

Content note: This episode contains themes some listeners may find distressing, including discussion of suicide, self-harm and mistreatment of people with mental illness. If you need support, you can contact the Mental Health Access Line on 1300 64 22 55. This is a confidential 24/7 line, and will link you to your nearest Queensland public mental health service. You can also contact Lifeline telephone counselling on 13 11 14. In an emergency, or if you feel unsafe, dial 000 (triple zero).

Intro: Choice and Control, a podcast celebrating people with disability. In this season we're talking about access, inclusion, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This podcast series is brought to you by Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community.

00:55 Jodie van de Wetering: Hi, I'm Jodie van de Wetering. Today I'm talking to Suzanne Dang, a Brisbane blogger sharing her adventures in fashion and her experience living with mental illness. Suzanne's living independently, working as a mental health peer support worker, and proactively managing her health and recovery with support from the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

01:16 Suzanne Dang: My first attempt at suicide was when I was 14, and I didn't seek help until I was 19 or so. During that time I was really stressed about school, I had problems with my self image, my self esteem, and I didn't seek help until much later. But when I went to the GP, I told them that I was feeling suicidal, I had a plan in place.

Over the years I've been in and out hospital, the mental health ward in the Princess Alexandra hospital. My first admission to hospital was when I was 19. I was on an ITO, an involuntary treatment order. I was on suicide watch for a whole month. I was on 'constant', and basically that means that the nurse was following me around everywhere I'd go, to the toilet, the dining room, because I was on suicide watch for such a long time. I spent three months in hospital,

in the mental health ward, and the constant was lifted off me after two months.

I was diagnosed with clinical depression, but over the years I've been misdiagnosed with, like, schizophrenia and so on. But my most recent diagnosis will be bipolar, which was diagnosed about four years ago. I sometimes hear voices, when I'm unwell I feel suicidal.

I was also referred to a mental health rehabilitation place called CCU [Community Care Unit] in Cooparoo. That was one of my best and worst times of my life because I spent almost two years in there dealing with my voices and how to control them. I also learned how to cook, how to budget, how to take care of myself. Do positive affirmations every day. And talk to other people, other clients, the residents in the rehab place. It was really interesting how I progressed in my journey in recovery.

I felt that I'd got a lot of support, especially during those almost two years of being in rehab. Since I've been discharged I've been supported by the MIRT team – the Mobile Intensive Rehabilitation Team – and all the medications I take is being managed by the GP. That's a really good thing for me. I'm still getting support from my support workers, and I have family and friends who are understanding as well.

03:52 Jodie: Going through those misdiagnoses, was it frustrating, thinking 'I'm not sure this is right?'

03:59 Suzanne: Absolutely. Some of them didn't resonate with me at all, and I found it really hard to get the right type of medication that I needed at the time. The trial and error was really frustrating. But I want to say that at the moment, my medication it's the best combination I've ever had since a long time. It's really good.

04:28 Jodie: It does sound like you're travelling really well at the moment?

04:31 Suzanne: Definitely. I'm working now, I'm working in mental health. I teach art, to mainly adults with severe and complex mental health issues. I find it really rewarding, even though it takes me one and a half hours to get to work. I love the job so much I don't mind at all. It gives me a sense of purpose as well, to get out of bed each day, because I want to give back to the community.

04:52 Jodie: And how wonderful that you can help people who are maybe going through some of the same things you went through.

04:47 Suzanne: Yeah, absolutely. I think my story, I was put into the position of being hurt and vulnerable and now I'm well, I think my purpose is to live through that experience and share it with others so that they can overcome their own issues as well.

05:15 Jodie: What works for you, in terms of your recovery and managing your condition?

05:19 Suzanne: I definitely have a safety plan, like I know what are my warning signs, my triggers, hearing voices or feeling suicidal and having a plan in place. I have a safety plan that helps me, printed out. I also do a lot of self-care almost every day before and after work, because they say that you can't pour from an empty cup, you've got to take care of yourself and I really believe in that. I exercise twice a week, and I do a lot of art. I teach art but I do my own art as well. I've had my art exhibited in exhibitions, which I'm really proud of.

