



GROW | 
mental wellbeing programs

ANNUAL REPORT

23/24

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About GROW

Founded in 1957, GROW has been dedicated to providing free, peer - to - peer support groups for individuals seeking assistance with their mental health and wellbeing. The origins of GROW trace back to 1954, when Con Keogh, a Catholic priest, experienced a severe mental breakdown and was hospitalised for about 10 months. After his discharge, Con struggled with fear and severe memory loss in an era marked by high stigma, discrimination, and a highly institutionalised mental health system. Con believed there had to be a better way.

During his recovery, a friend invited Con to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. Although not an alcoholic, Con found solace in the fellowship and structure of the meetings. He soon discovered that others at AA meetings, who were not necessarily alcoholics, also benefited from the mutual support for their mental health.

Inspired by these experiences, Con and a group of like-minded friends began discussing the formation of a group tailored to their specific mental health needs. They sought fellowship, humanity, social serenity, friendship, and community—elements they found in mutual support. This group began meeting regularly, recognizing the significant benefits of their gatherings. Understanding the need to document their findings, they initiated the earliest leadership meetings, meticulously recording what promoted recovery and what led to setbacks.

This collaborative effort led to the development of a wellbeing program created entirely by individuals with lived experiences of mental illness. On April 26, 1957, the first official meeting of what would become the Grow Program took place. Initially named “Recovery” to emphasize the goal and solution rather than the problem, the organisation has evolved significantly over the past 67 years.

Our Impact and Growth

From its humble beginnings, GROW has continued to develop and expand across Australia and internationally. As a community-based organisation designed, developed, and delivered by people with lived experience, GROW has assisted tens of thousands of Australians in their journey to recovery from mental ill health. Today, we proudly stand on the shoulders of giants, continuing the work they began and perpetuating the same process of mutual support and collective wisdom.

Co-design

Long before co-design in mental health became a widely recognised concept, GROW established itself as a global leader by involving individuals with lived experience in the co-design process. GROW advanced beyond this approach by developing a model of integrated governance, a level of involvement that many of today’s co-design organisations strive to achieve.

Co-design should not be seen as the ultimate goal; rather, it is a step toward achieving integrated governance and recovery. For individuals with lived experience, mere participation in co-design is not sufficient if they lose control over decision-making regarding the implementation of their designs. Integrated governance ensures that those with lived experience are the decision-makers on what gets implemented, how continuous improvement is managed, and how services are delivered.

Looking Forward

As we reflect on our history and the foundations laid by our founders, we remain committed to our mission of providing peer-to-peer support for mental wellbeing. GROW continues to thrive as a testament to the power of community and lived experience, ensuring that no one has to face their mental health challenges alone.



Our Unique Structure - Peer-to-Peer support groups

Peer-to-peer support groups for mental health are community-based gatherings where individuals facing similar mental health challenges come together to provide mutual support, encouragement, and understanding. These groups offer a safe and non-judgmental environment where members can share their experiences, learn from one another, and develop coping strategies.

One of the key benefits of peer-to-peer support groups is the sense of connection and belonging. Participants often find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their struggles and can relate to others who have faced similar issues. This shared experience fosters empathy, reduces feelings of isolation, and can be a crucial step toward healing and recovery.

These groups are typically led by peers who have personal experience with mental health challenges rather than by professional therapists or counsellors. This peer leadership creates a more relatable and less hierarchical atmosphere, encouraging open and honest communication. Members can share their stories, offer practical advice, and provide emotional support to one another, creating a network of care and solidarity.

Peer-to-peer support groups can address a wide range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, PTSD, and more. Grow Programs are structured and with sets of guidelines focused on leadership and recovery.

The Grow Program illustrates the distinctive leadership participation structure of our organisation. It is designed to preserve and promote the value of participants' lived experiences, foster personal development, and provide opportunities for deeper involvement in the organisation's growth and development. Individuals with lived experience are esteemed and respected as custodians and developers of the Grow Program, actively participating in all decision-making activities across all organisational levels.

Central to our program is the Blue Book, a guiding document created, developed, and written entirely by Grow group participants over the past 67 years. This living document embodies the collective wisdom and experiences of those who have walked the path of recovery.

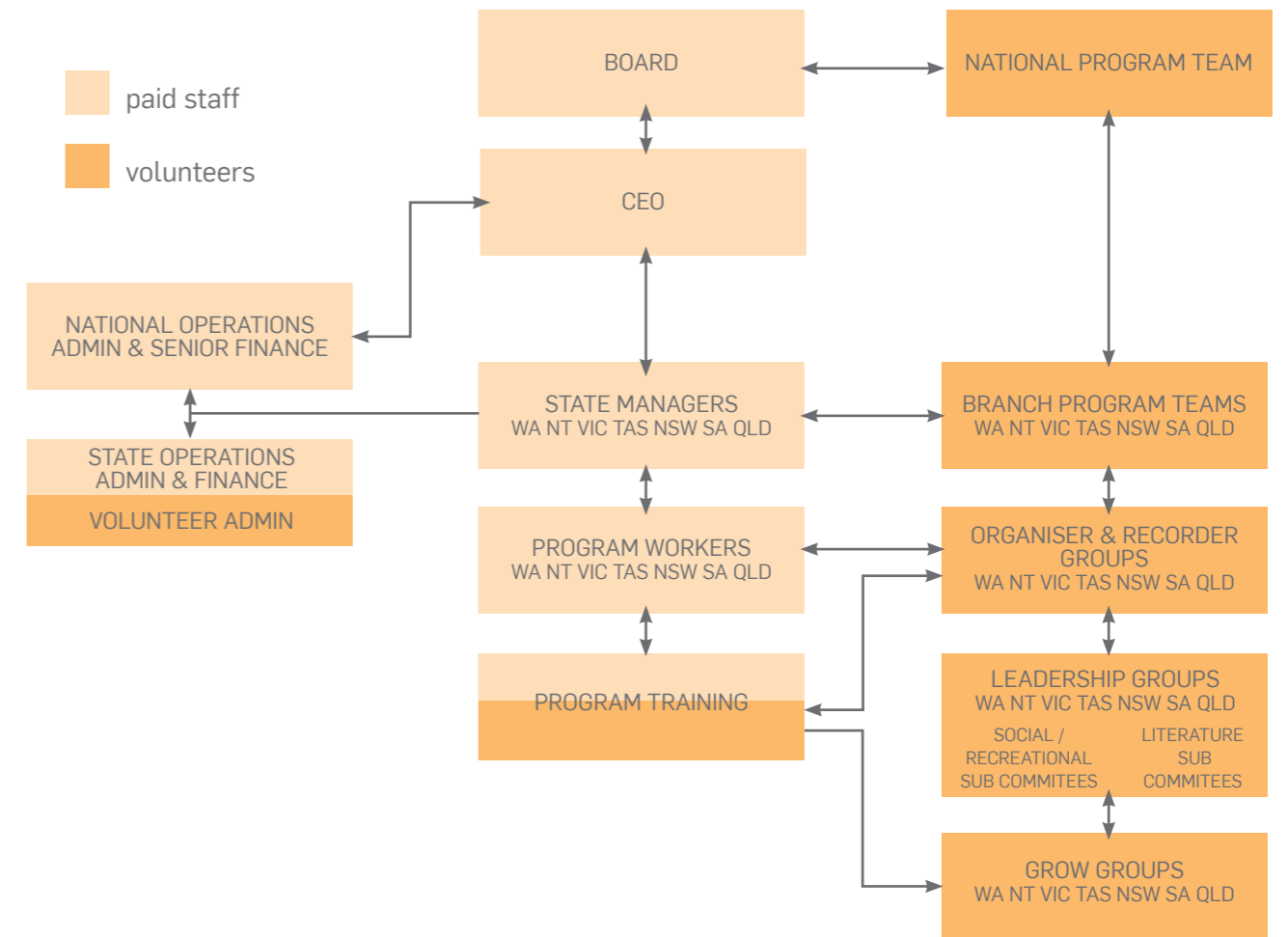
GROW operates as two parallel universes. On one side are the Growers (members of Grow Groups) who participate in the program: individuals, organisers, recorders, leadership meetings, Branch Program Teams, Literature Teams, and the National Program Team. These groups have inviolable control over the program's content and written material. On the other side is the management team, which supports the Growers in their endeavours and ensures compliance with public, statutory, and fiduciary requirements.

Organisational Structure

This unique structure ensures that the voices and experiences of those we serve remain at the heart of everything we do, driving our mission and shaping our future.

All of us work together in accordance with GROW's Chief Operating Principle:

“ **The development, evaluation, and improvement of each activity in GROW is looked after by the grouping of people responsible for it, in conjunction with those responsible for the common welfare of the whole movement.** ”



GROW Statement of Strategic Intent

“ **MISSION**

We enable people and communities to grow, recover and maintain good mental health.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

We act ethically and always take responsibility for our actions.

- To be the leader in peer-to-peer support for good mental health by:**
1. Continuously developing the Grow Program of Recovery and Personal Growth
 2. Providing new ways to deliver the Grow Program through sustainable and vibrant peer group programs that attract and retain people
 3. Developing and delivering prevention and early intervention strategies and programs applying the GROW philosophy and wisdoms
 4. Identifying and diversifying into new streams of revenue which:
 - a. enables GROW to expand its offerings to the community and
 - b. reduces the level of GROW's reliance on a relatively small number of funders to ensure our long-term sustainability.

PERSONAL VALUE

We believe every person has intrinsic value.

MUTUAL HELP

We collaborate and share knowledge and skills.



Chair of the Board - John Della Bosca A.M

There is no doubting that this year has been a better year for GROW than 2022-2023. We have learned the lessons of WA and the NT and know that we must beat our own drum to the decision makers in each jurisdiction at every opportunity. To this end David Butt and I have taken the opportunity to have dialogue with the highest levels of Mental Health policy in the Commonwealth government.


Our message is simple and direct-no mental health Peer to Peer program comes close to the level of co-design, and client orientation achieved by GROW. Underlining that, our success is backed by sixty years of experiential and academic evidence. GROW has absolute contemporary relevance to Mental Health policy and society more generally.

As a harbinger of change GROW NCEO David Butt announced his intention to retire from his position earlier in the year. David came to GROW as NCEO at a time when the organisation was facing many challenges. David's vast experience in mental health and Health policy and his experience as a public sector manager gave new impetus to GROW and allowed us to meet those challenges and thrive.

David has been true to GROW's mission while giving us a strategic focus and a nimbler and more capable organisation. His wisdom and advice to the board, his colleagues and to Growers has been indispensable to the ongoing improvement of the organisation. David is leaving GROW in much better shape than when he came to it.

Of course, the other side of the coin to David's retirement is the recruitment and orientation of his successor as NCEO. The board is delighted to have made the decision to offer Elaine De Vos the role of NCEO. Elaine comes to GROW with a solid public sector and NGO management background and a strong interest and focus on social policy and mental health. Importantly she is keen to engage with "Growers". The board is confident that Elaine will lead us through the challenges of the year ahead while creating opportunities for innovation and improvement.

John Della Bosca A.M.



“
Our success is backed by sixty years of experiential and academic evidence.
”

Former National CEO Report - David Butt

This has been a year of great success in building, consolidating and continuing to modernize our systems, products and services for GROW and the people we support.

We have continued to deal with the fall-out from the loss of funding in Western Australia and the Northern Territory while also making significant advances in ensuring the contemporary nature of our systems and services, including aiming to maximize potential gains through our digital developments. Building or rebuilding relationships and then gaining funding can take considerable time. In WA, we already have made good progress. There is now a more stable, trusting relationship with the Commission and I am sure GROW can build on that over time.

I congratulate managers Lynda Diagne in WA and Kate Francis in the NT for the way they have persevered in their roles while under extreme hardship and have supported as many groups and services as possible to continue. Kate also took on the Management of Eastern Region (NSW, QLD, and ACT) while Sharon Friel was on maternity leave.

One of the lessons from these experiences is about the need to speak in language that is easily understood by funders and policy makers. For example, we may have an internal language which we understand and cherish, but for external purposes we have begun to speak in our submissions about local community mental health services rather than groups, and instead of Organiser and Recorders we have been talking about Lived Experience Leaders. If decision makers want to talk about co-design, GROW should talk about its history and legacy of leadership in co-design, and how we ensure that the way we continuously do co-design results in our services being contemporary and relevant.

On that note, Darryl Ballestrin also presented on GROW's behalf to the National MHS conference in Adelaide in August 2023 on the topic, "Shifting the Balance of Power – moving beyond a seat at the table to equality in decision making". Darryl advises his session was well attended and the presentation well received, particularly with our emphasis on:

- *Co-design is not new: GROW has been doing it for 66 years (now 67)*
- *Co-design is not the ultimate goal but rather contributes to the goal of integrated governance.*
- *It's no good co-designing something and then losing control of decision making on whether what has been co-designed is implemented.*
- *Integrated governance means people with lived experience are the decision makers on what is co-designed, implemented, how continuous improvement occurs and how services are delivered.*

Darryl advised that there was a lot of resonance from people who said they had been involved in co-design but then were excluded from decision-making. That is not the GROW way.

GROW continues to face challenges demonstrating to decision makers the value of intentional peer to peer support as a low cost but evidence-based approach to keeping people out of hospital, at home, in the community and functioning to the best of their capacity.

That also means GROW needs to continue to work on ensuring that GROW does not remain mental health's best kept secret: we have made gains over the past five years but more needs to be done to gain much broader recognition of GROW's significant success in supporting mental health and wellbeing in the community.



