



## Military member to civilian: Identity in transition

### Garth's story

Garth never thought it would come to this. Nearly 30 years old. No job and no prospects. Left the Army after 11 good years, feeling proud of his achievements and excited about the future. Now 20 months later he had nothing to show for it.

The Army had been good to and for him. He loved his work as a medic, his mates, the routine, the opportunities, the team spirit. Over the 11 years he had moved units several times, he never imagined he'd get the chance to live where he had, having originally come from a very small outback country town. He had reached the rank of Sergeant and developed a good reputation as an instructor and as a manager of teams. And what about his overseas deployments? First Afghanistan and then Vanuatu for humanitarian relief after the cyclone. It was unbelievable what he'd got to do and what he'd seen and been part of during his career.

But all good things must come to an end and when his youngest child, Nathan, was about to start school, Garth didn't want to miss out on this experience as he had with Neve, his older daughter. And if he was honest with himself, it was time to leave the Australian Defence Force (ADF). '*Leave them laughing*' had always been his mantra, but by the time he decided to leave the Army, he was almost on the verge of crying. Well, not actually crying, but feeling restless, irritable and, for some unknown reason, not really looking forward to the next posting or possible future deployments. So he knew leaving was the right decision and he made it

quickly and was out within three months of putting in his paperwork.

He didn't have a plan about post army life, just an idea that it was time for him to be a dad.

He settled in Darwin to be near his kids who lived with their mother, Karen and her partner, Chris. Garth had never lived with Nathan and only with Neve when she was very young. Karen had left him while he was deployed to Vanuatu, when Nathan was just a baby, claiming she couldn't handle the constant disruptions to family life that came with being a partner of a serving ADF member. It didn't take her long to settle down with Chris, and Garth always blamed Chris rather than the Army for the breakdown of his family.

Although he hadn't thought deeply about employment as a civilian he assumed his experience as a medic and manager of teams would bode well. He was surprised by the limited job opportunities in Darwin. Casual employment didn't provide enough security; and any permanent position he secured he'd lose or leave. He couldn't stop flaring up, so annoyed he would get with his work mates; their low resilience and constant whining even at the smallest amount of stress. He often wondered how they'd be if they had seen some of the things he had. He was aghast how leadership in the real world was so different to the Army. In the Army leaders were respected. It was hard to respect them in the civilian world.

Since he'd left the Army he'd struggled with sleep, being woken frequently by vivid and disturbing dreams. As a result his best sleep was from dawn to midday making getting to work on time difficult. Time and anger management were often cited as the reasons for his employment being terminated.

He didn't know many people in Darwin. Initially he kept in contact with his mates on base but after a while he couldn't relate to them anymore and decided it wasn't good for him to see them. Perhaps he'd re-connect later when he'd established himself as a 'civilian' and had something to be 'pumped about'. And that was it; nothing really excited him anymore. Not like some of the experiences he'd had in the Army. If he got worked up about anything now it was more about things not going his way, not being fair, or funnily enough, being too easy.

He missed the busy schedule of his day-to-day Army life. He struggled to occupy himself in Darwin, and couldn't afford to do the stuff he had always enjoyed, like gym and rock climbing. He'd put on weight since leaving the Army, about a kilo a month and now he was 20 kilos overweight. He was drinking more and while he told himself he could live without it, he couldn't deny booze was a good time killer. He wouldn't have said he was lonely as such, more bored and tired all the time.

He could only afford a small, one bedroom unit which didn't have enough room for the kids to stay overnight. Karen and Chris assured him that they wanted him to be part of the kids' life but the numerous rules, standards and requirements they set made seeing them challenging. Garth couldn't keep up with the kids' allergies and associated dietary requirements, their extra curricula commitments, their 'play dates' and their constant need to be entertained. It was easier for him to see them at Karen and Chris's home. Except that he was invariably tense in Karen's home, convinced that Chris didn't like him, let alone trust him, and always felt that his interactions with the kids were being monitored. It didn't help that Neve

was a 'mummies' girl and that Garth struggled to find some, or any, connection with Nathan.

One day it all came to a head. He'd gone to visit the kids unannounced. Chris wouldn't let him in, claiming he could smell alcohol on his breath. Garth encouraged Chris to come outside and '*deal with this like a man*' and before he knew it, he had swung a punch, surprising himself with the force. Chris hit the ground swiftly and sustained a blow to the head. The kids were screaming and the neighbours called Karen. Before he knew it Karen was home, telling him '*I'm calling the cops and if you think you are ever going to see your kids again you're dreaming*'.

The next morning he woke feeling shocking. He couldn't remember much of what happened the night before but he'd never felt as alone and as ashamed as he did now. Rock bottom he was, he couldn't go on like this. He knew he needed help but didn't quite know where to start. And when he was at the pharmacy buying some hydralytes he saw they were attached to a GP clinic. Maybe a doctor could help him. He made an appointment to see one of the GPs the next day.