

Community and storytelling key to supporting people experiencing mental health issues

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Photo: Leah Kelley, Pexels

By Sarah Liversidge

A prominent community leader has called for improved community connection through listening and storytelling to support people living with trauma and other mental health issues.

Mariam Issa, co-founder of Melbourne's Resilient Aspiring Women (RAW) and a former Somali refugee, said yesterday individuals need to work together to help each other through times of adversity.

"Our solution has to come from each and every one of us," she said.

Ms Issa said shared storytelling is one way that people can support others in need.

"If I am connecting with you with my story, the story becomes the heart of the matter. It becomes our story."

Ms Issa said it is important that people telling their stories are "listened (to), observed with no judgement and are validated".

Ms Issa also said sharing stories can help build resilience.

"Sharing our vulnerabilities is one of the things that creates resilience and resourcefulness in our community," she said.

She said while mental health funding and resources are vital, a “bottom up” approach is equally as important.

“When there are only resources...the heart is missed, where grief and grace co-reside, and that is where the story is at,” she said.

Ms Issa said the coronavirus lockdown was highlighting the need for community connection.

“The global collective consciousness is the fears (and) traumas that we’re going through. We are feeling it together.”

She said there are three important things to consider both during and after the coronavirus pandemic.

“I need to make sure I’m connected with myself and my relationships, make sure I’m creative and intentional about it, as well as make sure I have things I can celebrate,” she said.

Suicide safety group Beyond Now ambassador Jenny Szymanski said the pandemic has created a “new kind of psychological warfare”.

“As a community we tend to keep to ourselves,” she said.

“Hopefully COVID will open us up to the people that have been living next door to us for years.”

Ms Szymanski said it is important to stay connected to people during the lockdown.

“Take the risk to ask someone how they are really going,” she said.

“When you take that risk to open up, it allows the other person to feel that and it really matters to that person.”

Ms Issa said that she has tried to put a “positive spin” on the current situation.

“Sometimes we need the light from someone else. That’s where dignity comes from. We need to dignify the other,” she said.

“There is a beautiful word in our African culture, Ubuntu, which means I am because you are. If there is no you, there is no me.”

Ms Issa arrived in Melbourne as a refugee from Somalia at age 30. As well as co-founding RAW, she is a speaker, storyteller, author and community builder.

Ms Szymanski is a child abuse survivor and family violence prevention advocate living in Melbourne. She has recently become a marriage celebrant.

If you or anyone you know needs assistance:

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