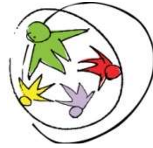

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Using Strengths to Create Change

Presentation by

Professor Lea Waters

Chair in Positive Psychology, Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, Monday, May 20, 2019

Video and audio versions of this speech are available at
www.communitiesincontrol.com.au

About the presentation:
Lea Waters is an Australian academic, researcher, psychologist, author, and speaker who specialises in positive education, parenting, and organisations. She's currently serving as the President of the International Positive Psychology Association and serves on the Council of Happiness and Education for the World Happiness Council. Lea has been listed as one of Australia's top 100 women of influence by the Australian Financial Review and Westpac Bank.

Professor Lea Waters
Thanks so much for the invitation to come along and connect with a large group of changemakers – people who are passionate about creating good social change. I'm really honoured to be here, and in our next 50 minutes together we're going to have a little bit of a look at the field of positive psychology. We'll have a look at some strength-based science. I'll tell you a bit about my journey, and how I came to build the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne and then set up my own social enterprise around boosting the mental health of young Australians. Then, as I said, we'll finish with an example of a New South Wales community I'm working with at the moment who are putting in place a very impressive whole-of-community strength-based initiative designed to boost the mental health of teenagers in that area.

As I said, we're going to talk a little bit about psychology, we're going to talk a little bit about mental health, and we're going to talk a little bit about community action, but really the core of my talk is on change, and how we create change, and how we seek improvement. What I'm hoping to do in my time with you is to flex your mind a little bit, and challenge you a little bit about our very ingrained notions of change and the process of change.

Let me start with an example. Let's pretend that I'm your boss. We're at this conference today, and it's all very exciting, and as I walk past you in the hallway I say, "Can you make an appointment to come and see me on Friday? There are some areas of improvement that I'd like to talk to you about." What goes through your mind?

Audience member
What have I done wrong?

Professor Lea Waters
What have I done wrong? Exactly. I can see from your body language. So, we meet on Friday. Today's Monday, right? So you've got four days to sweat it. What have I done wrong? "Areas of improvement...." What does she want to talk to me about? What do I need to fix?

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So we have our meeting on Friday. We sit down, and I say to you, "What I've noticed about you is that you're exceptional at volunteer management. You're exceptional at grant writing. You knock it out of the ballpark when it comes to bringing stakeholders onboard and seeing our vision. You have a gift for taking a very small budget and eking out as much as you can from it. What I want to do is take this talent and help you improve it, because if we can build on that strength that's going to be good for our organisation" (our not-for-profit, our humanitarian organisation, our local council, whatever it happens to be)

"If I can help you to improve that, that's going to be good for our organisation. It's going to be good for you, because you're playing to your strengths. You're doing something that you're good at, that you get energy from, that you're self-motivated to do. If I can figure out how we can take something that you're good at and analyse why it is that you have this strength, so we can improve that strength, then you can share that learning with the rest of your team members, and we'll all become better".

You come out of that conversation feeling very different to the way that you went into that conversation. Why do you think that is?

You'd been expecting the worst. You're expecting the worst because when you hear the phrase "areas of improvement", you immediately think improvement is a process of fixing what is wrong, and we've been conditioned in society to think that improvement is a process of fixing problems, fixing error, fixing what is wrong with us. No - we can improve what's right with us, too.

As things are, though, you're not going to think when I speak to you today "Oh, perhaps she's going to talk to me about how I can improve something I'm doing well at". That's one of the essences of the field of positive psychology; let's start first with what is working, let's start first with our strengths, what's going well, and then let's see what happens if we build on and amplify those.

That's a foreign concept to us, because we immediately think of change and improvement as fixing what's wrong with us. And yet, if you think of anyone who's reached the top of their game - an Olympian, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a Nobel laureate - they don't get there by spending all of their time improving what's wrong with them. They fix the areas of improvement, they fix the areas

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of improvement, they fix what's wrong with them, and then they spend the rest of their time improving on their strengths.

David Beckham spends a certain portion of his time developing his defence skills, but he spends the bulk of his training time perfecting his goal-kicking.

We spend so much of our time creating change based on problems, and fixing problems, that we don't stop to think about what's working well within this system, what's working well for this person, and what strengths and assets of our organisation or our community can we leverage and harness?

