

Dan's Story



Introduction

Before we begin today's conversation, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we're recording the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation here in South Yarra, Melbourne. We pay our deepest respects to elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples joining us today.

We also want to acknowledge that today's conversation will touch on themes related to mental health. Stress, addiction and recovery. If anything we talk about today stirs something difficult inside you, please know you're not alone and support is available. In Australia, you can contact Lifeline anytime day or night.

You can also reach out to your employee assistance program if one is available through your workplace.

And if you're listening internationally, we really encourage you to connect with local support services.

Thank you for being here with us today. Today I'm speaking with Dr. Dan Harrison. Psychologist, researcher and founder of Lumenara. Dan's 20 month sober milestone isn't just about not drinking, it's about sobriety from the constant need to prove our worth through achievement.

It's about a deeper commitment to working on oneself and being of service to others when you take a step back. Dan's story challenges some of our fundamental assumptions about success and healing. It's not about adding more achievements to our lives. It's about letting go of what keeps us from being present and real.

It's about coming home to ourselves and for Dan, coming back to Echuca really represented that. Dan, it's so good to have you here.

Growing Up In Echuca



Honestly, growing up in Echuca was incredible in a lot of ways. I moved there from Melbourne when I was in grade three, and suddenly it felt like I was living in this giant playground. River banks, fishing bonfires, good mates, so much fun and mischief.

It was a tale of two sides for me growing up though, as I look back on it – it was being raised in a really special part of the world, but at that time, and still even today, mental health and wellbeing was not a priority. Something had to be so called "wrong" to get the help and support needed; and the culture around men's health meant that talking about it was seen as a weakness.

As a kid, I felt things really deeply. I don't think I had the words for it back then, but it felt like I was missing a layer of skin. Everything hit me harder. I'd pick up on moods, the way someone's voice changed little shifts in tone and I couldn't just brush it off like other kids seemed to.

Echuca, gave me a lot, the river, the bush close mates. But I often felt like I was circling myself – monitoring - like I was watching myself from the outside trying to figure out who I was supposed to be. At the same time I was not happy or comfortable with myself – as if something was wrong.

Then alcohol came along and honestly, it worked. It turned the volume down. The critic in my head finally shut up. I could laugh without analysing it. Be in the moment without that constant self-surveillance, it felt like the solution, like something clicked into place. And I would get encouragement from others too. Being a legend was about how many beers you could "put away" - nothing to do with taking care of yourself.

So growing up was mixed – I am super grateful for having a great lifestyle and experiences, but I learned to find relief from myself in alcohol. It seemed pretty insignificant at the time, you know – it was a part of growing up in the bush.....

Getting Busy



Later on, work-wise. I tried a few trades, thought maybe that would be the answer, but something kept pulling me towards something else. I ended up at uni, started in engineering, then computing. It wasn't until I found psychology that something clicked. Four years of general psych training, then a PhD in organisational psychology awards, publications, conferences.

On paper, I was doing great. I'd felt like I was finally "somebody" - I had an identity - and I'd smile you know; but inside I was still fuelled by a discontent and a need to achieve – a need to prove my worth – and um I was still chasing the next thing, like a hamster in a wheel – going round and round.

