



ONE WAVE

Every Friday morning at Bondi Beach in Sydney Australia,
a costumed band of local surfers gathers to talk, ride waves,
and add color to the challenging topic of mental health.

by SERENA RENNER

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inter wind rattles me awake before my alarm has the chance to go off. It's 5:42am, and the howling blackness outside the window looks menacing and cold. I roll over to hide. After several minutes in that early morning purgatory between dreams and day, I force the covers off and shuffle my shivering body to the closet. *Remember, you're doing this for Gordon.*

The clothes I laid out the night before glow in the dark: fluorescent ("fluoro") yellow tank top, psychedelic yoga pants, green hoodie with internal neon fuzz, flamingo socks. One by one, I don each piece, assembling today's "anti bad vibes suit." Then I pull my wetsuit down from the hanger, sling it over my pink-bottom foamie, and slip out the door into the unwelcoming dawn.

As I walk down the hill beneath gnarled fig trees and giant bats, my mind wanders back to September 5, 2016—the day my life was turned upside down. The day my flight landed in Seattle and I opened Facebook to find an "In Memoriam" post about my cousin Gordon. "May 25, 1963–September 4, 2016" is all I could read. After trying to blink off what was surely a hallucination, reality hit. My first thought was suicide. I started trembling and hyperventilating in my seat.

Twenty years older but a kindred spirit, Gordon was a passionate conservationist, exuberant river guide, intrepid mountaineer, and magnetic life of the party. To me, he was like a cousin-uncle-brother who also played mentor, guide, and best friend. The last time I saw Gordon was in Indonesia. I got invited on a rare surf-focused work trip at the renowned Nihiwatu resort on Sumba island. Gordon was the first person I thought to take with me. We scuba dived a reef wall, treated a taxi driver to dinner, rode former race horses along the beach, and surfed, or—in Gordon's case—bodyboarded in a button-down shirt until sunset. During one ocean-view dinner, I said I felt guilty writing about such a fancy resort when there are so many problems in the world. With that trademark twinkle in his gray-green eyes, Gordon said, "Honey, you deserve every amazing opportunity that comes your way. May I suggest gratitude instead of guilt?" He drank a lot that night, maybe too much, but it only helped him drink up the people and the place.

In the nine months after that trip, our relationship grew distant. My living in Australia while he lived in the Bay Area never helped, but the regular cross-oceanic contact we once shared had become stunted. There was more silence between emails, more questions left unanswered, more than one message that I started with "Hey Stranger." My last Skype chat with Gordon was two months before he hung himself. He looked clear-eyed but tired—different from the hilarious, high-energy Gordon I was used to, but maybe more real. He told me about his four months of sobriety, and said although he felt it was right for him, "There are days I can't get out of bed." Those words will forever haunt me.



Photo: @picsbyjdb

When I reach the south end of Sydney's Bondi Beach, hues of pink and melon start bursting through the gray. Members of my tribe glimmer against the sheer sand below: a blonde woman carrying a neon yellow board; Sam Schumacher wearing shiny orange fabric around his neck like a cape; Grant Trebilco, the group's fearless founder, in a 70s-style outfit complete with bell-bottoms and a hippy headband over his shoulder-length hair. This is Fluro Friday, an initiative of the nonprofit surf community One Wave. Today, like every Friday at 6:30am, we gather in crazy costumes and fluorescent colors to raise awareness about mental health.

I discovered Fluro Friday four years ago, as an expat newly washed up on Bondi Beach. While I don't identify as having a mental health disorder myself, a tough situation with my dad had started giving me anxiety and panic attacks. Not only was the group a way to make friends, it was a place to learn about the struggles

of others, and it helped me not feel so alone. I appreciated the openness and the insights, not to mention the simple pleasure of surfing in costume on a foam board. *And then Gordon died.*

Today, as we sit in a small circle—like some semblance of the group has done every week for more than five years—Sam kicks off the conversation about the vulnerability that comes with sharing mental health challenges. “Do you need to follow up after someone opens up to you?” Sam asks. “Do they feel better right after, or worse?” Stu chimes in from across the ring. “I felt so much better after finally sharing my story a few weeks ago. I stood taller and felt more like myself.” Heads nod all around, bedecked in furry hats, sombreros, and floral crowns. The topic then pivots to the importance of having someone, *anyone*, to talk to, whether at work or in our personal lives. After a moment of hesitation, I share a brief anecdote about Gordon. In the foggy days

leading up to his memorial, it came out that a friend of a good friend of Gordon had similar life struggles and attempted suicide before finally getting the help she needed. “It’s so tragic to think that a life-changing conversation may have been only one degree of separation away,” I say.

This is why Grant founded Fluro Friday in 2012. After struggling with his own mental health for years, the New Zealand native finally disclosed his feelings to a psychologist who diagnosed him with depression. But antidepressants sent him on a manic high that ended up getting him checked into Manly Hospital in Sydney, where he was properly diagnosed with bipolar disorder. With his new diagnosis, which his father also has, Grant says he felt like his life was over. He was scared to reveal his true colors. Surfing was the only thing that helped.