Other areas of important change during the year include:

- *The Blue Book review, being led by the National Program Team. This is a big undertaking and a great example of GROW's commitment to co-design, with seasoned leaders driving a highly consultative, renewal, modernization and change process.*
- *The development of GROW's Learning Management System (LMS) includes delivery of the Grow Program Training eLearning modules which were created with the intention of providing an introductory background to the Grow Program.*
- *An LMS training program specifically for Grow Organiser and Recorders – derived from the new staff modules – was subsequently developed and released.*
- *Work on the Grow Program Resource Manual continued with updates and revisions being made to the original commentaries where necessary. This is a work in progress alongside the review/revision of the Blue Book.*
- *Finalization of the Get Growing learning suite, filled with so much valuable material. This work really puts GROW into a strong position moving forward to not only having a solid training resource that will give clarity and confidence to any Get Growing Program Workers but will also support standardization across delivery nationally.*

Late in the year, we also saw the extension of a number of vital contracts for GROW – the Victorian contract by four years, the West Hoxton Residential Rehabilitation contract by three years, and the South Australian contract by two years. This brings a lot more certainty to GROW for the future.

In February I advised the Chair and the Board that I was retiring from full-time work and would not be seeking to renew my contract when it expired. The Board went through a merit selection process including an interview panel with a lived experience representative from the Board (an NPT member) and I am delighted to say Elaine De Vos was appointed as GROW's new National CEO. Elaine took up her role on 8 July 2024 and after just over five years in the role I retired on 19 July.

I wish Elaine every success as she leads and supports GROW in the next stage of her journey.

As I advised when I announced my retirement, I have really enjoyed and learnt much of personal benefit and growth in my time at GROW as the final CEO role in my career (I have had eight CEO roles over the past 28 years, broken only by three years as Deputy Secretary of the Australian Department of Health). I have had a very fortunate career. It's had its hard times, but that's life and a lot of people are far less fortunate than I have been. This is of course a major factor in what attracts us to do what we do in GROW.

My thanks once again to all staff for their support and successes over the year, and their strength of dedication to the GROW purpose. I also want to thank our Chair, John Della Bosca, and other Board members who bring so much to GROW, as well as the National Program Team. I have enjoyed working with the NPT, have learnt much from you and have been delighted to watch your leadership develop as you lead the task of ensuring GROW is modern and accessible to meet today's demands and tomorrow's opportunities.

In GROW friendship,
David Butt

“ I leave with no doubt that GROW will continue in strength to build on the shoulders of those past, present, and future, and will be a strong contributor to the betterment of individual, family and community mental health and wellbeing. ”



Current National CEO – Elaine De Vos

We are clearly in a race against time in terms of supporting those needing access to mental health services. Joining GROW is both an honour and a privilege, and I am grateful for the warm reception from the dedicated staff and volunteers during my initial two months.

I am deeply impressed by the organisation's resilience in offering effective programs that cater to a diverse demographic across Australia. Beyond the evident passion and commitment, GROW's robust governance framework stands out as a cornerstone, positioning us for future growth.

Engaging with various stakeholders and government bodies since my arrival, I have been struck by the sector-wide concerns regarding meeting the needs of individuals with psychosocial conditions, from moderate to severe mental health issues. I'm also hearing about the increasing number of young people grappling with anxiety, often facing challenges in accessing services that are either scarce, costly, or non-existent. I am hopeful that by leveraging our traditional Grow programs or tailoring group services for specific sectors like defence, education, caregivers, and young adults, we can create impact through a range of service delivery models across the country.

At GROW, our vision is to be the premier provider of intentional peer to peer support to promote hope, mutual help and recovery for good mental health for people throughout Australia. The Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Act of 2022 emphasizes such a model of recovery oriented care. Our enduring commitment to integrating lived experiences in our programs, is a practice ingrained in our ethos for over six decades, and is reinforced by our stringent governance and accreditation standards.

Furthermore, our supportive and recovery-oriented approach acknowledges the continuum of recovery stages, offering sustained wellness support without predefined endpoints. Moreover, our longstanding dedication to providing services in regional areas has been a foundational aspect of our program development. Wherever the need exists, GROW is primed to establish cost-effective support initiatives.

I am eager to work with the Board, staff and stakeholders in the upcoming year to create the pathways for GROW to be a lead player in delivering a stronger mental health system for those in need.

Elaine De Vos, CEO



“

GROW's robust governance framework stands out as a cornerstone, positioning us for future growth.

”

Grow Testimonial - Simon from Bunbury, WA

What brought me to GROW.

Growing up in the suburbs of Perth, I was quiet, shy and sensitive. I had largely a pleasant childhood but in late adolescence I suffered abuse, followed closely by a broken family and being estranged from my Mum and both siblings indefinitely. I received no help or support so naturally I declined mentally and my social, intellectual and spiritual development was adversely affected.

I went to live with my dad who was really good to me but had no idea how to deal with my experiences, we simply didn't talk about it. He showed me all the role modelling of a typical Aussie bloke. He taught me many manual arts skills; he instilled in me a solid work ethic and how to be independent. I gained an arts scholarship at high school which helped me move forward and to develop some social skills. Through poor choices and no parental guidance or direction, I dropped out of my art scholarship to attend another school I thought was better. It wasn't and couldn't go back, my education suffered and I dropped out after 3rd year. I tried TAFE but when my Dad went overseas to find a new wife I also dropped out of that to get involved with the wrong crowd and began using a range of intoxicating substances to escape my intense feelings of depression, inadequacy and abandonment.

At the age of 50, my 25-year marriage had ended, both my parents had passed away suddenly under harsh circumstances and I had suffered a strong psychological trauma in the workplace. I discovered my chemical crutches no longer worked. After spending 35 years using alcohol and other intoxicants to anaesthetise my feelings and emotions, I woke up to myself and began a journey of self-discovery. With the help of the twelve steps, groups and other support mechanisms, I gave up taking drugs and alcohol permanently.

That was eight years ago & during this time I have proactively & holistically sought & engaged in many methods of therapeutic treatment for my condition. I have worked as a Mental Health Support Worker to gain some more understanding & explore myself further. I have trialled antidepressant medications and found them unsatisfactory with too many side effects. I prefer nature, natural remedies, spirituality, meditation and peer support.

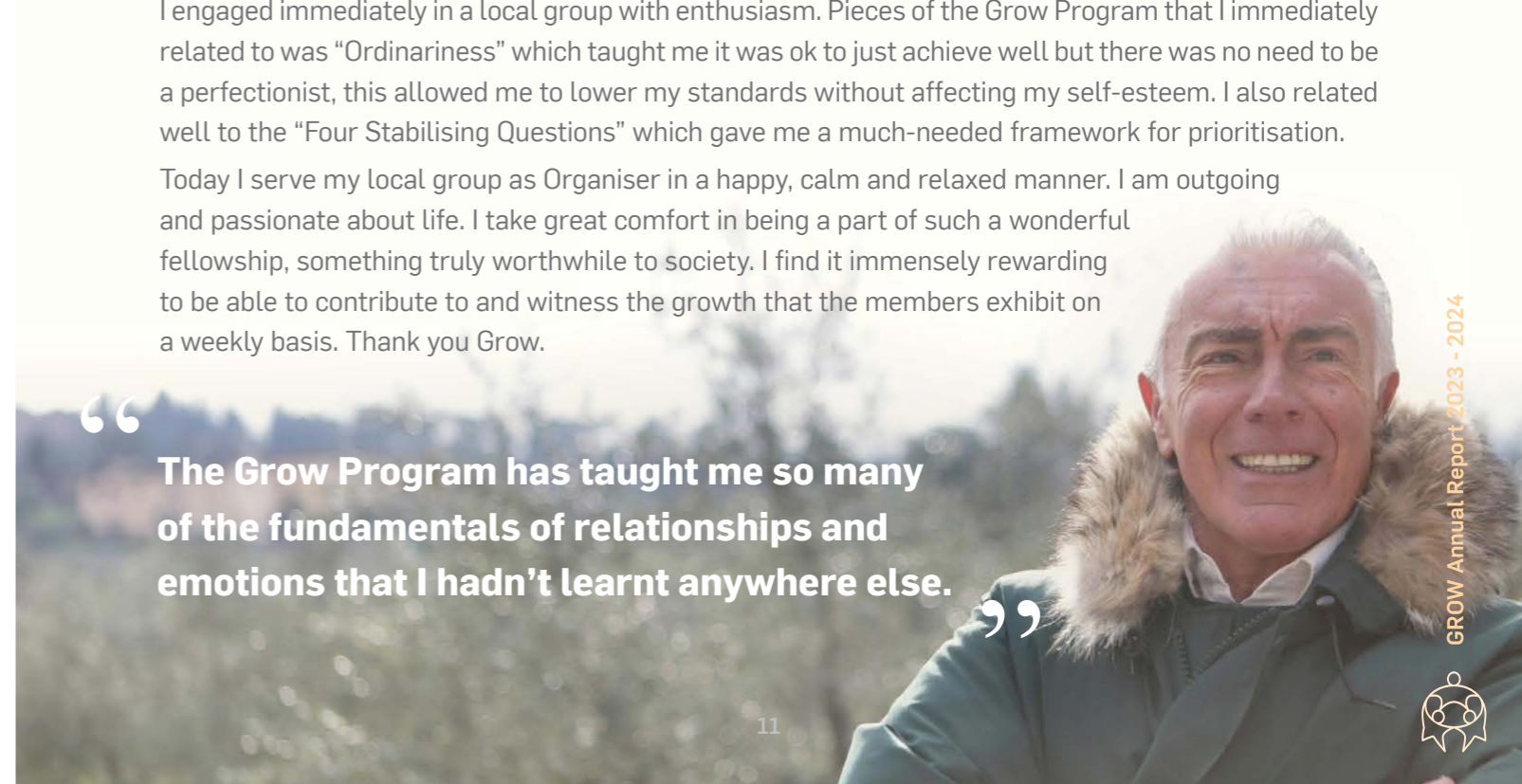
Two years ago, I was recommended by a friend to GROW for general mental health and wellbeing, I engaged immediately in a local group with enthusiasm. Pieces of the Grow Program that I immediately related to was "Ordinariness" which taught me it was ok to just achieve well but there was no need to be a perfectionist, this allowed me to lower my standards without affecting my self-esteem. I also related well to the "Four Stabilising Questions" which gave me a much-needed framework for prioritisation.

Today I serve my local group as Organiser in a happy, calm and relaxed manner. I am outgoing and passionate about life. I take great comfort in being a part of such a wonderful fellowship, something truly worthwhile to society. I find it immensely rewarding to be able to contribute to and witness the growth that the members exhibit on a weekly basis. Thank you Grow.

“

The Grow Program has taught me so many of the fundamentals of relationships and emotions that I hadn't learnt anywhere else.

”



National Program Team Report

The National Program Team (NPT) of GROW Australia consists of volunteer lived/ living experience leaders with support for administrative duties provided by Darryl Ballestrin (National Program Manager) and Dishni Fernando (Admin and Operations Officer) and Maria Thwaites (Educational Officer). Each member of NPT is considered a "seasoned GROW leader" having made significant personal growth in mental health and recovery and having participated in local leadership roles, activities and development within the organisation. These members, representing most States and territories in Australia come together to review the running and development of the Grow program as assessed by local volunteer leaders in each GROW branch. The NPT provides feedback, training, new literature, handles quality improvement suggestions and new content development for GROW nationally.

This year we welcomed new member Bill Narnst from Queensland, unfortunately his tenure was brief due to personal health concerns, but we thank him for his willingness to serve on the team even if briefly. We also welcomed new member Kathryn Ryan from Queensland in 2024.

Blue Book review and update

The NPT continued one of the largest co-designed, lived experience projects in the country with the review of the Grow Program or Blue Book. Engaging our local volunteer GROW member leaders in each state and territory to generate, review, feedback and vote on material for publication in 2024/2025. Participation and feedback have been of high standard, and we look forward to the results. All updates, feedback and suggestion were meticulously reviewed and where possible added into the book.

Information Booklet

The National Program Team also released a new booklet for members and new attendees titled 'Information for attending GROW group meetings'. The booklet clearly defines and outlines updated guidelines and policies for attendees (in person and online), based on feedback and needs submitted by members in the last 2+ years. It also serves as a great support for the volunteer leader group Organisers and Recorders answering many questions regarding conduct and support at the meetings.

Group Method Review and Update

The NPT continued a national Group Method review due to having several versions of method for the different areas of group format in GROW. The project was to see if we could create a single Group Method format – that is merging of existing processes for conducting meetings in person, online and in the young adult space. Factors to consider included the new areas of video technology considerations, updating of language and other group processes. A draft was produced and reviewed successfully by members, staff and the NPT and will be released in the second half of 2024.

Learning Management System (volunteer training modules)

In 2024 GROW's NPT signed off on Learning modules for volunteer leaders in GROW through GROW's online Learning Management System. A big thanks to Maria Thwaites our Educational Officer for putting the course together and Shruthi Rijesh (Operations and Systems Manager) for making it possible that GROW members can access it through GROW's online systems. The modules were developed as an adjunct to in person and group session training days and weekend retreats. However, it also provides access to training for remote and online only members and those that can't attend formal training as described above. The emphasis will remain wherever possible to attend training and support in community with your peers, but this creates an opportunity for all to access a standardised training baseline across the nation.

