

On the Same Wavelength

Episode 2: Schools, unis and mental health

Elise: Hello, and welcome to *On the Same Wavelength*, where we explore how we can make a better world for people living with complex mental health issues. I'm your host, Elise.

And in this episode, we're focusing on educational settings. Maybe you're a young person going through high school, university, or other education or training. Or maybe you're reflecting back on your past experiences.

It might be an exciting time, but often there's a lot going on. Whether it's a high workload, pressure to get certain grades, friendship groups changing, moving from a family home to independent living, financial issues, juggling responsibilities... it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Plus, a lot of mental health issues might emerge for the first time when someone is a teenager, or a young adult, sometimes in response to these stressful situations.

Last episode, I mentioned The National Stigma Report Card which surveyed nearly 2000 Australians who have lived experience of complex mental health issues. This study found that over 60% of participants reported experiencing some level of stigma or discrimination through education or training during the last year.

So why does this happen? What does this look like? And how can we make things better?

In this episode, we'll be meeting Jeanette, who will be sharing her lived experience story. I also chat with Vivienne Browne from Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, about work being done to improve how universities respond to students' mental health needs.

Just a quick note that this episode touches on topics including panic attacks and anxiety, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and the intersections between mental health and culture. And, like all our episodes, we talk about stigma and discrimination. So please only listen today if it feels right for you.

Jeanette: My name's Jeanette. I'm 23. I live here on Wurundjeri country in Melbourne.

Elise: Jeanette's a Peer Ambassador at SANE. She works in agriculture policy and programming. She studied economics and management at university, and loves being creative in her spare time. She also identifies as a migrant; she was born in Singapore, and moved to Melbourne when she was 15.

Jeanette: My extended family actually lives here in Melbourne. So growing up we would spend some of our Christmases here, so it kind of felt very natural, but strange straddling two different worlds because the culture that you identify with... you don't feel like you identify fully with each one, but you sit with both.

Elise: Jeanette was young when she first started experiencing mental ill-health. She told me about the first time she had a panic attack – around age 13. A feeling of sheer terror that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Jeanette: And I remember being alone in my bedroom, and I was a first aid cadet. So I knew how to help someone who was experiencing hyperventilation. So I kind of thought that was it. But I remember being alone in my room and just like trying to help myself calm down, but thinking to myself, 'there's something else that's happening here, but I don't know what'.

Elise: Jeanette's anxiety continued, and escalated in the years that followed. She didn't understand what it was – to her, it was normal.

Toward the end of school, a high-pressure time, she was experiencing panic attacks nearly every day. Adding to that stress, her father was in an accident where he was hit by a car.

Jeanette: He was in hospital for a while. And so I remember getting the call when I was in school... well actually, it wasn't a call, he sent a WhatsApp text message to our extended family group chat of him in an ambulance. So I'm calling St. Vincent's being like, 'where is my father?' Yeah, my mum had just left the country and I was alone with my sister at school. His recovery was kind of happening in the background during year 12. And I had all this anxiety, and there was a lot of pressure in school to perform.

Elise: This meant Jeanette found it really difficult to engage in school, to focus, and stay on top of her work. And her teachers began to notice.

Jeanette: A teacher had took it upon herself to call my dad and said, kind of blew it out of proportion, really: 'your daughter hasn't done any of the things that she's supposed to do. None of it is on time.' And my dad's like, you know, struggling at home, you know, trying to take care of us. Yeah. And he like, doesn't really know what to do with that information. So he kind of got angry. And his way of trying to help the situation was, you know, 'tell me, like, do your work, have you done it? Have you done this?' And so this added pressure at home.

And then, so when I went to school, there was also this pressure from that teacher. Like, I was being shamed in class. I was being picked on in front of other people. She'd even, after our class, she would get the next class to wait outside. And she would, make me stand there in front of her while she, like, told me off for a good second, for a few minutes before she'd let me leave and the next class could come in.

Elise: Jeanette's teacher spoke to some of the other teachers at school. And then she started being called out in other classes, including by teachers she'd had a good relationship with in the past. She felt like she was being shamed from all angles.

Jeanette: And it was really hard because, if I'm just, like, trying to survive and deal with everything that's going on in my life, and then I don't feel like I have a safe space in school or at home... It was incredibly difficult.

Elise: And none of this exactly helped reduce Jeanette's anxiety – or helped her get her schoolwork done.

Jeanette: One of the things that was really hard was I had experienced panic attacks in school, obviously absolutely mortified that that happened in public. And I just remember crying constantly, like, crying profusely that day. And I was in my year level coordinator's office and she had handed me tissues, but that was kind of it. Hadn't asked sort of like, what was happening, why I was struggling. I just felt like my teachers didn't really take an interest, or bother to ask what was going on.

There wasn't a really good sort of like mental health literacy at school. I certainly don't think it was something that we talked about at all. Certainly in school here and then in school when I was growing up in Singapore, too.

Elise: In terms of options for getting help, there was a school counsellor at Jeanette's school. But there was a perception that going to the counsellor was... well...

