

# Breaking down the barriers of support!

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In 2005, a group of nurses who identified as 'substance dependent' and experiencing impaired health due to their substance use courageously volunteered to participate in a confidential focus group. This activity was designed to collect their opinions on what barriers existed for them in seeking help with this very sensitive health issue.

The primary barrier they identified was FEAR. This included the immediate fear of losing their job and with it their income should it be discovered they had challenges with their substance use. The fear of losing their registration, making them ineligible to practice and the impact this has on their livelihood also prevailed. In addition they feared the stigma that is unfortunately associated with being a substance impaired nurse in our profession. They feared the labels, whispers and innuendo, the attitudes and behaviours that many had observed toward others within the profession.

They expressed the inevitable GUILT and SHAME that accompanies behaviours inconsistent with our professional standards. Those in our industry and the public at large have high expectations of us and they expect we uphold these. For many it proved impossible to seek help as they perceived themselves as having 'failed' the profession and this internal conflict prevented them reaching out.

Finally it was the ISOLATION and LONELINESS experienced by all of those in the focus group which resonated strongly. They described this as a paralysing force. Each of those participating spoke of feeling cut off from their colleagues and was left to manage their particular health challenges alone. Sadly, they saw no other option for managing their situation, due to the overwhelming fear of being exposed, and the guilt and shame associated with such exposure.

Since commencing business in August 2006 we at the NMHP have been told by those in our profession that these barriers also apply for our colleagues who are experiencing challenges with their mental health.

We know that social and professional disconnection is at best unhelpful. In the extreme it can have incredibly damaging ramifications for the person in need of support and by extension those closest to them. This can result in those we care for in a professional capacity – patients, clients, residents – experiencing harm due to our impaired health and judgement.

Fortunately in Victoria our colleagues have the NMHP to turn to for independent, confidential and free support. On the surface there may appear to be disadvantages in reaching out for help. In our experience the advantages far exceed those perceived disadvantages and seeking help almost always results in a positive outcome.

It may seem like the end of the world to those colleagues facing a sensitive health crisis, but we believe there is no situation that cannot be successfully managed through a combination of professional and personal support. I urge you to contact us if needed!

For more information on the NMHP go to [www.nmhp.org.au](http://www.nmhp.org.au). For advice and guidance on matters related to nurse and midwife health call the office on (03) 9415 7551.