

## Kieran Toohey, Peer and Community Advisor - Transcript

**Denise:** Today I'm talking to Kieran Toohey. Kieran is a Peer and Community Advisor at Open Arms Veterans and Families Counseling Service. He graduated from UNSW with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. Since then, he's done his Cert IV in Mental Health Peer Work, and he's thinking about doing some more study in Neuroscience. Thanks for being with me.

**Kieran:** Hi Denise, thanks for having me as well, I appreciate it.

**Denise:** I'm really excited to talk to you. So, let's actually start with what you're doing now. What's your job now? What have you done after psychology for work?

**Kieran:** Well, a couple of different roles. First, after the degree I worked in suicide prevention in male-dominated industries, like construction and mining. So, case management was looking after the specific needs of individuals and pointing them in the right direction for clinical and other community supports. The other part of that job was speaking to audiences about my lived experience of mental health and also providing them with really simple tools that they can use so that they can check in with a friend or a family member if they're worried about them, and what to look for, because it can seem so hidden. Yeah, so, construction, then mining and then the last two years of the mining job I saw a role come up with Open Arms Veterans and Families Counselling and decided to apply for that so I could go back and give back to the veteran community, if that makes sense.

**Denise:** Absolutely, and I know Kieran, because you've told me before, you are also an ex-defence forces, is that right? Ex-army?

**Kieran:** Yeah, so 13 years in the Australian army with different deployments in different locations so it was pretty good.

**Denise:** So, this must be close to your heart working with these people.

**Kieran:** Yeah it is, and it's something I've got to be mindful of too, that would be mindful too- exhausting myself because you can, you know, feel exhausted sometimes with the close relationships and the close experiences as well. So, you're working with a cohort of people who are all related in a very close way, so it's interesting to say the least.

**Denise:** Well let's say a little more. What do you actually do as a peer community advisor for this group? What does that job look like?

**Kieran:** Yeah, it's pretty similar to the case management and presentation role that I used to do with the suicide prevention charity. The role can be divvied in half, and half can be presenting. So, I teach ASIST (applied suicide intervention skills training) to the community of veterans and their family members who want to learn more about that. Also "Safe Talk", which is a shorter version. Presentations about what I went through and experienced in the military for an audience who want to learn, and also case management again. So, having a cohort of clients to work with and really non-clinical a very sort of "orgentic"... that's a combination of organic and authentic... 😊

**Denise:** So yeah, I got that. I like it.

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**Kieran:** Are very 'orgentic,' we'll keep that! An 'orgntic' relationship. Uh, full of mistakes too! So, it's where I think Open Arms as an organization have been clever, have noticed that some people feel a certain way about seeing a clinician. And having myself there who's used clinical psychologists for my own support, I'm able to help bridge that gap between the client and the clinician. And we can have discussions back and forth, myself with the clinician, and myself with the with the client, and it so far seems to be doing a really good job of it.

**Denise:** That's really interesting. What do you see the role of that bridge being? What's the value of the client having you come to be a bridge with the clinician?

**Kieran:** I think there are ideas about doing things that you've never done generally, whether it's seeing a clinician or trying surfing for the first time. Yeah, if I can be so random. It's not until you experience it that you realize that the ideas and the stigma you might have had about, let's say, seeing a psychologist don't exist. One of them, for example, is I've openly disclosed that I've seen a psychologist still do, and a psychiatrist still do. And I almost guarantee no one on the end of the line listening was, you know, moved deeply or greatly by that. They were probably like, well, good for you. And so we have these ideas that there's this stigma behind seeing someone when in fact no one really thinks about it, that badly. In fact, most people are thinking of it in quite a positive regard, so why don't we afford ourselves that and so having conversation like we are can also help breakdown those barriers for people trying to get in to see a psychologist, or counsellor or whoever it might be.

**Denise:** Yeah, that makes sense. So, you're easing the transition and easing that decision for people to go and seek help, making it more accessible. That's beautiful.

**Kieran:** That's right.

**Denise:** That must be very rewarding work for you.

**Kieran:** Yeah, it is and the because the veteran community is a very unique community of people who were, you know classically and operantly conditioned, literally. And so you learn behaviours and they're quite implicit too. So, without much awareness and you come out of the military, you can be really unaware of what you're doing. So, because I lived and worked in the military, I have that shared experience too. So, when they say hey, did you notice this when you went to see a GP? I say yeah, I did, and here are some other ways you can broach the subject with the GP like that if you so need, but also there are charities out there for different organizations, LGBTQI and Indigenous and veteran and men and women alike. I can also say hey I've used this service, why don't we go take a look together and see what it's like and then so connecting people back into communities of like-minded individuals where they can start to form different bonds and relationships again.

