and now I do that for people. And I'm so passionate about it because it can change your life. You can affect somebody else's life and make their life better, and so that's what I do.

In 2020, Victoria went down into hard lockdowns. It was very difficult time for a period of about two or three months because I was having some struggles around... Working in mental health, it was a real really stressful time for the mental health sector. So, I myself needed some support and I thank Open Arms again. I was having some really depressive episodes, and so I was really thankful that I could access Open Arms again. And again, give trust to another person, that clinician that I don't really know, but I just have so much trust in Open Arms, that they can hold the space for me and keep me well to get through this short period that I was having my depressive episode.

A lot of the mental health system is really difficult to navigate. Open Arms has always been, for me, quite excellent in that you can get almost immediate support. So, you would call the intake line, they would do an intake assessment nearly right away. And I find that that is so helpful to anyone that might be needing that immediate support. And so, I think one of the barriers that Open Arms managed to break down through the whole mental health sector is having that easy access to support that is rather immediate.

You don't need to go to a GP and get a referral. You don't need to do anything. All you need to do is call the number, and it's so worth it. So, I still live with CPTSD and anxiety, but I have tools, I have strategies, I have positive, healthy ways to cope. Whatever hobbies you enjoy... For me, it's baking. I find baking to be really sensory, and it is a simple thing like following a set of rules, a recipe. I find whenever I'm feeling stressed, even unconsciously, I'll gravitate to the kitchen and I'll find myself baking a cake because that's what I know is very self-soothing for me. It's the smells, it's the feel, it's the process. So, looking at sensory activities is really good.

Grounding exercises are amazing. Grounding is even if you've got a very cold glass of water and you take a sip, that'll help to ground you. You really put your feet on the ground and feel your body. There's a lot of grounding breathing exercises you can do. So, they work for me when I'm feeling particularly stressed. But when those don't work, it's okay to ask for a bit more additional support. Mindfulness helps us slow down. And particularly with trauma, we hold a lot of stress within the body, and so mindfulness and the breathing helps to release some of that stress from the body, which is really important.

So, I was over-exercising as a way to self-soothe and to compensate and to self-medicate. We actually had to work on pulling exercise back in a bit, but also to do it mindfully, not as a punishment. Getting out and moving our bodies to get that stress out of the body is really important. I know when I run, I feel a freeing of my mind more than anything, so I do it for that. I call it sometimes getting the cobwebs out because when you run, you listen to your breathing and you've got your feet pacing on the ground, and there's this rhythm to it. And it's a way for me to release built up stress that is in my body.

When you reach out, these people are really going to be there for you. They really, really want to help you. If it's your carer, if it's your family member, if it's your friend, they can make that call for you and start that process. I had three very serious suicide attempts where they were not calls for help. I was out. I ended up in intensive care on life support three times. And thankfully, after that, I accessed Open Arms and my whole life changed. And I lead a great life now. I've got friends. I'm back to playing my tennis. I was a tennis player. I have a great job. I love working in mental health and helping to support other people.

So, I think when we're talking about mental health and we are talking about a recovery journey, it is not a linear journey. We need to and we have to accept that there's going to be ups and downs. And through the tough times is where that therapist and clinician is going to be so helpful in, like I said before, holding space for you when you can't yourself, holding hope for you when you have no hope yourself. Being able to have a trusted third party to talk to to actually express all those inner thoughts, those inner demons, to get them out, to work through them.

Again, really comforting to know that if I'm ever in a space where I feel like I might be really struggling again, that I can reach out to them. I'd received so much negative commentary on my health, my mental health from clinical sectors, but to actually receive that positive reinforcement that, "Oh, you've had suicide attempts, you've had this, but you're so strong, you're so resilient because you're still here. So, we can work with that." And it was so nice to know that I wasn't alone in this anymore, that I had somebody and I had somebody that really I trusted and that really was there to authentically support me and work with me to recover. But if we build up our healthy sense of self and we build up our strength using strength-based models of psychology, we can develop ourselves and move on. And it takes professional support, though. We need to do that in conjunction with somebody. Being vulnerable sometimes is a strength, and being vulnerable means being able to ask and put your hand up and say, "Oh, I need a bit of support."

Host:

Thanks To Dannii for sharing her story for us. If this episode raises questions for you or if you would like to speak to someone about how it impacts you, you can contact Open Arms in Australia on 1800 011 046. Details about Open Arms and support services are available in the show notes and on the website.