



Left: Darren at home and more at peace with himself, in April 2011. The keys to his recovery? Timely professional help, medications, staying active, and the support of loved ones

and I thrived on helping others at the local level. But club politics intervened – as they often do – and I had my responsibilities taken away from me by high-ranking committee members. As a community-minded person, I couldn't get over what happened to me at my former club. It was a shattering experience.

During the depths of my despair, I was on the receiving end of what I perceived to be some terrible treatment by friends, so I made a decision to move away from some and develop new connections. Family disagreements over minor issues began to creep under my skin. It all came to head in August 2009 when, at the age of 42, I had two panic attacks in Victoria's Grampians National Park during a working holiday, followed by a total breakdown in the Centrelink office in Broadmeadows, north of Melbourne.

Bronwyn, my partner of 24 years, was beside me that day when I felt like a broken man, at the lowest point of my life. Reluctant to go through the red tape required to gain financial support, and confused to the point of despair, the tears began to flow in front of dozens of strangers.

The grief was overwhelming and painful, and it was then – at Bronwyn's urging – I realised it was time to seek professional help. The reality of doing that felt like a tonne of bricks crashing down on me. The sense of shame was palpable.

I went to see a doctor and, after putting me through a few tests, he diagnosed me with depression. The label was mine, I accepted it. I also knew it was time to do something about it. That day he introduced me to a psychologist, who asked me a few simple questions and – most importantly – showed compassion. I felt relieved, even though inside I was reeling. We made an appointment for a session of therapy a few days later. It was time to make a plan.

Cognitive behavioural therapy has been one of the keys to my recovery; it certainly helped me stay on track. I've also tried a couple of different antidepressants, and to be frank, I hated them both. Always reluctant to take medication, I only did so after exhaustive research. I soon discovered they weren't for me as I suffered from side effects including jerky, involuntary movements, loss of sex drive, loss of concentration and excessive weight gain: during the first 12 months I put on 20kg. It felt as though a thief was stealing my personality and good-hearted, easygoing nature.

I now pursue holistic methods, and believe that with an open mind concerning therapy, exercise, healthy eating and moving back into community activities, my recovery will accelerate. Engaging with health professionals sooner rather than later is so important to get the wheels moving forward. My own struggle came from being hesitant to move

back into local community activities for fear of not being wanted. But as I become more comfortable with myself, people seemed willing to welcome me back.

Over these dark years, Bronwyn, my parents Patricia and Gordon, and my brother Matthew have seen me cry many times. There have been some testy moments – I don't often react well to them talking straight to me, but I do understand that they do it out of love and don't want to see me slide backwards. Their love and support has kept me going. Without them, I don't know where I'd be. In fact, as part of my "active therapy", my dad and I now walk three to four kilometres twice a week along the Maribyrnong River in Essendon, before eating lunch together. It's therapeutic for both of us, and it strengthens our bond.

Walking has always been an important part of my life. Through my golfing years, I'd walk up to 20km a week. But during the lowest point of my depression, walking quite simply went by the wayside. I felt it was a chore, and not something to enjoy. My psychologist and GP continually encouraged me to get mobile again, and that inspired me to create and coordinate Let's Walk Australia, which is a new



Darren with a photography award he won in June 2008. One year later, he would break down and be diagnosed with depression

walking programme designed for Australians who have experienced a mental illness. Of course my research of the first regular venue for the walk was already done for me: the four-kilometre Maribyrnong River Loop Walk – the very walk I share so regularly with my father. ●

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Now 44, Darren is determined to keep the black dog away. “But he comes snapping at my heels every so often.” When he does, Darren recalls the keys to his recovery. “Staying active to help myself, but also reaching out to others who have experienced mental illness. If I can help people connect at a local level to the point where we meet, chat, and enjoy each other's company, then I feel as though one day I'll walk out of this black hole for good.” Check out LetsWalkAustralia.com for more information.

Walking out of a black hole

When **Darren Stones** felt depression snapping at his heels, getting active became a crucial step in his ongoing recovery

THESE DAYS it's possible we could walk right by each other in the street and you might think I'm OK. I never had the word “depression” written on my forehead, but it often felt that way. Now I'd probably just say “Hi” and we'd continue on our merry way.

Depression crept up on me like a wily old cat, preparing to pounce when I was at my most vulnerable. Beginning in March 2006, at the age of 39, I found myself effectively cocooned in a home office, detached from friends through a desire to find success at my chosen career as a photographer and writer. I didn't much like what I'd become. Reclusive, scared to go out, hardly answering the phone.

I now know that the trigger for all of this – a depression that wouldn't be properly diagnosed until some three years later – was something seemingly trivial. Yet recalling it brings back such horrid memories.

In 2005, I held a key role as a coach of young golfers at a private golf course in Melbourne. Golf had always been a major part of my life,