Let me give you another example. Let's say that a student brings their school report home to their family. They're doing five subjects and across the five subjects, they get one A, three C's, and a D. Now, in theory, that D should occupy about 20% of the conversation. Put up your hand if you think in practice more than 20% of the dinner-table conversation will be spent on the lower grade. Yeah.

We look at change as kind of fixing the problem, and our first thought is what's wrong and how can I fix it? Now, if we were having this as a private conversation (and I've had this conversation in many different contexts over decades now) you'd say to me, "But Lea, we need to fix the D. That's the weak link in the chain." I would say, "Absolutely, we need to fix the D. However, the real question is what assumptions have you made about the process of change? Because what generally happens is that we zoom in on that D, the poorer grade, and spend a lot of time analysing it, and what we get at the end of that analysis is a deep understanding of poor performance".

If instead we flipped the orientation and, instead of saying, "Why did you get the D?" we started our conversation with, "Tell me about the A. What was it about the teacher, your study patterns, your homework timetable, your interest, that allowed you to get the A?" If we study the A, we end up having an understanding of success. If we study the D, we have an understanding of poor performance.

And even though we might be great at understanding and overcoming poor performance, all we can really hope to do is lift that D up to a kind of a C. We

can pull someone out of a negative score. If, instead, we start with the A, we get an understanding of what creates success. We've then got a much better opportunity to help that young person transfer and translate what they're doing well to all four of those other subjects, so we get an opportunity to enhance the C’s as well. Do you see the difference in approach? But our natural temptation is to zoom into the problem. “What's wrong, and how do I fix it?” It's not our natural instinct to think “What's right, and how do I improve that”?

It's the same for any form of change. If we're seeking to create change in our own individual lives, or in a school, a workplace, at a community level, we focus first on what is wrong. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't. We do want to address the D. But there's a different way of doing it, coming at it first from what's working well, and you can imagine that might be a more effective solution for that student, because then they can start to analyse, "What’s getting me that A? Maybe I can apply that to my other four subjects."

It's also a much more empowering solution for that student. Instead of coming out figuring out what's wrong with them, they come out figuring out what's right with them, and they feel good about themselves, and that empowers improvement. Improvement isn't just a process of fixing what's wrong with us. We can also improve on what's going well. We can improve on what's going well, and what's right for us. It turns out, too, that when we invest our energy in improving what is right with us this is a key pathway to organisational performance, and a key pathway to mental health, and a key pathway to you as an individual or as a group or collective reaching your full potential.

The question, then, is “Why don't we do this more often?” That's why I call my book "The Strength Switch". It's not about ignoring the problem, it's not about ignoring that D, but it's about switching your attention so you focus first on what your strengths are, what's going well, what are the assets that we can leverage here to create change. Rather than just creating change by saying, "What's the problem and how do I fix it?" it's about switching our attention. It's not about ignoring problems, but it's about coming at them from a different side.

Why are we so conditioned to go, "What's wrong, and how do I fix it?" rather than our first question being, "What's right about this and how can I amplify that ?" Psychologists refer to this as our negativity bias, and negativity bias is

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an inbuilt, universal, subconscious bias. Everyone in this room has the negativity bias. It's a subconscious bias – we're not aware of it - and it's built into our brains to ensure our survival. It's a bias whereby our brain is designed to focus first on what is going wrong before we focus on what is going right. It's a subconscious bias that grabs our attention first to the negative before the positive and then holds our attention more to the negative than the positive.

In terms of grabbing our attention, everyone in this room (and it doesn't matter what personality you have – you can have a very positive personality style, but this is a *subconscious* bias) has this bias. You can think about it as your own internal, inbuilt, smoke-detector system. You're always scanning the environment. You're not aware of it, because it's happening at a subconscious level, but you're always scanning the environment – where's the threat, what's the error, what's the problem, what do I need to fix? And your attention zooms into that, grabbed first by the problems in our environment and not what's going well.

And the reason for *that* is that our negativity bias gave us a survival advantage. Think about it. If our ancestors out there on the African savannah had this inbuilt negativity bias, this inbuilt kind of smoke detector system - where's the threat, where's the threat, where's the error, what can go wrong, what's the problem, what do I need to fix? – they had an early detection system for threat. So our ancestors were the ones who heard the little rustle in the bush behind them before anyone else did. "Oh oh, I'd better run."

