

confronting their fear

ANXIETY DISORDERS AFFECT ONE IN 10 AUSTRALIANS IN MANY FRIGHTENING AND DEBILITATING FORMS. HERE JOSEPHINE BROUARD SPEAKS TO THREE PEOPLE WHO HAVE OVERCOME THEIR ANGST AND FOUND A ROAD TO RECOVERY

Ray Brookes was once living on the streets. His favourite resting place was the steps of a 24-hour medical centre in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown. He was the kind of person – asleep in bright daylight outside a city building, surrounded by paper-wrapped bottles – that we've all walked past at some stage and wondered what events could have led them to such a low point in their life.

Brookes explains that his homelessness was brought on by feelings of incredible anxiety. As far back as he can remember, his life has been filled with moments of irrational fear and panic.

"I always felt different as a child. I was okay with friends, but in social situations I became too frightened to speak. As I grew into my teens, I became more and more afraid," says Brookes.

"I started having panic attacks in queues. I couldn't bear crowds, I would avoid shopping malls. Some of the thoughts that ran through my mind were devastating. I thought I was going to pass out, or die, or go insane.

"Of course none of these things happened, but my mind and heart were racing. I was convinced something terrible was going to happen to me."

Brookes says he lost a number of jobs

because he was always late for work, experiencing anxiety attacks on public transport because he was convinced people were staring at him.

"It was constantly tired because of the incredible amount of energy all this anxiety used up," he says hesitantly, pained at the recollection.

"It reached a point where I would dry-nitch in the shower in the morning. Turning on the tap became a signal I had to go out. I would put off leaving the house, I was simply terrified.

"It was like an argument going on in my head, frightened on one hand, fighting the fear on the other. It was exhausting. I started drinking to get through the day, and it went on like that for years."

a widespread problem

One in 10 Australians suffer from anxiety disorders, according to a National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing by the Federal Government's National Mental Health Strategy. These people are not merely anxious; they suffer persistent anxiety that's way out of proportion to any dangers they actually face. Their condition involves disturbances in emotions and behaviour to an extent that substantially interferes with life.

More common among women than men, anxiety disorders are particularly



From left to right: Alison Tansey, Ray Brookes and Josephine Brouard have all learnt to live with their anxiety disorders.