National Feedback Process and Quality Improvements

The NPT would like to thank all those members and attendees who submitted feedback and quality improvement suggestions throughout the year. The NPT made a commitment to improve feedback and implementation times wherever possible. Many suggestions have resulted in updates to existing processes, policies and procedures regarding the running of GROW meetings activities and reporting.

The NPT would also like to thank outgoing NCEO David Butt for supporting the aims of the team over the last 5 years. David was instrumental in helping re-build the NPT Charter and to action our first domestically produced National literature publication since the 'Yellow Book' (Brown book). David also helped launch the first Grow Program for Mental Health (Blue Book) Review in over a decade but unfortunately leaves on the cusp of its completion. We look forward to sending him the revised publication to peruse in retirement. Our best wishes to him in his future endeavours.

National Program Team , from left to right – Darryl Ballestrin, Mark Lacey, Heath Fereday, Mel Hayward, Frank Carsburg



Our Services

The Grow Program

Our program is a 12-step journey of personal growth, mutual help, and support. The Grow Program is inclusive, incorporating various principles for mental, social, emotional, and spiritual health. During each peer-to-peer meeting, members discuss their paths to GROW and share self-improvement strategies they are exploring on their road to recovery. Grow Groups are free to join, with no referral or doctor's diagnosis required, and members have the option to remain anonymous. Meetings are conducted in a safe, caring, and confidential environment, whether face-to-face or online (eGrow) Groups.

Members of the Grow Groups meet weekly and follow structured meeting guidelines, ensuring a consistent and supportive environment. During these meetings, members have the opportunity to share their life challenges, personal experiences, and any issues they are currently facing. This regular sharing helps build a sense of community and mutual understanding, as participants realise, they are not alone in their struggles.

For those attending a Group meeting for the first time they simply listen and not speak. This flexibility allows new participants to acclimate to the group setting without the pressure of immediately opening up. Listening to the stories and experiences of others can be both comforting and enlightening, helping newcomers understand that their feelings and challenges are shared by others.

Finding and establishing groups who have unmet needs continues to be a focus for GROW. Across Australia groups continue to expand for young adults, carers and the prison sector.

In Victoria we are committed to ensure we meet the diverse needs and preferences of Victorians. As we move forward, we are guided by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act of 2022 and the principles of inclusivity, empowerment, and recovery. This report serves not only as a reflection of the past year's achievements in the delivery of programs in the community and to specialist groups such as young adults, carers and prison groups in Victoria but also provides a continued future commitment to create compassionate, supportive communities where every individual's mental health is prioritized and respected.

Young Adults Group

GROW is committed to the needs, wellbeing and safety of children and young people. This report outlines our efforts over the past year to ensure that the health, wellbeing and autonomy of children and young people are promoted and supported. Improvements to our Young Adult Model over the last year have ensured that those principles are central to all our initiatives, policies, and services.

Our young adults, ranging from 18 to 35 years old, form a well-balanced mix of diverse personalities, coming together to support each other on their mental health journeys. This cohort truly shines in their patience, active listening, and affirmation of one another's efforts and experiences. The groups consistently experience strong attendance, with meetings characterized by authenticity and vibrancy.

GROW currently have one National Young Adult group with an additional 3 on the way. Victoria and South Australia worked closely this past year to review and improve our Young Adult model. To modernize and connect with our younger cohort, the 4 guidelines to cooperation have never been more integral. This principle shows us 'In necessary things strictness and unity, in optional things detachment and liberty, in disagreement over which one it is, respect and personal integrity and in all things, reason and honesty.'

Our Young Adult members are a great example of honoring the authentic learnings from the Grow program to ensure a quality meeting occurs while members are progressing with their mental wellbeing. Whilst showing us the way in allowing flexibility of how the group members use their lived and living experience to guide and support each other.

They also allow us to reflect on the changes we have seen over the decades towards stigma and the radical changes seen in the sector to how consumers may approach their recovery. Our Young Adult group is currently flourishing with our South Australia Program worker Amelia. "Our Young Adult Grow group started in April 2024, from the start, new Growers were expressing genuine encouragement by pointing out each other's strengths and progress. Each week the Growers share candidly and have been engaging in philosophical discussion in the middle routine, as we love to dig into the Blue Book. I am grateful to share the company of these engaged and caring young Growers". Amelia says the group "emphasise what is, not what isn't". Queensland and Victoria plan to introduce a group in the coming months which will allow our Young Adult cohort to become a wonderful addition to our GROW eco-system.

Carer's Group

Our Carer's group is a dedicated support group for individuals who provide care for someone experiencing mental ill health, neurodiversity, brain injury, or dementia. These groups offer a space where carers can come together to share their experiences and find emotional support from others who understand the unique challenges they face. Operating successfully in a hybrid format, our meetings often see attendance from more than eight members each time. With seasoned leaders ensuring that the program method and structure is followed.

The program includes Group socials that provide a space for carers to enjoy activities away from the structured meeting setting, fostering a sense of community and mutual support.

The Victorian Carer's group have continued to support each other while managing the various responsibilities they take on fearlessly every day. The group were successful in being awarded a small grant from Carer's Victoria to provide the group with some much-needed respite to share some time together. The group were able to do this during National Carers week in October 2023 where they had an enjoyable morning tea and social together. The group members actively participate in GROW and show leadership through participating in our Branch literature team, our Newsletter team and our Blue Book reviews held throughout the year. The group leaders connected in with Carer's Gateway this year, a Federal funded organisation and have their support to provide creative ways to connect in with more carers throughout this next year. We are proud of our Carers group who are often the first to put their hand up to help others and the branch with activities throughout the year.

“ **Finding and establishing groups who have unmet needs continues to be a focus for GROW. Across Australia groups continue to expand for young adults, carers and the prison sector.** ”

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Prison Groups

After a successful re-building of our Prison groups in Victoria there are currently 3 groups operational at Hopkins Correctional Centre and HM Prison Langi Kal Kal where 114 meetings took place with a huge 1012 attendances across the 3 groups. The groups focused on leadership these past 12 months with many encouraging stories of members being nominated into leadership roles within the group. All groups are fully formed, meaning they each have trained leaders in the group supporting and encouraging mutual help. We had inmates exit incarceration this year which has allowed a Custodial transition group to form. We had the first Custodial Transition Group meet in June 2024 with 3 members joining in and a Program worker. It was a great meeting and was the opportunity for participants to share their lived experience of transitioning back into community following their incarceration.

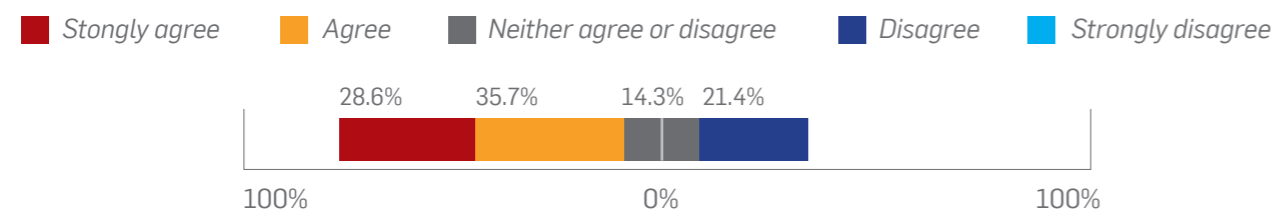
Growing Resilience

From a program developed in quick response to the conditions applied due to the Covid pandemic, Growing Resilience remains in demand. Delivery is being supported by Program Workers from around the country delivered both online and face to face. Annually, there were **300 registrations** of people interested in participating in the online sessions and the 6-week program was delivered on 9 different occasions.

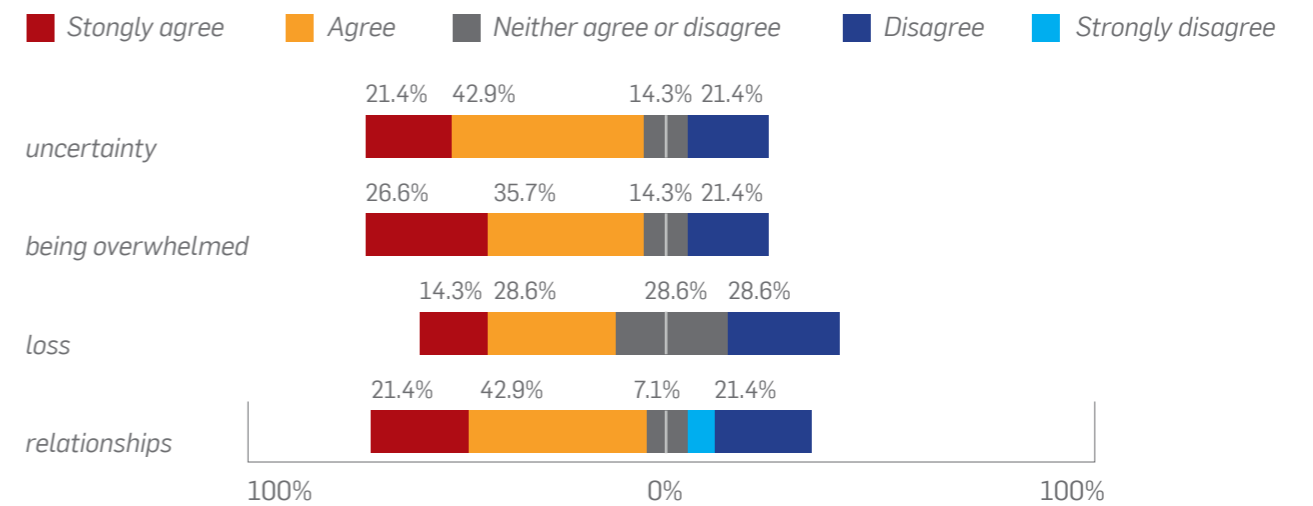
The NSW Branch also received a grant through the Commonwealth Bank that allowed the Program to be delivered on ward to staff and consumers in a mental health facility. Our funders from Queensland Health have started putting some monies towards the delivery of the program which historically was being delivered entirely online. The investment has enabled the formation of a working group who are currently finalising changes to the program resources to ensure currency moving forward. Shortly, we will have a shiny suite of resources, delivering the same magical material but ensuring the content remains relevant and accessible to a great variety of community members. Excitingly, this update could not have happened at a more convenient time!

In April 2024, the NSW Branch were successful in securing an 18-month contract to deliver Growing Resilience in the central and eastern Sydney catchment area funded by Central and Eastern Sydney PHN. The last few months have included recruitment of a Program Worker who, with the support of another Program Worker based in the region, will roll the program out in the area. So far, 1 complete Program has been delivered at Zetland fitness with 2 more Programs scheduled to commence in July 2024. We are very excited about the opportunity of bringing more people some of the magic that GROW can offer while encouraging them to better seek help and support from their community peers. We are also confident that through participation in Growing Resilience our GROW population in the area will also hopefully GROW. A Program Worker who supports the delivery of the program reached out to Program participants requesting feedback regarding their experience in the program: The positive results are recorded below.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement – Participating in the Growing Resilience program has been of value to me and my mental wellbeing.



To what extent do you agree with the statements – Growing Resilience taught me strategies to manage...



What has been of value to you in the Growing Resilience Program?

“ **Having a group to share with and listen to. Jo and her gentleness. Learning about mental health of others and realising there are others worse off than me. Learning about coping mechanisms**

Strategies

I really liked that the practical solutions/activities have different steps to them that I could follow, felt a lot easier so far knowing I'm working through a “process” rather than just trying to reason with myself without that structure

A structured environment for sharing challenges

Peer Support

Program felt very organised, and relatively comfortable for being with random people

The presenter was fabulous and allowed everyone to talk

Knowing I am not alone

Listening to other people's stories and views and continuing to make adjustment in life to manage issues

Learning different ways to deal with hard situations

I feel like I got more out of these group sessions than I've had working with a psychologist 1-on-1

Hearing others' ideas

”



Get Growing

Get Growing is a youth-based program delivered in schools and youth-based organizations to young people aged 11-17, many of these considered 'at risk' of developing poor mental health. Developed on the philosophy and using the main principles of the GROW Program, this 10-week Program is facilitated to 'start a conversation' around issues that can impact a young person's wellbeing- Personal value, defining healthy relationships, personal boundaries and chilling out in a crisis are but a few. The real magic of the program, however, becomes visible through the genuine and positive peer rapport that grows within the group members, as they develop new skills in better managing life challenges and learning through others experiences.

Overall, it has been a very exciting year for the Program! Delivery continued in SA, VIC, and the NT and excitingly, in NSW after the Branch secured funding through Health Coast PHN to deliver the Program in the Northern Rivers Area. Due to the time of recruitment our newly welcomed Program Workers had to spend their first few months developing their Program Knowledge and networking in the local community to build relationships with like-minded providers and schools. Through this work, they locked in Schools for 2024 and commenced delivery in Term 1 of 2024. It continues that the need and demand for the program is much higher than our current capacity to deliver it. Sadly, due to cessation of funding opportunities, we lost a Youth Program Worker from both VIC and the NT. Thankfully, we still have capacity to deliver in VIC through separate funding stream so all is not lost.

As per previous years, an ongoing challenge is communicating with the schools to lock in Bookings and Timetables. Program Workers appreciate the challenges that schools are also faced with and try to be flexible where they can accommodate last minute rescheduling. However, as the popularity of the program gathers momentum, the capacity to do this is becoming less.