“I remember catching this wave one day, and it was the first time I had smiled in so long,” Grant says. “That’s where One Wave’s [tagline] ‘one wave is all it takes’ comes from. When you’re going through depression or anxiety, you haven’t got the energy to get out of bed. You need something positive to hang on to. Surfing was the thing that gave me hope that [life] could get better.”

One Friday morning, Grant had a wild idea to go surfing in boardshorts, a dress shirt, and a tie—he called it a “board meeting.” He hoped someone would ask about his getup so he could have the kind of honest conversation that rarely happens outside the therapist’s office. After enduring some stares and heckling, a man in his mid-fifties asked Grant what he was doing, and he shared the story of his diagnosis. To his surprise, the stranger

opened up about his own depression, which he said he had never spoken about before. “I remember thinking if all it takes is me dressing up in ridiculous outfits to start a conversation, I’m going to do this every Friday morning,” Grant says.

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With the help of his friend Sam, the “board meetings” morphed into Fluro Fridays, which have now been held on more than 120 beaches across 20 countries. The ritual is aimed at brightening the heavy subject of mental health challenges, which Grant prefers to just call “funks.” The duo wanted to make an invisible issue—believed to affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide—visible, through silly costumes and fluorescent colors. They also wanted to share Grant’s “free-the-funk” recipe of surfing, saltwater therapy, and fluro as well as break down stigmas with One Wave’s second message: *it’s okay to not be okay*. “Yes, [mental illness] is a dark and really tough issue, but a lot of the people going through [challenges] are the kindest, most giving people ever,” Grant says. “Let’s celebrate that, and make sure they know it’s okay to reach out for help.”

Why didn’t Gordon ask for help? It’s something I’ve wondered a hundred times. He opened up to a point, but not enough that any one of his friends or relatives ever saw his suicide coming. Talking to Grant and others has helped me come to terms with how hard it is to reach out

when you're struggling with depression, anxiety, or other mental illness, especially if you're known as the happy guy who's always lifting others up. Sometimes it's the shiniest people—Robin Williams, Anthony Bourdain—who suffer the most and lock their sadness away, probably because society still views depression as a character flaw rather than an illness.

But why didn't I call? Gordon did tell me he was having trouble getting out of bed. I also knew about his struggles with sobriety and women, and about his job that was coming to an end. Any one of those challenges could have been a trigger without blowing together into a tornado. Yet, aside from one brief email, I didn't follow up. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forgive myself for that. The truth is I wasn't that worried about him. He was one of the most outwardly positive people I knew, and in my mind, there was no summit Gordon couldn't climb, no rapid he couldn't navigate his way through.

Hindsight truly is a bitch, and the warning signs now seem so obvious. Gordon was a single white male in his early fifties—suicides in the US are particularly high among those aged 45 to 64. The male suicide rate is almost four times that of women, and whites are more likely than members of other groups. On a more personal level, Gordon was pulling away from friends and social gatherings; growing increasingly discouraged about politics and the fate of the planet; and had lost motivation for the adventures that fueled him. Then there was the unavoidable fact that his mother suffered from depression and killed herself when Gordon was 13. I think that brought unfathomable demons into Gordon's life that he ultimately couldn't overcome—some kind of ancestral curse.

I remember during one conversation about his mom, he said he hates when people call suicide cowardly. "I think it's one of the bravest things you can do," he said. If that's not a red flag, I don't know what is, but at the time, it didn't wave that color. Thinking he was just defending his mother, I nodded and didn't protest.

**"The deeper that sorrow
carves into your being, the
more joy you can contain."**

—Kahlil Gibran

After our chat on the beach reaches its natural end, we break to surf or do yoga. The waves are over my head today, but I decide to paddle out anyway, embarking on a private battle that progresses from smashing through cold, suffocating whitewater to conquering a nearly paralyzing fear of the set waves. I picture Gordon watching me and paddle harder. As I get closer to the lineup, I can see my fluro-clad friends floating like beacons beyond the foam. Like so often happens while surfing, a life parallel rises from the depths: In surfing and in life, we're all on our own, but the journey is easier with friends. When I finally make it out past the breakers, I spin my board around and paddle into the next crest. I catch it, barely landing the drop, only to get immediately engulfed by the closeout. When I come up for air, I'm simultaneously breathing and laughing. I can hear Gordon hooting "Yeaaaaah baby!" *One wave is all it takes, indeed.*

Photo: @aquabumps



I no longer think of Gordon daily, but I do think of him on most Friday mornings. I think about his passion and his joy, and the dark shadows I didn't see that I hope I could pick up on now if, God forbid, anyone else I love ever gets to that desperate place. I've come to see those shadows as the natural inverse of Gordon's vibrance, like the 19th-century poet Kahlil Gibran proposed when he wrote "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." I couldn't save Gordon, but I come to Fluro Friday for others out there like him. To shine fluorescent light in the darkness to remind people of that one wave, or river, or mountain, to look forward to on the horizon. To spark hope that after the cold black night, there will be another brilliant sunrise. ☸

If you or someone you know needs help, reach out and know you're not alone. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.



About the author

Serena Renner is a journalist and editor who likes to write about culture, social change, and the environment as well as creative change makers and their obsessions. She has written for dozens of US and international publications, including AFAR, National Geographic Traveler, Outside, Sierra, and Surfing World. @wanderwide / www.serenarenner.com