Jeanette: You *never* wanna end up with a school counsellor. Yeah, it was a bad thing. It was like something you didn't wanna do, it wasn't an enjoyable experience or a positive experience. At least, wasn't portrayed as one. And so you would kind of, there's a sense of, like, you would tell... you would say what you needed to say, so you would avoid going to the school counsellor.

Elise: Jeanette's anxiety made it difficult to get through year 12. She had to work hard to focus and concentrate, and struggled with memory, and doing assigned work. All while not feeling supported or understood by the school.

I asked about special consideration, but what was provided was pretty limited.

Jeanette: Only in relation to my dad's accident, but not in general, because I don't think I knew that it was available to me or that it was even an option, or that what I was experiencing was valid enough to warrant it.

It kind of feels like an 'excuse', quote, unquote, 'excuse'... when I was in school. Like, it didn't feel like it was a valid reason. It just kind of felt like, 'this is me, this is normal. So this is me not trying hard enough'. It was like the product of individual responsibility. Not like anything else that might sit behind that.

I just wish someone had taken an interest. And I wished we talked about it. Like, I just genuinely don't remember any conversations about it. Maybe we did, maybe earlier on, but from the time I was in school, at least here in Melbourne from year 10 to 12, nothing.

Elise: Despite her hardships, Jeanette finished year 12, and went on to study at university. Navigating the transition from high school to uni, and the intense amount of work, was extremely hard.

Jeanette: My time at university was incredibly challenging. Yeah. It was worse than high school. Yeah, I experienced my first depressive episode and then a

few following that. I was on antidepressants for the first time, and experienced the side effects that came with that. Had suicidal ideation, that was really hard. You know, my eating disorder wasn't great.

Like when I first developed depression, I thought it was just really intense anxiety. Because I didn't know what depression was like. And then experiencing like, just how numbing and... just awful being depressed is. And then multiple times, while going through uni and navigating like this transition from high school to uni, all the work, like, intense amount of work that's associated with that stuff. And then engaging with other people, that was so hard.

Elise: Still, compared to high school, it was a different environment. Towards the end of uni, with push from her psychologist, she began to realise that she needed support.

Jeanette: I only found disability services like in my second-last or last year of uni, because I'd only just begun to like, identify as a person with a disability and mental health. But to get to a point where you can ask for help in the first place is so difficult. Feeling like you deserve that help, that you can ask for that help. And then when you ask for it, how much are you asking for, what is reasonable to ask? I remember just, like, agonizing about those questions for a really long time.

And I remember my conversations with disability services was one phone call on like when I was doing my plan for the first time. And then after that, it was just a plan online afterwards. So no sort of further conversations about the kind of support I needed.

Elise: Reflecting back, she wished that there had been more to this interaction than a once-off call, and her online plan.

Jeanette: I don't think you know that you can ask for help. And those conversations with disability services would've been such a wonderful opportunity to have had those discussions.

Elise: Not everyone who experiences mental ill-health identifies as a person with a disability. But over time, Jeanette felt that this resonated with her.

Jeanette: My mental health issues were complex. I was learning to understand, I was beginning to understand how much of an impact it had had on my life. Like, truly impacted every facet of my life. And so I was like, 'oh, this is like objectively a lot.' Yes. I identify as a person with a disability.

Elise: When putting this episode together, I was thinking about the responsibilities of high schools and universities to support students who are experiencing mental ill-health. Schools and universities throughout Australia really differ a lot in terms of the level of support, and how much prevention, awareness or educational activity they provide around mental health to students and educators.

Vivienne: My name is Vivienne Browne. I'm the Associate Director of Government Relations and Policy at Orygen, which is the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

Elise: Orygen is a leading research and knowledge translation organisation, focusing specifically on young people. As part of her role, Vivienne is very aware of some of the ways that stigma and discrimination rear their heads in educational settings. And the potential long-term impacts.

Vivienne: It can actually be incredibly detrimental then in terms of not seeking support for their mental health. And yeah, it can often mean that they may not achieve academically the way that they would want to. And, and then some students might then, as a result of that, either leave education or depart that educational pathway early.

Elise: The Orygen policy team released a report in 2017 called Under the Radar. This report looked at the mental health and wellbeing of Australian university students.

Vivienne: And what we'd actually found early on in that report was probably that the issue, as per the title, had been flying under the radar for quite a while.

Elise: The key recommendation from the report was that there was a need for nationally consistent guidance in Australia. This led to the development of the University Mental Health Framework. It took a couple of years, with a lot of consultation with key stakeholders – including students and university staff.

The Framework encourages universities to have a clear strategy and implementation plan. It also has a set of key principles.

Vivienne: The first principle, principle one, really puts the student at the centre of this framework. And, and I guess, clearly articulates that the student experience is enhanced through mental health and wellbeing approaches that are informed by their own needs, by their perspectives, and the realities of their experiences.

Elise: Other principles speak to how mental health and wellbeing should be seen as a *shared* responsibility, not just the responsibility of the individual student. Universities are encouraged to really emphasise mentally healthy communities – ones that are inclusive and support students.