Can you imagine what happened to the others who didn't have that inbuilt negativity bias? They were lunch.

So the negativity bias is a subconscious bias whereby the negative things in the environment grab our attention first. Today, in our country at least – a first-world country at peace – we don't necessarily need that negativity bias as much. We're not under mortal threat. But our brain hasn't caught up, and its first priority is always to ensure our safety.

So it plays out in different ways. You've gone to this great conference. At lunchtime you zip out, get onto your phone, open up your emails, and then you

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see a particular name in your email inbox, and you get a physiological reaction. That is your negativity bias – "Uh-oh! Alert! Alarm! Alert! Alarm!"

The negativity bias is our friend. It's a early detection system to ensure we notice a threat. Threat is on its way. Get out of the way before it gets here! Threats grab our attention first and holds our attention for longer, so we spend more of our time ruminating over negative things, problems, than we do over positive things. The problem with that is we don't see the situation clearly. We spend so much of the time listening for a rustle in the bush that we fail to notice that on that bush is a beautiful berry that could be food. Our attention, because of the negativity bias, is grabbed by the problem.

There's not much we can do about the negativity bias except just be aware of it. Be aware of the fact that our reality is shaped by the negativity bias. It's a very useful tool to have, in certain situations. I'll give you an example from my home life this summer. I'm based in Melbourne. For people not based in Melbourne, we've a spate of 40-degree-plus days. They're crazy hot, a desert sort of heat. We had a spate of those – and my husband is *very* fixated on temperature. I call him Temperature Man.

So we have certain jobs in our house. He's responsible for temperature, and I'm responsible for cleaning the toilets. We've never actually discussed that. It's just that over 23 years of marriage, certain jobs seem to have been allocated to each of us. At the moment I'm trying to get my son to be responsible for cleaning the toilets, but it's not working very well.

Anyway, Temperature Man. So it's a Sunday afternoon, it's crazy hot, there have been four hot days in a row, and my husband is catching up with some of his high school buddies and they're going to the movies. He leaves for the afternoon, and he leaves me with this big list of instructions. We've got two different types of cooling – we've got evaporative cooling, and then we've got ducted. I don't even know what they are, because it's not my responsibility (ask me about toilet cleaner and I can tell you everything).

So he leaves, and he leaves me with this long list of instructions, like, "When it gets to a certain temperature outside, that's when you turn off the evaporative cooling and you put on the other cooling, and neh-neh-neh-neh". So yes, he

leaves. And I have to tell you that I was feeling very virtuous that day. I was feeling like if there was a poster for best wife, that would just be a picture of me with a halo above my head – because, you know, he's going out with his mates while I'm looking after our kids, I'm cooking dinner, I'm doing the washing, when it gets to a certain temperature I'm changing the evaporative cooling, I'm going way above and beyond my job description.

I actually went around the house closing all the doors from the extraneous rooms and closing the curtains – I was feeling *so* good about myself – and I kept the temperature cool. And Matt comes home. He comes into the kitchen. I'm preparing a salad for dinner and, unbeknownst to me, I had left one of the kitchen windows open. Just ever so slightly open. I didn't realise that I had done that. And so Matt walks into the kitchen and I'm like, "Hi, how was your day?" and preparing the salad, and he says, "You left the kitchen window open."

So I'm chopping the carrots. Put the knife down. Back away from the weapon. And I'm about to go into the whole, like, unappreciated wife script. You know, "I'm the best wife in the world. You've been out enjoying yourself. *And I closed all the curtains.* ***And you don't even say hello***." Then I realised, okay, that's Matt's negativity bias, because he's Temperature Man. He comes into the house, whether he knows it or not, scanning. Alert, alert, alarm, alarm, alarm, *beep beep beep*. There's a window open! He's not trying to be ungrateful. He's not unappreciative of what I've done. It's just his negativity bias, because we're primed to see the things that can go wrong before the things that can go right.

So in that moment, when I realised that, I stopped the whole unappreciated wife shtick and had a little pause. He didn't get away with it scot-free – I did talk about it later, and said, "When you come home, it would be nice if you said hello first." And in his mind, he had. He said, "I did. I said hello. And then I pointed out the window," and I said, "No, you didn't." Anyway, I hope that you're laughing with me and not at me.

