





# In[ter]view: Kate Henderson and Alex Thorpe

Verse Mag's Regular Interview



Interview conducted by Jesse Neill

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According to a report released by Orygen last year, of Australia's 1.4 million university students, at least one in four will experience mental ill-health in any given year. For our Mental Health Edition, Jesse sits down with fellow UniSA graduate Kate Henderson of the Panic Room SA and Alex Thorpe of Batyr, to discuss common questions students may have regarding mental health.

**What does your organisation do and what is your role?**

**Kate:** The Panic Room SA offers one-on-one, group and online support to individuals and families affected by anxiety and panic. I am a professional counsellor and operate the service as a sole trader (no other employees/volunteers).

**Alex:** Batyr is a young organisation that focuses on reducing the stigma around mental health and helping those who need it reach out for support. My role as the University Program Coordinator at UniSA is to focus on doing this throughout UniSA, across all four campuses.

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**What are the most common stressors in a student's life?**

**Alex:** The biggest thing for uni students is the amount of change that's going on for them. As a first year student coming out of high school the atmosphere changes tremendously; university students are required to be far more self-motivated and self-driven, there's a lot more responsibility on them. Many move out of home for the first time, don't see their friends as often, experience more academic pressure than they have previously, and begin to experiment with drugs and alcohol – it can be a tremendously stressful time for people and many of them don't realise what they're putting themselves through.

**How can I tell my family and friends that I am not doing ok?**

**Kate:** Choose someone who is likely to be understanding and determine what you would like to disclose – you get to decide what and how much. Then choose a time and place to chat that is most comfortable for you. If you are unable to talk about it face to face, consider writing an email, message or letter. In that message explain how you've been feeling and how it is affecting you. Explain what would be helpful and unhelpful for you, in terms of how

your friend or family member might assist. Keep the conversation going and identify others who may be supportive if possible. Remember that anxiety thrives on secrecy and shame.


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**What are some signs to look out for in my friends and family that can tell if they are not doing ok?**

**Kate:** There are a number of signs including but not limited to:

- Withdrawal and social isolation
- Avoidance
- Excessive procrastination
- Difficulty making decisions
- Excessive reassurance seeking
- Excessive worry and the need for great detail about upcoming events
- Difficulty meeting new people, going places, dealing with the unfamiliar
- Signs of 'fight' – anger, aggression, irritability, tantrums
- Signs of 'flight' – exiting quickly from situations, places, relationships, crowds
- Appearing aloof, indifferent or disinterested, scattered, confused, forgetful or distracted
- Catastrophising and beginning sentences with 'what if?'
- Frequent trips to the toilet due to frequent urination or stomach upset (common symptom of the fight or flight response)
- Perfectionism
- Difficulty sleeping
- Complaining of physical pain (chest pain, muscle tightness, nausea, stomach ache)
- Unusual self-soothing habits when distressed (ie any repetitive action)
- Disclosure of suicidal thoughts or intention to harm oneself
- Self-harm





How can I speak to and help a friend or family member with a mental health problem?

**Kate:** Similar to when you want to tell someone else you aren't doing ok, give the person opportunities to talk. It can be helpful to let them decide when to open up. Choose a suitable time to talk in a space you both feel comfortable, where there will be no interruptions and you are both in a calm frame of mind. Use 'I' statements such as 'I have noticed... and feel concerned' rather than 'you' statements - using 'you' can come across as blaming or attacking. Let the person know you are concerned about them and are willing to help. Respect how the person interprets what is happening for them. If the person doesn't feel comfortable talking to you, encourage them to discuss how they are feeling with someone else. If the person feels they need additional help, offer to explore options with them and encourage them to see their GP.

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What can I do if I think a friend is going to hurt themselves?

**Alex:** If you are certain a friend is going to hurt themselves or someone else, always call 000. However, if you are just concerned that this may be a possibility and don't know with any certainty that it will take place, let them know you are concerned. You can ask if a friend is thinking about suicide and if they've made plans. Asking about suicide does not increase the likelihood of it happening. In fact, asking will give your friend a chance to talk about their feelings and shows that you care. The most important part of all is to encourage them to reach out for help. Suggest they call lifeline (13 11 14) if they ever need it, but also suggest they reach out for professional help in the way of a GP, counsellor or psychologist.

### How should we imagine good mental health?

**Alex:** Much like good physical health, it's something we maintain with regular self-care. Much like our physical health, it takes getting a healthy amount of sleep, eating well, being active, but on top of that it takes doing what makes you happy. Taking time for yourself to stop and do whatever it is that you enjoy, and that something is different for everyone. Good mental health doesn't mean you're always happy, that will never be the case, it simply means that you are functioning in society, you are still happy and sad and everything in the middle, but overall you are coping and have a sense of optimism about your life.

### What can someone do about dealing with side effects from certain medications?

**Kate:** Talk with your GP or psychiatrist. There may be changes that can be made to the type of medication, dosage, or time at which it is taken that will reduce or minimise side effects. Your GP may also be able to prescribe additional medication to alleviate side effects that are temporary (such as those that can occur when weaning on and off of anti-depressant medication).

### How can I tell when I am just feeling nervous or low and when these feelings are something more serious?

**Alex:** We all get anxious and flat in our day-to-day lives, it's when these feelings don't pass or are on an extreme level that we may need to reach out for support. If you notice yourself or your friends isolating themselves for a long amount of time, rocking up to uni or work exhausted and without much sleep, not taking care of their personal hygiene or on-going are more quiet than normal, check in. Only you personally will know if it's something internal, but we can always keep an eye out for physical symptoms of mental ill-health for our friends and family. It's not weak to reach out for support, it's strong. It takes a lot of courage to admit that you may need help, so never feel bad for doing so.

### How can we reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and avoid negative labelling?

**Alex:** We learn and talk about it. It's as simple as that. You'd be amazed how many people around you have gone through their own battles with mental illness or have known people who have. The thing is, there's a good chance you may not notice these people suffering from mental ill-health, as they're fully functioning. An amazing amount of people out there who face uni, work or school every day are facing their own battles and that's why there should be no stigma, because these people are not their mental illness, they are still themselves. Many people can still function entirely normally in society and if that's the case, why is there a stigma? So always be kind and open to conversation, because you never know what battle people are going through, and you never know how much you may one day appreciate the same kindness in return.

### Are there alternatives to medicinal treatment that someone could try?

**Kate:** There are a number of alternative methods. These include:

- Therapy – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Graded Exposure, Mindfulness, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Schema Therapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy
- Exercise
- Good nutrition
- Omega-3
- St Johns Wort
- Meditation/mindfulness
- Relaxation and breathing techniques
- Yoga
- Alcohol and drug avoidance
- Acupuncture ◊