MILY FUNG IS A TALL, ELEGANT WOMAN WHO IS A HANDS-ON MEMBER OF ST Thomas', North Sydney. She is often up the front giving children's talks; she also teaches Scripture and leads at Jesus Club. To all outward appearances this 40-something mother is confident, composed and outgoing. Most people in the pews would have no idea that Emily suffers from such crippling anxiety that she has often longed for God to take her home to heaven. They little know the effort it can cost her to get out of her pyjamas and come to church, or the chest tightness and swirling

thoughts and worries that often overwhelm her. The startling reality is that one in every five people sitting in pews in our church services are likely to be suffering from some kind of mental illness, and half will suffer some mental ill health during their lifetime. It's a leading cause of disability, especially for women, with government statistics showing 22.3 per cent of women suffer mental health problems compared with 17.6 per cent of men. "Friends are often a bit surprised that I struggle with anxiety because I am at the front a lot, but

Southern

11

people who come up the front aren't always confident. People who are missing may be at home because they can't face it," says Fung, who is married to Sam and is the mother of three boys. "I do have to overcome my own hesitation to do some of the things I do but that's part of being a Fung now sees that her personality type - perfectionistic, introverted and sensitive - plays into her tendency towards anxiety, which became more pronounced after she had children and the demands of

believer, trusting in the Lord and doing it for him. It's God's power." "I like order, I like to know what happens next and my biggest challenge in life is having three boys

life piled up. because life is not predictable. It's extremely messy!" she says. "It's not ordered, and I've sometimes thought that it's like juggling - not three balls, maybe 20 - and struggling really hard to keep them all

going. "The other thing is my husband is an action person and while I'm juggling 20 balls with the kids he's lobbing in curve balls from the side. I'm trying to keep it going and everyone okay, and it is sometimes

overwhelming." When in the pits of anxiety, Fung's swirling thoughts and worries often rob her of hours of sleep, leaving her tired, teary and unable to face the world. "Sometimes you can't stop sobbing, sometimes there's shortness of breath or just feeling a tightness

in your chest. And at the very worst it's like, 'Just take me home, Lord'."

Fung has seen a counsellor, takes medication every day to keep her symptoms at bay and now views her anxiety as akin to Paul's thorn in the flesh. "I consider it hard, but it is actually God's gift to me because it's forced me to have complete dependence on God," she says. "When I get to the end of myself, when I can't control everything, I come to him and I just throw myself on him and he's my everything. If I didn't have this then I wouldn't be so fully dependent on

him. 'Be still and know that I am God'. And that's a great reminder to me that he is sovereign, he's in control

"I've come to realise that I'm not centre of the universe - I can't control the world. Psalm 46:10 says, and I can just leave the details to him. I don't know what'll happen next, but my challenge is to keep trusting him daily and... he'll take me where I need to go."

THE EXTENT OF MENTAL ILLNESS Almost half of Australia's population (45.5) • About 2 per cent of Australians will experience

• Females were more likely than males to 24-year-olds. have experienced mental disorders in the 12 months before a Department of Health survey • Women are more likely than men to use (22.3 per cent compared to 17.6 per cent). services for mental health problems. Mental illnesses are the third highest cause • According to a 2016 study by the Australian of disability burden in Australia, accounting Institute of Health and Welfare, mental and

this than men.

for an estimated 27 per cent of the total years substance use disorders were responsible lost due to disability. for 12 per cent of the total burden of disease in 2011 – placing it third as About 14 per cent of Australians a broad disease group after cancer will be affected by an anxiety and cardiovascular diseases. disorder in any 12-month period. The same study showed mental and behavioural disorders were • About 3 per cent of Australians the largest contributor (23.6 per

with reality during episodes of illness.

where there is a loss of contact

per cent) has experienced a mental disorder

• Every year, about one in five Australians will

at some point in their lifetime.

experience a mental illness.

are affected by a psychotic

illness such as schizophrenia,

- Sources: The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Mindframe and Beyond Blue
- STIGMA AND STRUGGLE Fung was one of five brave women who gave testimonies about battling mental illness at a women's conference on mental health at St Thomas's earlier this year. Another was Briar O'Brien, wife of the church's youth minister Gerard O'Brien, a stay-at-home mum who has suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and generalised anxiety disorder for more than 10 years. When the obsessions about cleanliness, intrusive thoughts and checking behaviours were at their worst, she says, she struggled to see God's purpose in her suffering and her faith was challenged. "I know that over the past 10 years, and even now as I continue to struggle with this illness on a

and to display his power in my weakness."

spend time with them, be informed and stay in touch.

through it. Don't be ignorant and base things on stereotypes.

around, to help alleviate the loneliness of mental illness.

are they safe from self-harm or even from suicide," she says.

received from God [2 Cor 1:4]."

and even that it is a sin.

