

Dan Hunt, 31

Former NRL Player, mental health advocate & founder of the Mental Health Movement, proudly managing bipolar disorder II, SYDNEY

Former NRL player, Dan Hunt, 31, Sydney, played 150 games for the St George Illawarra Dragons during his prestigious nine-year career, which concluded in July 2015.

In retirement, Dan has continued to partner with the NRL as its *State of Mind* community and mental health ambassador.

In April 2016 Dan founded the company *Mental Health Movement*, which provides awareness, education, training and resources to improve mental health within the workplace. Mental Health Movement has worked with some leading Australian companies, speaking to more than 65,000 individuals, changing their views towards mental health and arming them with the education, coping strategies and support networks to improve their mental health.



By sharing his personal, lived experience with bipolar disorder II, Dan is striving to educate members of the community about the illness, in order to reduce the stigma that prevents many from seeking the help and support they need.

This is Dan's story.

Growing up in Dapto on the south coast of NSW, Dan dreamed of playing rugby league.

During this period, Dan, his mother, two brothers and sister were all subjected to domestic violence. Dan was unaware at the time of the significant impact this would have on his life.

After graduating from high school, Dan was drafted into the St George Illawarra Dragons, a first-grade NRL team, and in 2007 he made his debut as a professional rugby league player.

Soon, Dan found himself playing in every Dragons game until he ruptured his Achilles tendon in 2010, requiring surgery. That year the Dragons went on to clinch the premiership while Dan was forced to watch from the sidelines – a devastating experience that hit Dan “like a tonne of bricks”.

Following his surgery, Dan was treated with a string of pain-killing medications, which, for the ensuing six to eight months, he abused, to mask not just the physical pain, but also the emotional pain he had been battling since childhood.

Observing his out-of-character behaviour, his then coach Wayne Bennett approached Dan and asked whether he was okay. This marked a turning point for Dan, who was finally able to explain that he was not okay, and needed help.

Two weeks later Dan met with several psychologists and physiologists at The Black Dog Institute in Randwick, Sydney, and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder II – a mental illness characterised by extreme, uncontrollable changes in mood (ranging from elevated to depressed moods), thought, energy and behaviour.

“When I was diagnosed in 2010 by the Black Dog Institute, I started to access a lot of different treatment methods, from meeting with psychologists and psychiatrists, to using different antipsychotic and mood-stabilising medications, which I took for a period of nearly five years from 2010,” said Dan.

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“Today, I am nearly three years medication free, an option I have chosen through my clinical support and in conjunction with consistent, vigilant coping strategies. I am a big advocate for the right medication with the right diagnosis and am very thankful that the medicines were there when I needed them. I am also very open to taking medication in the future if needed.”

As well as medication, Dan was treated with various different techniques, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Schema Therapy, to aid his recovery.

For Dan, the medication was very beneficial, but deep down he knew that weaning himself off the medication to manage his illness would aid his recovery. So he set this as his goal, working closely with his psychologist and psychiatrist to come off of medication when ready.

“I got to the point where I had gone to TAFE and studied community services, mental health, AOD (alcohol & other drugs) and I work well when I challenge myself. So I spoke to my psychologist and psychiatrist about how to best manage my condition without medication, as I wanted to challenge myself to see whether I could do that.

“Today, I am managing my illness without medication, but I’m always very open to the fact that should I ever get back to a point where I need medication to manage my bipolar disorder, I will take it,” Dan said.

At the height of his illness, Dan felt alone and isolated because information was then not readily available. This left him feeling vulnerable and fearful, and growing increasingly concerned about displaying weakness by requesting help.

“When I was struggling with my mental health, I often felt alone. I didn’t know where or how to get help. I had no understanding of mental illness, and was scared to ask for help, because I thought it was a sign of weakness.

“In retrospect, I wish I had asked for help sooner,” said Dan.

“I don’t want others to experience what I went through. I want to empower people with knowledge and acceptance of how to ask for help.

Today, Dan is supporting the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study*, a ground-breaking international collaboration exploring the genetic risk factors associated with bipolar disorder. QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute is leading the Australian arm of the study, and Dan genuinely hopes his contribution will allow experts to unravel more answers to help treat bipolar disorder.

“Knowing what I know now, I suspect I lived with bipolar disorder II for as long as I can remember. Years before I was diagnosed in 2010, I was very volatile. I have a family history of mental illness – close members of my family have lived with clinical depression, bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses.

“Having come through it, I am now working to be the best version of myself. I have a one-year-old son, and recently, when I was speaking with a psychologist, I enquired as to what would happen if he too, develops a mental illness, and she said, ‘he’s got the best teacher to guide him, and support him through the process,’ which was great for me to hear,” Dan said.

“The *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* is really important because it will help to provide a scientific base and credibility to the illness. The research will also work to determine the genetic causes of bipolar disorder, in order to improve our understanding of the illness, and treatment, which is excellent.”



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To coordinate an interview with Dan Hunt, please contact Kirsten Bruce or Holly Hamilton from VIVA! Communications on 0401 717 566 / 0431 465 004.