

Revealing the inner voices

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WHEN Lucy Lester was a child, the voice inside her head was kind and peaceful and helped her deal with life's events.

Later, as she became an adult, the male voice she called "the teacher" changed, becoming malicious and dominating.

The Hobart woman says there was a point she could not even hang out the washing without the voice telling her she was dumb or useless.

People know her as a library technician at Dodges Ferry Primary School and an active member of social clubs and a church in Hobart.

Ms Lester suffers from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. She fought her condition without treatment for more than a decade because she was fearful of community backlash. She has now decided to give a face to mental illness - something one in five Australians experience on a daily basis.

Ms Lester's story highlighted the release yesterday of a review into initiatives to remove the stigma of mental health around the world.

The review by the Queensland Alliance has been supported by the Mental Health Council of Tasmania.

"So many people come up to me now and tell me that they have a family member that also suffers from schizophrenia but aside from speaking to me, no one wants to talk about it and often people will stand back," Ms Lester said yesterday.

"In the job before my current job, I was told by my boss not to tell anyone about my illness.

"He said it was not kosher and when my colleagues knew about my condition and we would have bit of a disagreement they would say 'Are you taking your meds?'

"For me there was nowhere to turn to. Schizophrenia is so unknown and in all of the TV shows the killer is always the schizophrenic," Ms Lester said.

"There was really no good literature to read and there are no role models.

"There is no one you see as normal, succeeding in life who has schizophrenia, which is why I am now taking it on myself to try and make a difference."

Ms Lester said that after being diagnosed in 1991, it was not until 2001 she started treatment because she was fearful of how others would view her.

"I am speaking out because I don't want people to spend as many years of their life as I did unsuccessfully treated or partially treated," she said.

"I have always been able to work but schizophrenia has kept me isolated.

"I was challenged daily and suffered constantly during that 10 years, both with my own condition and what it was doing to me and my workplace.

"I finally got the courage to say to a doctor that I could hear things that I probably shouldn't be able to hear.

"Within days of starting medication I had the keys to my life back. I now have friends who say to me, 'I want what you have'."

Mental Health Council of Tasmania chief executive Michelle Swallow said the fear of speaking out about mental illness needed to end and state and federal governments