I also have a good support network. I have support workers, I have a few best friends. In terms of my recovery and maintaining my health I also enjoy eating healthy food, and talking to people, and doing some public speaking like I'm doing now. And just giving back as a

way to help me feel better about myself, I have a sense of purpose in life as well.

06:22 Jodie: Your background is Vietnamese. How is mental illness treated in the Vietnamese community?

06:32 Suzanne: I think that's a really interesting question. If you were to compare Vietnamese people who have mental illnesses in Vietnam, compared to here in Australia, in Vietnam they have no mental health system. My grandpa told me that people in the countryside in Vietnam, if they happened to have a mental illness, they get chained to the bed. And it's really scary. Also back maybe three, four or five years my family forced me to see a fortune teller and the fortune teller said that I was possessed, and I found it really disheartening and really not appropriate. Yeah. People in the Vietnamese community generally think that people with mental health illnesses are possessed, really a lot, a big stigma in the Vietnamese community. But I think it's getting a bit better. There's a mental health system in Australia, and we need to do what we can like make sure people like me can seek help and get the help that they need. But still in Vietnam, there's no mental system, as I said. It's really, it's really bad.

07:24 Jodie: How much more difficult then, you're not only dealing with your own internal stigma around mental health and the challenges of reaching out for help, but you've also got all this cultural stigma and background to work with as well.

07:46 Suzanne: Yeah, absolutely. It's stigma, I would say. It's getting a bit better, but there's still stigma. My family don't always understand why I'm still taking medication, when they can see that I'm doing really well. That's hard to explain to them that I am doing well because I am taking the medication, and it's very hard because they haven't been through that kind of thing before, so it's hard to understand. For some in the Vietnamese community here in

Australia taking medication is a sign of weakness, but for me it's a sign of strength.

08:16 Jodie How has your faith influenced your recovery and also the way you understand your illness, particularly around hearing voices?

08:23 Suzanne: Hearing voices is a, it can be a frightening and scary experience for me. Long time ago, I thought God told me to die, but I realise that it was not God, it was something else, it was a voice that was in my head. And it was very traumatizing for me to experience that. I remember telling one of the spiritual leaders that God told me to die, and she took it the really wrong way. I felt she didn't understand. She said that I wasn't praying hard enough, that I wasn't believing hard enough. And I felt really stigmatized from her saying that.

Yeah, but I'm a believer. God has a plan for me. I believe that he put me in a place of hurt and pain so then I can help other people through my experiences. And I think God is a good God, he wouldn't say anything that's bad to me. If it's bad, it's actually my voices, I'm hearing voices. I need to seek professional mental health support straight away if I'm hearing those kind of voices telling me to do something bad to myself. I won't go into detail.

It's helped me understand my illness in a way, to help me differentiate which is a good voice and which is a bad voice. My medication helps me with my hearing voices too. If I get to hearing voices telling me to end my life, that's when I know I need to reach out for help and perhaps get hospitalised.

10:03 Jodie: These days Suzanne you're using the NDIS, how's that going for you?

10:08 Suzanne: It's my second year of having a package. I had a review session yesterday that went really well, and I'll be having an

NDIS plan for the next 24 months. In terms of NDIS support, it's been amazing, Jodie. I went to art classes, and it gave me opportunities to broaden my horizons in my art process. And they helped me with my driving lessons, I had a few accidents when I was younger, like 20, 23, and I'm 29 now. They helped me build my confidence in driving again and it's made a big, positive impact in my life. I'm driving now, driving halfway to work and then halfway by train also. It pays for my support workers come here and help me in my home with organisation, scheduling, and cooking sometimes. I'm really blessed to get that support from the NDIS the first time I tried. I see my support workers once, twice a week, I have two support workers and it's been really, really good to me. I was lucky I met the right people, I have the right support coordinator, the right support workers, I have a good plan manager who manages my finances.

