

Strengthening the Waka – A Senior Māori Officer's Haerenga

I have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Before I was diagnosed, I became a solo father, I was employed in a number of high tempo operational and staff appointments in the New Zealand Defence Force, still traveling, and still going through a journey of not understanding why I was doing things that were affecting my immediate and extended whānau and work colleagues. Excessive alcohol drinking to get the highs when I was low only to wake up the next morning feeling guilty for myself and then realising later that what I was doing was self-medicating for the wrong reasons. There were the mood swings, risk taking and losing myself on emotional roller coasters. And then there were the suicidal thoughts because I thought I had failed. This was not right. This was not who I should be and wanted to be. I knew something was wrong.

Since starting a relationship with a new partner, I had the realisation that there was more to it, something underlying. I wasn't the same person that I was or I was brought up to be. That's when I went down a spiral dive and I ended up on three months sick leave after visiting my doctor. I completely agreed with this decision because I simply wasn't functioning anymore, and the signs were there, and had always been there, including the emerging suicidal thoughts. If it wasn't for the support from my partner I probably wouldn't be here today. No one else but her understood what was happening. She comforted and supported me on the start of my journey – our journey.

After being referred to a Clinical Psychologist, I finally found out what was wrong and began to embark on a journey of learning, and identifying strategies I needed to put in place to allow me to steer my canoe (*waka*) on a journey (*haerenga*) that will weather the storms and get me through those difficult challenges and hard patches. I was definitely broken at that stage. Out the end of it, I was able to go back to work a little stronger, more aware of who I was and how I could be better with baskets of knowledge and tools (*kete matauranga*) in my box on my *waka* to use when the going got tough.

Today, I would say I am not 100% fixed, I'll never be. But what I can say is that I am stronger and able to stand tall and strong when the going gets tough; what I can say is that the '*haerenga*' that I've come from helped me realise why I was veering off course and at times directly in to the storms and what I needed to do to strengthen myself and my *waka* to be able to weather the storms ahead of me. You'll never be able to change the currents, there will always be new things, and you're going to be forced to try to improvise and tap into those strategies and the *tapa wha* and - *kete matauranga wairua, kete matauranga hinengaro, kete matauranga tinana, kete matauranga whanau*.

I now need to take medication, that allows me to sleep better at night, and to be better during the day. These help me to stabilise my *waka*, but there are days when the medication doesn't work. So, it's how I manage those - taking a deep breath and stepping back. Time out – by clearing my mind, using my passion as a competitive sportsperson in sporting activities I enjoy and including multi-sport competitions to help me over the downs and to reach the highs and successes I want and need. Sometimes you need to holster your pistol, remove yourself for a little while, rather than digging yourself into an early grave. The odd time I forget to use my strategies – but that's part of the journey and reflection I do that make me stronger. I know when I should be applying them, but for some reason, there seems to be a stronger pull away from my strategies. It is for that reason that I still need to steer my *waka* quite carefully, especially when there is a storm brewing, and seek the support from whānau when I need it.

One of the things this journey has unsheathed for me, as Māori, is to be a better leader and person. It has helped me to understand who I am (*Ko wai au*), and reflect on how I can be a much better

person to the people that I love, to the people that I serve, and to the people that rely and look to me for guidance and wisdom. I want to be a person that people can look up to and trust, and to do that I need to own who I am and need to be. This journey has also allowed me to understand the issues our people are trying to battle and being able to have the *aroha* (empathy) and the courage to stand strong (*tū kaha*) to say to others that they are not alone. The key reason I was keen to share my story (*korero*), was to reinforce to our people that if you have a concern or are feeling down, don't try and fight it or manage it by yourself. "*You're not alone*". There are other people out there who have battled the storms in their '*waka*', and who have battled the storms that you are now facing. Don't be afraid to reach out. If you don't, you'll dig yourself into a grave or worse, something more tragic. I want to be able to reach out to people and say, I'm a Māori and a Māori officer and leader, I've been in the organisation a long time, I've been affected by this. It might be different to other people, but the key is to not try and fight it alone. You need a team of warriors in the back of your *waka*, to help steer you and support you in the right direction. If you don't, you will end up in that storm that you can't get out of.

Looking back, I was happy to go and seek help. I needed to. For me that was easy. After those three months of sick leave, what I found difficult was trying to manage my mental health in the work environment. I confronted a lot of brick walls in the organisation which really pissed me off. There were some people who made some damaging comments about my mental health and career when I came forward. I was told to 'harden up' – 'get back in my box'. The initial reaction by the organisation was not good, but the subsequent acceptance has been better. In saying that, the organisation and our leaders still need to be better at understanding what mental health means and how it affects our people by getting to know them.

It is also important for leaders to understand the values of Te Ao Māori, such as *aroha* (empathy), *whanaungatanga* (Family, relationships), *ngā tikanga*, and then understanding *tapa whā*. If you are only travelling on the military *waka* with the authoritarian style of leadership, what you need to bring on board are all the other *kete matauranga* in order to be a better person, a better leader and not undervalue your people. Are you actually taking off your traditional military hat, and embracing these leadership values and taking care of our biggest asset, our people?

He aha te mea nui o te ao katoa

What is the most important thing in the world?

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people

I refer to myself as a '*Mental Health Warrior*', I am on a *haerenga* steering my *waka*, who has weathered storms, but also wants to reinforce two things.

- Firstly, people who are suffering need to be looked after. Don't just think that what you see in front of you is a drunk or someone not committed to their work because it may not be the case.
- And secondly, if our leaders are not willing to accept or don't have the full understanding of what it is to have a mental illness, there is a group of us who do, and who are leaders.

I am a Māori Leader and a Māori Officer in the New Zealand Defence Force

I suffer from a mental health condition.

I now stand strong with courage to face the storms ahead of me

I share my journey to tell others that "*You are not alone*" and I am here to help

I am a Mental Health Warrior and this is my journey.