So, negativity basis. It compromises our ability to see reality, and there's not much we can do about it, but just be aware of it, because it's a major player in how we address change. Because when we're addressing change, we see the problem first, so it primes us towards what is the problem and how do I fix it. We have to consciously step away from that and think what is going right in this

situation and how do we leverage off that. It takes intention. It takes a switch in focus, hence the name of my book "The Strength Switch".

Just to give you an example, let's say that in this particular version of reality we have an equal number of good things happening as bad things. Now, that will change. Sometimes there'll be more bad things, sometimes there'll be more good things, but the thing is that because of our biases, because of the way that our brain works, we don't see this reality. We don't work with the full reality. What happens immediately, because of the negativity bias, is that there'll be some good things that are happening that we don’t notice, the way Matt didn't notice the curtains and he didn't notice that I'd shut the doors. Some good things are happening in our environment, we just fail to see it unless we intentionally step back and zoom out and look at them.

In addition to some of the positive things going awry, what happens is that the negative things, because of the negativity bias, become amplified. There are all these aspects of reality that we could use to effectively create change but they're not in our purview. We don't see them. We see the negative and we miss the positive. What that does, of course, is that it primes us to create change by going, "Everything's wrong. We need to fix what's wrong."

I’d like you to have a discussion for two or three minutes at your table about an example of the negativity bias that you've seen – in yourself, in your community, in your society, in your workmates, in your kids. That’s not necessarily you seeing the negative in your kids – it might be your kids coming home after school, and they've had a great day but they still just talk to you about the one thing that went wrong, for example. Just have a quick conversation about where, even though there were good things happening, our attention got focused on the negative.

Okay, thanks, everyone.

I know that there were great conversations out there – maybe it's something that you can continue over the lunch break. Really, I just wanted to introduce you to the idea that our brains are wired towards negativity. It ensured a survival advantage then, but it doesn't necessarily give us an advantage now, when we're trying to create change, because it means that we zoom in on what's the problem

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and how do I fix it. We hear the rustle in the bush, we don't see the food source. And yet we know that all the science of my field, positive psychology, shows us that, if we focus first on what's going well and use that as a leverage point to create change that will be more effective and we will be more successful. And it's also much more engaging and empowering for us while we're doing it.

So the problem with the negativity bias is that it primes us to focus on problems. I'm not saying that we shouldn't focus on problems, but what I am saying is that fixing problems is not the same as building strengths. Focusing on the D is not the same as focusing on the A. What we learn about good performance is different to what we learn about poor performance. So when we focus on fixing a problem, that's great, we're fixing a problem, but we're not necessarily building up strengths, we're not necessarily building up assets in the system. The absence of a negative is not the same as the presence of a positive. Fixing a problem is not the same as building up strengths, and yet when we build up our strengths, that's when we create positive momentum for change.

Reducing racism, for example. We absolutely need to do that. But that's not the same as building respect. Racism is a feeling of superiority. "I feel superior over him because of his race." Respect is a feeling of deep admiration for someone. So we can do a lot to reduce racism, and we should. But you can have a person who doesn't feel superior to someone else but still doesn't necessarily have deep respect for that other person. They just don't feel superior.

So from my perspective, we need to push beyond our traditional approaches to change, which are problem-oriented. We need to look at strength as well. Yes, reduce racism – but also increase respect. And, not surprisingly, what the research shows us is that, if we focus also on the second part - it's not an either/or, it's an and/both - often that turns itself back around to be part of the solution for the problem. If we spend our time helping people build up a deep sense of admiration for their fellow man or fellow woman, it's very hard to feel superior to someone when you have a deep sense of admiration for them, so focusing on strengths helps us circle back for the problem.

Most of my work is focused on schools now. A lot of schools these days have anti-bullying programs, and I'm all for that – I think it's fantastic that we're

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doing that – but I don't think it's enough. Anti-bullying programs are about reducing harm. We absolutely have to do that. But why not also have pro-kindness programs, social justice programs, programs that build empathy and compassion and altruism, restorative justice programs? Because if we're just reducing bullying, we need to do that. It's taking away harm. But taking away harm is not the same as doing good.

