Host:

Welcome to Open Conversations, an audio series where veterans and family members of the Australian Defense Force share their stories about accessing mental health support. For resources or support, head to openarms.gov.au or call on 1-800-011-046.

Kristy:

Sometimes we feel like we're carrying the weight of the world or there's knockdown after knockdown. You can really feel stuck in a place of, why does this keep happening? Why are so many things happening to me? Why can't it just happen to someone else? So being able to connect and plug in when you might be feeling like that provides you the opportunity to share the weight of the world with somebody else.

My name is Kristy. I joined the Royal Australian Navy in 2008, straight out of high school. As a medical sailor, I'm also the spouse of a veteran, so I'm living, still living, breathing, being a family member of a veteran and also having served to myself, the experience with defense is quite deep within our family. My grandfather is a Vietnam veteran. There's a long history of serving members throughout the family as well.

In high school, I wasn't quite sure what path I wanted to take. I knew that I wanted to travel the world and was seeking adventure. I was very, very interested in a nursing career, so for me, when defence recruiters came to the school and gave their spill, I was pre-sold. I thought it was a great opportunity to travel the world, have some world-class experiences and skills and training. As soon as I was old enough, I started the application process, so when year 12 rolled around, I had already been accepted into the military.

I had a really positive experience when I was in service. I still speak to a lot of people today, some of my closest and dearest friends served with. For me, joining the military was something that I wanted to do for a really long time, and I had big career dreams that I never got to fulfill. I transitioned out in December of 2009. I served for just under two years before a medical separation due to a pretty serious back injury. I was single. I'd moved back into my parents' house and was trying to figure out what I wanted to do next. I'd been so fixated on this career path of joining the ADF and having a career in the medical field that when I injured my back as badly as I did and suffering chronic complications as a result of that, leaving at such a young age and only after such a short period was a big shock, and there was a grieving process as well attached to that, and it took a really, really long time to find a new path after that.

I had to change my entire career path, which I really struggled with, so I muddled through some poor choices. I thought university would be a great option, studying by distance. At the time, I didn't have guidance and support. I hadn't had great experiences with looking at career opportunities because I had injured my back so young and having been so focused on having a career in the ADF and also in medicine and nursing, I really struggled to find what else I could do.

Once I started actively participating in the DVA rehabilitation program, I had a fantastic case coordinator from about 2016 that really supported me to find my strengths and refocus on my skillset.

I fell in love with community services. At the time, finances were really tight with having a really young family. When my rehab coordinator had discussed the option of accessing Open Arms as a free counseling service, I absolutely jumped on that opportunity, figuring that I had nothing else to lose. My experience with Open Arms first began in 2016, 2017. After the birth of my third child, I was participating in a DVA rehabilitation program, and my case coordinator at the time had noticed some changes in me post having my third baby. I'm sure that I'd heard about Open Arms or VVCS prior to when I had engaged with Open Arms through a conversation.

Probably at that time, I wasn't ready to hear the information about Open Arms, so it may have fallen on deaf ears, and it wasn't until I'd reread the email that I'd received from my rehabilitation coordinator. She'd said that I could reach out to Open Arms and access the support that I probably really started to pay attention to what Open Arms could offer me and my family and the support that was available. When I did feel really alone and she had discussed that Open Arms had just increased their eligibility for people to access support that had medically separated from the ADF, which meant that I could access Open Arms support for the first time.

I jumped onto it straight away. I noticed that after having my third baby, my mental health had sort of nosedived. It was challenging to make that first step, but once I'd made that connection to Open Arms, I really felt supported. I had really positive engagements and found strength within myself I didn't know that I had. I was able to process a lot of that grief and trauma from my military career that I had never processed, and then also after having babies in sort of muddling through that postnatal depression, it was life-changing for me.

There was a lot of unprocessed grief and trauma from my military experience that had sort of compounded and also postnatal depression was the cherry on top for me. I still remember making the first call actually after she'd recommended the service and having the first discussion with the intake worker and what my options were. We were living rural. My options were to see an outreach provider, and I was so grateful for that support. It normalized the conversation around mental health. I didn't feel like I was being judged. I didn't feel like I was crazy. I didn't feel like I was different. It was just a normal conversation, and for me, I think I needed that at the time to not feel like it was a big deal to be accessing mental health support, that it was just something else that I could access to support my overall wellbeing and to support my family as well.

I find it really important, particularly in my role as a community peer advisor, that we are able to walk the walk and talk the talk. For me, my mental health now is great. It's the best that it's been in a really, really long time. But maintenance is important too, and so I still have regular counseling sessions with Open Arms to just make sure that I'm still looking after myself, particularly in the world that we're living in and living with chronic pain. I find for me, the opportunity to still connect with a clinician once a month provides me with the support that I need to just maintain my wellbeing and my mental health keeps me in check.

I think that sometimes we are our biggest roadblocks when it comes to access and support. I think when I've supported other spouses to access the service, it's being able to support them through the processes as well. Particularly with ADF members when all their veterans, when they can't talk about some of the things that they've experienced, for partners and spouses, to be able to access that support for themselves, to know that that's okay and it's normal as a part of the process, but to have that support for themselves when they're quite often muddling through not knowing where their partner is or having really limited contact or not knowing how to answer questions that are from the kids.

Over the years of accessing support myself right back from when I initially accessed Open Arms for support to everything that I've learned from then till now, I have a toolkit. I call it a toolkit. I refer to it as my toolkit, but I'm really self-aware now when my mental health may be having a bit of a dip or a decline, and some days it's just a day. Some days I just need to give myself a day to go, you know what, hard is hard, and that's okay, but tomorrow the show's on the road we've got this. I think being able to give myself the permission to acknowledge when I might be having a day or a week or a dip in my mental health and knowing what I can do to support myself through that, so I have a self-care checklist.

I prioritize self-care when I am feeling like that. It could look like going for a walk with the dog. It could be focusing more on getting outside with the kids, whether it's taking them to the playground, actively making the choice to do something that I know that I'm going to enjoy rather than just feeling like I'm in the grind of being an adult, paying bills and working. That's something that's really high on my priority list. I use different tools and techniques. I use journaling sometimes, particularly if I feel anxious, then I can get my thoughts down on paper, which is all techniques that I've learned through Open Arms. Being really self-aware has been a big part of that journey as well, and not trying to just brush her under the rug.

I think acknowledging, accepting how you're feeling is the first step in being able to move forward on your own mental health journey. If you're unsure about seeking support, it's okay to feel unsure. It's okay to have reservations. It's okay to feel anxious because you're vulnerable. You're sharing parts of your lowest points in your whole world with somebody else, and that's okay. Seeking that professional support and knowing that your information is kept confidential, and sometimes just having that phone call with somebody who gets you and understands where you're at can have a profound impact on feeling validated and feeling seen, and being able to pick yourself up and learning the tools to know how to look after yourself.

Sometimes we don't even know how to look after ourselves, so by having the support to identify what that looks like, you can have your own toolkit. You can build your own toolkit and be able to support other people on their journey and share some other the things you've learned to be able to one day connect somebody else in with Open Arms or mental health support.

Accessing Open Arms, particularly in those early stages when my mental health had nose died was lifesaving. To be able to have that support in working through some of the most challenging times of my life meant that I could do and be what I am today. To be able to support other people to connect with Open Arms and other support services and de-stigmatize mental health and normalizing the conversation has made such a difference.

Host:

Thanks to Kristy 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 on the website.