



Thank you for taking the time to answer the feature questions below.



Please tell us about yourself. (Where were you born and raised? What was life like growing up in childhood? -your family?)

First, thank you for featuring me on the PsyCope website this month! I'm an Aussie; I was born in the 1970s and raised in regional Victoria. I was fortunate to have a great childhood. My family lived in a beautiful rural area, in a little town about 130km east of Melbourne. In 1979 we moved out of town to live on a small farm. Mum and Dad worked hard to build a house and everything on the farm from nothing. They both had jobs, Dad in the power industry and Mum as a nurse. Farming was a hobby. Dad was constantly doing something. Occasionally, Mum would relax, enjoy a cup of tea and read a book,

although she never stopped being busy for too long. I have a brother; he's slightly older than me. For the most part as kids we got along very well. In some ways I was a solitary soul during my formative years, I spent a lot of time alone playing and exploring after school and on weekends, often taking long walks in the bush and using my active imagination to entertain myself. I feel at peace when reflecting upon this. It was a privilege to live in an environment that I see now was quite idyllic.

What is the earliest childhood memory you can remember? (Just curious, if these questions bring up any negative reflection, just skip to writing a short introduction.)

The earliest memory I have is of being fed while sitting in a high chair, in the kitchen of the green-painted weatherboard house my family rented in those first years. Strangely, I feel as though I'm watching myself as I recall it, seeing with the mind's eye me as a small child sitting in a high chair! It's probably better to think of it as the memory of an impression formed in my mind at an early stage in life, augmented by perceptions now, rather than an accurate memory of the experience itself.

What educational course did you follow and where did life take you after this?

I had a competitive nature in my youth and was driven to succeed. This translated to academic excellence throughout my primary and secondary school years, which led to my pursuit of tertiary studies through The University of Melbourne. I enrolled in the 1990s to undertake a double degree course in engineering and science. Upon graduation, I left Melbourne, traversed the continent and joined the workforce in Perth, Western Australia. I



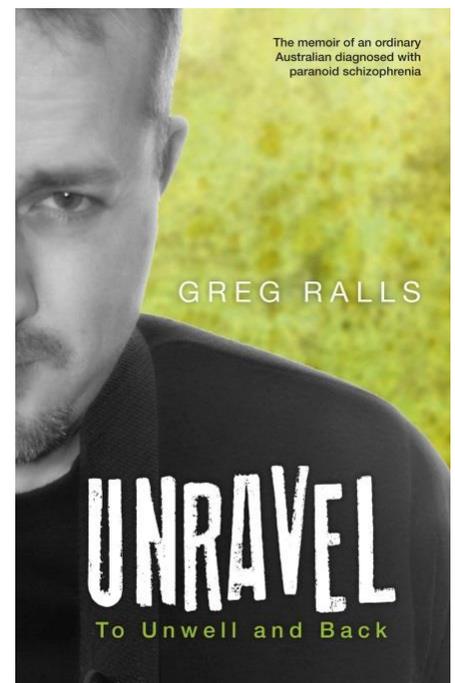
worked in the geotechnical and dams section of a large consulting engineering firm, which afforded me the opportunity to travel. I spent about half of my time in the office, the rest in the field. I did jobs in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and worked for a month on the island of Borneo. I loved it.

Would you like to share how you got involved in mental health?

Purely by accident. I experienced what for me was a deeply distressing episode of psychological trauma while working, as a graduate engineer, in the tropics. I thought at one point, perhaps with perfect justification, that my life was in danger. Everything I knew told me this was the case - thoughts, feelings, emotions, instincts served as a guide. I don't want to say too much here, or nobody will read the book I've written about it! Suffice to say, the trauma wasn't dealt with. Over a two year period, my mental health declined. I was vulnerable and struggled alone as a young man to come to grips with what I'd experienced. Eventually I was straightjacketed and locked in a psychiatric facility. There's more to it than that of course, but the initial element was trauma. Ultimately, I came out of it with a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Please tell us about your book, 'Unravel: To Unwell and Back', and the journey in writing it?