**Emily Fung** 

some type of eating disorder in their life, with women nine times more likely to experience

• Prevalence of mental illness decreases with

age, with the numbers highest among 18 to

cent) of the non-fatal burden

of disease – a measure of the

years of "healthy" life lost due

to living with a disability.

daily basis, that God is using it all to refine my faith, build my character and maturity and deepen my dependence on him," she says. "None of the struggle is ever wasted. God always uses it for his glory O'Brien is grateful for the way her continuing struggles enable her to bless others in her discipleship and pastoral care roles. "I'm able to help others in similar situations and empathise in a way that others can't. As Paul says, I've been able to comfort those in any trouble with the comfort I have O'Brien's practical advice for those who want to help a friend suffering with mental illness is to

O'Brien's friend the Rev Lily Strachan, who works with the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students at Macquarie University, gave three Bible talks at the conference about how to cling to Jesus in times of struggle with mental health. It's an issue she feels passionately about, having suffered from mental illness herself. The fact that both O'Brien and Strachan were hesitant about having their conditions written about in this article shows the stigma that still attaches to mental illness, and perhaps even more so in church. As Strachan pointed out in her talk, in Christian circles there are some misconceptions that

mental illness is a result of not praying enough or reading the Bible enough, not trusting God enough,

"Most people hopefully now accept that Christians can and do become mentally ill, that they are not immune from terrible illnesses such as depression and anxiety or bipolar or OCD or schizophrenia; nor

"People who battle with mental illness are no less Christian, no less saved, no less loved by God. They

are, in fact, known, loved and kept by our good and powerful God and yet they face a really horrible

illness; they are not immune, we are not immune, our families are not immune."

Hamish

'Be real and ask deep and genuine questions," she says. "If you're concerned about someone, don't

"People with a mental illness often struggle with feelings of self-hatred and feeling useless, hopeless

and worthless. You can help by reminding them of God's promises and who they are in Christ. Their

to build them up. Tell them what you appreciate and are thankful for about them."

identity and worth are found in him and what he has done. Also encourage and affirm them and seek

O'Brien says it's important to spend time with people, even when they're not chatty or fun to be

comfortable going. Remind them that you're with them in this and want to walk this journey alongside

them to support them; and a call or text to say 'How are you?' or 'How are you feeling?' never hurts."

"Help them to connect with others. Invite them to things and ask how you can help them feel

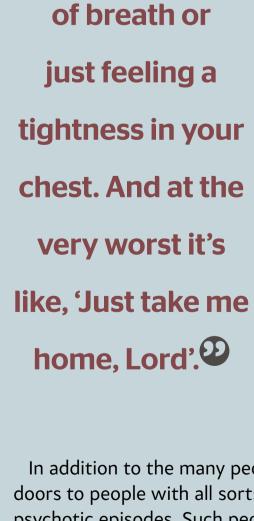
just ignore it – be informed; learn about mental illness and read about how to support those going

The lie that & Leisure Club] is underpins all the you can't stop sobbing, very important lies is that my sometimes because it gets God is not good. there's shortness me out of being This lie led me

at home and

helps me forget

my problems.



works with churches that share the vision to support people with mental illness. "I talk a lot about boundaries, I talk a lot about a circle of security and support in a church. So if there's one person who needs a lot of support, maybe we can get a number of people around helping... and then maybe it's going to impact on their health."

course.

community."

still be full-on. "What you'll find with most people, I've learnt, is they are just as scared as you when their brains aren't working to capacity, when psychosis kicks in. When anything like that happens, people are terrified." This means it's important for a helper not to try and juggle too much on their own. "You might get connected with someone and then things around their need for support might be greater than you can offer," Hand says. "So, doing what you can with the skills and resources that you

problem shared is a problem halved.