Below are some case studies and feedback from some of our program participants this year: A regular activity that occurs in the weekly sessions one called 'Rose and Thorn'- Where members share the best and worst part of their day/week/moment. It is a way of encouraging objective thinking and practicing acceptance and control.

**Participants in a year 8 group shared they did not spend time together before the program started but had become friends through the group. "I don't know if we ever would've talked to each other if it wasn't for this". They shared the reasons they don't talk about their problems with adults, because the adult's feelings become centred instead of their own. 3 of them gave feedback that this was one of the most powerful things about the program for them. They were able to talk about their problems without someone telling them what to do or trying to 'fix' it. This helped them build trust and feel comfortable to open up.*

**Get Growing Participant – A student who was very innovative, kind and creative. At the end of the program, she started to show her funny side and self-confidence as at the beginning of Get Growing she was shy and a little unsure of herself. In her practical task she made a dragon puppet and demonstrated that for her it is important to authentically and creativity express herself. She showed her qualities of being grounded, naturalistic and un-materialistic. Her thorn through this process and throughout Get Growing is that she can be a little too hard on herself. Her rose is her sense of humility and proudness to feel a deep pleasure of satisfaction to her achievements and creative endeavours. She really believes in her artistic skills and growth into self is from being creative and unselfish. She opened up to her strengths of being grounded and kind, and unafraid to show her creative and authentic self-expression to others.*

Get Growing was delivered to 28 school-based groups and to a special adult group of NDIS participants. 255 individuals participated in the 10-week program over 1400 occasions!



“ It helped me a lot to understand my emotions and friendships. ”
A year 5 participant

“ It helped me be a more open person. ”
A year 5 participant



eGrow (Online Grow meetings)

eGrow has emerged as a valuable and innovative addition to Grow's Wellbeing Programs, addressing the need for accessible alternatives to traditional face-to-face meetings. As an online peer-to-peer support group, eGrow leverages digital platforms to connect people regardless of geographical location, making support accessible to a broader audience. While eGrow introduces some differences in social interaction, the core methodology and principles of the Grow Program remain identical, ensuring that members continue to receive the necessary support and guidance for their well-being.

The virtual format encourages flexibility, allowing members to engage at their own convenience. By maintaining the programs integrity while embracing technological advancements, eGrow ensures that members receive the support and resources they need to enhance their mental and emotional well-being.


Our eGrow groups have consistently proven to be a valued addition to our Grow Wellbeing Programs, remaining in high demand and delivering positive health and wellbeing outcomes for participants.

“ **In the 2023/2024 financial year, there were 18 eGrow groups operating nationally, with an additional five groups operating in a hybrid model (a mix of online and in person participants). There were 435 attendees, 4686 attendances and approximately 125 first timers.** ”

Welcome to Grow

This is an orientation session to new participants before attending their first Grow Group meeting. The introduction of the online submission form has significantly streamlined the process of enrolling new participants into the Grow Programs. The data shows that, on average, there are 2-3 new submissions per week for each online group. This not only indicates a consistent interest in the programs but also suggests that the online format is convenient and accessible to potential participants.

Service Activity

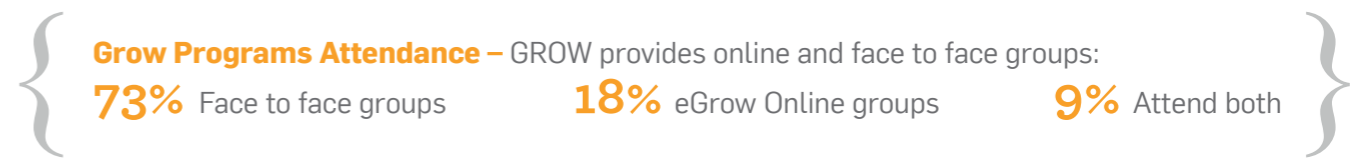
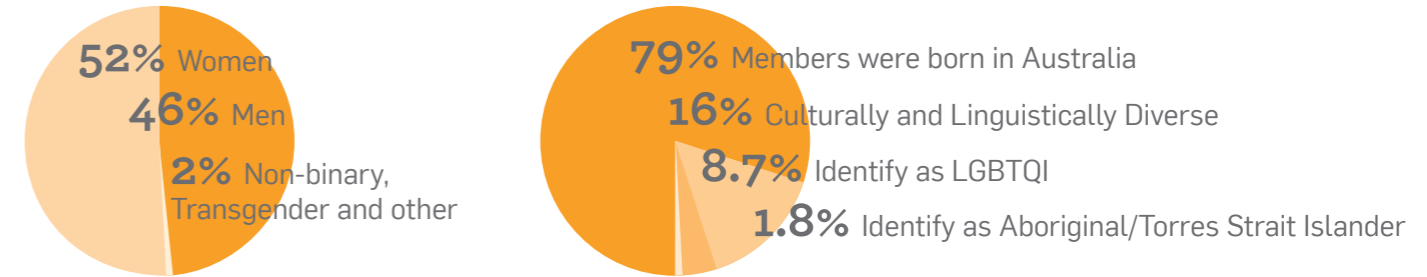
<p>In FY 23/24 GROW had an average of</p> <h1 style="text-align: center;">132</h1> <p>active groups delivering services each month around Australia. During this time,</p> <h1 style="text-align: center;">4408</h1> <p>meetings were held.</p>	 <p>GROW also provided leadership development opportunities throughout the year, with</p> <h1 style="font-size: 2em;">80</h1> <p>leadership sessions and</p> <h1 style="font-size: 2em;">80</h1> <p>Organiser and Recorder meetings for the year.</p>
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GROW also continues to be delivered both online and in face to face group meetings, to meet the needs of different locations in Australia.

Member Survey

Every year, GROW undertakes a member survey to gather valuable data from members about the makeup of our member base and the efficacy of the Grow Program.

Demographics –



Hospitalisation – Out of **376** members who answered the survey question about hospitalisation, **52.39%**, a little over half of our members surveyed (**51.84%**) have been hospitalised for their mental illness or other emotional problems. The number of times the participants were hospitalised, **77.36%** state that they have not been hospitalised for mental illness since joining GROW.

Suicidal Thoughts –

60% of survey participants had thoughts about attempting suicide

55.90%, Overcome suicidal thoughts

30.89% Stopped suicide attempts



Medication –

After attending Grow programs:

18% Reduced their need for prescribed medication

8.4% No longer require prescribed medication



“ **GROW has helped me cope with my grief** **Allowed me to understand myself better and given me practical advice to help me deal with everyday life**

I love coming to GROW meeting because of all the help and support I get which gives me confidence in my life **A place I can discuss my mental health issues safely and confidentially**

Sense of purpose Personal Value

My life has improved in all areas, across the board. I have a place at the table of life and people care and are kind.

Increased personal value and confidence to be well

Helped me through my resentments

GROW has given me a sense of purpose to help prevent suicide

Feel less socially isolated and anxious ”

Insight - GROW is directly contributing to reducing our members sense of loneliness and isolation through community building activity.



Residential Rehabilitation Program

GROW Dual Diagnosis Rehabilitation Centre – West Hoxton, NSW

The Grow Rehabilitation Centre remains as the only Long-Term Dual Diagnosis program in Sydney NSW that addresses both mental health and addiction in conjunction with each other, making it an extremely important part of the make-up of health services, not only in Sydney, but the Nation as a whole.

Located on 7 acres of property in West Hoxton founded in 1982, our program offers a unique animal-assisted therapy program, where clients cohabitate with dogs, cats, cows, pigs, and goats, promoting a nurturing environment for recovery.

Staffed 24/7, the expansive space including a large man-made pond provides a serene environment unlike any other for rest, recovery and reflection.

The program uses the GROW 12 steps as our foundation whilst leveraging off AA/NA/DBT groups to help bolster a resident's chances of a full recovery.

On a weekly basis, residents also take part in swimming, yoga and daily exercise which make for a physical and mental recovery journey.

Our staff have been specifically handpicked to support our residents holistically. 75% of staff have lived/living experience whilst the remainder have an academic background in psychotherapy, counselling and psychology.

Although GROW is a long-term recovery program, not every client requires the full 9-12 months to graduate the program as the level of severity is different for everyone. Over the course of the year, we have supported over 40 individuals on their dual diagnosis recovery journey.

Members receiving their Grow scarf to keep them warm at West Hoxton



Achievements: -

In 2024, GROW secured increased funding for the next three years, ensuring continued support for our residents and program development. Not only was the existing grant renewed for a further three years, the monetary amount of the grant was also increased in line with increasing overheads such as rent, wages, electricity, gas and food.

After an in-depth application 2023, GROW received a prestigious Development Grant from NADA (Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies) for \$93,000 in early 2024, recognizing our innovative approach and commitment to excellence.

The grant money has been put towards the overall improvement of the facility including new lounges and seating for Group Therapy, New Bathrooms, Painting, Technology and program enhancements such as the introduction of DBT (dialectical behaviour therapy) which is aimed to help clients that struggle with personality disorders and emotional regulation as well as new therapy sessions, focusing on trauma-informed care and mindfulness-based stress/anxiety reduction.

During the year, GROW collaborated with Western Sydney University over the course of 8 weeks to produce a detailed report, highlighting how GROW functions as a therapeutic community and the benefits the program has with its residents.

We have worked tirelessly to expand and improve our Key Partnerships which include: -

- The Gorman Detox Unit
- Corella Lodge Detox Unit
- AA/NA networks
- Step Up Step Down
- Head to Health
- Stride
- Bill Crews Foundation
- Oral Care (resulting in free dental work for Residents)
- NADA

These partnerships have helped increase our reach as well as ensuring the centre is running at full capacity via extensive referrals, thus helping as many residents as we possibly can throughout the year. Continued collaboration with DCJ (Department of Communities and Justice) is also a large part of the support offered at GROW, reuniting mothers with their children, and promoting family reunification and support.

Future Directions: -

- Expand our services to support more individuals and families affected with dual diagnosis by the possible addition of a "mums and bubs" program.
- Strengthen community partnerships, enhancing referral pathways and supporting aftercare programs.
- Pursue additional funding opportunities to sustain and grow our programs, ensuring accessibility for those in need.



Results: -

Residential House internal surveys results show that we have reduced a residents need for hospital visits, decreased their severity of dependence along with decreased suicide ideation.

Other result confirms that 92% of residents that complete the program have retained their sobriety whilst 89% of residents stated that their outlook on life has improved since joining the Grow Residential Rehabilitation Program.

We are proud of our accomplishments and grateful for the support of our funders, partners, and dedicated staff. Together, we are making a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals navigating dual diagnosis recovery.

Transition House

The Transition House is a three-bedroom house located 10 minutes' drive from the GROW Residential Rehabilitation Centre – West Hoxton.

The Transition House has remained mainly full all year with graduates taking up the opportunity to relocate from West Hoxton to the house after completing the program.

While staying at the Transition House, residents have access to staff at the main centre 24/7 and are still supported by the Grow Program.

Residents come back to GROW on a weekly basis to attend GROW Groups, NA/AA meetings, swimming and group dinners.

After spending up to 12 months in rehabilitation a resident can start to feel institutionalised, thus easing residents slowly back into the community makes the transition for them easier and has proven to be an effective mechanism in their recovery journey and the Grow Residential Program.

All residents of the Transition House have maintained sobriety over the year, and all have commenced work/study and are now part of the broader community and are functioning members of society, free of addiction and their troubled past.

Working with Grow staff and the Department of Housing, we ensure our residents have secured full time accommodation/housing before leaving the Transition House.

“ **The transition house remains as a pivotal turning point in a resident’s recovery, offering support, but also preparing a resident to join the broader community.** ”

Dual Diagnosis Facility - ACT House, ACT

The ACT House is a 5-bed facility providing personalized support for individuals with dual diagnosis (addiction and mental health concerns). Our staff team comprises individuals with lived/living experience, ensuring empathetic and effective support. During the year, GROW has verbally secured increased funding beyond 2025, ensuring long-term sustainability and growth. We have fostered close relationships with external services and hospitals, establishing robust referral pathways and comprehensive support networks. This has resulted in the ACT House being at 100% Occupancy all year round. The ACT House has successfully supported roughly 25 residents in their recovery journeys, addressing addiction and mental health struggles.

The ACT House Manager completed the GROW West Hoxton program (12 months), graduating there before taking on their current role, bringing invaluable expertise and leadership.

Throughout the year we have expanded services to include:

- Trauma-informed care
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction
- Family support and education
- Collaborations with external services for specialized support (e.g., psychology, psychiatry)
- Enhanced discharge planning and aftercare support

Future Directions: -

- Continue to expand services and support more residents
- Strengthen partnerships and referral pathways
- Pursue additional funding opportunities to enhance programs and facilities
- Develop staff training and development programs to ensure ongoing expertise and compassion

The ACT House has demonstrated exceptional commitment to supporting individuals with dual diagnosis, and we look forward to continuing our vital work in the years to come.

Aaron Beatus (National Residential Manager)

Legacy Club

In 2023 GROW Australia officially launched its Legacy Club - our special community of future stewards of mental health and wellbeing who have left a gift in their will to GROW Australia. While people have left gifts to GROW in the past, this is the first time we've met with those who have pledged a gift to GROW to thank them and understand their intention for their farsighted pledge.

GROW has partnered with Safewill, Australia's leading online Will writing platform to offer all our Growers, their friends, and families the opportunity to write a bespoke Will for free as part of Free Wills Week.