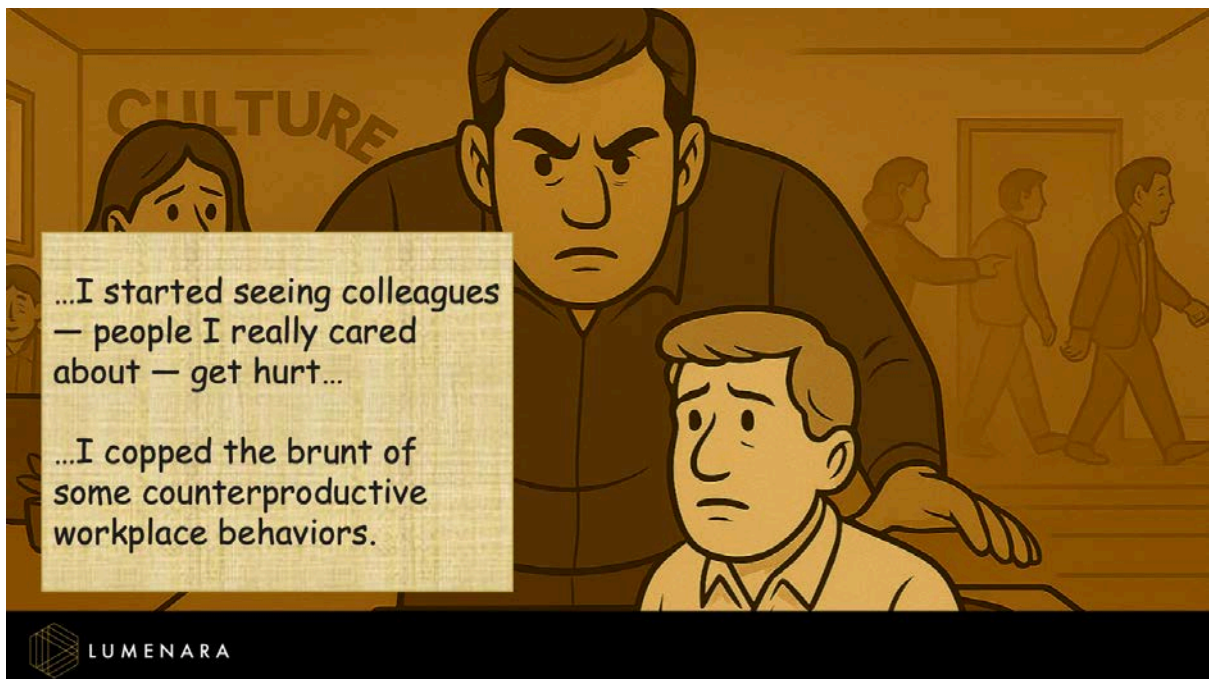
I love work and you know it loved me back – but it did become a place to hide out. I see that now – but I was totally unaware during the majority of this. Looking back, work gave me a lot – and for me, to get to a place of self-acceptance I had to achieve something, and it helped settle that burning irritability and discontent with myself. Stay busy, stay useful, stay sharp, stay ahead and focused on the next thing.

I looked capable, even confident at times, but at times holding it together with the finest of threads. It felt like I was performing life through a fog, smiling, functioning, even thriving in parts, but always holding my breath, waiting for the crash. Anxiety and depression weren't loud. They were just always there, like background static.

Every ten years they would really rear their heads first early 20s, then early 30s, then in the 40s. Every ten years was a pattern of crash, fall down, brush the knees, get up again and on with it. Still not really addressing the root causes of things.

I'd lose myself in a project or a few drinks, sometimes both, and it would work for a while, but the crash that followed always came and it always hit a little harder. Deep down, I knew something wasn't right, but I'd build an identity around being the guy who had it all together, the helper, the achiever, and when that identity starts to fall apart. The shame is brutal.

Work No Longer a Safe Harbor



For a long time, work was a safe harbour.
Something steady I could throw my energy into.

You know, I've had some amazing opportunities -
and I've been lucky enough to work with people and organisations to have a real, positive impact.

Some of the most meaningful moments for me have come from being part of a team,
working to improve lives, engagement, and wellbeing.

The work, and my career - it's been an incredible journey.

I've seen some really wonderful things take shape.

But, you know, that also comes with seeing people and companies in some really tough spots.

As a psychologist, it's been great being able to support people through all kinds of transitions: returning to work, managing disability and psychological injury, navigating career change, working through large-scale company transformation.

I've had a really diverse career -
and I've seen up close what contributes to healthy workplace cultures,
and what happens when those systems break down.

For example - I've led investigations into the effects of poor people practices.
And I've seen first-hand the long-term impact of workplaces that don't prioritise individual wellbeing.
Those impacts? They can be life-changing.

And you know - up to a point, I witnessed things happening...
but always from a distance.