I can 'not bully' you, but that doesn't mean that I'm also being kind to you or empathic to you. It means I'm just not causing any harm to you. Do you see the difference? Do you see that distinction? The absence of a negative is not the same as the presence of a positive, and yet most of our change initiatives are designed to reduce, or get rid, of or ameliorate the negative. We don't think about extending ourselves and saying, "What more could we be doing? How can we play to our strengths?"

In my field, in mental health, we push on reducing illness for 100-plus years, my field of psychology. We're a healing profession. We are about reducing illness. In the last 20 years, the new field of positive psychology, which is the field that I work in, has really extended that and said it's not just about reducing depression, anxiety, self-harm, addiction, relationship problems. It's also about building up wellness. It's about building up hope, optimism, courage. It's about building up positive relationships, respect and empathy. The absence of illness is not the same as the presence of wellness. My field is very much about extending the practice of psychology – saying it can't just be about healing someone who's ill, it also has to be about equipping them with the tools they need to get well and stay well.

In my book I talk a little bit about my own journey (a couple of people came up in the morning tea break and talked to me about my book, so thank you for doing that). I was born in 1971, so I was a teenager in the '80s, so I everything to do with the '80s – disco, synthesizers, leg warmers, and spandex (I don't actually wear spandex myself anymore, but I appreciate people who do).

I grew up in a very small country town – dirt roads, horses, ducks, geese, a little five-acre farm. In some ways it was an idyllic childhood, but in other ways I suffered a lot.

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My mother had a very severe mental illness – and this was in the '70s, so there was no conversation around it as there would be these days. She didn't get the help that she needed, and she really suffered. She spent time in and out of psychiatric institutions, she had multiple suicide attempts, and, when things weren't going well for her and her mental health was compromised, unfortunately she would become very violent.

These days we have a term for it. It's called domestic violence. In the '70s there was no term for it, and no one talked about it. So we didn't talk about it. It was just this great source of shame and stigma in my family.

And I was the oldest, so I took on the responsibility very young to be the protector of my younger brother and my younger sister and to be constantly hypervigilant, hyperalert, constantly looking for that little change in my mum's tone of voice or her demeanour or her facial expression that meant she was about to flip. My job was to step in between my mum and my younger brother and my younger sister and literally take the punch, or the kick, the yank of the hair, the dig of the fingernails into the elbow, whatever it happened to be at that moment.

I dealt with a lot at a young age. Domestic violence from my mother. A lot of emotional abuse, verbal abuse, psychological violence from both of my parents, and unfortunately also, at the age of 11, I was raped by someone that my father had brought home to live with us for a short period of time. By the time I was 15 I'd slipped into mental illness. I developed bulimia, an eating disorder. It had a lot to do with the struggle and the abuse.

I understand now, as an adult and as a qualified psychologist, that a big part of that was also keeping it secret – the enormous amount of effort that went into not talking about it. My dad didn't know how to handle it, and so he put a lot of energy and effort into keeping everything behind closed doors, making sure that the family's reputation wasn't damaged.

So when I was 15, I developed an eating disorder. I developed bulimia. I had a lot of anxiety, too. My younger sister also developed the same eating disorder. When she was 15 she ran away from home and dropped out of school. It was a couple of weeks before my year 12 exams, and we didn't know where she was.

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When we did find her, not surprisingly, she decided that she didn't want to come home. She had a very high IQ, but she dropped out of high school in year 9. She went back into a sort of relationship with my parents when she was in her early 20s.

Later in life she went back to school and trained to be a social worker, and I'm so proud of her for that. She was a single mum and she had a lot against her. I grew up to be a psychologist, and she grew up to be a social worker, and in some respects we both made meaning out of the struggles that we've had.

When I was 22 and I was studying to be a psychologist I finally made the decision to get some help myself, and I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My sister finally made the decision to go and get help when she was in her 30s, and she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as well – complex post-traumatic stress disorder. I don't know how many people in the room know about the difference, but *complex* post-traumatic stress disorder is stress disorder that occurs through relationship. Post-traumatic stress disorder can occur because of a one-off trauma – an accident, a terrorist event, or a trauma that occurs for a certain period of time but ends, like war. *Complex* post-traumatic stress disorder is ongoing because it occurs through what psychologists call *repeated relational trauma*, and it occurs from the people who you rely on for safety (parents or a partner), the people who are supposed to be protecting you are the people who are actually abusing you.