Having a Will is a good, ordinary thing to do. It builds on the principles of self-activation and regard for others by ensuring loved ones are taken care of and estate wishes are considered and articulated. An estimated 40% of Australians do not have a valid will. GROW is pleased to be able to offer this service to our community at no cost.

The Free Wills Campaign has resulted in 42 bequests being pledged to GROW Australia in 2023-2024.



GROW Testimonial - Kirsten, Residential House

My childhood was a happy one. Growing up on 22 acres, it was filled with much imagination, bushwalks, swimming and playing treehouse wars with my older brother. When I was 17 years old, my father died quite suddenly and unexpectedly from alcoholism, and it took a considerable amount of time for me to understand and come to terms with this loss. Alcohol had never been a significant issue for me.

After leaving school, I found employment in childcare and maintained my rental living. I had a small circle of friends, but over time, our friendships waned as we pursued different interests. Initially, I consumed alcohol only on weekends while socialising, but gradually this habit escalated to nightly consumption, and eventually during the day as well. It was not long before I always had a drink nearby, planned my days around alcohol, lied about my consumption, and hid alcohol around the house.

When my son was born in 2014, I moved back to my family home that I grew up in and I maintained my sobriety for a year. However, when I resumed drinking, it was at the same level as before. This is when it became apparent to my family that I was following in the footsteps of my alcoholic father. Despite numerous attempts to assist me to recognise I had a problem, I remained in denial. Consequently, they resorted to the tough love approach, which led to me becoming homeless. I went to stay at my best friend's house, but after a week, she was involved in a terrible accident. I stayed with her until help arrived, but she never regained consciousness. After that, I was constantly intoxicated, sleeping just a few hours a night. My life had become unmanageable. Eventually, I checked myself into a mental health unit, where I stayed for two weeks. During my time there, I contacted various rehab centres. I received a call back from Grow Residential Rehab in West Hoxton, which specializes in mental health as well as addiction. Finally, I found a place that seemed right for me. Upon arriving at Grow residential rehab, for the first time, I felt calm due to the bush-like surroundings and animals that reminded me of home. The small community of eighteen residents and staff welcomed me, and it wasn't long before I felt comfortable enough to open up and be honest in the Grow groups. Working the GROW 12- Steps has helped me understand my personal disorders, get to know myself again and identify my triggers.

GROW provides a safe environment where I can challenge myself, step out of my comfort zone, and learn from my mistakes. "Our true self is our happy self", a GROW wisdom (bb page, 44) resonates deeply with me, because now I truly am happy and I know I can be myself. I still have bad days now and again, which is okay, because the good days far outweigh the bad and I have a community here at GROW, which I consider to be my second family. This community helps me navigate challenging times using the tools and skills I have learned along the way. Another favourite GROW wisdom is "Meaning generates energy. Lack of meaning depression". Each day is a successful step in my recovery journey. By working through the Grow program and the 12 Steps, I have come to understand myself again, recognising that I am unique and am worthy of love, happiness, and a feeling of belonging. The Four Qualities and the Four Stabilising Questions (blue book pages 21), provide me with clarity and allow me to focus on what is important, helping me to understand what troubles me. My belief in myself, my communication skills and leadership skills have all become stronger since being at GROW. These are lifelong skills that will continue to be of value to me. I now have hope for the future, and I plan to stay connected with the Grow community, regularly attending Grow groups and being part of this wonderful community, I call family. Connection is the opposite of addiction. GROW has saved my life, given me purpose and restored my love for myself.

Thank you GROW.

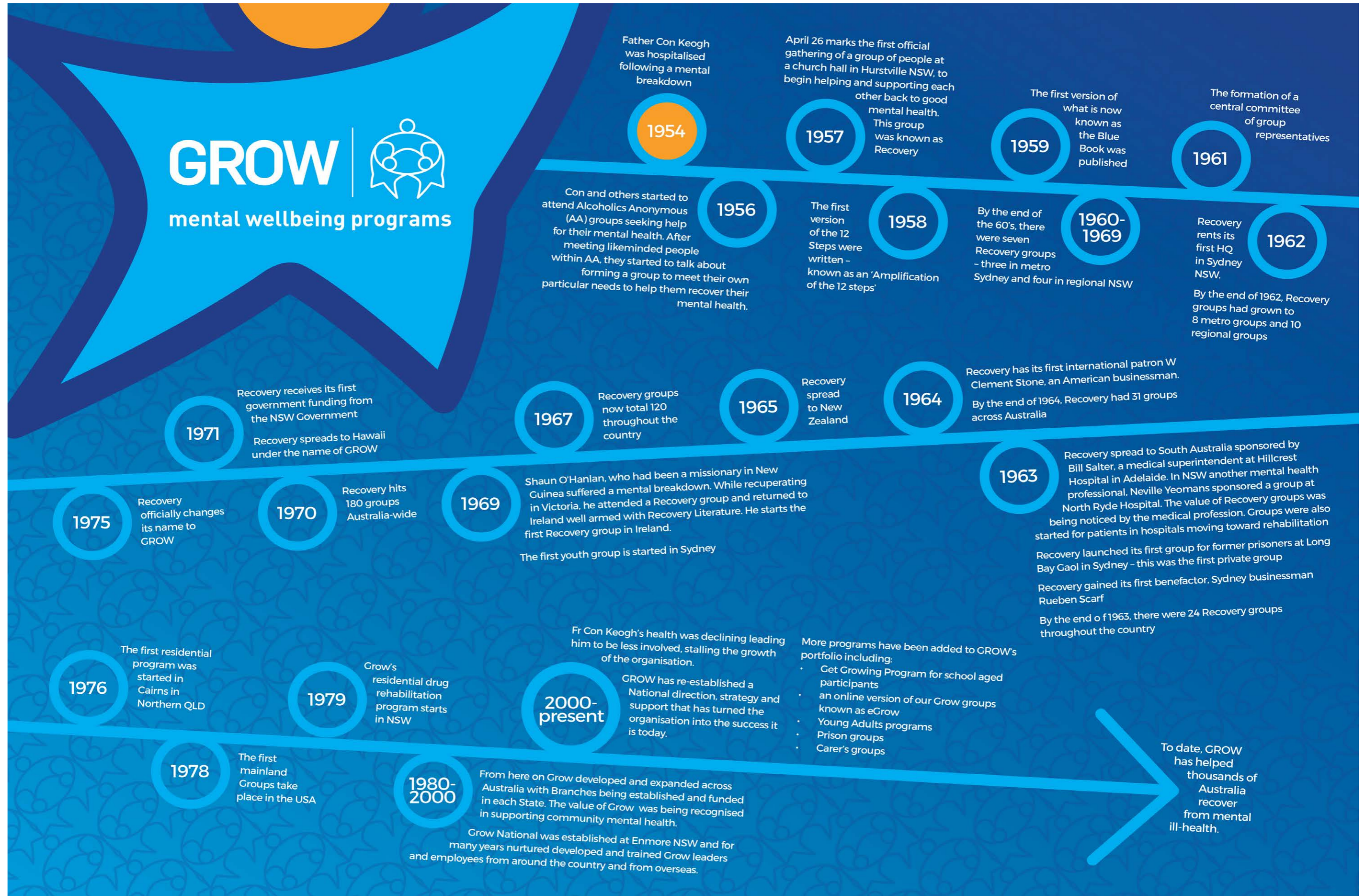
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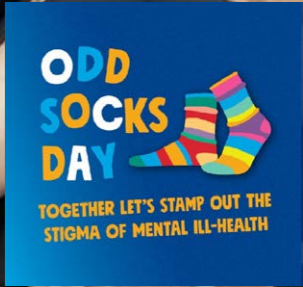
I now have enough energy and excitement for each day. Working through Step 3 of the GROW program, I have found my Higher Power. Each morning, I ask my Higher Power for strength and guidance through the day and express my gratitude each night for another day sober.

”



The History of GROW





Talk About Mental Health on



Odd Socks Day 2023

Odd Socks Day is GROW's major awareness raising campaign, an engaging and light-hearted event aimed at raising awareness about mental health and combating the stigma associated with it. Celebrated annually, this day encourages people to wear mismatched socks to symbolise that it's okay to be different and to highlight the importance of embracing our unique qualities.

It celebrates our shared humanity by acknowledging that everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, can have an "odd day." This simple yet powerful gesture reminds us that we all face challenges and struggles at some point in our lives.

- Raising Awareness
- Combatting Stigma
- Promoting Inclusivity
- Fundraising and Support

“ **Odd Socks Day aims to empower everyone to realise that they can make a meaningful difference in the lives of those affected by mental health challenges.** ”

Photos – Odd Socks Day at GROW, St George Adult Mental Health unit on Odd Socks Day. Tie Dying Socks! Highly creative.



GROW Testimonial - Delys, WA Carers Group

My name is Delys. I am dyslexic. I am proud Aboriginal woman who was part of the hidden generation, meaning we hid our Aboriginal heritage and our Jewish roots to be accepted.

I first arrived at Grow about 12 years ago. I was a carer of someone with mental illness. I learned of Grow through the Mental Illness Fellowship of WA (MIFWA). I had been going through mild depression for 25 years because my children had special and medical needs.

I also have medical needs and have experienced this for approximately 12 years. My needs mean I need to walk with a frame because I fall over without that physical support. I have complex regional pain syndrome. It means my brain thinks it's injured all the time.

I attended the Midland Carer's group and became an Organiser, a volunteer position I held on and off for years. I attended lots of Grow training and Leadership meetings and have been active doing outreach delivering presentation in my local community, including hospitals, garden groups, pharmacies and everything in between. I knew I was making a difference because people that I spoke to in hospitals thanked me for helping to break down the barriers that surround mental health and they come to Grow to get support once they left hospital.

When I first started at GROW I had been a carer for 25 years. I was very angry with the system, doctors, institutions, governments etc, and the discrimination. My kids couldn't get to sports clubs, and getting teachers to listen and getting therapies and finding therapists that weren't doing lip service was really hard. So, I wasn't able to work because I was spending all my time finding the right therapies and therapists for my children who were diagnosed with dyspraxia and were told they would never be able to walk correctly, talk, read or write. All my children are successful independent people who are married and have careers.

I persisted and since coming to GROW I have been able to deal better with my emotions. I am alot calmer. GROW showed me how to look after a person with mental illness and how to become better myself. I learned also how to look after them once they'd healed, otherwise as a carer it is usual to overcompensate at times and that can derail the relationship. I learned how to deal with my own mental health along the way and was able to step into the leadership roles with my heart intact and full of hope. I felt I had a purpose and could then support others who might otherwise have gone through burnout in their carer's roles.

In the Carer's group, we do a reading from the Carer's training in the Middle Routine. As carers we need to learn how to apply self-care and use the words and language of Grow to support not only the people with mental illness but also the families associated and all the community because everyone is impacted.

The pieces of the program in GROW that helped me the most were "If a thing is worth doing it's worth doing badly for a start and while you are improving (Blue Book p.35) As a Carer we are quite capable of doing a lot, but when getting so worn out that I only had 10% left in my system, I learnt I didn't have to do everything perfectly, so that was a big relief. A completely different way of looking at things.

The 4 stabilising questions continually helped me when I was seeing doctors, politicians and others. It also helped me deal with my own personal and family problems. We use this program all the time in the Carer's Group to help sort out exactly what the Carer is talking about to find out what is the real problem and cause. What is causing you to be in tears right at this moment because we get very overwhelmed.

Also "telling the untellable" (Blue Book p.48) when I first came, because I could admit that I didn't like having to be a Carer. I was happy doing it, but I knew I was sacrificing a lot in my life and career. Many carers don't get carers allowance.

And the last one was "Feelings aren't facts (Blue Book, p. 24) and that was good because as a Carer fear doesn't stop death it stops life. And worrying about someone doesn't take away tomorrow's troubles, it takes away today's peace.

I used a lot of other program. One was Principle 16 Reasonableness (Blue Book p.36) and that helped me by understanding that people have a right when going to hospital to be treated in a reasonable way from others. I would love to do some Carer training for other Grow Carer Groups around Australia because I have learned so much.

Thank you GROW and the Carer's Group.

“

The best thing about GROW for me was meeting other carers, sharing our stories, feeling supported and supporting others. It gave me a purpose in our mental health struggles while caring for others.

”



GROW Board of Directors

John Della Bosca A.M – Chair

John has extensive experience within the health and mental health sectors, having held such positions as the NSW Minister for Health, Associate Director of the Whitlam Institute (University of Western Sydney), Chairman of Family Drug Support, and served on the boards of Coast and Country Primary Care and Independent Community Living Australia. John also led an important campaign called Every Australian Counts – to increase grassroots support for the introduction of the NDIS – displaying diverse and valuable skills that will be critical to the success of GROW's future strategic plan. John is highly accomplished – having been awarded an Order of Australia in 2020, the PRIA Golden Target Award in 2013 and the Ted Noffs Humanitarian Award in 2001. He completed a PhD in History (2023), after already earning a Masters in Letters with merit in 2010.

Ina Mullin – Deputy Chair

Ina has over 20 years' experience in stakeholder engagement and communication. She is the inaugural Director of Partnerships and Engagement at the National Suicide Prevention Office after serving as Director, Communication and Engagement at the National Mental Health Commission. Prior to this she held business development, brand management and public relations roles at a variety of NFP suicide prevention and mental health service providers, most recently as National Manager Communication and Public Affairs at Lifeline Australia. Ina holds a Master of Arts in Communication Management, an Executive Master of Business Administration and a Bachelor of Arts (Hons).