LUNCH WITH THE FAMILY

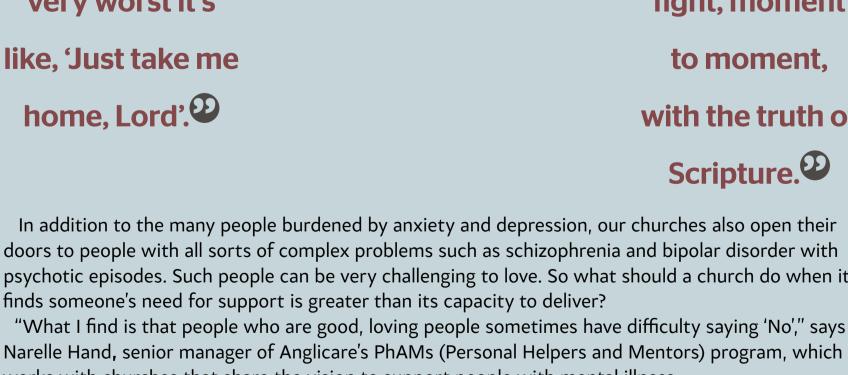
a beautiful smile transforms his face.

on dealing with day-to-day issues.

ramp because they're caring people.

group in church last Christmas.

DON'T DISMISS IT



Hand says the PHaMs program has the capacity to support churches when this ministry goes off

church can run it and we go somewhere else," she says. "If things get hairy or anyone gets unwell we can come back in. We wouldn't want to set anyone up to fail. It's about building that strength in our

She adds that even with her own professional skills and long experience, this type of ministry can

have, but not going to an area where you're not comfortable - not feeling like you have to hold it all. A

"The first thing I say when I'm training people is don't feel like you have to fix stuff. We can get help

without having to take the responsibility of trying to fix someone's health."

"For example, we help run art groups for a year and then, hopefully, we can move out and the

is what we must fight, moment to moment, with the truth of Scripture. In addition to the many people burdened by anxiety and depression, our churches also open their doors to people with all sorts of complex problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder with psychotic episodes. Such people can be very challenging to love. So what should a church do when it

Lily Strachan

to all sorts of

dark and lonely

places. And this

one another. It's very important because it gets me out of being at home and helps me forget my problems." L&L Club co-ordinator Kerri Grant tells me Hamish used to work in a nursing home but when his anxiety worsened he had to give up work. But Hamish says in the five years he's been coming to L & L Club he's become "more confident, less self-conscious, more relaxed". The parish's minister the Rev Jarrod Booker says the L & L Club was started more than 10 years ago by the then minister, the Rev Bruce Southwell, to provide a safe place and friendly community where people struggling with mental health issues could come for conversation and company, a healthy meal and interesting or helpful activities such as art therapy and music therapy. Once a

"These are not high-functioning professionals that come for a bit of help or support – they're people from the area that are really struggling with the day-to-day issues of life and coping, so it's very real, very raw," he says. "The group aims to help people with life skills as well and provide advice

Therese joined the group last year after participating in a mentoring program the church ran with Health Department funding, which paired people who had suffered mental illness with someone in the community in one-hour weekly mentoring session. A sufferer of MS and depression who is in a

"I used to come with a carer but they realised these guys are all my carers," she says. "They cut my steak up when we have steak, they give me a knife and fork and get me a drink. And they built me a

"I call them my diamonds – they are all gems. They all have a story. You have to speak to them about what they're interested in and then they'll talk to you." She also loved being able to sing with the

Kerri Grant has been involved with the L & L Club for the past 10 years, and says it's like family for

Research shows some disturbing misconceptions about mental illness in Christian circles. For example,

Dolores, who used to run the group, now returns as volunteer cook because "we're committed

some of the members because they don't have any contact with their own families.

