

## Experiences of mental illness and service response in North Queensland and the Northern Territory

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Conversation with Janet Fletcher.

I shared two poems to enhance my conversation with Alison.

The first is called “[Rain from Nowhere](#)” by Murray Hartin. It describes a farmer’s thoughts as he contemplates suicide and I can never read it without crying. The suicide is stopped by a letter from his father who sensed the situation and wrote to his son.

The second is called “[Care, the Source of all Cure](#)” by Henri J.R. Nouwen. This poem reminds us, as health professionals, that it is not always possible to cure however we can always care.

My first discussion is about the experiences of losing our dairy farm after we were late with a payment. Having pulled through drought with drought relief, we were then hit by wet weather and the weakened cattle all went down and died despite our efforts to lift them up with a sling on the tractor. We still had to pay off the loan for the dead cattle and drought relief stopped the day the rain fell.

I recall the day of the auction when we were sold up and how they even auctioned our beautiful farm dogs, a border collie and a red kelpie and how my husband lay devastated on the dirt road as he grieved for the family farm and how he had planned to make it a showcase to honour his deceased father.

I had been a remote area nurse so I applied to Tennant Creek Hospital and we left with 3 little children under the age of 5 in a second hand 4WD and a trailer of what was left of our belongings. My husband had never left Mundubbera so it was a huge change for hi.

The DON of Tennant Creek Hospital was very good to us.

We ended up in a small unit 3 floors up after leaving 300 acres behind and wondered what we had done.

I had previously worked for the Australian Inland Mission, so applied with the now Frontier Services and we were appointed to The Monument which is a small remote mining town in Qld below Mt Isa.

After 4 years at The Monument the mine shut down and we were retrenched with now 4 little children. We understand the frustration and tension of living day to day at the mine wondering if you will still have a job the next day.

From here we moved to the Northern Territory and have lived and worked on remote Aboriginal Communities for the last 25 years.

Something that is stark in my mind is how lonely it is when you lose your farm. No hands reached out to help us and we were on our own which is why my husband and I are so close. This is in comparison to natural disasters. I have personally experienced being flooded where I am now and we were moved to an evacuation centre where we were fed and cared for and counsellors were sent to help us.

The second part of my conversation is about the high rates of suicide and attempted suicide in Aboriginal communities and the reminder to care.

I have sat in the gutter watching the sun come up while trying to prevent a drunk lady from leaning forward to cut her throat on a sliver of glass. On another occasion this lady was distressed and whilst in a consulting room grabbed the needles and started cutting herself. As she was doing this she was telling me she was not mad. I managed to quietly talk her down by acknowledging that she was not

mad, just hurting. This woman had been raped 3 times and never had any of the right intervention to try and help her.

Another case history is that of a man taken by a crocodile in front of his wife and children. They lived on an outstation and I was advised to send them out literature on grief.

Later the coroner wrote to me and asked me to be with the family when they read his report which was a bit graphic as the man had his arm torn off.

I drove the 2 hours over a rough dirt road to sit with the family. On arrival I took the woman in my arms and just let her cry. Later she advised me that she did not want information sent out to her, rather she just wanted someone to sit with her and care.

The conversation with Alison reflected on how important it is to self care and how we cope suffering from a mental illness in rural and remote places.

My first support is my husband.

The second support is the CRANA plus Bush Support Service which has psychologists on call 24 hours a day and is a free service.

The third support is an anonymous on line forum for PTSD sufferers and , again is free, and is very useful as it is worldwide and if you can't sleep or are having terrible nightmares, you can go online and always find someone who understands.

It has taken a lot of courage to share this with you.