



## Staying Strong as a Carer - Debbie's story

As we go through the session today, we're going to be checking in with Debbie and looking at her kinship care journey. Of course, Debbie is not a real person, but Debbie's story may represent the experience of thousands of people who have stepped up to provide care and support for children in their family when needed.

### Introducing Debbie

Debbie lives alone in a small town in regional South Australia. Debbie just celebrated her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Debbie separated from her husband 10 years ago after her two children moved out of home to start their adult lives independently. Debbie volunteers at the community centre three days per week, helping in the community garden and cooking for the lunches that are held there for the locals. Debbie enjoys crafting, spending time with friends and looking after her grannies.

Things were going ok for Debbie when something unexpected happened and life as she knew it came to a stop. Debbie got a phone call from the Department of Child Protection (DCP) letting her know that her three grandchildren had just been taken into care following concerns about their parents' drug and alcohol use and alleged family violence and asked Debbie if she would be willing to take them in. That was nine months ago. Since then, Debbie has been providing care for Taylah (3), Justin (5), and Riley (6).

Debbie was aware that her daughter was struggling because Debbie has always been there to help out with the kids when needed, but didn't realise how bad it really was. Debbie always cooked for the family, helped clean up when she visited, babysat the kids, and supported her daughter through tough times over the years. Debbie also heard from someone down at the community centre that the children's father was arrested for drugs, but also heard that he was back home again soon after. Debbie just considered this to be none of her business, so didn't talk with her daughter about it.

It's hard for Debbie to make long-term plans without much information about what's going to happen in the future and there seems to be so much to deal with just getting through every day. Debbie has little time and energy to help out at the community centre anymore and with school drop-offs, pick-ups and running around after Taylah, Debbie is exhausted. It has turned out that Riley isn't doing very well at school, Justin is destructive and Taylah isn't meeting her milestones. On top of this, the kids are having family contact two afternoons per week at the DCP office. Debbie loves her grandchildren but is worried that she won't be able to do this for much longer, the kids have additional needs and she feels that the kids should be at home with their parents anyway.



## **Stress Markers**

As time goes on, Debbie starts experiencing some changes in her body. Debbie feels tense and finds it hard to relax even though her mind and body feel tired. Debbie often feels nauseous and has noticed that she has lost a lot of weight as well. Debbie thinks these changes are symptoms of getting older or just a result of running around after the children, but Debbie goes to the doctors to seek some advice anyway. The GP considers Debbie's circumstances, age, medical history and current health needs. The GP advises Debbie that her symptoms are likely a result of unmanaged stress.

## **Warning Signs**

Debbie isn't getting the kids to school on time these days and she missed Taylah's paediatric appointment at the hospital again. Debbie's relationship with her daughter has changed and this is a constant thing that sits in Debbie's mind. Debbie has lost contact with most of her friends and tells the few people that are left very little about what's really going on in her life. She no longer thinks about the things she used to enjoy. She loves the children, but life feels like it's all too much for one person. Sometimes she imagines what it would be like to just get in her car and get away from everything. These thoughts make her feel very guilty so she doesn't tell anyone about them. Debbie also worries that if she shared her feelings with DCP, the children might get taken away.

## **Bucket Fillers**

Eventually, Debbie decides that something must change. Even though it feels very difficult, she opens-up to her kinship care worker about how she is really feeling. The kinship care worker helps her to identify all the things that are bothering her and helps Debbie find ways to fill her bucket. She makes the decision to share a little more of her experience and needs with her two closest friends. She also decides to reconnect with the community and attends the shared lunches down at the centre. Debbie also agrees to meet with her kinship care worker more regularly and look into childcare for Taylah.

Speaking up to her friends and to DCP was hard for Debbie. She felt ashamed and scared about how they would react. Debbie is really moved by how kind and supportive they have been. When it comes to meeting her own needs, Debbie sometimes feels that she should cancel so that she can do something important for the children or the family but reminds herself that she can't be there for the kids if she's not there for herself as well.

As Debbie's bucket slowly fill up again she finds herself feeling a little stronger, a little more patient, and a little more hopeful about the future. Debbie starts finding ways to enjoy life again and get her needs met.



## Support Networks

Debbie meets with her kinship care worker and examines how things have been going since she started filling up her own bucket more often. They both agree that progress has been good. The kinship care worker notes how helpful it has been to get Debbie back into the things she was doing before the kids came.

Taylah is now in childcare three days per week so that Debbie can rest and use this time to attend her own appointments. There is a council program that helps people out with their yard work, so a gardener comes once a fortnight now to mow Debbie's lawns, which save a lot of time. Debbie also has her close friend, June, from the community centre helping with picking up the kids from school on Thursday afternoons because Debbie has to take Taylah to her speech therapy appointment that day and finds it hard to get back in time to get Riley and Justin from school by 3pm.

The kinship care worker explains that all carers need a network around them to grow and thrive and helps Debbie to identify others in her life who may be able to assist. The kinship care worker lets Debbie know about the kinship and foster carer events coming up where she can meet other kinship carers that are in a similar situation. The kinship care worker also speaks to the DCP case worker to organise a care team meeting for everyone to be on the same page about whether DCP are working towards getting the children home and what this plan looks like. They also discuss whether a referral to the Therapeutic Carer Support Team would be beneficial, to get some targeted support in responding to the children's behaviour. At this stage, Debbie doesn't think she needs that but is keen to attend some of the carer training sessions that are on offer in the Kinship Care Program to better understand trauma.

It takes Debbie a couple of months to fill in some of the gaps in her support network, but Debbie has seen how much of a difference it makes to have others in the care team on board. Debbie is getting better at asking for support when she needs it and finally feels that she is a part of a wider team that are all there to make sure the kids are safe and happy.

Life is still very busy, and the future is still uncertain, but Debbie is feeling stronger. Justin and Riley still have their good and bad days at school, but mornings are much easier now. Riley got a confidence award at the school assembly and Justin needs less one-on-one support in class as he gets ready to start year 1. Taylah's development has improved significantly since starting childcare and therapy appointments have now reduced to monthly.

Debbie has enough resources filling up her bucket and is better able to recognise her own signs and symptoms of stress. Debbie has moved from surviving to thriving in her caregiving role.