Later in the journey - it started to hit closer.
I began seeing colleagues - and people I cared about - get hurt.
And eventually, I copped the brunt of some counterproductive workplace behaviours.

That was tough.

Combined with the fact that I wasn't putting myself first,
and a consistent pattern of overwork -
that safe space? It wasn't safe anymore.

Trust broke down. The dynamics shifted.
Toxicity crept in.
And my nervous system? It went into overdrive.

That deep stress response - fight, flight, freeze -
it became my default setting.

And yeah - reflecting now - I didn't have the skills to work through those things effectively.
When we're experiencing prolonged pressure and stress,
the neuroscience shows we get cut off from the parts of the brain that help us regulate, settle,
and steer the ship.

For me - it was a perfect storm.
And instead of stepping back and putting my wellbeing first...
I pushed harder.
I ran deeper into addiction, into despair, into false refuges - hoping they'd hold me up.

But they never did.

The Rock Bottom



These stories usually have a rock bottom. And mine's no different.

You can't outrun pain forever. Sooner or later, the walls close in. A lifetime of personal neglect catches up with you - not knowing how to put your wellbeing first, not knowing how to slow down the storm inside, not knowing how to be your own safe place.

I didn't have self-care. Not really. I had achievements. I had all the trimmings of a life that was meant to mean something - the Lexus in the driveway, the caravan parked nearby, a lifestyle in southern California with all its glorious sunshine.

And yeah, I had those things. But inside that house... it was hollow. I returned to the place after the kids and my ex-wife left.

The rooms looked like someone had just left - clothes still folded, dishes barely cleared, the beds still warm like someone had only just woken up. But it was silent. Still. As if the place had been paused mid-scene.

That illusion faded too. As my family returned to Australia - one by one - I was left behind in a kind of emotional and physical exile. A beautiful house, and not a soul in it.

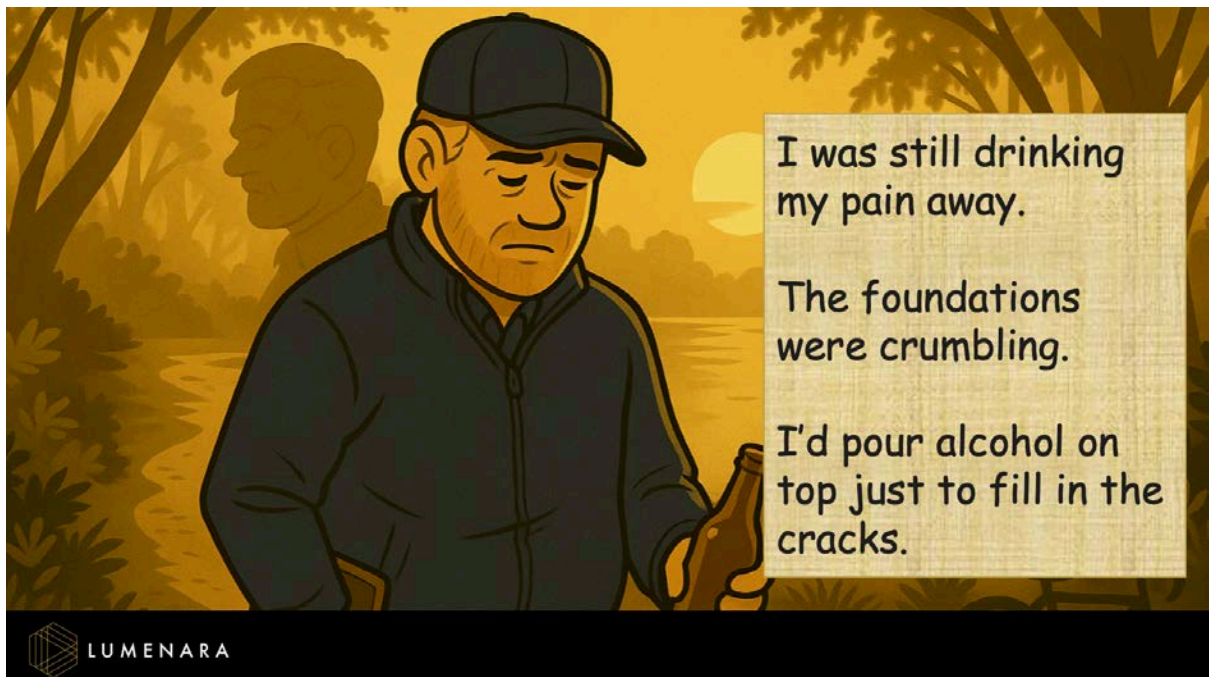
And it hit me: this wasn't living. This was survival dressed up as success.