My sister and I had exactly the same diagnosis, ten years apart, from different psychologists. When I was in my 30s the field of positive psychology first came forward. The big call for positive psychology, as I've just explained, is “Don't just fix what's wrong; build what's right”. At an individual level, I'd never thought about what was right with me. I knew a lot about what was wrong with me. I'd suffered anxiety, and depression, and an eating disorder. The messages that I got as a young child were that I was weak, I was unworthy, I was faulty, I was unlovable. My mum would say that I was the reason why she became mentally ill, because I was the first-born. I was too much for her. I asked too much of her and she became ill.

I knew a **lot** about what was wrong with me, and I'd spent years in therapy overcoming what was wrong with me - overcoming depression, overcoming an

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eating disorder, overcoming PTSD, getting rid of illness. But the absence of illness is not the same as the presence of wellness. I found myself in my 30s as a person who was no longer ill and, touch wood, haven't been ill since then. The eating disorder, the depression; that's long gone. I can slip back into anxiety, but I've learned to manage it. But the absence of illness is not the same as the presence of wellness.

I was a person who was no longer ill – but I wasn't happy, healthy, vibrant, or thriving. I wasn't living to my full potential – until the field of positive psychology came forward and I found myself a strength-based psychologist to go to. At that time, they were very rare. It was a very new field. I'll never forget going in to see my psychologist. If any of you have had therapy – and I've had enough for everyone in this room – you know that the first two sessions are just really taking a patient history. He's taking a lot of notes and he's not saying much. At the end of the second session, though, he put his pen down and looked at me, and I remember my heart dropping because I just thought "Here we go. I'm going to hear everything that's wrong".

He said to me, "Have you got any idea how strong you are to have survived what you have survived? To not have become bitter, to have stayed open-hearted, to have completed a PhD, to be helping people, to be in a long-term relationship? Have you got any idea how strong you are?" I started bawling my eyes out, because no one had ever said that to me.

I've had a lot of love in my adult life. I'm very, very lucky. I met my husband when I was 20. I'm 48. You know, I've had this long-term, 28-year long, healthy, happy, adjusted relationship (even if he does annoy me because he's Security Man and Temperature Man). I have beautiful children. I have lovely friends. I'd had a lot of love in my 30s, but no one had ever told me, "You were strong."

I went home to my husband and I said, "Oh my God, he told me I was strong," and my husband was like, "Well, you did pay to see a strength-based psychologist, so probably not as surprising as all that." Yeah. Fair point, fair point.

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But working with him was really a turning point for me in my own individual journey. He really connected me to my strengths – my intellect, my curiosity, my compassion – and he really challenged me, asking "What are you going to do, now that you're finally owning your strengths?" He helped me to see that my strengths had been there the whole time. They had helped me to cope with a very dark childhood, because I had an intellect, so I did well at school. School was my happy place – safe, routine, predictable. I knew I was safe with the adults. I got praised.

So I was utilising my social strengths - my kindness, my compassion. I had really lovely friends in high school. I was always staying the night at their place. I didn't realise it back then, but my strengths were what got me through. They were my liferaft. I just didn't realise that I hadn't been using them intentionally. My psychologist said, "Well, you're in your 30s now. Start to use them intentionally." And that's been a big part of my healing journey.

My sister, unfortunately, had a different journey. Her anxiety and depression continued and, very sadly, I lost her to suicide two years ago. In fact, this Monday it'll be two years exactly. It's just a profound loss. It's the sharpest pain sitting beside the dullest ache, and it's as if someone had reached into my chest without my permission and torn off a chunk of my heart and walked away with it, and I'm never, ever going to get that piece of my heart back. It's hard for me to talk about, but I want to, because I think it's in groups like this where we need to start talking about this.

We need to start talking more publicly about family violence. We need to start talking more publicly about suicide, about mental illness, because we need to be doing something about it, and it's us, it's the people in this room, who really have the opportunity to do that. We need to, because our young people are struggling.

According to the latest statistics of youth mental illness in Australia, approximately 25% of teenagers and young adults are experiencing mental illness. 50% of all illness in our teenagers is mental illness, and suicide is the number one leading cause of death for teenagers in our country. That makes me feel so sad, because we're a democratic, wealthy country in peacetime and we're still letting a quarter of our population struggle and suffer. We need to be

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doing something about it, and this is where taking the strength-based approach comes in.

