



A FORMER Muswellbrook High School student is now assisting Australians in remote communities, via a new online psychology service.

Rural Help, which connects a variety of private psychologists to those people who might not be able to easily access therapy, was launched in January.

And, it's the brainchild of Kerry Howard, who still has family living in town.

"I would never have considered myself to be an exemplary pupil," the Class of '85 - Year 10 alumni said.

"In fact, I remember Mr Mowatt wrote in my Year 9 report: 'Kerry is an extremely capable student who has an aversion to work'.

"I even spent quite a bit of time outside deputy principal Mr Guest's office.

"So, you can appreciate that I didn't ever see myself as the type of person who was going to attend university or run multiple businesses.

"Today, I specialise in treating trauma.

"I really enjoy being able to integrate technology into systems to improve our mental health."

Designed to be safe, secure and easy to use, with sessions being conducted from the comfort of the client's home via video conference for approximately one hour, Rural Help is much-needed with suicide rates in rural areas 40 per cent higher than metropolitan areas, according to Sane Australia.

For every person who takes their own life, many others in their local community and extended family in other areas are directly affected by that loss.

"Rural communities are really suffering from the impacts of the drought," Ms Howard said.

"Mental health issues continue to rise and without intervention, people often take things into their own hands and this increases the mental health issues for more people.

"The exponential impact of suicide on communities means that it is crucial to intervene as early as possible when problems start to arise.

"After I left school I undertook a number of different roles - service-oriented roles such as hairdressing and beauty therapy.

"Honestly, while working in this industry, it exposed me to people's problems and the fact that many of them needed support to resolve them.

"At the age of 27, I made a decision to go back and study.

"I had young children [at the time], so I only studied part-time.

"I later returned to full-time work, so it took me 13 years to finish my degree (including Honours).

"I studied psychology as a mature-age student and graduated in 2010.

"I now run my own private practice in Canberra, but I have a number of business entities that assist people with their mental health.

"At the beginning of this year we launched Rural Help, with specialised expertise on topics such as trauma (abuse and domestic violence), anxiety, depression or drug and alcohol issues.

"It facilitates access to psychologists from the comfort of home - minimising the time needed to engage in therapy and reducing travel costs."

Rural Help is supported by recent changes in Medicare rebates for psychology that are specifically focussed on rural and remote regions.

Under a Mental Health Care Plan, individuals in those areas are able to access allowances for online therapy - something that their metropolitan counterparts are unable to do.

If you would like to access Rural Help's professional services, you should consult your GP for a referral and send an initial enquiry through the website at <https://ruralhelp.com.au/new-clients/> or phone 1800 HELP 2 U