It wasn't just that I wasn't taking care of myself. It was that something had to break - because if it didn't, we were all going to go under. I was sinking, and I was taking people I loved with me.

What followed was a spiral - of guilt, of shame, of deep, bitter resentment – toward self and other. A tangle of old wounds, unspoken fears, unfinished grief. And underneath it all: a continued pattern of self-neglect so entrenched, I barely knew who I was without it.

That's what brought me home. Home to Echuca. Four months later - held up by friends in the US, guided by the steady hands of my parents - I landed back in the place I first learned how to hide. Only now, I was ready to start learning how to heal.

Getting Sober



Coming home gave me physical safety - but I still didn't feel safe in my own skin.



I'd been diagnosed with treatment-resistant depression. I'd spent time in hospital. We tried everything. Psychiatry, medication, review after review. At one point, a medical specialist said: "We've thrown everything we can at this - and nothing's really working. You need to look at your drinking."

That was the turning point. A glimmer of hope broke through.

It wasn't certainty. But it was something. My family, friends, and support network - they held me up when I couldn't hold myself.

I went into rehab. It was exactly the reset I needed.



I downed tools. Quit my job. For the first time, I actually put myself first. That decision in itself was massive. Not working. Not earning. Not being the provider. That was scary. But it was also life-changing.

That's when it started to shift. Not all at once - it wasn't some silver bullet I'd been chasing. But I finally stopped pretending I had all the answers, and started doing something radical for me - I started listening.

Eventually, I stopped trying to fix myself... and started learning how to care for myself.

I flipped the script.

Wellbeing first. Not performance. Not perfection. Not proving. Just presence.

Twenty Months of Research

What came next wasn't one giant leap - it was a string of small, quiet turning points.

But a few of them stand out.

It began with the simplest of things: noticing. Showing myself just a flicker of kindness. At first, it felt awkward - almost repulsive. Like my system didn't know what to do with it.

But I kept going.

I became both the experiment and the experimenter. I started building a personal catalogue - little tools and practices that helped depending on what I was facing.

Slowly - gently - those old stories began to soften. I approached them with compassion. With curiosity. With kindness.

Coming home helped, too - to family, to Echuca, Mum and Dad, to the trees, the fire, the bush. To the part of me that didn't need to hustle to feel like I was worth something.

Lucky to have a close network of extended family - and a good mate returned from Canada to Echuca as well.

And I started to study again - but this time, not for a degree. 300-500 words most days for 20 months.

I studied my nervous system. How to calm it. How the vagus nerve functions. How the brain responds to stress and what can reverse it. I read scientific literature, tested techniques. Mindfulness became a lifeline - not in a spiritual, lofty way - just in small, ordinary pauses. A breath. A check-in.

Journaling helped untangle the maze of thoughts and emotions. Neuroscience helped me spot the patterns. Habit science gave me tools to build new routines - starting with five minutes a day. That was enough.

I started to see how trauma - especially the kind we turn inward - loops itself into the nervous system.

Negative self-talk. Shame spirals.

These weren't just emotional patterns - they were biological ones.

They triggered surges of cortisol and adrenaline, locking me in a cycle of hypervigilance and depletion.

So I began to interrupt the loop.

I started creating simple rituals that activated different chemicals - endorphins, dopamine, oxytocin.

The good stuff. The ones that soften, soothe, and help you feel safe again.

I learned this truth the hard way:

Your emotions are messengers, not masters.