I want to finish with an example of a community that got angry and then got organised around youth mental illness. As part of my own journey, almost 10 years ago I set up the Centre for Positive Psychology at Melbourne university specialising in the science of positive psychology, because it had been so helpful for me in my own journey and I wanted to bring that to young people. I can't change my past, but I can change the future of as many young Australians as I possibly can, and that's my mission, that's my purpose – to do everything I can to help protect and support and build the mental health of young Australians, having been a young Australian who knew what it was like to live without mental health.

So we set up the Centre for Positive Psychology. In the last five years, I've also set up a social enterprise that's deliberately designed to take good science and turn it into programs and practices and initiatives that make a concrete difference on the ground for young people. I've done that through setting up a program for early learning centres, setting up a program for schools, and then setting up programs for families.

We have a lovely little program for early learning centres called The Strength Stars. It teaches little kids, kids as young as three, that they have their own unique strengths. Some kids are kind, some kids are wise, some kids are brave, and some kids are just get-out-of-town funny, but they each have their own unique strengths.

I have a program called Visible Wellbeing. It's a social enterprise that goes to schools. We're now in five countries across the world. We have more than a hundred schools who are using this initiative to bring the science of positive psychology to young students. Getting to families is a little bit tougher, because you can't go through a sector or an industry or an association, but what I've done for families is, of course, writing the book. I'm so proud of that book, honestly. I mean, I wrote it between a full-time job and two kids. I wrote it at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, feeding my addiction to caffeine and chocolate.

The book got published two days after I lost my sister. I don't even have words for what it was like at that time, but the book has now been translated into 10 different languages and it's really gone off across the world and it's so meaningful to have parents from different countries write to me on social media and say, "I just want you to know I'm using this book and it's radically changed the relationship with my teenage son." To think I grew up in this little town, with no privileges and a lot of struggle, and now my book's in 10 different languages, including Arabic, Russian, and Hungarian.

And there’s also an online program, because not everyone likes to read books. That's not everyone's thing. I can tell you that my husband has not read a single parenting book – not even mine (he read the first chapter, just in case anyone asked him about it). And there’s a facilitated course.

So what do we do with these things? This is where I want to finish up. We’re working with a community – Upper Hunter, in New South Wales – a community who got angry and then got organised. Upper Hunter is 140 kilometres away from Newcastle. It’s a mining town, it’s a farming town and it’s an equestrian town. Because of the drought, and because of the downturn in mining, it’s a town that’s struggling. And, very sadly, it’s a town that has experienced a youth suicide cluster. Way too many young people are taking their own lives in that community.

One mother, whose boy took his own life set up a charity called Where There's a Will (her boy was called Will). She and her team are basically farm wives – a community taking action by the community for the community, and they've raised lots of money through all sorts of things. One example is Glencore, the coal company. They have their trucks with the Where There's a Will logo, and every time a truck makes a delivery, Glencore donates money to Where There's a Will.

I’ve been working in this community for the last 18 months. I hire my car from Newcastle Airport and I drive out there. It's a two-hour drive. When you're driving along that highway there's coal trucks going past you all the time, but when a Where There's a Will coal truck goes by it’s amazing. Everyone pulls over to the side of the road and let the truck get by quickly, because they know that every time that truck makes a delivery, money is donated by Glencore back

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to their community, back to the program to support the mental health of their students.

What they've done is put that money towards a whole-scale strength-based initiative to build the mental health of young people in that area. They're working on depression management, yes, and they've increased the number of psychologists – they're working on the problem, but they also understand that they need to work on building up strengths.

Visible Wellbeing, my school approach, is in all 23 schools in that region, and we've trained all of the teachers in that region to be able to bring that science to their students. The Strength Stars program is in all 15 of the early learning centres in that region. And for families – every single family has access, if they want it, to a free copy of the book. We've trained five facilitators in that region – just local mums who are interested in the area – who'll be running courses at the local RSL clubs for parents on how they can take a strength-based approach at home. This is a whole-school initiative, starting from the earliest little kids right through to families, and looking at how we can take a strength-based approach.

Things happen at the community level, and I guess what I'm encouraging you to do, for mental health or for some other form of initiative, is just train your mind to flick the strength switch. Go beyond the temptation of just fixing the problem, and have a look at what are the strengths in the system and what you can leverage.

Thank you very much.

ENDS

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