It's also important to avoid unnecessary pressures on students – for example, avoiding having assignments due at the same time – something that students dread, even if they're not struggling with their mental health. Plus, of course, universities need the right supports in place.

Vivienne: The more that mental health and wellbeing can be seen as a responsibility, and in the remit of everyone in the university, the more, we were able to, I guess, address stigma and not sort of have it siloed off into just being the responsibility of a counselling service on campus to deal with when students are struggling, that everyone's got a role to play here.

Elise: I asked Vivienne about how universities can support students who are experiencing more complex or severe mental health issues, whether students are entering universities who have existing mental health issues, such as Jeanette, or who might be experiencing mental health issues for the first time.

Again, a whole of university approach is needed, including good mental health knowledge and training. In some instances, this might mean linking with supportive services outside of the uni.

Vivienne: It's about connecting into services in the community, which yeah. Unfortunately is you know, easy to say, but in reality, it can be really hard to achieve, but it's about where there's some good relationships already between community based mental health services and the counselling services.

Elise: Guidelines like these can hopefully help universities develop strategies that can make a real difference for students like Jeanette. Although it's not compulsory, many universities are already releasing strategies that reference the framework.

Despite having a more positive experience at university, Jeanette's experiences have led her to be aware of the risks of talking about her mental health, not just in educational settings, but more broadly. Because people can react pretty badly.

Jeanette: Every time before, you know, you tell someone, particularly every time I've been in a new workplace or a new team, there's always just like overwhelming sense of feeling like, 'oh my gosh, I don't know how they're gonna take it. Are they going to react poorly, like the first time?' Cuz that's gonna make my experience here really awful.

It really does feel like a coming out, and I am coming out too. Yeah. As, as queer, which is new the last few months. So it absolutely does feel like a coming out ... the level of sort of like fear that you experience, the apprehension, the almost, like, sense of rejection you're already feeling definitely feel similar.

Elise: Jeanette reflected on her overall experience at high school and university:

Jeanette: I think the, the thread for me, through my experiences in high school and uni has been, the onus is always on the individual. And learning how to advocate for yourself and ask for help has been a huge journey of, like, learning that that's something that you can do, and then figuring out how to do it, and then figuring what you actually need. And then, like, overcoming all the barriers to communicating that to somebody else and then getting the support that you need.

Elise: And now, Jeanette is feeling more comfortable advocating for herself. And more comfortable being in her own skin, too.

Jeanette: So it's been this really huge journey from like, not being able to talk about mental health at all, and not knowing it was this thing, and like feeling really shameful about it. To like getting comfortable seeking help, to be in a place where I can ask for what I need, figuring out what I need. It's okay that

your needs change, your needs always change. And then feel comfortable, like, communicating that with other people.

That sense of safety is so underrated. And it's made such a big difference to me. Feeling comfortable to express who I am fully. And now, today I'm here with like purple bluish hair. I've got like a pink top and bright red corduroy pants ... it's so weird, like I, I look at my closet now, and I'm so happy. And I think back a few years ago, my entire closet was black. Maybe like a few textures of black, but like black, and dark colours.

And the joy that I experience in my life now is so incredible. Like I remember having a moment a few years ago where I was like, 'oh my God,' like, I'd come out the other side after sort of like depression and suicidal ideation. I just remember having a moment. And I was like looking at my closet and I was like, 'oh my God, I want to live.'

Elise: In terms of what she would like listeners to take away from her story, Jeanette had some important reminders for students with a lived experience.

Jeanette: If you have struggled with your mental health or you're experiencing mental health issues, the strength and the tenacity that you have to get through each and every day just to survive, will get you to where you want to be eventually. I truly think that's the case for me, because getting through every single day, like just surviving... I'm slowly getting to a place where I'm thriving. I never thought I'd be here.

Elise: We know that a lot of students are doing their best, but are still struggling. One thing that struck me about Jeanette's story is that many different people in schools and universities have a responsibility to foster a safe environment, one that is set up to help people who might be struggling with their mental health. We don't have to be experts to respond in a way that is respectful, thoughtful, and helpful.

Jeanette: Some of this stuff I hope a lot of people don't get to experience. They're incredibly trying times, and they're so difficult to get through. They have such an impact on you, but also the people around you.... and the thing is you don't have to understand to be compassionate.

Elise: *On the Same Wavelength* is a collaboration between the University of Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, and SANE, Australia's leading

national mental health organisation for people with complex mental health needs, with the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation. It is hosted by me, Elise Carrotte, and edited by Chris Hatzis. Special thanks to SANE Peer Ambassador Jeanette, and Vivienne Browne from Orygen, for their contributions to this episode. If you're interested in learning more about the University Mental Health Framework, I've included a link in the show notes.

This podcast was recorded on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and we wish to pay respects to elders past and present, and extend our respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander listeners.

If this podcast has brought up any challenging feelings for you, please consider reaching out to SANE's free counselling support via 1800 187 263, or Lifeline via 13 11 14.