Sometimes they guide you.

Other times, they hijack you.

One of the most powerful tools I used early was something called opposite action - a therapeutic skill that works like a nervous system reset button.

It teaches you to respond differently than your emotion urges you to. Rewire your response to emotions.

To do the thing that realigns you with your values - even when it's uncomfortable.

The more I practiced, the more I felt myself coming back online. Back to centre. Back to me.

I didn't just think about gratitude - I let myself feel it. Really feel it.

A bird landing in a tree.

A quiet moment by the fire.

A text from a friend at the perfect time.

And that led me deeper - into reading, research, reflection.
Neuroplasticity. Somatic psychology. Peer-reviewed studies.
Decades of wisdom I'd always known intellectually, but was only just starting to live.

At first, it was hard. Foreign. Clunky. But eventually... it clicked.

I remember one night, lying in bed, and hearing myself whisper gentle words to myself - not out of effort, but out of habit. Self-compassion. Appreciation for others. A moment of beauty.

That was the turning point. All of this - the tools, the science, the practices - started with one small intention:

To treat myself with a bit more kindness.

To become... my own best mate.

Life Now



When you don't look after yourself - and your not taking good care of your thoughts, perceptions, your inner world, it is extremely difficult to live according to your highest intention. The water get's muddied - and people experiencing addiction can leave a pretty big wake. You know - we have had a life where we have done things we regret. The more time you are in recovery you get to see that part, and understand it for what it is; take accountability but move through life with a renewed story - a renewed identity. You know and ah - I have had hands down the most amazing 20 months of my life; and in that I have been able to work on my past relationships and you know help facilitate the healing process; while experiencing life in high definition.

Everything is better.

You know I remember that mornings used to start with four seconds of peace - then the guilt would hit. What emails did I send last night? What responsibilities did I miss in place of going down to the pub? The weight of not showing up - the weight of not being your best self. But there is help - there is a way. That learned helplessness that often comes with things like "addiction" and terms that get thrown around like "treatment resistant depression" are not permanent. And you know the most important thing for me has been just letting time pass.

Now? I wake up and make a coffee - I don't immediately check emails.

I use Daily calm for a short meditation. I read a lot and do a ton of research. I write 500 words a day. You know - I am out for walks. For me my day used to start around 8 - now it is 5am. And by 9am, I've already got so much done - not because I have to but because I want to.

But it is one step at a time - it is about doing the next right thing and checking your intention. Getting up early in the morning may not be your thing - but I can tell you that honestly living sober and chipping away at my mindset and approach to life has been incredible. You know - whoever is listening I would rate it highly!

My dad and I are both sober now. We jump on 12-step meetings together. That connection, that shared growth - it means the world.

Hard days still come. But now I see them. I don't believe everything they tell me. I can breathe, call a mate, say, "Today's rough... but I'm still here."

Because I don't hide in the same places anymore. Beer was my biggest comfort. It worked - until it didn't. If I didn't start working with myself, if I let a more negative mindset take hold, I knew exactly where I'd end up: back at the bar. Back in the spiral.

I didn't have another option.

But being a psychologist? That gave me a head start because although it once burned me out it became the platform for my recovery. For the last 20 months I have journaled and documented everything. I have read texts from traditions lost over the ages and also stayed abreast in terms of modern practice and what the neuroscience is saying. The different strategies I have used and explored - I have journaled and documented everything. The practices, the science, the shifts. And as I saw the changes - as I experienced the power of what actually works - I knew I had to share it.

You reach a point where recovery becomes like a sport. Not in a competitive sense - but in rhythm. Something comes up? You notice it. You work with it. You let it pass. You stop being the small boat tossed by the waves. You become the ocean. Calm. Capable. Holding it all.

The things that used to trigger me? They've become quests. Challenges. Adventures. I'm better resourced now - with tools, with support, with perspective.

And yeah - 20 months sober.

But it's not just sobriety from alcohol. It's sobriety from the hustle. From the proving. From the inner war. I've had to look at my relationship with everything - work, social media, even the stuff that looks healthy, like exercise and ambition.

