



## Supporting the Families of Veterans: Understanding the Impact of Veterans' Mental Health on their Families, Partners and Children (part 2)

### Family background

Jason (age 45 years old) and Melissa (age 42 years old) were married for seventeen years before they separated five years ago. They have two children Isabella (21 years old) and Sophie (19 years old).

### Jason's story

When Jason was in Year 11, after he'd heard a returned serviceman speak at a Careers Day at his school, he decided to join the infantry of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). After successfully completing Year 12 at age eighteen, he joined the army's infantry division. He planned to leave after twenty-five years, figuring he'd have earned the right to an early retirement after all those years of service. However, he was medically discharged in 2017, after 24 years' service, due to a back injury. During his timeserving, Jason was deployed to Afghanistan a number of times.

Jason enjoyed the intensity and excitement of army life, particularly the deployments. He found validation and identity in being a soldier; he was grateful for the sense of purpose and the routine the ADF provided. Being an infantryman in the ADF was *'his life'*.

Jason was a sociable and popular fellow; he'd always enjoyed partying and drinking, even more so after he joined the army. He had many mates who were also serving; together they'd work out, train, party and drink.

Jason and his ex-wife Melissa met at a nightclub when he was on leave after his first deployment. They had a whirlwind romance and married in 1997, having two daughters in quick succession. Jason hadn't planned on having a family, he wasn't *'big on planning, things always seem to fall in my lap at the right time'*. He enjoyed being a father although he wasn't *'hands-on'*, partly due to the demands of his working life, but more so because he didn't think parenting came as naturally to him as it did to Melissa.

Due to various ADF postings, the family moved six times in seventeen years: Isabella went to seven schools while Sophie went to six different schools. Jason was grateful for how well Melissa and the girls adapted each time they moved. The first twelve years of Jason and Melissa's marriage were intense, characterised by homecomings and farewells, Jason felt he had the best of both worlds *'the buzz of*

*deployments, and then the buzz of seeing my girls'.*

In 2013, while deployed, Jason was medically downgraded due to a back injury. The ADF rehabilitation counsellor anticipated that Jason would be back to his old self in 6-8 weeks but he wasn't, and despite continuing with the program, his flexibility remained significantly compromised. He also suffered residual chronic lower back pain. Jason was subsequently relegated to administrative duties which he found boring and demeaning. How had he ended up this way? He didn't know who to blame – himself or his rehabilitation counsellor. He wondered about his plan to leave after 25 years and retire. He had another five years to reach this milestone. He didn't think he could. He felt confused and a little lost because he didn't feel like he had earned the '*right to retire*' anymore.

Now when Jason went home it wasn't as exciting, he didn't feel like he had anything to offer. He was drinking more and for different reasons. He was no longer a '*happy sociable drunk*', preferring to drink alone. The more he drank, the angrier he became. His drinking sessions would end with him verbally lashing out at Melissa, followed by the inevitable remorse and guilt the next morning. While he was invariably disappointed in himself he found some comfort in the knowledge that '*at least I was able to stop myself hitting something/someone. Because that's what I really wanted to do*'.

Jason and Melissa both knew that things were not good, so much so that Melissa had started seeing a counsellor at Open Arms. She'd wanted both of them to see the counsellor but Jason refused.

In early 2015, Melissa decided to leave the marriage. Jason tried to persuade her otherwise but she was reconciled and stalwart, she'd made her decision and she was determined to make it work. Isabella and Sophie who were 16 and 14 years old respectively, were devastated, particularly Sophie.

Reluctant as he was, Jason did what he was told. He moved out and tried to move on. He secured a small two-bedroom unit to live in. When he was on leave, the girls would stay with him, it all felt very strange. Jason didn't know what to do with the girls when they stayed. Or himself for that matter.

Three years passed. Jason felt he was mastering life as a single man, aside from some casual flings he hadn't found anyone '*to replace Melissa*'. Isabella was growing up and seeking some independence from her parents however Jason and Sophie were very close, having got themselves '*into a weekend groove*'.

Jason was medically discharged in 2017 and '*in a blink, I went from soldier to civilian*'. He finds it tricky to organise himself in the '*outside*' world. He hadn't realised how much the army helped him to organise his life. Money is tight and he tries to keep things simple. To bide time he drinks, plays video games and trawls through

Facebook. He avoids his serving mates as well as ex-serving organisations. Melissa urges him to see someone at Open Arms, but he can't see the point *'how can they help me? Can they turn around time and make my serving history something to be proud of?'*

Jason's GP, who he sees when he needs repeat prescriptions for back pain meds, is about the only person, apart from Sophie, he sees regularly.

He has put on weight and has stopped going to the gym. He feels tired and lacklustre; he assumes that one day he will find his *'mojo'* again. He doesn't know how long it will take but in the meantime he's prepared to sit it out . . .

