

Paul Nicolaou



Talking to each other is best done face to face

Reverend Bill Crews has spent a lifetime working among the poor and marginalised in Sydney but he has never been more concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of our entire community.

Bill's message to the people of Sydney is we need to relearn the lost art of talking to each other to absorb the strength of people-to-people contact.

It's time to get to know our neighbours again.

After years of Covid isolation shielding ourselves from the pandemic, we've also become accustomed to shielding ourselves from people and workmates. This is not sustainable for our society.

If we follow Bill's advice — and we should — it is time to add a "neighbourhood talk" element to the "neighbourhood watch" program.

Greeted by enthusiastic applause, Bill made this heartfelt intervention at a recent Business Sydney forum held in conjunction with Lifeline Australia, devoted to dealing with an increase in mental health concerns in the workplace.

The forum confirmed we are a society under pressure as the cost of living soars with high interest rates,

crippling energy costs and yet to be tamed inflation.

And it is not just employees who are reporting psychological stress to Lifelines' telephone counsellors. Anecdotal evidence shows that business owners and managers are just as likely to be calling.

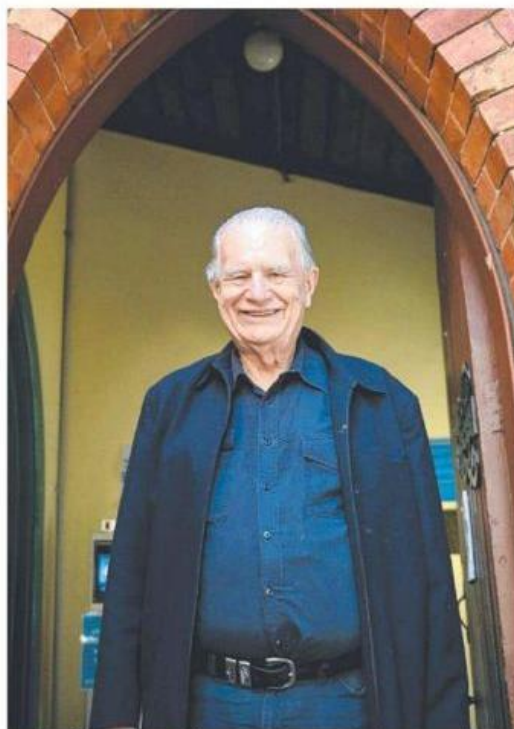
Two NSW Government ministers spoke at the forum. Rose Jackson, who counts mental health among her suite of portfolios, and Steve Kamper, who has small business and multiculturalism.

Both ministers spoke from the heart. Kamper added an additional level of authenticity. He came to politics from a career in small business and knows what it's like to face years of personal stress trying to save a struggling business.

But on the day, it was Bill Crews' message that really cut through, drawing attention to an important issue that we need to deal with if mental health is to be improved across the whole of society, not just the workplace.

"We cannot discover who we are sitting alone contemplating our navel — we see who we are in our reflection in the eyes of those around us," Bill says.

"It's in the community that we discover ourselves and that community as of late has been under



The Rev. Bill Crews has called for greater communication. Picture: Jeremy Piper

a lot of pressure. Unless we get back to the idea of community, no number of therapists will be enough to deal with the anxieties people face just living life today."

We came out the other side of the pandemic but on the way we stopped doing a lot of things that brought people together.

We stopped travelling because we weren't allowed to, we didn't go out to our favourite clubs or to shows and restaurants to dine out — places where people are likely to meet.

We didn't talk to our neighbours. Unfortunately, we have been slower than expected in reconnecting. And as the good reverend says, we need to do better.

I'm particularly worried about our

young people still being caught up in the isolation of work-from-home arrangements. As everyone knows, Business Sydney has strongly advocated for people to return to work on at least three to four days of the working week.

Workplaces are where Sydney does business, careers are made and individual and corporate achievements are celebrated. But going to work is also a social event in a number of ways.

It's where we make friends, sometimes for a lifetime. People meet their life partners at work. So much of what we do at work involves talking to each other.

Face-to-face communication and workplace dynamics go hand-in-

hand. In my view, there are healthcare benefits from going to work. Lifeline Australia is working to ensure that workplaces are also conducive to promoting mental health and wellbeing at a time when business owners and their employees are facing so many pressures.

According to Lifeline, social isolation can have marked and varied negative impacts on human health including increased emotional distress, suicide risk, compromised physical health such as a higher risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, and increased risk of dementia.

Lifeline and Bill Crews are on a similar wavelength — forging, rekindling or maintaining connections with others can help.

We were pleased to partner with Lifeline on a seven-point plan that can promote mental health and wellbeing in the workplace for owners, managers and employees.

The plan calls for modeling mentally healthy behaviours and self-care, designing workplaces that promote psychological safety, enhancing personal resilience, facilitating early access to help when it is needed, reducing the stigma of mental health and supporting recovery for employees who have experienced mental health issues.

At a time when there are so many pressure points in the community and we are encouraging young people in particular to come back to work, it makes sense to focus on ways to make the return to work as positive as possible.

In some cases, they will be returning to workplaces where business owners and managers are also feeling immense pressure. We know from Lifeline's counsellors that people are increasingly giving financial pressures as their reason for calling.

Together with the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the NSW Premier Chris Minns, we all need to do the heavy lifting so that we can rebuild the mental health and wellbeing of our entire community.

To come back to Bill Crews' call for us to relearn the art of talking to each other. Restoring personal contact will work just as well in the workplace as over the neighbourhood fence.

Paul Nicolaou is executive director of Business Sydney