**Denise:** Absolutely, that sounds like really important work, Kieran. How did you get into this? How did you get this job following your psychology studies? How did you get this role?

**Kieran:** Good question. I think at the time when I was in the military, I was aiming to become a military psychologist only because the last few years of my career I became really fascinated in philosophy, neuroscience, human behaviour. So, I actually began my degree when I was still in military.

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Unfortunately, due to another story which I won't go into, but the military has a way of, It can get rid of people in a fashion that normal civilian jobs can't. So, I was unfairly discharged. And so, it really interfered with my studies. Nonetheless, I finished the studies. And got the degree over and done with or completed finally, and then started to look for jobs that could take a person with a degree and not necessarily an Honours to get into Clinical Psychology.

**Denise:** Yeah, so let me just pause you for a second there and say. First of all, congratulations on doing that on finishing your degree, even though it sounds like you were in probably a pretty stressful time and I don't only want to congratulate you on that, but just mention it because I think that that's obviously a story that's very unique to you, but I feel that a lot of students have very stressful situations arise when they're studying, and it's nice to hear other people experience a lot of stressful studying and get through it and make it happen. So, well done.

**Kieran:** Oh thanks.

**Denise:** And then it sounds also to me that you know you didn't do the Honours after your undergrad and instead you started looking for work, is that right?

**Kieran:** That's right, yeah.

**Denise:** Yeah, that's also reassuring to people who maybe don't want to do Honours or for whatever reason don't do it, so that's so that's great. So, to get the job you have now, you needed your undergrad in psych, but nothing higher than that, is that right?

**Kieran:** That's right, and to be fair, I didn't even need the psych degree, so it could be something that a student who's studying looks at doing before they finish too, getting their foot in the door with the psychology organization or social work organization. And even attending to volunteer work is helpful and can add to your experience and your CV as well when you apply for jobs after. But, the case management role with the suicide prevention charity needed the degree, so they knew that there was a certain level of education. But this role is purely, mostly I should say, based on my experiences of, let's say hitting rock bottom as a military veteran and then how I used different tools and aids to recover from that role.

**Denise:** Yeah, I think your life experience obviously is really helpful to your role and I'm sure in a lot of different ways in your life. But I would also imagine that what you studied in psychology comes in handy, even though it's not necessary for this role. What would you say is really helpful in your current role, from what you learned when you were studying psychology?

**Kieran:** Yeah, I agree actually that there's a lot of pressure we put on ourselves as students and lots of students who if you are struggling now, I thought I'd just pop this in there that there are.... If I could go back and do my degree, I wish I'd used the resources that the university had available to help me. Part of it was because I didn't know, part of it was pride, or minimizing my story like well, am I using a resource that someone else really needs and you know, down playing it. So, I hope moving forward that people take some comfort in knowing that there is a lot of people around you, as you said, Denise, who might be going through a rough trot and there's so many resources you can use. Also, the pressure I put

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on myself to get into Honours now I wanted to be Clinical Psych. I put so much pressure myself to get there and I didn't get the score I needed and I was so upset and it really annoyed me. I thought damn well, what am I going to do? Turns out, there's lots of things I can do. Turns out, there's lots of things I have done and made a great impact too. So, I thought I'd just share that reminder. And the learning that came out of not getting into the Honours was I had time to think about it. I had time to practice case management and suicide prevention training, gain experience in other areas. And you know, I've come to the point now that I'm like, I don't think that clinical psychology is for me. I think it's just helpful to know that it needn't be the end answer for anyone studying psychology and that from there you can go on to do other things now. How did I use the degree? I still use it right now. In a conversation like we're having. Learning real simple things like, you know, your implicit bias and techniques for mindfulness, research in conditioning, operant, classical and all these other fascinating areas of human behaviour... they can help and do help in just normal relationships as well. And it's not me psychoanalyzing anyone. We all judge and psychoanalyze a step when we walk up at anyway. It's a natural human thing. Rather, it's more about feeling engaged with another person and finding that common union if I can, call it that.