## Melissa's story

For as long as she could remember, Melissa wanted to have children. With a background of alcoholism and family violence in her family of origin, she was committed to not making the same mistakes as her parents.

Initially Melissa and Jason's romance was a whirlwind of drinking, partying and revelry; however, as soon as she fell pregnant Melissa cut back on her drinking and partying. She found moderation easy to maintain. It wasn't a sacrifice, she enjoyed being a mother.

Melissa worried about Jason's continued drinking but, as she didn't have the *'whole picture'*, she assumed when he was on base he was more tempered. She saw his drinking as *'release'* from the intensity of army life, which she also thought was *'well earned'*. For the last

seven years, Melissa has worked part-time in the local child care centre.

The turning point in their marriage came when Jason hurt his back. Something inside Melissa switched; she saw Jason in a different light, and felt that he *'needed propping up'*, but it wasn't her job to do so. She felt deeply conflicted and started seeing a counsellor at Open Arms which she found helpful. She urged Jason to see someone at Open Arms but he refused.

When Melissa decided to leave the marriage, she knew it was the right decision because she felt released and able to focus on the girls. Initially worried about Jason's drinking, she restricted the time the girls spent with their dad, but after they left school she trusted them to make their own decisions. Without fail and with pride, both girls marched with Jason every Anzac Day.

However over time, and more often than not, Isabella would find an excuse to leave Jason's place early, arrive late or not go at all. Sophie, on the other hand, told Melissa she felt *'sorry for dad, he's got no one. He needs me'* and she'd spend most weekends in Jason's tiny unit, binge-watching Netflix and helping him *'clean up his place, after a drinking session, for a fresh start on Monday'*.

Melissa didn't worry about Isabella as much as she did about Sophie. Isabella reminded Melissa of Jason - she managed her emotions through physical exertion and pushed herself to take risks, be extreme. However, unlike Jason, Isabella had purpose and was driven; she was

good at making plans. Isabella had been in her final year of school when the marriage dissolved; while she didn't do as well as she expected, she did well enough to become a personal trainer, which had always been her intent.

Sophie was not as self-assured or self-aware. She didn't have Isabella's drive. Her schooling suffered from the marriage break up, and after failing Year 11, she didn't return. She had a string of casual jobs but none that sustained her. Melissa felt Sophie was waiting for something to happen, but she, Sophie, didn't know what. She had few friends and always looked forward to spending time with her dad, after which she'd invariably come home quiet and morose.

## Present situation

Melissa decided to see the Open Arms counsellor who she saw about five years ago before she split up with Jason. Melissa tells the counsellor she has returned *'because my life is a mess. My baby daughter needs me but I don't know how to help her'*.

She explains that the other night she was deeply disturbed to learn from Isabella that Sophie was cutting herself. Isabella had walked into the bathroom catching Sophie unawares. Sophie told Isabella that cutting *'made her feel better'* and urged her not to tell Melissa.

Melissa was shocked that she'd missed any warning signs; ironically, it was Isabella who Melissa had been worried about. Isabella was training for a marathon, and according to

Melissa doing so obsessively. Sophie on the other hand, was either at home or at Jason's and while Melissa didn't think Sophie was that happy *'...I didn't know how messed up she actually is. She's a quiet, gentle soul who keeps to herself'*.

Melissa tells the counsellor about her new partner, Ben, a divorced father whom she met at child care. They've been together for three years, and recently he moved in with her and the girls. Initially, it wasn't easy for the girls (or Ben or herself) but over time they've achieved some balance and harmony.

Jason however couldn't or wouldn't adjust; he refused to accept that Melissa had moved on, that Ben now had a role parenting his daughters. Jason and Ben didn't have a good relationship. Ben, a manager at a recruitment agency, thought Jason was depressed and had serious substance abuse problems; Jason thought Ben a *'ring in'* who doesn't know his place.

The tensions in their relationship came to a head about three months ago, a disturbing incident which both girls witnessed. Jason had appeared unannounced at their place, clearly under the influence, demanding to *'talk to my wife, alone'* but Ben wouldn't let him. Jason went off the handle and punched Ben along with a couple of walls in the garage. Ben agreed not to call the police only if Melissa agreed to ban Jason from their home. Melissa felt torn. Melissa remembers thinking *'if I agree to Ben's demands I'll make Isabella happy and Sophie sad, but if I*

*don't I'll be putting Ben at risk'. Jason was a big man, having put on at least 20 kilos since he left the army. Melissa decided to follow Ben's advice; Jason hadn't been to their home since. But Melissa still feels in a quandary - she wants to please Ben but she can't 'cut my ties with Jason... I still feel guilty for forbidding him in my home. He's the father of my children. I can't abandon him'.*

She's here to seek direction – how can she manage the demands of all those she feels she needs to care for - Isabella, Sophie, Jason, Ben and herself?