

STAY AFLOAT OUTREACH OFFICER

Through funding from the State Government, Rural Alive and Well has employed a new dedicated Stay Afloat Seafood Outreach Officer.

Chris Claridge has hit the ground running, already visiting many ports, jetties and seafood businesses.

With a long history working in the seafood industry, Chris will be a huge asset supporting the mental health needs of our seafood industry.

We recently caught up with Chris to talk about his background, interest in mental health, and what the process is for seeking support.

You can contact Chris directly on 0477 066 112 anytime Monday-Friday, or call Rural Alive and Well 24/7 on 1300 HELP MATE (1300 4357 6283).

● What's your background in fishing?

I spent five years with Mures on the auto longliner. I thoroughly enjoyed that. Still miss it a little bit. Before that, I'd done a little bit of king crabbing with John and Graham Cull out of Queenscliff. I always had a passion for it.



Chris spent five years working for Mures on the Diana

● What made you interested in working with Rural Alive and Well?

There was an opportunity there. You know, being out fishing and being isolated, being able to relate back to some of the problems. I thought it was a really good opportunity to get into the mental health sector and try to assist people that have had some of the same issues that I've had - [with isolation], and some of the things that I've seen through the fishing industry in the last five years. With relationship breakdowns, obviously there's sometimes a little bit of drug and alcohol abuse within the fishing industry and stuff like that. So being able to assist and offer some help in that aspect is really rewarding.

● What's the process when someone wants to reach out to you?

Our 1300 number (1300 4357 6283) is manned 24 hours a day, so anybody can call that at any time. That is then referred back to me as a Seafood Council worker. So if anybody cannot contact me outside of work hours, you can call the 1300 number.

You can also call my number Monday-Friday (0477 066 112), which anybody can call at any time of the day.

● What happens once someone calls you or the 1300 number?

I'll call you back, and we can have a chat about the situation, if you want to meet up in person and talk about whatever the issue is that you're going through. Or if the person is not comfortable meeting in person, I'm happy just to



Stay Afloat Outreach Officer Chris Claridge

have conversations over the phone and assist that way.

I suppose one of the big messages is: just because you're talking to somebody over the phone, sometimes people don't feel comfortable because they feel like they are talking to a psychologist. I'm just a mate. I'm there to put you in touch with the right organisations or the right people to assist you to get through the hard time that you're going through.

I can put you in touch with those organisations if that's what you want. You don't have to, but that option is there. If I don't feel that I can meet your needs, there are a lot of organisations out there that we can use and people are [often] unaware of.

● Why mental health?

I've always had a passion to work in rural areas and be able to assist people that are going through a hard time. I've been there, everybody goes through a hard time at some stage in their life. Sometimes people feel like they haven't got that friendship around them, or they don't want to talk in front of their skippers or their fellow workmates because they might feel that it's looked at as a weakness.

Trying to get rid of the stigma of mental health, so people can relate to it as a mental illness. It is an illness and it can be fixed. That can be just through talking, it doesn't always have to be medication.

It may only take one or two phone calls, it may take ten, it may take a couple of months. But at the end of the day, as long as you've

got that support beside you and you know that somebody's there to listen and to guide you in the right direction, sometimes that's all people need.

● **Do you think people are more forthcoming about mental health nowadays?**

I certainly do. There's a lot of positive feedback statewide, when I approach a fisherman who hasn't heard of RAW or isn't aware that RAW has come on board with the Seafood Council, or vice versa. The response is that it is needed within the industry. There's a lot of positive feedback from around the different wharfs around the state that I approach.

● **For a lot of people, it is a big deal to open up about mental health issues. What do you think about that?**

Sometimes when people are in a bad place it is a big deal for them [to open up]. Part of my job is being able to not judge somebody by their issue, not being judgemental, and trying to help them see that their problem is not as big as what they actually think it is. It can be fixed, whatever it may be.

● **You've just spent the last two days in mental health first aid training. What sort of things did you learn?**

Just different strategies in how to deal with different situations in every form of mental health. So anxiety, depression, bipolar, drug abuse, alcohol abuse. How to approach and know what to say to make the person feel that they have got choices.

Just because you're having this issue, that doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. Everyone reacts differently to different stressors.

Doing training like this, you learn a lot about yourself. It was very beneficial both for this work and personally, learning how to look at things different and basically just keep an open mind.

When some people are in isolated areas and they haven't got a lot of friends or family around them, sometimes it is as simple as being heard. They don't feel like they've got a purpose, and having someone to talk to, and someone they can ring when they're not feeling the best. That's all it can take sometimes, just to give that person a purpose, to reach out and help them up, and sort of give them a bit of a nudge along just to get back on track and try to help them see that

they have got a purpose and they have got a lot to live for.

Often there are more people around you who care for you than you think. Sometimes things get a bit cloudy and a bit dark, and you can't see it until somebody points it out for you. It can be hard to recognise.

● **What can you do if you know someone else who might need help?**

It doesn't always have to be the person who needs help reaching out. It can be a referral or somebody else who can see that somebody is struggling. You can ring up [Chris or RAW] and say, 'I've noticed that old mate's not turning up to work, it's very out of character for him,' or 'He seems a bit down at the moment and could do with a bit of a phone call just to check.' It doesn't always have to be the person that's struggling. People can reach out if they do see the signs that somebody's not doing okay.

● **Do you have any tips for people who might want to start a conversation with a friend, or someone they're worried about?**

Just don't be scared to ask the question 'Are you okay? How's things?' Sometimes when somebody is in a bad place they're screaming out for somebody to ask that question, but in the past it hasn't always been an easy question to ask. Sometimes when people do ask that question, and they're too scared of getting the answer 'No, I'm not okay,' it sort of puts them on the spot.

We're trying to get rid of the stigma of being scared to ask that question. It's okay to go and ask somebody if they're okay. It's something that everybody should be doing in every aspect of life, not just a mental health worker.

● **How do you find your fishing background helps with your role at RAW?**

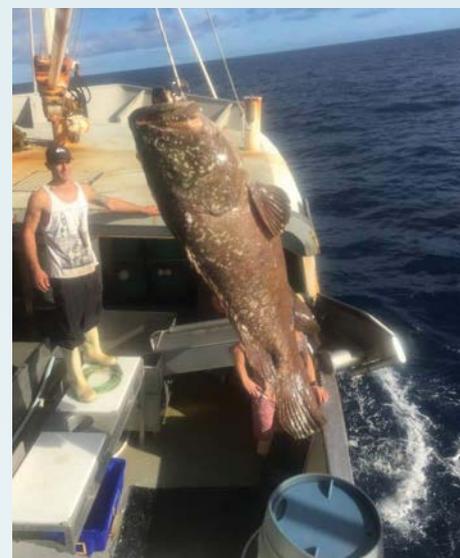
It's a lot harder to relate to somebody that that doesn't have much knowledge about the fishing industry. It feels like they're just sort of fishing for information and they're just generally interested in what we do.



Chris with his stepson

It still can be challenging walking up to some fishermen, but then when you engage with them, and you can start to talk to them about fishing, and what's going on about tides, and markets, and prices and stuff. It really does make the conversation a lot easier when you can relate to what's going on.

Nine times out of ten when you're talking about fishermen, you've got the same interests; inside of fishing and outside, with football, shooting, whatever it may be. ■



Chris admiring his catch