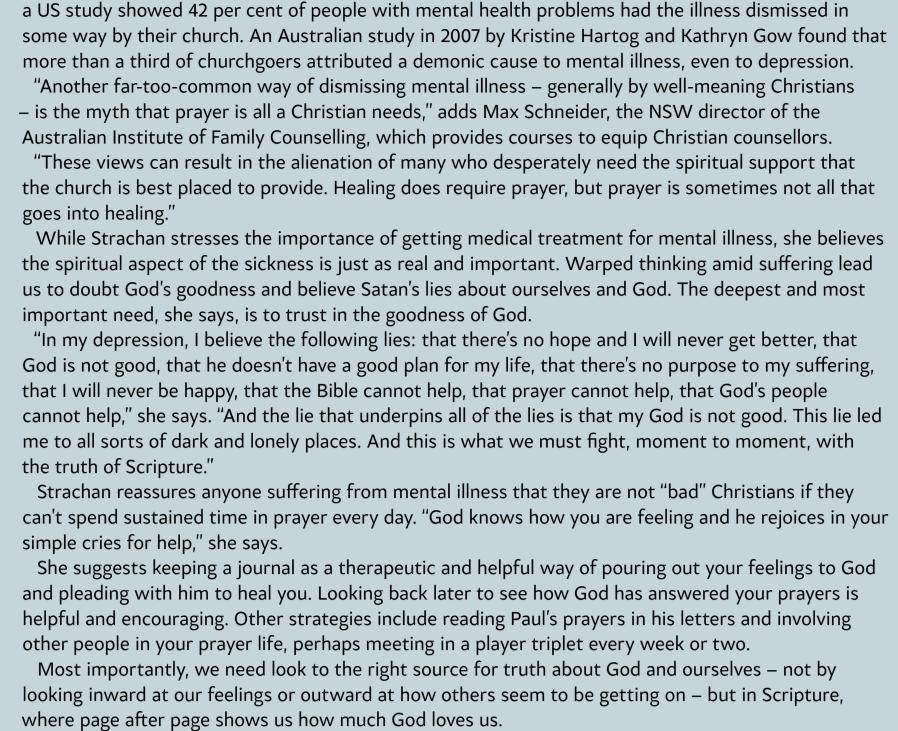
Christians and we really believe in what's happening here".

wheelchair, Therese is a bright spark who has enjoyed making friends with people in the group.

term the group heads outdoors or somewhere special for an outing.

Hamish sits quietly at the table as other members of the Riverwood Lunch and Leisure Club play a video game to raucous commentary in the cosy den at Riverwood-Punchbowl Anglican Church. He seems lost in his own thoughts, but as soon as I ask him why he comes to the L & L Club each week

"Just for friendship," says Hamish, who lives alone in a local bedsit. "We all get on well and respect



"God may not eliminate our suffering but he will work for our good to make us more like Christ, even

your life and you can trust him, whatever is happening in your life. You may not always feel that this is

Mental health charity Waves of Wellness (WOW) Foundation partners with Anglicare in a learn-to-

"We're excited to have the support of Anglicare, which shares our passion for bringing innovation to mental health support," says the charity's CEO and founder, Joel Pilgrim. "We've had a couple of people say that the program has changed their life, and in one case a participant said the program

"Throughout the existence of the WOW program, we have heard some incredible stories of triumph over adversity. One participant noted he was on the edge of suicide and said without this program

surf experience for people with mental health issues, based at Bondi Beach and Cronulla.

through suffering," Strachan says. "He will not abandon you or forsake you. There's a good plan for

true, but we can know it and cling to it anyway."

FREEDOM ON THE WATER

had saved their life."

want and achieve anything.

disturbance.

social support.

pastoral ministry.

always bear a very significant load as well."

**SUPPORT** 

asks.

society," he says. discussion on the sand before a 90-minute surf lesson. really able to open up because they don't feel threatened any more," Pilgrim says.

The most helpful thing the psalms do, Condie adds, is head off our natural instinct to withdraw from God when life is going badly; instead they give us "God-ordained language" to cry to him in lament, then move from lament to praise. Condie and his wife Sarah are the inaugural directors of the Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute, an innovative project of Anglican Deaconess Ministries. They have drawn up a strategic plan of prevention, equipping and supporting – to help churches care for their flock, especially those who have mental health concerns. "We've come up with a three-pronged strategy," Condie says. "The first one is prevention. We've got a real heart for anything we can do to work at the preventative level of mental illness."

redefines family along faith lines rather than merely biological bloodlines - and cites research showing that the number one thing needed to sustain a healthy life, whether someone is mentally ill or not, is