I wrote the book on a smartphone, while walking around the local park in the mornings before work. The purpose of writing was to unravel what had happened to me, to find a meaning for my experiences - particularly those around the time I was involuntarily locked in a hospital. A diagnosis of schizophrenia and psychiatric treatment were both never really very satisfying to me. I wanted to demonstrate that such experiences, whilst being very powerful, form only a very small part of who I am, especially when viewed in context with the entirety of what I've lived. Looking back over the past few years, the journey has largely been about self-empowerment. I'm fortunate that God has equipped me with the skills to be a storyteller. I've managed with the book to not just make sense of my experiences, but also gain a certain amount of understanding and control over a situation in life that I mightn't otherwise have a great degree of control over.





What have been some of the personal highlights of your time, either writing the book or in life?

With regard to the book, I started with a limited edition 200-copy print run without ISBN and barcode. Several of these now 'rare' first copies were sent to various important individuals around the world - a little madness goes a long way! I sent books to some of the most influential, high profile people on the planet. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one person who kindly acknowledged receipt of the book. He was pleased that I thought of him. I hope he's not inundated with books by mad independent authors as a result of my saying this! Another reward has been connecting with my former geology teacher, Professor Ian Plimer. When I was a student, Ian made an impression upon me. He continues to impress and is a man whom I respect. He's in the book and has read and endorsed it. Ian's quote from the Vivid Publishing webpage for 'Unravel' is: *"I taught Greg Ralls in the 1990s. His journey, this book, shows that mental illness can strike anywhere, anytime – and can be cured."* Ian's been generous in replying to my emails, he's very supportive. I'm grateful for that.

What projects are you currently working on?

I've been engaging in public and corporate speaking with my business, Mental Health WA Pty Ltd. I presented at the 2013 World Hearing Voices Congress, in Melbourne. I also did talks for companies and organisations including oil and gas giant, Chevron, Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Richmond Fellowship of Western Australia. I did a presentation this year for the world's largest mining company, BHP Billiton. My aim is to continue with it. I'm therefore actively seeking new opportunities. I submitted an abstract for a conference that will be held in Australia later this year; if the abstract is accepted then I'll spend some time soon working on my first paper targeting mental health. I'm also writing two new books, in parallel.

Do you have any 'coping strategies' that you use?

I'm reluctant to reveal too much as this will be covered in my second book, which I'm investing time and effort in. Right from the very beginning in October 2013, I've included in my public and corporate presentations '5 Keys to Recovery and Mental Wellbeing'. The five keys are simple, common sense factors which in combination have enabled me to cope and recover. Perhaps when the second book is published the five keys will enable others in need to recover. The second book is hopeful, optimistic. There's nothing astoundingly new about the five keys themselves; it's not rocket science. What is unique is my approach. To be fair and open, and in answer your question, I can give away two things: first, I read widely; and second, I listen to the people around me. That said, my wife might laugh at the latter half of that last statement. I'm fairly certain, in fact, she'd say I'd best qualify it with 'sometimes'!



What does the future hold for you?

Well... I guess each of us likes to think we have a big future ahead of us. In reality, though, who knows? In a public sense, I've come from nowhere. I'm only just beginning in mental health. Along with unique and brilliant people like, say, Ron Coleman, Jacqui Dillon, Rufus May and Eleanor Longden, I've survived certain things in life that not everybody does. Each of the people whom I've just mentioned has been active in sending a message to the world and has gained recognition for it. I've recently become vocal about my experiences and am powerfully motivated to help others. I want to reach out to those whom I can to create change and positive mental health outcomes, so that's what I'll do. I'll also continue with what I enjoy outside mental health – my work as a consultant in the mining industry, being a dedicated family man and, hopefully with the little left of my time, find space to relax and enjoy life!

Favourite quote?

'I'm the lightning bolt in-between!'

- Singer, Bon Scott, when asked whether he's the AC or DC in 'AC/DC'.

(This response occurred to me a few days ago, while driving to work and listening to music. It's not that it's a particularly brilliant quote; rather, it expresses street-smart defiance in the face of pointed questioning by an interviewer who clearly failed to respect the legendary singer's talent and tenacity. I identify a little with Scott's attitude of defiance; also the strong work ethic that led to his great success in what I imagine is commonly a fickle world, in the field of rock 'n' roll stardom.)

Web link:

www.vividpublishing.com.au/unravel

Those who have a professional interest in mental health are welcome to connect with Greg via LinkedIn.