Not because I had to. But because I wanted to.

There's peace now. Seeing a police car and not wondering when I had my last drink. That kind of peace.

These past 20 months have been about lightening the emotional load I didn't realise I was carrying. You'd think, as a psychologist, I'd have it all sorted. And for a while, I believed that too.

But it doesn't work that way.

Without early emotional literacy - without real tools for navigating our internal world - most of us end up carrying far more than we show.

And that's what I'm working to change. For myself. For my kids. For anyone who's ready to come home to themselves.

About Lumenara

We draw on wisdom from a wide range of sources - stories, rituals, lived experience - and blend that with modern neuroscience and psychology. Because today, we understand more than ever how the nervous system works, how emotions are processed, and what genuinely helps people grow and heal.

But information alone isn't enough. That's where technology comes in.

With Aria, we're building emotionally intelligent tools that offer support in real time. Not just in crisis, but during a tough workday, a quiet evening, or those moments where something just feels off.

It's not a binary between ancient and modern. It's about integration. Using technology to deliver care that's deeply human.

So much of this work comes down to the pause - the moment of noticing. But awareness by itself isn't enough. You've got to pause first... then work with it.

Most of us are soothing ourselves with a preferred distraction. And that's okay, at first. But it keeps our inner world locked away. We keep doing what we think is right - until something breaks.

The truth is, learning how to care for ourselves is a skill. It doesn't come naturally for everyone. And at the beginning, it can feel awkward. Foreign. Even a bit repulsive.

But over time, it becomes powerful.

Now I'm 20 months sober - and I don't just mean alcohol. I mean sober from the hustle, the proving, the inner war. I've had to re-examine everything: my relationship with work, social media, even things that look healthy - like ambition or exercise.

Not because I had to. But because I wanted to.

And the upside? It's enormous.

I'm building Lumenara - a company grounded in nervous system literacy, emotional intelligence, and real human transformation. We've just launched the second round of our program Unstuck - focused on the skills most of us never got taught growing up: how to feel, how to regulate stress, how to respond rather than react.

And we're building tools like Aria - digital companions that offer just-in-time support. The kind that shows up when you need it most.

But it all begins with this: putting wellbeing first. When you do that, everything else flows from there.



Unstuck Program Outcomes

Know Your Nervous System

- Learn how your stress response actually works - and how to work *with* it, not against it.

Build a Regulate-on-the-Go Toolkit

- Master simple, science-backed techniques that soothe the body and shift your mental state — in minutes.

Make Mindfulness Practical

- Ditch the pressure to “clear your mind.” Instead, build a mindful awareness you can take anywhere



Unstuck Program Outcomes

Soften Your Inner Dialogue

- Learn how to speak to yourself with kindness — especially when it's hard. Less judgment, more self-leadership.

Move from Stuck to Shift

- Stop circling the same stories. With journaling, guided prompts, and weekly sessions, you start rewiring stuck patterns at the root.

Make Mindfulness Practical

- With 5-minute resets, you build a life rhythm that nourishes instead of drains you.



Companies also have a role too – and we support their efforts their as well.

We're seeing organisations like WorkSafe here in Australia, and now global framework for managing psychosocial risks at work - really begin to lead in recognising the psychological risks inside the workplace.

Our programs, tools and technology and designed for individuals everywhere – no matter the context.



Join our Upcoming Program - Unstuck

lumenara.io



Final Message For Others

I'd say this: however stuck you feel - you're not broken. You're not alone. And you're not behind.

That fog? That weight? It's not the end of your story.

You don't have to have everything figured out. You just have to keep going. Stay curious. Let the light in - even if it's only through a crack.

You have value, even when you can't see it.

You are enough, even when you feel like you're not doing enough.

You'll get there - not by being perfect, but by being present. Moment by moment. Breath by breath.

Keep showing up. Ask for help. Be your own best mate, even when it feels hard.

There is a version of your life that's lighter, more honest, more connected.

And it starts by choosing - gently, bravely - to care for yourself.