Jeremy Morse – Director

Jeremy is a CPA, with extensive experience in the for-purpose community sector, primarily centred on aged care, disability and mental health support services such as the NDIS. While his work has covered the breadth of accounting and finance functions, his recent focus has been providing reliable advice to Board and Executive decision makers. Alongside his financial leadership roles, he is also a director of an ethical investment company operating in Pakistan. He is a member of the AICD and holds a Master of Accounting from the University of Tasmania.

Dr Judith (Judy) Edwards – Director

Judy has a strong commitment to community service and lifelong learning and has qualifications in medicine and public health. Her interests have taken her on a stimulating career path through general practice, politics – where she was the West Australian Minister for the Environment and then the not-for-profit sector, leading a small medical research foundation. She was also involved in the implementation of new mental health laws in WA in 2014. Judy currently chairs an advisory board at Curtin University engaging community and industry and promoting digital transformation. She is involved with several local community services and other organisations and kayaks for relaxation in her spare time.

Steve Ryan – Director

Steve has had extensive exposure across the public, superannuation, union and not-for-profit sectors. He has held roles as a secondary school teacher, Queensland Teachers' Union President, a Trustee of the QSuper Board, and a director of QInvest. He is currently the board chair of two Qld Government Statutory Authorities - Health and Wellbeing Qld (HWQ) and the Residential Tenancies Authority of Qld (RTA).

Mark Lacey – Director

Mark is a mental health professional with twenty-six years' experience. He has fought for the recovery of those with mental illness and for systems that routinely provide for that recovery over that time. Mark commenced a Master of Philosophy degree in the field of moral theology in 2022. Mark has been a Grow member for twenty three years, a leader in Grow for sixteen years, and Chair of the Vic-Tas Branch Program Team for four years – from 2017 to 2020 and a member of the National Program Team from 2021 to 2023. Mark is a member of the four-person sub-committee of the NPT charged with leading the consultations to rewrite the Blue Book, Grow Australia's main piece of literature. Mark is a foundation member and current chair of the Insights Mental Health Group Ballarat, 2005 to the present. Mark is also the Consumer Member of the Grampians Region Interim Regional Body created by the 2020 Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health. Mark brings to Grow his experience in facilitating recovery, in reforming systems so that they promote recovery, skills in IT management, financial and legislative compliance & leadership/management, and a passion for the rights of Australia's indigenous people.

Elaine De Vos – NCEO

Elain is the National CEO of GROW and works with the Board to guide the performance and development of GROW.

Grow Board Members, from left to right – Ina Mullin, Heath Fereday, Dr Judy Edwards, Mark Lacey, Jeremy Morse, John Della Bosca A.M.



Branch Reports

Victoria

In alignment with the principles set out in the Victorian Mental Health Act 2022 this annual report, highlights our continued commitment both in Victoria and across Australia to promote and protect the mental health and well-being of our community.

Victorian had a wonderful year with many celebrations to mention. Four new groups were introduced including Carlton, Box Hill, Reservoir and Brimbank. Brimbank marks the first group to operate from the new Adult Mental Health and Wellbeing Local introduced as a recommendation from the recent Royal Commission into Mental Health. In 12 months, many of these new groups have had impressive success with regular attendance and members stepping up to take on some leadership. Many seasoned Growers helped support the opening of the groups. A total of 1179 meetings were held in Victoria with 6976 people in attendance. Victoria currently supports 27 groups including a specialized Carer's group, 3 Prison groups and 5 School based groups.

Victoria focused on community building and friendship throughout the year. GROW groups are provided with the least possible restriction of a person's rights, dignity and autonomy. Attending a group is free and does not require a mental health diagnosis. Participation in a GROW group provides a group structured program with the aim of promoting recovery and participation in community life

After many years of being isolated from our friends, our community groups and each other we focused on getting back to the GROW 'Caring and sharing community.' We achieved this by creating opportunities for intergroup and inter-regional support. Many regions joined together for their Organiser and Recorder meetings along with joint leadership meetings. This was a loving challenge for some but for many this fostered relationship building and innovative ways to work together. A total of 29 Regional/Branch socials were held and another 52 Group socials were held throughout the year. 499 Growers attended with some highlights including an on-going combined online social attended by our Footscray eGrow group and our face to face Melton group, our Box Hill and Kensington members went along to a Comedy show together for a laugh filled evening, the Branch held an enjoyable GROW Birthday social and our Murray to Mountain region don't let the distance get in the way and showed their friendship to each other through regular lunches and maybe a little cake.

The diverse needs and experiences of people receiving mental health and wellbeing services are to be actively considered, with services provided in a manner that is safe, sensitive and responsive.

We were privileged to be invited to begin running monthly Hospital Orientations at Sunshine's new Mental Health and Wellbeing Centre (previously Sunshine acute adult clinic). Our members enjoyed giving their testimonies to in-patients while providing hope that new members will be encouraged to make decisions and be involved in their own treatment and Recovery needs when they come to GROW. By attending Hospital orientations our members model 'self-activation' through mutual help. The GROW principle of self-activation is 'my own personal contribution to my own recovery or growth is irreplaceable. It consists of patience and perseverance in practice of the GROW program and the systematic development and use of my own personal resources.' Our Box Hill Group Leader Faisal S had this to say about attending an orientation 'I do it to honor those who have and continue to help me. And to realize my unique place and unique part in humanity.' We aim to expand this program to more hospitals throughout 2024.

Our focus has remained steadfast on supporting the principle of recognizing and valuing the lived experience of a person with mental illness. This is core to GROW's service delivery model from program design to delivery and the foundational literature the program is build on. In this ecosystem carers, families and supporters are recognized and valued.

Our Manager, Program Staff and many Lived experience leaders helped spread the message of our GROW program through lots of events including meeting with Peak bodies, connecting in with new initiatives including Mental Wellbeing Centres, adult locals and the Victorian collaborative centre for mental health and wellbeing. We also did lots of fun stuff together like promoting GROW at lots of festivals, expos, and field days across the state.

Get Growing continues to deliver our peer-to-peer groups to many school students within Victoria. 705 students across Primary and High schools attended 105 meetings. Students say they 'enjoyed making new friends and creating stronger connections within current friendships and relationships.' Their favorite part of each week was sharing in a safe space and not feeling alone. They enjoyed learning about themselves and others. They expressed what makes the group was a safe environment that allowed open and non-judgmental communication. The program offered young people valuable skills, which have helped to create better outlooks on their lives and how to better deal with emotions and crises. A student shared that they feel more confident interacting with their peers in and outside of the group, after learning their peers share similar hardships.

“ **Our focus has remained steadfast in supporting the principle of recognizing and valuing the lived experience of a person with mental illness. This is core to GROW's service delivery model from program design to delivery and the foundational literature the program is build on. In this ecosystem carers, families and supporters are recognized and valued.** ”





Tasmania

Tasmania currently has 6 groups with a total of 257 meetings and 1900 attendances. Tasmania saw the retirement of long-standing Program worker Ruth Parsons. After dedicating 12 years she has handed the mantle over to two new Program workers. Ruth retired with all Tasmanian groups experiencing full membership. New Program worker Linda says she is 'continuously inspired by GROW groups. In the short time I've been here I've already experienced an offering of improved evolution of the program through Growers'.

Our new Southern Program worker Peter has worked closely with the Tasmanian leaders and has successfully introduced a new Hobart face-to-face group.

Hospital orientations have also been introduced inside the newly operational Peacock Centre in Hobart. The orientations have been well received by the in-patients with some already attending groups in Tasmania. We are proudly supported by the Peacock Centre and Tasmanian Department of Health to deliver these sessions to ensure systemic connections enable the sector to work more closely with each other.

Continuing with the theme of community building, Tasmania held their first Community weekend since 2021 at Camp Clayton. Waves from the Bass Strait were crashing on Turners Beach with Growers from the West, Northeast, and South of the state. Victorian BPT member Paul Cooper was a guest from the mainland. 10 Growers attended with many eGrow members having only met each other for the first-time face to face. Much laughter and conversation were exchanged between friends with many saying they wished the camp would not come to an end. 4 Regional Socials occurred with 27 Group socials. 126 Tasmanians attended socials throughout the year.

Nikki Files (VIC/TAS Manager)

“ Tasmania has had a wonderful year of expansion, exciting change, connection, and vibrant groups. ”

Photos – Axedale Training Weekend August 2023, Farewell to Ruth Parson (Former VIC Team Leader) with Nikki Files (VIC/TAS Manager), West 66th Brunch, Vic training session, WR Christmas social.



New South Wales

It feels like the Branch hasn't stopped gaining speed since rebuilding the community following the impacts of Covid. The numbers of Grow groups, Community Leaders and Grow staff members have all increased over this financial year. That does not mean that the occasional group has not had to go into recess for some time due to inconsistent leadership, but the community has expanded in other regions with reinvigorated enthusiasm where seasoned leaders ensure the groups success.

This year, 982 weekly Grow groups took place across the Branch, meeting the needs of 621 individuals across the state on 5740 occasions. This year we also hosted more than 390 group and branch Socials that happen both face to face and online! It is so wonderful to see our members value not only the work of personal development that happens at the weekly meetings but also the importance of celebration and play, which can be seen by the amount of socialization that occurs throughout the year. This year, 56 Hospital orientations also took place at numerous mental health wards including Lilly Pilly, Shoal Haven, Amaroo, Byron Bay, Tallowood and Sutherland.

There has also been a very exciting opportunity for growth in the region, with the Branch being successful in securing funding through both the Healthy Coast and Central Eastern Sydney PHNs. The delivery of Get Growing commenced at the start of 2024, and we have now proudly delivered the program to 10 Schools within the region. Growing Resilience has also commenced being rolled out in Eastern Sydney. Whilst still in its formation stage, we are confident that interest in the program will gather momentum once word gets out that it is free and accessible to all people living in the cesPHN region. It is through these opportunities that we have also got to extend our team of workers, which is always a pleasure.

ACT

We currently have 5 groups in the ACT and greatly appreciate the extra support Program workers Matt, Justin and Jo have offered the community while we try to recruit a Program Worker in the region. Unfortunately, we have not had consistent staff representation during this time. A big shout out to Sunny, a relatively new member to our community who has generously volunteered her time to help support the groups while the process of recruitment continues.

The Branch would also like to acknowledge all our leaders but make special note of John and the Burwood Group. John was recently recognized for his contribution as a volunteer with Grow during National Volunteer Week, but he and his group were also successful in securing a grant to host a mental health forum in October: An example of 12 step work in its finest!

“ It is so wonderful to see our members value not only the work of personal development that happens at the weekly meetings but also the importance of celebration and play. ”

Photos – Coffs Harbour Community Weekend Bushwalk 2023, Leeton Show OSD 2023, Justin and Michyo Sutherland Hospital Mental Health Expo, Justin Isabel Soni Laura Danielle Jo Wizard of Australand rehearsal Castlereagh 2023, Soni and Laura Wizard of Australand, Nowra Stockland OSD, Ballina Odd Socks Day 2023.





Queensland

This financial year has seen great growth in the Qld Region: For '23-'24 the number of our attendees was 340 and attendances were 3473, compared to '22-'23 attendees of 243 and attendances of 2766. This year has also seen the highest number of Organisers and Recorders nominations for the past few years which has resulted in mostly fully formed groups. As the Leadership continues to grow in the region, this year has also seen the formation of 3 more groups in the region. These groups have now moved from beginning to progressing groups, with leadership being built and attendances stabilising. This year we also celebrated our biggest Community weekend yet! We had 32 Growers in attendance. 17 attendees were first-timers and from our 13 Grow groups, all bar 2 were represented. We believe this shows great growth in our community.

The number of branch socials that occur have also increased. Due to the scope of our members, we hold them monthly and alternate between face to face and online. Attendances at these events have been slowly building with our most recent event being our biggest yet! We had 17 Growers in attendance, 7 of which being first timers. Evidence of how well our groups must be in 'creating the environment' and welcoming first timers with ease. On the Gold Coast, we have also just opened an arts and craft social group which has already gained great interest.

There has been a huge increase in the community outreach being completed by staff and leaders alike. Encouraging Growers to support these projects can be an important part of individual recovery, building confidence and purpose. This time has also allowed the formation of relationships with likeminded organisations to support collaboration opportunity and referral pathways. Some of these providers include: MHLEPQ, QAMH, Metro South Community MH Network, Carers QLD, IASAQ, GC PHN and GC Private Hospital. After great determination we have FINALLY had a big win after many struggles of engaging Qld Hospitals into our services - a Brisbane hospital has invited us to deliver Growing Resilience in two of their inpatient units. Hopefully, this may form a warm pathway for patients to transition off ward and into a GROW group as part of their discharge care plan.

During the second part of the year, we have increased opportunities for our Growers by running weekly Program Study sessions. These sessions are facilitated by a staff member but encourage open, objective conversation. They have also grown inter-branch connections, as Growers from other Branches also attend these. Coinciding with these sessions, we also host bi-monthly Writing for Recovery workshops, gently encouraging our more pen-shy Growers into take the task of writing for recovery.

Whilst a very successful year for our Qld Branch, it still hasn't come without its challenges:

Though a 'win' was mentioned previously, overall, engaging Hospital for orientations has been an ongoing challenge. We get to meet with staff and provide in-services, but accessing consumers to talk about our groups has deemed a great challenge.

Not uncommon to other states we have found ourselves regularly 'relying' on the same seasoned Growers for intergroup support and community outreach. We've been discussing this at the BPT level, O&Rs and group levels also and it's an area of focus for us in the 2024-2025 financial year.

