Dear Carer,

Sarah Martin

Our world is full of colour,
shades of black,
shades of white,
and times when there are lots of scribbles muddling it all up.

Love - steady, imperfect, or determined, can light even the darkest moments.

For carers,
this book is for you.

Chapter 1

Why did I write Dear Carer?

> Carers are our parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, and the multitude of others that may sit next to us on the bus, in a chair at the emergency department, or those that care for our loved ones in hospital. Mental ill-health does not discriminate.
>
> — Sarah

I've been told to never start a book with statistics but this book is all about breaking the stigma and silence of mental health concerns, advocating for our loved ones and ultimately ourselves, so, where else to put them but at the start?

In Australia there are over three million unpaid carers. Nearly one million of that number care for those living with complex mental health concerns.[1] In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics states

---

[1] https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final-CWS-2024-Report-compressed.pdf Source 2023 Regional Wellbeing Survey, November 2023-March 2024

that, in a 2020–2022 study, '42.9% of people aged 16–85 years had experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life.'[2]

The population of Australia in 2022 was twenty-six million … ish. That's over eleven million people who had experienced mental health concerns or conditions. In September 2025, the World Health Organisation released an article stating one billion people around the world were living with mental health conditions.[3]

Who is looking after those living with complex mental health concerns and conditions?

We know who it is. It's us.

Carers can be parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, and a multitude of others. They may sit next to us on the bus or in a chair at the emergency department, or they may be one of those who care for our loved ones in hospital. Mental ill-health does not discriminate; anyone can be called upon to care for a loved one.

Regardless of how complex mental health concerns entered your life, life has changed. The tentacles of mental ill-health touch all who take part in caring, loving, or living with you. They can also reach friends and family who can see and hear what's happening in your world.

The dramatic representations of complex mental health conditions that we might see in the media are a sad reality for some, but they are not the norm. Recovery is often painstakingly slow and quiet – it may go unseen by many. But carers see the whole process. We also see the stigma, shame, and misperceptions that surround complex mental health conditions.

And these, my dear friends, are some of the reasons why many of

---

2. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health Released 5/10/2023
3. www.who.int/news/item/02-09-2025-over-a-billion-people-living-with-mental-health-conditions-services-require-urgent-scale-up September 2025

us do not share our mental health stories. My mission is to change this narrative.

As well as the very real challenges, mental health concerns can also bring laughter, joy, and love. It's not all doom and gloom, especially if we have support from family, friends and medical personnel. We can develop a toolkit of knowledge and establish a plan of action for when our loved ones are ill – led by and developed in collaboration with them.

In 2015, mental ill-health walked in our front door uninvited. We stayed silent because of stigma, grief, and the unknown.

Our twenty-one-year-old daughter was on the journey of a lifetime. A coming-of-age adventure that she had worked hard for. Three months into her trip, on a beautiful Saturday morning in August, I received a message from a stranger, who was concerned that she was experiencing some sort of mental health crisis.

We live in Australia. Our girl was in Istanbul, Türkiye. Her guardian angels – Syrian refugees, friends that she had met five short weeks before – kept her alive and safe until my oldest son and I could get there. It was clear upon our arrival that she was very unwell – hearing voices, not one but hundreds. She was in the grip of psychosis; our girl needed psychiatric care, and urgently.

After an exhausting 28,000km round trip, we arrived back in Australia. Her reality differed from ours. She had no perception that what we saw and heard was different to what she saw and heard. And we had no insight into what was going on in her brain, other than knowing it was misfiring in all directions.

When we arrived at the emergency department, we had to tell our story to six different doctors and nurses in three hours. The triage nurse, junior doctor, admission nurse, registrar, mental health nurse, and finally the psychiatric registrar. Seven hours later, our daughter was 'scheduled' and involuntarily admitted into the psychiatric emergency care centre (PECC), which provides urgent care to people experiencing critical mental ill-health.

The rollercoaster ride had begun.

We had so many questions, and no one had answers.

The hospital system for any medical condition is a 'mindfield' – yes, my word. I call it this as there is so much information for our brains to take in, unfamiliar words, new meanings to learn and medical language to absorb. Not to mention navigating hospitals, services, and medications, while worrying about an ill loved one, is a mindfield. Different terminologies abound, and with them come new acronyms that need to be explained every time we hear them.

When the tentacles of mental ill-health wrapped around us, we felt helpless. There was no one who spoke any sense to us, it was all medical jargon about the processes of the brain and blah blah blah. Most of it was white noise, and I'm a nurse. The one thing I did hear was that a formal diagnosis of a 'psychiatric condition' could take years. My heart sank. Could we live in the unknown for that long? Could she?

Our girl needed medical assistance and treatment. We needed patience. We needed to focus on the now and work the rest out later, when we had time to breathe.

We all began to learn to live with this new normal. It wasn't easy. There were steps forward and steps back, and days that were just too hard. Through it all, we stayed silent. We closed ranks against the stigma and stereotypes and did our best to protect our daughter and ourselves from assumptions, harmful or not.

My outlet over those years was writing. I filled page after page with raw emotions, hopes and dreams, and shattered realities. I thought I had the draft of an article, but I had way too much information for that. What could I do with it?

Dear Carer,

My first book, *Dear Psychosis,* was born. This was the story I had needed to hear when mental ill-health knocked at our door. A memoir about our family living with and through a major mental health crisis, and learning to live with a chronic illness. Our story reached further than we ever thought. Many people thanked us for breaking the silence that others living and caring for someone with complex mental health conditions could not.

My heart is full of pride in what we have achieved, but I felt it was not quite enough. I had a powerful desire to contribute to the mental health space. I'd come alive speaking to others at libraries, workplaces, with carers, journalists, and podcasters. I would sparkle when I was talking about complex mental health.

My focus shifted from being a caregiver and advocate for my daughter to concentrating on supporting caregivers. I was constantly seeking ways to ease their journey, now or in the future. I decreased my perioperative (operating theatre) job down to one day a week and started working as a carer peer worker – an advocate with lived experience – for committees at a local public hospital.

A teeny-tiny sparkle of an idea gave me my revelation moment about my future direction. Another book that I had needed.