**Denise:** I agree, I think it's about connection. Connection with other people, but also with yourself, and understanding other people and also understanding yourself. I actually believe that everyone should study psychology. But you know that's not happening yet. In that answer you gave, there are a couple things I want to pick up again. One of them, you said that now, knowing what you know now, you actually realize you don't want to be a clinical psychologist. You thought that's what she wanted in the beginning, and now that you've had more experience or something else has happened, you realize it's not right for you. How did you figure that out? How do you know it's not right for you? Because I this is a question I have, and it's question I think a lot of psychology students have. How do you know if that's the job that's gonna be right for you?

**Kieran:** Such a good question, I think. To be a very stereotypical middle aged man, right now I'm going to use the F word: feelings. I they are still a foreign thing to me and part of it was because my military conditioning that feelings weren't really that necessary to get the job done. I had to really work on myself to get in touch with my gut feeling. And part of it was realizing I was coming home to now my beautiful wife and I was tired and fatigued and didn't give her as much energy as I wished. So, for me it was a real introspective feeling that helped me gauge or even conflict with the person that I put as my number one. And I thought, why am I coming home and sometimes being not there for her?. And a very real thing for me is compassion fatigue. So, I talk to, discuss, you know, pretty heavy topics, sometimes with people and very heavy interventions to come home. And I'm exhausted, and no wonder right, you're putting your heart and soul into another person and you get home and that might be that resource there for the number one in your life, let's say and including yourself. So, to me my priority is her and so I had to make a decision. And I said I want my energy to be there for her. How can I give back to the community in a way that might be case management with my psychology degree? And so, because of my experiences in the last 6-7 years, in case management without Honours. That has been enough so far to get me into doing Masters. So, I can now extend my education, still give back but in a different, more sort of research based methodology, rather than exhausting my compassion with the clients. And I mean that you know, mutual respect to them as well.

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**Denise:** Yeah, that's helpful I think, you know, ideally people who are considering careers in Clinical Psychology get a chance to experience what it would actually feel like to do that role. So, what was it again that you did that allowed you the chance to experience that and to see sort of the amount of compassion it was taking from you?

**Kieran:** That was mainly doing suicide interventions. And but also using the qualifications I think that stress I put on myself to want to get Clinical can often be the barrier to moving forward itself, if that makes sense. So, thinking so much about getting in, creating more stress, actually sort of stopped me from being present, and I don't mean that in any mystical way, I mean being present in a practical sense. Being present allows you to sort of re-gather your thoughts, let the stress hormones reduce, and then take your time to think and focus. And I think, again, retrospectively, if I could go back and do the degree, I'd do it slower and I'll take my time and I'd use the resources. And look, I'm 39 and I remember how long it took and people straight out of high school were like frantic about getting it done before they're 23. There's no rush, and you know what the brain still developing at that age for a lot of people. Mine's still developing now and I'm nearly 40. I don't know if it will develop, but that's where I'm at now.

**Denise:** I agree there's never actually rush on these things, although sometimes we feel like there is. So, you also mentioned that it was a surprise to you that you know your plan changed. That you had a plan, it at the time it did include Honours and a Masters of Clinical Psych, and it changed. And I know that that's really hard for people at any age, it's hard when we have a plan and we're not the ones that change it. Something else changes it for us. So, can you go back and remember how did you move from a place of frustration into this kind of acceptance that you have now where it's genuine. You're genuinely clearly, genuinely happy with the work you're doing now as opposed to the work. That you had thought you'd want. How did that happen for you? How did you go from feeling possibly frustrated or even angry about the change to today, where you're in a great career and you're happy with your psychology career?

**Kieran:** That's a good question, and I might answer this a little sort of introspectively. I think that I wouldn't have found this out, wouldn't have found out that I didn't want to do clinical, if I wasn't so self-aware. So, I learned meditation and this isn't a selling meditation thing, by the way, but...

**Denise:** You're preaching to the choir, but keep going.

**Kieran:** OK. I think everyone should be doing that. Being more awake to your needs is ultimately what made me discover that this isn't this isn't for me. The field of human behaviour and psychology is. I am fascinated by it, but that clinical aspect isn't for me. And so again, the exhaustion from compassion fatigue was one thing, but cultivating self-awareness is like flexing any other muscle. If you haven't worked on that muscle, then you can't flex it much. Now, by no means am I saying that I'm an enlightened being, rather compared to where I was, it's akin to being awake from sleep walking. So, to answer your question, I know it's a little bit introspective and subtle, I needed to see my thinking to realize that I didn't want to do clinical psychology and I think while I was learning in case management, and while I was learning in presenting mental health programs, I started to realize that I was actually really fascinated in the science of everything that I was talking about, rather than their clinical therapeutic interventions one-on-one. And so that was the other signal for me. I was like I've got more

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of an engineer's mind. And so I can use that engineer's mind, let's say in human psychology and behaviour to apply in say, neuroscience or research? Did that make sense, Denise? I hope it did.