11:27 Jodie: One of your other roles, as well as being a mental health advocate, as well as the work you're doing with other people with mental health challenges, you are also quite heavily into fashion. Could you just talk us through what interests you about fashion?

11:41 Suzanne: Absolutely. In fact I started my blog in fashion first, in 2013, and I didn't find mental health and combine it with fashion until two or three years later. I love dressing up, I would say. I love dressing up: bold colours, statement earrings, lots of lace. I love pearls.

When I go to fashion events, I introduce myself as a mental health fashion blogger. I do like a little one minute pitch kind of thing, I say, 'I'm a mental health fashion blogger, I have bipolar. I want to share my story in my social media platforms as a voice to help other people who are going through similar things.' And yeah, it took me a couple of years to say that comfortably. I've noticed that when I've been going to fashion events this year, , I say the same thing and I hope

that it inspires other people. I hope it can help people in other ways, when they check out my website, my Instagram or Facebook.

I've been going to fashion events since 2013, seven years. I'm quite surprised I'm not sick of it yet! I still love it a lot. I love going to events and meeting people, and I especially love going by myself. Because I think by yourself, it pushes you out of your comfort zone. You go with your friends, you're confined to that group and you don't get to have the opportunity to talk to everyone. So I absolutely love being by myself and sharing my story in a vulnerable way. I think that I can make a difference in people's lives. There are a lot of fashion events coming up this month, in October, so I will be quite busy as well.

13:21 Jodie: How important is representation, that in the fashion world we see people with different abilities, different backgrounds, that it reflects the diversity of this great big community we have.

13:32 Suzanne: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a really good question, Jodie. A few years back I entered into a Vietnamese pageant and that was quote-unquote "the largest girl". I had photos taken of me in lingerie, in formal wear, in bikini and so on. I was size 14, I was 15 or so? I didn't care at a time, I knew I was the biggest girl. I didn't care because I wanted to become a role model for the younger girls, to show that anyone who has any size body can actually enter pageants. But soon after the photos were published I got some negative comments from people saying "Oh, you're fat" or "Sumo!", "why did you enter, you don't look skinny enough", that kind of thing. Yeah. And this makes me really curious how people have really extreme beauty standards, especially in the Asian communities I would say. And it just doesn't make sense to me, but I noticed that for a fact. I entered the pageant not because I wanted to win, but mainly I wanted to be a positive role model for those who want to try to get into modelling.

This just really important I think. When I go to fashion shows I try to see if they have diversity in models. Most of them do, this year, it's getting better. And I think it's so important because we people with disabilities, we're also human and we have our own experiences as well. And I believe that people can model no matter what size body they are or if they have a disability or not, they can do what they want.

My experience with pageants, yeah, I tried to reapply again I remember a couple of years after that, and they said 'we only allow size six to eight girls'. This was a big eye-opener for me.

15:22 Jodie: Wow, rude.

15:23 Suzanne: Yeah, very rude! She said unfortunately she couldn't accept me into it, because apparently they had issues with different sized bodies in the pageant, they just didn't like it or something? I don't know. So, I want to be a positive role model for girls who want to try out modelling, go to fashion events, or learn how to share their stories in a vulnerable way that helps people.

15:46 Jodie: You can follow Suzanne's adventures in fashion and mental health on her blog at suzanne-dang.com. You can also look for 'Suzanne Dang' on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

16:03 Outro: Thanks for joining us at Choice and Control, a Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about Carers Queensland, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or the Local Area Coordination Program, please contact us online at www.carersqld.com.au.

Or you can catch up with us on [Facebook](#), search for 'Carers Queensland NDIS'.

This podcast is a place for people with disability to share experiences, stories, and achievements. If you have a story you think we should know about, please contact us through the Carers

Queensland inquiries line on 1300 999 636, or email cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au.

Until next time, thanks for listening.

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