

# Double Take

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**Terry Pickard, 49, and his wife Nicole, 24, met in Brisbane while they were both receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder. They talk to Sarah Elks.**

**Terry:** I have no doubt that meeting Nicky saved my life. If I hadn't met her, I would have died accidentally somehow in my car, in an alcoholic binge. It was inevitable.

Nicky and I met in a psychiatric hospital, where we were both in-patients. We both have post-traumatic stress disorder, but for different reasons. I was a medic in the army, part of the United Nations' peacekeeping force in Rwanda in 1995. I witnessed the massacre of thousands of men, women and children at a place called Kibeho, but because of the UN's rules I wasn't allowed to fire my weapon to defend the refugees.

It was 10 years later that Nicky and I met. I was pretty low at the time with PTSD. It was another bout, another time to stay in hospital for a while. When I first saw her, I thought, "She's nice, but she's young, too." Other people, our families and friends, saw it as a big age difference and I was worried about what other people would think. My previous wife and older daughter weren't keen on the relationship at all. They said, "Don't you think there's a problem with two people with a mental illness being together?" But I knew straight away we complemented and understood each other.

She's probably the most important part of my treatment. There are things Nic knows that nobody knows, not even my doctor. I've been well more often since I met Nic. I've had a couple of weeks here and there in the hospital. Now it's more of a top-up, for my psychotherapy, cognitive behaviour therapy and to check up on my medication. When I have nightmares, there'll be the odd occasion where I need to wake Nic up to talk and have a coffee or a cigarette. She doesn't need to say anything. The fact she's there, I know I'm safe.

A few weeks ago, we were driving back from a shopping centre and I saw an African man running towards the car. I had instant flashbacks to Rwanda, of people running, escaping. I thought, "Shit, he's come to get us." Nic made me realise he was just running to catch the green walking light to cross the road and I was able to keep driving.

I don't know how to word this, but I have a reason to live now. Before, in my previous marriage and the one before that, I've never really felt the need to be alive. I was a soldier and it didn't really bother me that there was a chance I'd go out bush and be accidentally killed. No big deal. But with Nic, and now that we've got our daughter, Bella, I'm doing my utmost to live as long as I possibly can to share as much bloody time in this life with her.

We argue sometimes when Bella gets sick. I've got a lot of medical knowledge because I spent 20 years as a medic in the army. So if Bella's just got a tummy bug, I think we should let it run its course. Why do you need to see a doctor for a middle-ear infection when I've seen an 11-year-old boy with half his chest blown away, walking and talking to me? But I'm learning now, with Nic's help, that Bella does need a doctor for a middle-ear infection because that's what's normal.

Maybe I was meant to go through all that bullshit in the past – go to Rwanda, get sick, go to hospital, get divorced, go to hospital – for us to finally meet. Maybe it was meant to happen. It does make the pain worth it. I can tolerate the pain and stuff in my mind from Rwanda because Nic's here.

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**Nicole:** When we met, Terry told me a relationship was the last thing he wanted. But we started talking and it was easy. There wasn't the pressure of meeting someone in a café or a pub and eventually having to tell them I have an illness. With Terry, he knew it all straight away. He had seen the faults and the scars.

I have post-traumatic stress disorder, triggered by experiences from my childhood. I also have depression and a bit of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). I haven't been back to hospital since I met Terry. It's probably been about the longest I've been out of hospital my whole life.

It took a while, probably months, for my mum and my family to accept our relationship. The fact I met him in hospital, plus he's a lot older than me. Sometimes I see people staring at us in the shops. I don't think anything of our age gap, but when I

see those stares it annoys me. Comments like, “It’s not going to last, you’re both suffering from illnesses and what about the age gap?” are frustrating. You can’t announce on a loudspeaker so everyone can understand it that we’re in it for the long run. But I’m a lot better at dealing with it now than I was in the beginning.

It is embarrassing to talk about, but I asked him to marry me. And it wasn’t even face to face, but by text message. I don’t like telling people that. I’d just got out of hospital and I didn’t think he would say yes. But he sent a text back saying he’d be honoured and that he was one week off asking me.

When Terry has a nightmare or a flashback, I keep in mind what I wouldn’t want someone doing for me. I personally detest it when people say, “I’m sorry that’s happened to you.” Sorry is definitely not going to fix it. I let Terry talk it out, get it out of his mind before it builds up and makes him sick. I listen. If he’s really sick, I’ll have to call our doctor or take him to hospital.

I’m not going to say that because we’ve both got PTSD it makes the relationship easy. It could easily go the other way and make things really hard. We could get sick at the same time, which luckily hasn’t happened yet. It is different now Bella is around because I’ve got to stay well to look after her.

He might not seem like it, but he’s actually quite funny. Not too many people can make me laugh. I don’t think I actually laughed properly, without pretending, that often before. Of course, he has his annoying habits. He’ll throw his cigarette butts on the ground. Sometimes I’ll get up in the morning and there’ll be dishes everywhere and that’ll annoy me.

Terry thinks that if he hadn’t met me, he wouldn’t have had a reason to stop drinking, just like I didn’t have a reason to stop doing what I did. I probably would have still been going in and out of hospital myself. If we hadn’t met, I think one of us could have died. I guess we saved each other.