

### **A father, husband and engineer's reflections on grief and self-care**

Although I have spent much of my life with orderly moods and little trauma, the sudden loss of multiple loved ones (my dog, my wife, my dad, and my father-in-law) separated by just weeks impacted me and my whanau greatly. Self-care was not on my radar but it should have been.

Whilst I was utterly devastated, I had three things on my side during my journey through grief; some pre-planned time off, support from wider family (my mother-in-law) and the RNZAF/NZDF Whanau who gave me purpose and support. I was fortunate to have been financially prepared for a six-month sabbatical and this gave me time and space to support my children and take my grief at its own pace.

It was so helpful to be able to talk with my wife's mum, for both of us. We understood just how bad each other felt without having to explain it and we didn't have to apologise if we cried. I believe I was able to move through my grief more quickly thanks to the opportunity to just talk it out. If anybody had said to me that I would be chatting daily with my mother-in-law before the loss, I would have laughed out loud.

I wasn't really in the frame of mind for rediscovering myself or looking for work. Rejoining the NZDF had not been on my long-term plan, but as my mood lifted I felt more like reconnecting with friends and getting out in the fresh air. I was really fortunate to be offered a role back doing work that was familiar to me and with people I felt comfortable with. This gave me a sense of purpose that helped me on my self-care journey.

I also began a journey of physical recovery to mirror my emotional rebuild. Good food, less alcohol, weekly jogging, restorative Yoga, cold swims, and lots of walks have become my go to.

I had a great marriage for 33 years to my best friend. Her sudden departure was debilitating. I couldn't imagine life without her. Nine months after becoming a widower and back in uniform, I realised that living alone was bad for me and I needed to change my circumstances. I reached out to the world and found someone to share my highs and lows with. Our connection was very fast and was a total surprise to me, as I wasn't even sure I could feel anything close to what I had had with my wife again.

Moving on with my life with a new partner happened very fast, and this was understandably quite hard for my adult children to accept and has been hard for all of us.

The NZDF4U team connected me with the Employee Assistance Program or EAP and this has been helping me and my family greatly. We have come a long way rebuilding our relationship thanks to an excellent counsellor.

More recently, I have started writing three morning pages of thoughts every day. I write whatever I am thinking – absolutely no rules about what I write, I just do it without stopping until I have three pages and I do it every day. The brain can think anything, but when it is written down it is easier to discount the ridiculous thoughts. I even find my thoughts moving to solutions that get written down too.

Here I am, just 18 months after the worst period of my life feeling great and feeling grateful. Self-care works, it was not a selfish act to give myself time, space, and exercise. While I am not over my grief, I now know with a fit body and active mind I can cope with the inevitable dark days and I am more capable to support my whanau in their need.