Sharon Friel (NSW/ACT/Qld Manager)

Photos – Program Worker Diana with BPT member Gordon J at St David's neighborhood centre Autumn fest event.



South Australia

In 2024 Grow SA continued to offer both 'in-person' and online weekly Grow groups meetings across Adelaide and in Rural and Remote areas such as Whyalla. We were gratefully able to continue with the Get Growing Youth program and Growing Resilience programs, building on the success of the last two years.

We welcomed our new Patron for GROW in South Australia – the Honourable Nadia Clancy MP and Premiers advocate for Suicide Prevention in SA. Nadia has already been a feature at the annual Red Faces event which again was able to donate over \$30,000 to GROW in support of Youth Mental health programs, namely Get Growing.

Special thanks to Georgia Flinn who had been chiefly responsible for these areas prior to her maternity leave in late 2023. Georgia was a delight and brought so much to GROW in SA. She has decided not to return after maternity leave and stay with her young family at home while also continuing to work with her partner in their own business ventures – our best and most heartfelt wishes to her and her growing family. Also, thanks to Christie Baverstock who had been a longtime Grow member and integral employee for 17+ years. Christie resigned her position toward the end of 2023. Christie had been a staple of Grow life in SA and a smiling helpful face for many hundreds if not thousands who had come through our doors to attend groups, social activities, weekend retreats, workshops and so on in that time – we wish her all the best in her new endeavours with her partner and work ventures. Lastly, we also said good-bye to Michael Brennan who strived diligently in his Program worker role and really rolled up his sleeves through the Covid years for GROW. Always with a friendly smile to build up GROW's peer-to-peer and networking community in the Southern areas.

Very Special thanks to Brenton Williams for his drive and enthusiasm in volunteering and running the Red Faces evening in SA, it has become a landmark event in Adelaide. We also thank him for his continued support in donating all funds raised from the evening to Grow. It is truly remarkable!

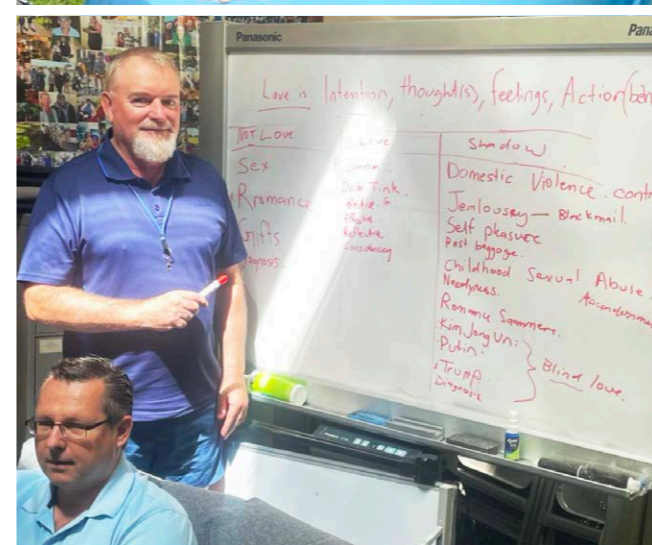
GROW in SA also welcomed two Northern Territorians, Grow member and leader Lynda Hyland and Kate Francis to our 'hybrid' Branch Program Team this year. Being able to connect the NT to the monthly lived experience governance team of Grow members in SA was a highlight of leadership development, use of technology and support between the two regions.

Of particular note in 2024 was GROW South Australia's role in redefining and relaunching the Young Adult (18-30) Grow group space – the 'wellness method' version originally trialled and ran successfully for nearly five years, but coming into 2024, the format had run its course. Thanks to GROW in Victoria for providing the impetus to reassess, re-imagine and relaunch, with a more closely aligned format to the weekly Grow group Program structure and leadership model. Great results and developing leadership within the group so far and looking forward to more in 2025. Please look for our Young Adult member testimony contained in this report.

Lastly thanks to South Australian Department of Health and Wellbeing our long-time funder and supporter. Thanks to Contracts Officers Kelly Smith and Adriana Lopez, Principal Contracts Manager David Lister and Deb Odgers Manager Service Contracts for their patience and support as we transitioned to new staff and admin handling reporting and acquittals.

Darryl Ballestrin (National Program Manager and SA Branch Manager)

Photos – Brenton Williams with his certificate of appreciation, Program Workers Holly and Amelia work hard to set up a mini Foodbank at the Hove center for a gold coin donation. Naru Farm Community Camp, Amelia, Jeff and a Camp staff say hello to the Emu. Doug Feeds a calf and Amelia and Doug cook a BBQ, Amelia, Michael, Doug, and Cecily running the booth at The Rotary Seaside Walk, Gavin leading a Study Day on the Topic of Love. Peter is joining in on the couch, Marine Discovery Centre Branch Social, Holly watches the digeredoo being played by a Staff member.



Western Australia

A priority focus in WA throughout the past twelve months was in response to the positive feedback from the community identified need, that people attending Grow Groups wanted GROW WA to continue. In direct response to this feedback from the voices of the people who need support for their mental health, Grow WA we continued as best as we could to invest in empowering and supporting the leadership through training and development, community and capacity building of all remaining groups, and maintain all other relationships of significance that could also promote the invaluable service that Grow offers to communities.

Overall, GROW WA's commitment to the leadership development of people attending Grow Groups throughout this time of deep need in the various communities had a range of ongoing challenges. However, GROW WA remained true to the Grow Program and continued with flexible, adaptive and collaborative strategies for each group to be supported as best as possible and maintained throughout the past twelve months with very limited resources, none of which was easy for any of the remaining staff or volunteers.

Health promotion through community education and training continued as a strategy to support all groups to help maintain the connection to Grow Program whilst targeting the identified and/or developing needs of each group. Such a targeted approach developed better quality group functioning over time and promoted better ground to develop the required individual and group skills within the groups, the outcome of which has led to 13 groups continuing in WA, 10 local community Grow Mental Wellbeing Groups which met nearly every week, that is 468 meetings during the year, and also one regional Leadership Group, one regional Organiser and Recorder Group and one regional Branch Program Team, that is 30 more meetings. (In total 498 meetings). Socials were maintained with all groups, and these were held over 120 times throughout this period. Socials are an important balance for social connection and are also part of the holistic support through the Grow Mental Wellbeing Program.

Thank you to all Growers and Grow Leaders in the field of mental health for your dedication, commitment and willingness to try to sustain the Grow Groups, seeing them as incredibly invaluable to all people who need access to quality peer to peer mental health support for people at risk and/or vulnerable as they need it in WA. We have had interest shown to deliver our Get Growing Program which we hope to do as soon as possible. We are all aware that appropriate funding is needed to be able to support, maintain and sustain the Grow services and programs into the future and we are all working as best as we all can on this. Thank you again.

While mental health presents a growing need in all communities, GROW WA commends the willingness, dedication, commitment and leadership that volunteers demonstrated within their own capacities, throughout the entirety of this difficult period.

Lynda Diagne (WA Manager)

“ **Thank you to all Growers and Grow Leaders in the field of mental health for your dedication, commitment and willingness to try to sustain the Grow Groups.** ”

Northern Territory

Leaders in NT have come together on 2 occasions to support the review of the Blue Book, which has been a massive task of co-design taking place nationally and involving more than 200 Grow leaders! During 2023, Drag Passport had a few evenings of fundraising for GROW at Bin-gay: Not only was it an amazing opportunity to inform the greater community about the work of GROW but also monies raised on the evening will be used to support Grower activities moving forward.

“ **Worth celebrating even more however, was the number of Growers that attended these fundraising events and had a 'good old time' as a group of genuine friends!** ”

2023 also included the NT community's 2nd retreat with more than 20 people in attendance. Members this time around were very much involved in arranging different activities to occur over the days which was a great example of leadership and confidence. Since then, the Branch has continued to receive some generous donations to go towards funding another Retreat, which can now occur even if further funding for the local branch is not secured in the future.

Sadly, the Branch lost staff member David (Daisy) Taylor at the end of December followed by their community space/GROW Office in February. Without the capacity to provide regular program worker support, one group has gone into recess, with the Rapid Creek group now meeting at a local Minister's office in Millner. The capacity to deliver Get Growing and Growing Resilience has also ceased due to the funding loss: But in GROW we know, we are more durable than vulnerable. While GROW's future in the NT remains uncertain, the Branch should be proud of its achievements this year including the output of 75 meetings that involved 59 individuals on over 600 occasions. Members also celebrated friendship on 19 different socials including birthday celebrations, Christmas day, Odd Socks Day and all branch BBQs.

Kate Frances (NT Manager)



A young adults view of personal growth through GROW

Admittedly, I didn't return after my first in-person Grow meeting. While I connected with the program and enjoyed the time dedicated to supporting everyone with their mental health, this particular group consisted of people older than me, and I so desperately wanted to connect with people my own age. Serendipitously, a few months later, the group Program Worker asked if I would be interested in joining the new Young Adults eGrow online group, and I was very eager to join.

Not only have I been able to connect with a group of amazing young adults, but the group is held at a convenient time after work, and I can stay warm in the comfort of my own home with my heater on and even be wearing my pyjamas! So far, I have attended the meetings consistently for two months and over this short time, I already feel more grounded, humbled, less socially anxious, and more positive about the future. Knowing I can receive as well as give support to others really makes me believe I'm not alone and gives me strength to keep growing into the person I want to be, week after week.

I first heard about Grow in 2023 at the Royal Adelaide Hospital where I was admitted with my fifth manic episode – the worst yet. It was the worst yet because at the same time I was diagnosed with an overactive thyroid, which gave me endless amounts of energy and only worsened the mania. On top of this, I had to confront the fact that this manic episode was the reason why my first real relationship broke down. I was abandoned during the episode and only had bipolar to blame. In previous episodes, nothing too bad really happened and I recovered by throwing myself into my university studies. But this time, the relationship breakdown was a big wake-up call. I finally 'admitted to personal disorder in my life'. After sharing my story in my first Grow meeting, I learnt that this acceptance was indeed 'Step 1' of 'The 12 steps of recovery and personal growth' (pg.13).

Having admitted to personal disorder in my life for the first time, I became determined to read David J. Miklowitz's, 'The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide' from start to finish. In his book, he emphasised the importance of engaging with a psychologist who you didn't have to teach about the disorder. My previous experience with two different psychologists had not been very helpful, and so I became motivated to find someone with more experience with bipolar. After some research online, I struck gold when I found Jo. She is a psychologist based in Sydney who specialises in helping people specifically with bipolar and we communicate online over zoom. She just 'gets it' and this has been the single most important step in my recovery. She keeps me accountable, has helped me develop a relapse prevention plan, has helped me improved the way I mood-chart, has guided me through exploring and understanding patterns of thinking and strongly held beliefs in schema therapy, and for the first time I feel like I can cope with the disorder.

There is a Grow Wisdom that reads, "The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide" (pg.52). My fifth relapse into mania as well as the subsequent breakdown of my first relationship was my 'lowest ebb'. Yet with my new support network in my new psychologist, the Grow group and with recently finding a new GP and psychiatrist, I feel that the tides are turning. It's true that, 'you alone can do it, but you can't do it alone' (pg.82). I understand now how important it is to cultivate a network of people that leave you feeling supported rather than anxious and frustrated. I also like the saying that, 'mostly, when things go wrong, they're meant to go wrong – so we can outgrow what we have to outgrow' (pg.18). The relationship breakdown was meant to go wrong so that I was able to accept bipolar for what it is – a disorder. With therapy and a stronger support network, I am outgrowing the fear of living a life with bipolar disorder.

While I think a healthy amount of fear about the disorder is a good thing to motivate me to look after myself, I know that there is also much to love about my life. I love being creative, painting in watercolour, writing songs on piano and singing, and I love going for runs and playing table tennis. As for work, I am grateful for the work I have even though I was influenced by perceived family expectations to pursue a career in engineering. Focusing on my work, hobbies and friends allow me to feel as though 'I can be ordinary' despite having bipolar disorder (pg.16). By 'emphasising what is rather than what isn't' in this way, I am able to cultivate gratitude for everything going well in my life. And while the disorder gives me a certain sensitivity to life's stress, 'good ordinary people' go through all kinds of stress and each of us must learn to cope. With my new support network and commitment to my self-care routines, I hope I can stay well and live out 'the best in life and love and happiness' that I truly believe is ahead of me (pg.16).

“

Not only have I been able to connect with a group of amazing young adults, but the group is held at a convenient time after work, and I can stay warm in the comfort of my own home with my heater on and even be wearing my pyjamas!

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Life Stories

Two GROW life members were interviewed to discuss their involvement with GROW. Here they share their stories and thoughts on the challenges GROW faces today in tackling mental health and building resilience in communities.

GROW Life Member- Gordon Jones

Gordon recounted that he first heard about GROW when a door knocker came by my church after a service. I wasn't sure at first but after a Field Worker (Program Worker) turned up to talk about GROW, I realised she was genuine, and I attended a few meetings to learn about GROW. I was a Minister in the Church and had access to a hall. So soon after in 1991 I attended a group at Holland Park in the then head office in Crown St. Gordon was drawn into the program despite not having a specific problem to address by after meeting this women several times she did influence his decision to run a group for a year. I started by first group at the church in Hawthorne, a suburb of Brisbane.

I became more responsible as an organiser, wrote papers for leadership meetings, and got involved in organiser activities and camps.

