

Shining The Spotlight of
AWARENESS

onto

Mental Health

and the

Deaf Community

with

YOGA





In this article, **Melissa Thompson** looks at how yoga can assist people who have mental health issues and at the same time live with different levels of hearing loss. Melissa refers to the Deaf community in this article with a capital 'D.' The Deaf community represents people with hearing loss who use the Australian Sign Language (Auslan). However it is also recognised that there is a spectrum of hearing loss which includes those who do not use Auslan, and who do not identify as 'Deaf.' So the term 'deaf' is also used as a general term to describe a segment of the population who share problems of access to auditory information. Melissa is proficient in Auslan, she has been practising yoga for over 15 years, and she has a background in caring, community and healthcare.

Stuck in frustratingly slow-moving traffic one afternoon, I heard Osher Gunsberg (also known as Andrew G. from *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* and former host of *Australian Idol*) recounting his mental health story. Osher is a board member of SANE Australia, and makes no secret of having a mental health diagnosis that requires ongoing treatment and medication. He openly describes a deterioration when he went off medication, and promotes the need for people to openly share their stories as an important part of their recovery process, and also for broader education and awareness about mental health.

"One of the things about mental illness is that it can be very isolating and by sharing stories you actually get to realise that you're not alone ... it was in fact only after I started hearing other people's stories, describing pretty much what I went through, that I realised ... those people were going through the same thing I was, and they're alright so maybe one day I'll be alright too."

Osher went on to emphasise that 1 in 5 people in Australia experience mental health problems. If the person with the diagnosis is your child, parent, partner or friend, then by extension you are affected too.

However there is a population that could not access this podcast or radio interview, a group for whom the radio transmission literally does not resonate. In this population, the prevalence of mental health problems is even greater, in part because of problems with accessibility to information and communication.

The group of people to which I refer are those with

hearing loss, which includes Deaf people and those who are 'hard of hearing.'

Speech and sound is hugely important to the wider 'hearing' population for access to information and connectivity to those around them. This is demonstrated by the impact of the Osher Gunsberg radio interview on me. The interview and podcast series which it sought to promote were shared by spoken English. Osher described mental illness as being isolating and the importance of being able to share experiences with others.

Imagine how isolating it would be if the health advice, engagement with medical and mental health professionals, and conversations within support groups, were not in a language that you could access.

Indeed, isolation for those who are Deaf is a major contributor to the higher prevalence of mental illness within this population.

For most appointments and therapy sessions for a Deaf person, a qualified Auslan interpreter must be present. This must be organised in advance, and as with most things, there are logistical and funding issues and limitations which must be considered. Without the presence of an interpreter, communication may perhaps be by written notes. Can you imagine doing this work effectively with a notepad and mime?

The ideal scenario for a Deaf person is to be able to communicate in a visual language – in Auslan, but how many mental health professionals are fluent in this language? Even more rare is a professional who understands what it is like to be Deaf, who has a shared cultural and linguistic background with the client, and who has themselves experienced the challenges and barriers of living with deafness.

The closing remark from the radio interview with Osher is again relevant: **"if you see someone overcome the same challenges that you are facing, it gives you hope that maybe you can do the same."**

Treatment by a Deaf professional can demonstrate to the client that with the right support and advocacy, deafness does not need to be a barrier.

One such Deaf professional is Karli Dettman, who is a qualified counsellor, yoga teacher, and director of the Karli Health Centre. Karli has a wealth of training and experience working with both Deaf people and people who have varying levels of hearing loss along with mental health illness. Karli is very aware of the connection between mental health problems and deafness and through yoga, meditation, bushwalking, connection with nature and other training and practices, she works to enhance wellness and resilience in Deaf participants, in the hope of both improving and preventing mental health problems.



A Deaf client who was seeing Karli for counselling sessions, agreed to start attending yoga classes following Karli's suggestion. With an athletic background and in peak physical fitness, this client was unsure that anything further could be gained from yoga.

In addition to benefits from the yoga practice itself, this client went on to enjoy and grow because of the opportunity to meet and be amongst other Deaf people in the class. Through connection to community and those with shared experiences, this client discovered the value of yoga classes which was fully accessible to Deaf people.

Karli is a rare example in Australia, of being both a Deaf counsellor who is fluent in Auslan, and a yoga instructor. She runs counselling sessions using Skype with Deaf clients around the country. These clients do not have geographic proximity to the Karli Health Centre, but prefer interacting in sign language via video link

with someone who can truly understand their perspective and experiences. Karli also just started nationwide yoga classes via live video to Deaf people keen to experience teaching in their native language.

Recognising the rareness of Karli and the need for accessible yoga classes within the Deaf Community, The Yoga Foundation and the Karli Health Centre have recently commenced working together. They hope to together create more options for Deaf people in Australia to experience yoga in a truly accessible way. The Yoga Foundation provides yoga services to disadvantaged communities - in particular those suffering from mental health issues. It strives to bring evidence-based yoga to disadvantaged people who cannot access it easily to reduce the symptoms of depression and anxiety. The provision of yoga classes to Deaf clients fits this brief beautifully, as often consequences of isolation and limitations, depression and anxiety have a higher prevalence in the Deaf population.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

This article has been translated and is available in Auslan on the following link:

<http://karlihealthcentre.com.au/>