"Isolation is a killer, it's as dangerous as smoking – that's what the research is showing," he says. "So we're trying to think of a suite of resources that can be made available over the coming years that will

In the second prong of their strategy, the Condies hope to build a website in 2018 filled with helpful

being comprehensible to the untrained reader. They also hope to run courses for pastors and people in

He believes the porn epidemic, social media and work stress are all contributing to an increase

material on mental illness that is accurate medically, psychologically and theologically - as well as

"The third area is the actual supporting," he says. "How can we care? What can we do to provide

the senior minister shapes the culture of a church, both consciously and unconsciously.

care for people in the midst of mental illness and also help to care for the carers, because the carers

Condie believes senior ministers are key to reducing the stigma attached to mental illness, "because

"The mental health of senior ministers is important, but also those ministers need to be prepared to speak about mental health up front and make helpful applications in their sermons, recognising one in every four or five people sitting in the pew is likely to be suffering from some form of mental illness."

in anxiety. He quotes Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showing a threefold increase in the incidence of anxiety in the three years from 2011-12, when 3.8 per cent of the population had an

strengthen marriages, strengthen families and church communities."

anxiety condition, to 2014-15 when it had jumped to 11.8 per cent.

robust theology of suffering to balance the message of the world that people can have whatever they

"If you're depressed and you come to church and everybody's happy and all the songs are upbeat, do

we send a message, 'This is a place for people who've got their lives together and are doing well'? he

"It's not true," he says. "Life is hard. When it comes to suffering, how will they respond to that?" He also wonders if church services are sometimes too upbeat for someone suffering a mental

"Christians carry extra resources, but also extra challenges, when it comes to mental health," he says. "For example, we read in the Bible, 'Do not be anxious', so what happens when you are feeling anxious? 'be joyful' is the command from Philippians and you're feeling completely depressed and there's not a joyful bone in your body - again it makes you feel worse. Then we're called upon to serve people and be other-person centred but how do you feel about that when it's a huge struggle just to get up in the

"So these things are particular challenges for Christians – and the way sermons are preached in our churches, the way we run our Bible study groups, the way we pastor people, can both uplift and press

The upside for the Christian sufferer, of course, is the extraordinary resources available in the

down depending on how we do that."

richness of the gospel.

should not feel they have to do anything other than just be there.

When I Don't Desire God, John Piper When the Darkness Will Not Lift, John Piper Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts, Jerry Bridges

Excel, PowerPoint etc), bring your own device, one-on-one teaching. mental health and wellness. more information on 9700 4000. https://www.anglicare.org.au/directory-category/mental-health

"God's unconditional love and the fact that we are saved by grace, not by our performance, are beautiful, wonderful truths," Condie says. "And one of our goals is, how do we help these truths be woven into our hearts in a way that really refreshes our souls rather than bringing us further down?" Emily Fung believes the key to such care is love and companionship, rather than advice. People "I think when people are having a meltdown it's quite common for people who don't really understand to back off because they don't really know what to do," she says. "I don't think you have to do anything as such – just be present and say, 'Would you like me to pray for you right now?'. Or just sending a little note – those things anyone can do. "Bible verses are very helpful, prayer is very helpful, just a tissue is helpful! A hug – you know, they're not hard things, but people do get a little freaked out and they don't think they know what to say. But what to say is not really the issue. It's just loving people and being alongside them for the long haul." • **Resources** Books (available from www.reformers.org.au and www.koorong.com) God is Enough, Ray Galea Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness, Edward T. Welch Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those who Suffer from Depression, Zack Eswine How Long, O Lord, Don Carson Suffering Well, Paul Grimmond A Path through Suffering, Elisabeth Elliot I'm Not Supposed to Feel Like this: A Christian Self-Help Approach to Depression and Anxiety, Chris Williams, Paul Richards and Ingrid Whitton When I am Afraid, Edward T. Welch Living Without Worry, Timothy Lane Anxious for Nothing, John MacArthur The Silent Shades of Sorrow, Charles Spurgeon Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed? Dr Arch Hart and Dr Catherine Hart Weber Unmasking Male Depression, Archibald D. Hart