Eventually, I was elected to the Branch Management Team, equivalent to the Branch Program Team today in around 1993. I then moved to become a field worker in the Gold Coast from 1996 to 1999. Then after six months, I moved to Carindale residential where my wife and I lived with clients in need. I was paid for 20 hours a week. We would plan our meals together and I remember one day I had a doctor's appointment I had forgotten when the appointment was, and we sat down with the group after lunch – and I started to stress and then one of the women in the house said "Gordon you should be in this house and we should be the staff".

He remembers the time at the residential program where a person was severely depressed. I encouraged them to use the Program, "I can compel my muscles and limbs to act rightly in spite of my feelings". They did, and that changed their life. The Program is powerful.

In 1999, I joined the national board as one of two Queensland representatives until 2004 and then for a further year in 2007. At this time the Board was involved in addressing issues between the national structure and the states. It was a time of great change.

Con was a crucial driving force nationally and internationally, being in his late 70s by then. When Con retired Mary Anne Lucas was appointed at a National level. At this time two board members from each State were chosen to become life members Neville and I were amongst this group.

As society becomes more secular it's important to think about the foundations of the program and where it started and the history of how it helped Growers. A lot of great people have come through GROW, and we need not lose that history. Gordon noticed that a lot of people drifted out of GROW once they served on the board.

The program is powerful, and it works.

I can't speak about whether other programs work. I still remember a woman who came to the Hawthorne group, and she never spoke. For the sake of rounding things out I asked her why she came to GROW, and she said, 'there is no hope for me I'm bipolar' and from that point on for the next three meetings you could see a visible change in this woman. After 9 months on the program, she said I have an opportunity to go and do some study, so we encouraged and supported her. I saw her down the street a year later and she was bubbly and as far as I know she was off medication, and she was doing well. So, the program works, and it is powerful. A lot of people say their wish they could have found GROW 30 years ago would have helped them a lot.

“ **The program is powerful, and it works.** ”



GROW Life Member- Neville Bradbury

Neville Bradbury - Life member of GROW started in 1997 Lives in Wallsend and is the father of three adult children. Neville is from NSW and as a teacher and principal found himself living in the central west of NSW Bathurst as principal of a catholic primary school in his mid-30's. That was when Neville experienced mental health challenges and was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder but that was not until his mid-forties. Prior to that he had no episodes but the stress of his job and what he took on became too much. After being urged by his doctor and wife, he attended his first meeting from an advertisement in the Western Advocate. Initially sceptical, he eventually embraced Grow's approach, focusing on larger goals over minor tasks, after hearing testimonies learning the Grow program. It took Neville around 10-12 meetings before experiencing a breakthrough.

"Laurie who came from Albury and started the first group was the person who told me I had a lot to offer. But at the time I couldn't see it I thought I was just hopeless"

Attending a training weekend in Ballina further solidified Neville's commitment to GROW, and he has attended 40 weekends since. Field worker Claire Layfield played a significant role in Neville's journey, as he visited various groups in the Central West region. Neville became a volunteer Field Worker (Program Worker) for GROW in 2003 and served until around 2012. He eventually joined the GROW Board, becoming the Chair for 5-6 years.

Mary Anne Lucas was the National Executive at that time, handling administrative tasks and program management. There were around 200 groups across Australia at the time but Mary Anne was finding it difficult to be both so the idea was that we would get a CEO, and she would stay on as the Program Co-ordinator and so Sally Edwards became the CEO, and I was chair of the board when she was appointed.

I also represented GROW on the National Mental Health Community and Carers Forum a national body that advocates for people with mental illness and that meant travelling all over Australia.

GROW is unique in treating mental illness holistically, contrasting with symptom-focused approaches like antidepressants. The program emphasizes an overall mental health plan and Grow books with sections to ease understanding. Key aspects include the fifth rule for objective thinking and the importance of friendship for mental health. The supportive community within GROW helps individuals realize they are not alone in their struggles with mental health.

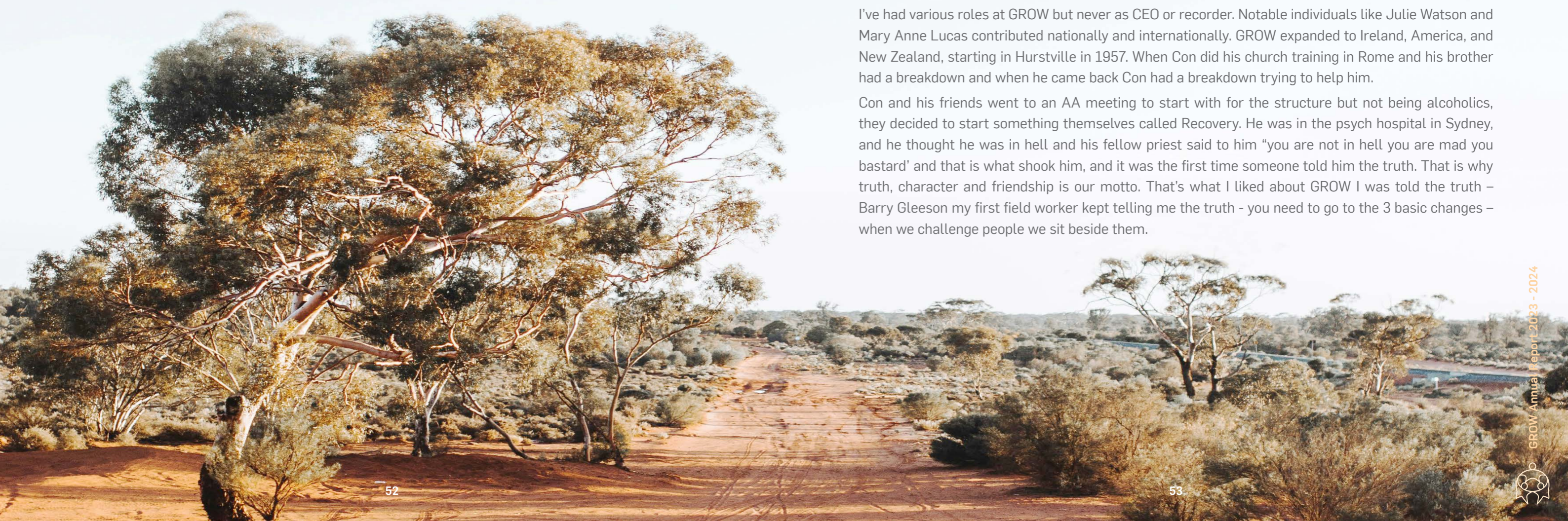
“ **You realise when you come to GROW is that you are not alone in your struggles, but you discover others with similar challenges. The process of improving mental health takes time and effort.** ”

GROW had a golden era when it was funded federally, but when the GST came in and then the government said all the money goes to the States so they can fund you – that was around 1996. There were 14 staff at the GROW office in Sydney at that time. There was even a GROW group in Norfolk Island for a few years after a mental health worker rang up and funded our work.

Like Gordon, Neville agreed that the program works but it takes work. To succeed you need to put in the work and maybe our society today is all about instantaneous results.

I've had various roles at GROW but never as CEO or recorder. Notable individuals like Julie Watson and Mary Anne Lucas contributed nationally and internationally. GROW expanded to Ireland, America, and New Zealand, starting in Hurstville in 1957. When Con did his church training in Rome and his brother had a breakdown and when he came back Con had a breakdown trying to help him.

Con and his friends went to an AA meeting to start with for the structure but not being alcoholics, they decided to start something themselves called Recovery. He was in the psych hospital in Sydney, and he thought he was in hell and his fellow priest said to him "you are not in hell you are mad you bastard" and that is what shook him, and it was the first time someone told him the truth. That is why truth, character and friendship is our motto. That's what I liked about GROW I was told the truth – Barry Gleeson my first field worker kept telling me the truth - you need to go to the 3 basic changes – when we challenge people we sit beside them.



GROW Testimonial - Isabel

As good stories go, my mental health story starter a long time ago in a land far far away: when I was born in Brazil, my parents were not in a good relationship, having fights and my mother left the home with me and my brother when I was 6 months old. She was concerned for our safety as my father was becoming more and more dysregulated. So, the baby that was supposed to be celebrated... was not. My father was mostly absent, and my mother worked full time to raise the family. Many times, I felt rejected by my father over the years for various reasons. With that, I developed a feeling of being a burden and not wanted. To fight it, I created an unconscious need to please and help others to be loved, putting everyone else before my own needs. I became a perfectionist too. Looking from outside, it seemed I was a happy person, very optimistic and with lots of friends. But that was only part of reality, as I couldn't express or even recognize the bad feelings I had inside. As a young adult, I remember sometimes being so deeply sad (when alone, not showing it to others) that I had thoughts of self-harm, thinking something in the lines of "... if I did this, would they understand how I am feeling?" Thankfully, I never acted on those thoughts.

In my mid-twenties, my father died by suicide and that was a tipping point that brought me to my first depression. For the first time I couldn't contain the darkness inside. I felt so guilty, lost and without purpose. Nothing was pleasurable anymore. Luckily my mother had done therapy herself and one day she was unexpectedly home when I got back crying my eyes out and she recognized I needed help, which she helped me to get. My psychologist at the time, still in Brazil, insisted for me to join a therapeutic group she ran. I am very glad she did, as it was in that group that I was first able to say that my dad had ended his own life. Being amongst others that are also hurting made me feel less alone in my struggles and I learnt that in a group we can work on our problems both directly but also indirectly when helping other group members, which was in itself a beautiful lesson for the future.

After that crisis passed, I moved to Australia a again lived life as if nothing was amiss. Nonetheless, other life scares brought me back to a depressive state: after my mom passed away, then a health scare, relationship breakdown etc. Every time I got to a point where I really needed help. At least I was learning how to get help, but in my mind, I was still my happy self, just needing some aid after something bad happened in my life. It made sense... Nonetheless, a few months after my son was born in 2019 (which was a dream come true and supposedly a very happy occasion), I fell into my worst depression ever. I got to the point that I had brain fog continuously and I couldn't keep up a conversation. I would get overwhelmed by the smallest things (one day I fell into tears over which socks I should wear). Even though I was concerned to start medication (which I never needed before) while breastfeeding, it got to the point where I had to give in. And in the midst of it, my GP gave some reading on major depression, which finally made it click to me that my mental health problems were a life-long journey, not only episodes. I understood I needed more than just crisis management... I needed to learn ongoing skills to cope with changes and to find a way to know when I was on the way down before I got in a critical state. That is when I went online looking for an Australian support group and I found GROW. The first thing that struck me about GROW was how easy it was to get to a group. In less than a week I had started, while I was still on the long waiting list to see a psychiatrist. In my first meeting I was advised I didn't need to say anything if I didn't want to, but because I already knew the power of group work, I was able to share. It was a relief to be among people that were ok with me not being ok, who didn't want to fix me. I think I mostly cried for my first few meetings and that was ok. Initially I only received 12 step calls, which were nice and made me feel cared for. My first piece of the program was Personal Value.

Learning that I was always valuable was such a good alternative to my feelings of only being worthy if I was doing everything for others and forgetting about myself. The piece of program that first started to change my habits was the second basic conviction: "I can compel my muscles and limbs to do the right and healthy thing in spite of my feelings." In achieving little goals, I started getting better at it. Slowly my attitude of "when I feel better I can do something" transformed into an attitude of having power over my feelings/depression and not only learning, but living by the 3rd conviction: "My feelings will get better as my habits of thinking and acting get better", especially connected to steps 7 (We took care and control of our bodies) and 9 (We trained our wills to regulate our feelings).

During those years I have used so many bits of program and learned a lot of the wisdoms. It has been incredible to notice that whenever I am dealing with problems and/or I feel low, some useful part of the program will come to mind to change my thinking from stinking to positive. And then I can take the next step in the right direction. For example, I went through separation and, even though there were really hard times, I haven't felt I couldn't deal with it. Some days I wanted to isolate myself, but I would instead "keep contact" and go to the group. The days before selling the family home I would wake up with a dreadful feeling and not want to get out of bed. And then the 3 basic determinations would come to mind. "I will go by what I know, not by how I feel..." – I would start to list what I knew (to sell a house it takes time, I chose a good real state person, we cleaned as much as possible before inspections etc.). That would calm the feelings, and I could then think about the next step towards doing the "right and healthy thing" and start the day. Other times, I would share in a group, and they would lovingly let me know that my thinking did seem very logical and that it was time to slow down and take care of myself. Since I know how it came from a caring place, those comments were not received as an attack, but as a reminder that sometimes we have to "follow guidance" when our thinking is not objective. And that helped me to not get to rock bottom again during such a very stressful time. What a treasure! I wouldn't have done that without GROW!

I am at the moment working in "Healthy relationships" with my friends while trying to uphold my personal value. I have had a light bulb moment over a piece of pizza (my first thought was to get the smallest one so others could get the better ones) - decentralizing is not only about decentralizing from self, but actually it goes hand in hand with personal value as there is no center: not me, not others. It is about our common well-being, and we are all equally valuable. The beauty is in the relationships and the "regulated spontaneity" that we can have with people around us.

My hope for the future is that I will continue to grow as a person and get closer and closer to full maturity with the help of my GROW friends and loved ones. And then I can keep helping others on the way, and hopefully my son will grow up knowing those skills as second nature. Later, when I look back in my old years, I will hopefully be able to say that I have reaped a beautiful and growthful destiny, not in spite of my mental health... but because of it!



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