Putting yourself first isn't weakness. It's wisdom. It's strength.

We're not broken. You can't hate yourself into healing. We're just wired for survival. But with patience and presence, we can choose new pathways.

You're not wrong for feeling how you feel. You're having a real response - to real conditions. We often mistake what's felt as what's true. But we can learn to pause. To question. To soften.

We all seek relief - from discomfort, from pressure, from pain. We do it in different ways: distraction, overthinking, controlling, avoiding, performing, postponing.

We dissociate - pull away from the moment. Or get caught in reactivity - tumbling forward without pause.

We turn on ourselves - with judgement, shame, self-condemnation.

We misinterpret cues - I feel bad, so I must be bad. I'm struggling at work - there must be something wrong with me.

We try to control everything - our schedules, our roles, how we're seen by others. We hide in responsibility. Or delay caring for ourselves - pushing it to tomorrow, again and again.

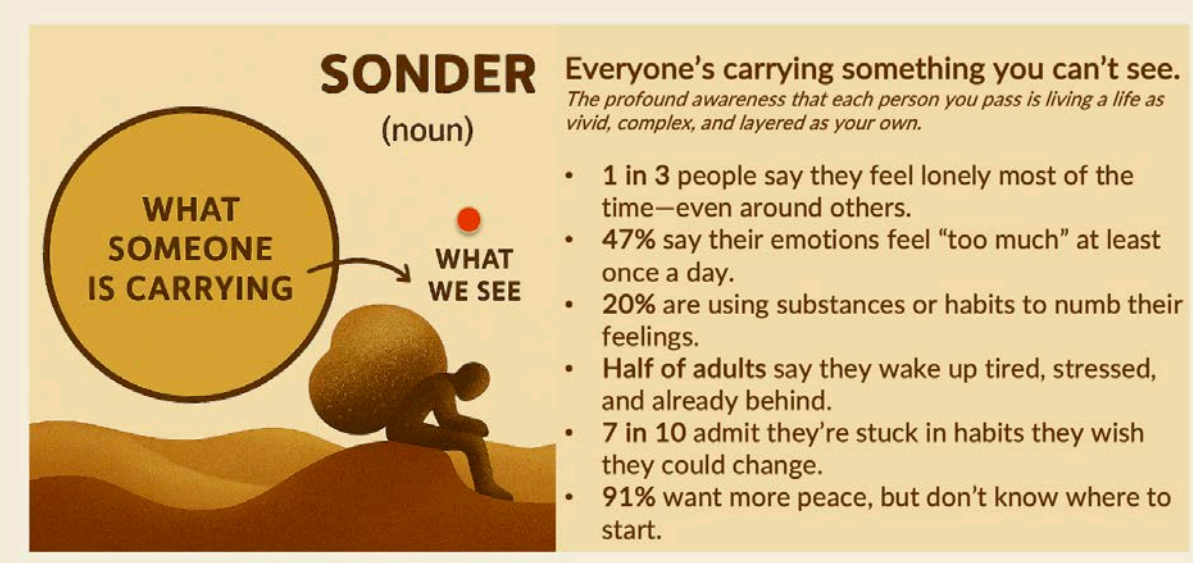
But here's the truth: these are human strategies for coping.

And they make sense - until they don't.

Putting yourself first? It's not weakness. It's strength.

You're going to get there.

No one knows the extent of what you have gone through.




SONDER
(noun)

WHAT SOMEONE IS CARRYING → **WHAT WE SEE**

Everyone's carrying something you can't see.
The profound awareness that each person you pass is living a life as vivid, complex, and layered as your own.

- 1 in 3 people say they feel lonely most of the time—even around others.
- 47% say their emotions feel “too much” at least once a day.
- 20% are using substances or habits to numb their feelings.
- Half of adults say they wake up tired, stressed, and already behind.
- 7 in 10 admit they're stuck in habits they wish they could change.
- 91% want more peace, but don't know where to start.

 LUMENARA

And you're going to pull through this period.

Additional Resources Here: https://lumenara.io/welcome/dans_story/the-journey/