**Denise:** That's why I'm going to summarize what I took from that which is, everyone I'm sure would interpret different things from. That one I heard. And what it made me think of was that. It sounds like you were forced to develop that self-reflection muscle more because of the fact that life had thrown a spanner in the works basically and said no, that path you had sort of drawn out. We're going to change it on you. The cost of. That have forced you to actually develop a deeper self-awareness but also getting in touch with those gut feelings you mentioned before. And I think that that's the ideal way to deal with change that's not in your control, right? Is that sometimes life will actually force you in a moment where you either get very upset or reflect on what this is offering you instead. And I love talking to people like you who've done something different after studying psychology because it reminds me that the utility of learning psychology extends to so many different jobs, and there are so many ways in which you can think of it scientifically, not just through research, but also like you were saying, approaching problems with more of an engineering kind of mindset. But also, what strikes me is that you're still doing something that's very human-centred and very much about helping people. You're still connecting with people and connecting people with other people. So, it's not just that you've been given an opportunity to go into more of a science role by looking at neuroscience, but you're still looking at ways to help people, just in ways that are a different kind of relationship, not the one-on-one therapeutic clinical relationship. My summary answer might have been longer than your answer.

**Kieran:** No, but I'm nodding with you that that's a really good mirrored response, Denise. It is the way. There's another thing, like I wasn't very academic going into university. For those who limit themselves there's this beautiful quote from Albert Einstein that sat next to my desk every day. I hope it's Albert Einstein, but anyway. The quote goes like this: If you continually examine a fish Oh no sorry, go back a sentence. It starts everybody is born a genius. And I thought, wow, that's that's a pretty profound statement everybody, he said. But if you continually examine a fish on its ability to keep climbing trees, it will spend its life. Thinking it's silly or stupid, and so I thought about that and I went. Maybe I'm a swimmer, not a tree climber. And maybe I learned differently. And so, but I'm still passionate about human behaviour. I employ to keep pursuing your dream of going to do human behaviour, but again I wish I'd used the resources that the university could offered, like some tutoring support. I wish someone sat next to me and helped me read a paragraph differently or write differently. I was also struggling with PTSD from the military experience that I had, so my soldier mindset was keep pushing, keep pushing. But we also know there's an optimal level of pushing, and I maybe went too far and should have taken my time. But at the same time, there's too little pushing, which does you no good either, and so it's finding that Goldilocks zone for your own learning abilities.

**Denise:** I think that's the last thing that we keep trying to learn our whole lives. In any situation relationships, work, health, whatever it is. It's always. I think the essential lesson is that push and pull balance of how do I put enough pressure on whatever it is? The thing that I want or the thing I'm working towards that it actually happens and you know, I'm paying attention to it and trying my best. But how do I practice enough? That it can actually happen. You know, enough pressure to push, but not so much pressure, it just breaks. That's the life lesson we're all struggling to figure out.

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**Kieran:** Here's a practical psychology thought experiment for you. Pretend that everybody had one ear that was a speaker, that had a cable attached to the brain. And that speaker would blurt out whatever you're thinking at any time, and you couldn't turn it off. Quickly, you would realize I'm no better or worse than any other human here. You know, you'd see faculty members struggling and professors you'd hear funny thoughts, intelligent thoughts, and sad thoughts. The stigma, would go away. And so I think that if we can bring that to mind from time to time, you're like we're all in this together. And other people have struggled to like I'm openly disclose. I got through and it was hard and there's the other beautiful word that I love is neuroplasticity, which means the brain can change. And then how I feel about myself today needn't be how I feel tomorrow. And I'm really proud of just having the undergrad right now is really a great achievement for me and took a lot a of effort to do an undergrad degree for me. For others, it might come easier, but again, there are resources there you can use, and I hope you do.

**Denise:** Thank you, Kieran. I think that's a beautiful message to share and I really appreciate you are being honest and open about your own story. I think that I'm sure I'm not the only person who has found it really interesting to listen to, so thank you so much for talking to me today.

**Kieran:** You're welcome, thanks for having me Denise.