he wouldn't be around today. The program was the two hours of the week when he was able to not hear the voices in his head or have to rehearse everything he was going to say." Anglicare support facilitator Mark Micelli also commends the results of the program. "It was an incredible experience seeing the participants gain confidence in themselves and their mental health recovery over the eight weeks," he says. When it comes to the ocean, Pilgrim believes there is something about crossing the barrier of the shoreline that distances people from the challenges they face in everyday life. "It's almost like a protective mechanism where you get out there and you get to be at one with the water but also you close off from those distractions and the negative stimuli that can impact us in Pilgrim and Micelli co-facilitate the weekly program, which begins with a half-hour wellness "Instead of an uncomfortable hospital environment we're providing a really comfortable, collaborative setting for people to engage on the beach... and a lot of the time we find people are Adds Micelli: "As a facilitator, being able to see participants getting active, enjoying themselves but also having really meaningful conversations about mental health was hugely rewarding". WOW has been running for just under a year, but existed for a couple of years before that under a different umbrella called One Wave. "The program was so successful that we decided to register WOW as its own charitable organisation," Pilgrim says. About 150 young people have taken part in the program to date, along with about 60 volunteers. One of the volunteers is Nicola Travers-Robinson from Wild Street Church in Maroubra, who has found it a great way to connect with vulnerable people in the community. "I thought it was incredible how well it was run to make it such an open and easy environment for people to talk about mental health," she says. "The two guys who run it just make everything so normal, and I think the participants really responded to that. I learnt a lot of really practical things about what it meant to serve people in your community, and to love your neighbour beyond the neighbour that you know and try to identify with anyone." Travers-Robinson says the facilitators work hard to blur the line between the volunteers and the participants, so that it simply becomes a group of people rather than patients and helpers. "We definitely had nothing but positive feedback... the discussion part was great because there were amazing strategies, and the practical part was great because exercise and being outside are such important things for mental health," she says. "It was really cool to see that people were experiencing it and the difference it made in their mental health." She is looking forward to continuing as a volunteer when the program starts up again in October. SUFFERING AND RESPONSE Former Moore College lecturer on pastoral care, Dr Keith Condie, believes churches need a more

"I wonder have we lost something from the fact that at church we don't say the psalms any more – because the largest part of the psalter is lament. And where is our lament? Where is the place where someone who is really struggling can cry out to the Lord?" Their plans include providing access to parenting resources to help strengthen families, plus developing the biblical concept of friendship to build church communities. Condie believes that when Jesus asks in Mark 3, "Who are my mother and brothers?" he powerfully

You add guilt onto your anxiety, which makes you feel worse, so it becomes even more crippling. Or morning?

He believes a sermon has the capacity to uplift or depress a Christian suffering mental illness.

Dealing with Depression: Trusting God Through the Dark Times, Sarah Collins and Jayne Haynes Christians Get Depressed Too, David Murray

This Way Up | www.thiswayup.org.au Beyond Blue | www. beyondblue.org.au | 1300 224 636 Black Dog Institute | blackdoginstitute.org.au

www.thegospelcoalition.org and <u>www.desiringgod.org</u> have many helpful articles.

Lifeline Australia | www.lifeline.org.au |

13 1114

Being There: How to Love Those who are Hurting, Dave Furman Mindscape: What to Think About instead of Worrying, Timothy Witmer Trust: A Godly Woman's Adornment, Lydia Brownback Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission, Amy Simpson **PHaMs** or over whose lives are severely affected by mental illness. Case managers and peer support PHaMs is based at the Anglicare office at St Mary's, Waverley and also has a close partnership

with St John's, Maroubra where many of the PHaMs special events are held. PHaMs groups include: Contact narelle.hand@anglicare.org.au or phone 9798 1400. FoodREDI – learn about healthy eating, food preparation and food budgeting. POPPY playgroup – supported playgroup for families with children under five experiencing

Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMs) is a Government-funded program for people aged 16 workers provide mentoring one-on-one and in groups to support individuals towards recovery. Anglicare art space – free arts-based program for people who are experiencing, or who are at risk of, mental health challenges. Creative and encouraging, plus re-engagement with community. Technology group – learn to use technology (iPad, mobile phone, digital camera, internet, email, Waves of Wellness – surf therapy. Meet like-minded people and use learning to surf to manage

mental health challenges, or families with young children with a disability. Contact Aftercare for Websites Christian Counselling and Educational Foundation | www.ccef.org