

Getting help for substance abuse in the middle of a pandemic is difficult, but not impossible

October 11 2020

By Sarah Liversidge

When Melbourne went into lockdown earlier this year, Darryl Edwards was all too familiar with isolation.

After a relationship breakdown in 2018, Darryl retreated into his “own little world”. He stopped going out with his friends and turned to substances to cope.

“Initially I used (drugs) as a kind of anti-depressant,” the 41-year-old Melbourne man says. “I didn’t know I would get into such a dark place with it. I needed to get help.”

The coronavirus lockdown in Melbourne created a scenario where he was “isolating in isolation”.

“When you’re alone and everyone else is alone, there’s like a deafening silence,” he says.

Darryl tried to his access support for addiction in Melbourne, where he was living at the time, but there were long waiting times and he found the kind of help offered unsuitable for his needs. “I felt there was this kind of blanket approach, but everyone’s different,” he says.

He eventually found help at a drug and alcohol support service in Ararat, a regional town in Victoria’s south-west. Darryl has been staying with friends who live nearby and is in the process of getting his own place.

Laurie Gibens, an intake worker at a Salvation Army drug and alcohol service in inner Melbourne, says there has been a significant increase in people accessing the service during lockdown. She says people are at greater risk of substance abuse due to increased stressors such as unemployment and housing.

Laurie’s role involves “getting people into the system” and providing referrals to other services such as drug and alcohol withdrawal and rehabilitation facilities.

Laurie says coronavirus restrictions have affected waiting times for some services. “I get concerned that some people might go backwards because we can’t help everyone straight away,” she says. “People might want help then and there, but they may change their mind in a moment.”

Laurie says it is difficult for people living with addiction in lockdown because typical methods of distraction “like going to the movies or seeing a friend” are not an option.



A Salvation Army building in Carlton, Victoria. Photo: Sarah Liversidge

For Adam Bull, the coronavirus crisis created a “pressure cooker” environment.

When the 37-year-old Melbourne man had his working hours reduced earlier this year, he and his family had already been under stress. His partner had stopped working to look after their two young children at home. She had been experiencing post-natal depression since the birth of their second child.

Adam says he began drinking heavily to relieve financial and emotional stress. “I found it hard to process what was going on,” he says. “I turned to the quickest fix I know.”

His relationship with his partner became strained a few months ago and he moved out of the family home. He sought help through the Salvation Army and is currently working with a drug and alcohol counsellor.

“They are helping me (by being)... a person to connect with,” he says. “When I’m feeling down and low, I can contact her and she can talk me through.”

Adam also experienced long waiting times for some services in Melbourne but says the Salvation Army were “surprisingly quick” to help.

He is now working on his recovery with the help of his counsellor.

“Addiction does not just go away. I am taking it day by day, step by step,” he says.

Adam believes people turning to substances to cope is “to be expected in these times”.

Laurie agrees. “There are many compounding issues for people at the moment,” she says. “Even counsellors are struggling. They can’t help everyone.”

Darryl and Adam believe the government should be doing more to improve services.

Darryl says having more people working in drug and alcohol and mental health services who “really understand” would be beneficial. “They throw money at these services...but it’s not enough,” he says.

Adam says services have improved over the years but “could be a lot better”. “Our lives are under the pump. People turn to drugs and alcohol because what are they meant to do?” he says.

Darryl says he lost contact with some of his friends due to the stigma attached to substance dependence. “People think you’re a thief...I’ve never stolen anything my life, I’ve never hurt anyone. I’m still me,” he says.

“But I know who my real friends are and that’s a beautiful thing...they mean the world.”

Darryl says the support he has received in Ararat has been “the best thing”. “It’s the best help I’ve received in all my 20 years of trying to get help,” he says.

“I’m working with people who actually love their job, not just to fill a quota or something.”

Darryl says he is feeling healthy and positive since receiving support. “I’m six weeks sober next week. I’m eating and sleeping again,” he says.

“It’s just been such a surreal year.”

For anyone needing assistance

[DirectLine](#) drug and alcohol support 1800 888 236

[Beyond Blue](#) 1300 22 4636

[Lifeline](#) 13 11 14