

Social Services Kaimahi Hauora Stories:

Caitlin's story*

Caitlin's story reminds us that everyone faces challenges in our lives, and that navigating through them with the right support, including while working as social services kaimahi, is essential.



I'm the eldest of five, a mother, a step-mother, a wife, an aunty and friend.

I'm a registered social worker, working in community-based social services in regional Aotearoa New Zealand. My mahi focuses on supporting whānau and tamariki who have experienced or are experiencing abuse.

My own children, family and life experiences are what drives me. I worked in another profession for 27 years, but after an abusive marriage, I had to end that career, moving to start a new life with my children in a new rural region.

I lost a partner in a car accident a few years after that, and I thought that was it – I was meant to be on my own. Two years later though, I met a man who changed my life forever. We have raised our children together, and have a young child together, too. Until recently, our home was truly intergenerational, with his parents also living with us.

In the beginning of our relationship, I decided to study social work, and started my social work degree. This was at the same time as having four teenagers, a young child, in-laws that needed caring for and my partner who was extremely unwell at the time. We've nearly lost him a few times – I've had to perform CPR on him.

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The last two years of my social work degree were the toughest. I lost a few close relatives during this time – my grandmother, a cousin, and my uncle – all on the other side of the world, as well as my grandfather and my Dad, here in Aotearoa. Undoubtedly, experiencing these losses, and especially my Dad, was the most difficult time in my life.



I was also pregnant during this time. When our much longed for daughter was born, I took a semester off study to be with her. I was thankful that my daughter got to meet my dad before he passed. I was almost ready to give up on my social work degree. It's because of the support I experienced from my study whānau that I was able to keep going and graduate. We still keep in touch and support each other in our lives and mahi.

Due to complications with my partner's health, the pandemic has been a particularly hard time for our family. I ended up having to walk away from my last role to support him – I was also incredibly exhausted. Once we were able, it was great for me to get back into the mahi I love, with a new organisation. Unfortunately, five weeks into my current role, I injured my back – I was paralysed, in extreme pain. This led to back surgery – the recovery time has been massive. Thankfully, my employer has been supportive. I started back with mahi from home, working with an occupational therapist, and then moved to three days a week, before getting back to full-time. This has been an incredible journey for me and is ongoing.

I'm really lucky that I work in a hugely supportive workplace with amazing fellow kaimahi and an incredible boss. I've noticed that if you're in this kind of work, it's likely that you're a special kind of person, and we all need to be supporting each other. It's not always the way though, so I don't take it for granted.

All my life experiences and the various challenges I've navigated have made me more mindful of looking after myself when it comes to hauora – wellbeing. I didn't always have this awareness. But having experienced burnout, I'm so much more aware that my own hauora is paramount to be able to do my mahi supporting whānau and tamariki with the greatest needs. Being open to new ways of self-care and supporting one another is really

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The realities of the mahi we do means that whakawhanaungatanga is incredibly important to enable positive outcomes. This can take a long time to establish. Often by the time tamariki and whānau have got to know me and trust me, it's time for them to move on. That's something I find challenging in this work, the reality is that we need more time and investment to do what we do.



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My own experience shows the importance of having supportive and understanding employers, access to resources to support kaimahi hauora, and ongoing training and development that's tailored to us as social services kaimahi, recognising the pressures we are under and the realities of our work. I'd also like to see government funders factoring paid stress leave or wellbeing leave into contracting arrangements – because the reality is that the work is stressful, workers are going to need breaks from time-to-time, and investing in leave arrangements like this is a practical way to help build a strong workforce.

Last year I was fortunate to be part of Social Service Providers Te Pai Ora o Aotearoa's Social Services Kaimahi Hauora Programme. The six week programme with other social services kaimahi working in communities around the country was very supportive for my wellbeing. It reminded me that I need to check in on myself and my colleagues, to ensure the safety of ourselves and the whānau who we tautoko.

I know that there's many social services kaimahi out there who are struggling right now – it's been a really tough few years, and the demand for our mahi is continuing to grow. I say to them – “Céad míle fáilte” which is Scots Gaelic for “one hundred thousand welcomes”. I hope fellow kaimahi in our social services can pause and offer an ear to one another, engage in supervision, and explore self-care options that work for them. It's also amazing how grounding it can be just to take a deep breath or two. I try to remember to BREATHE (maybe this can help others, too):

Break (take them throughout the day!)

Rest

Eat

Ask

Think

Hear

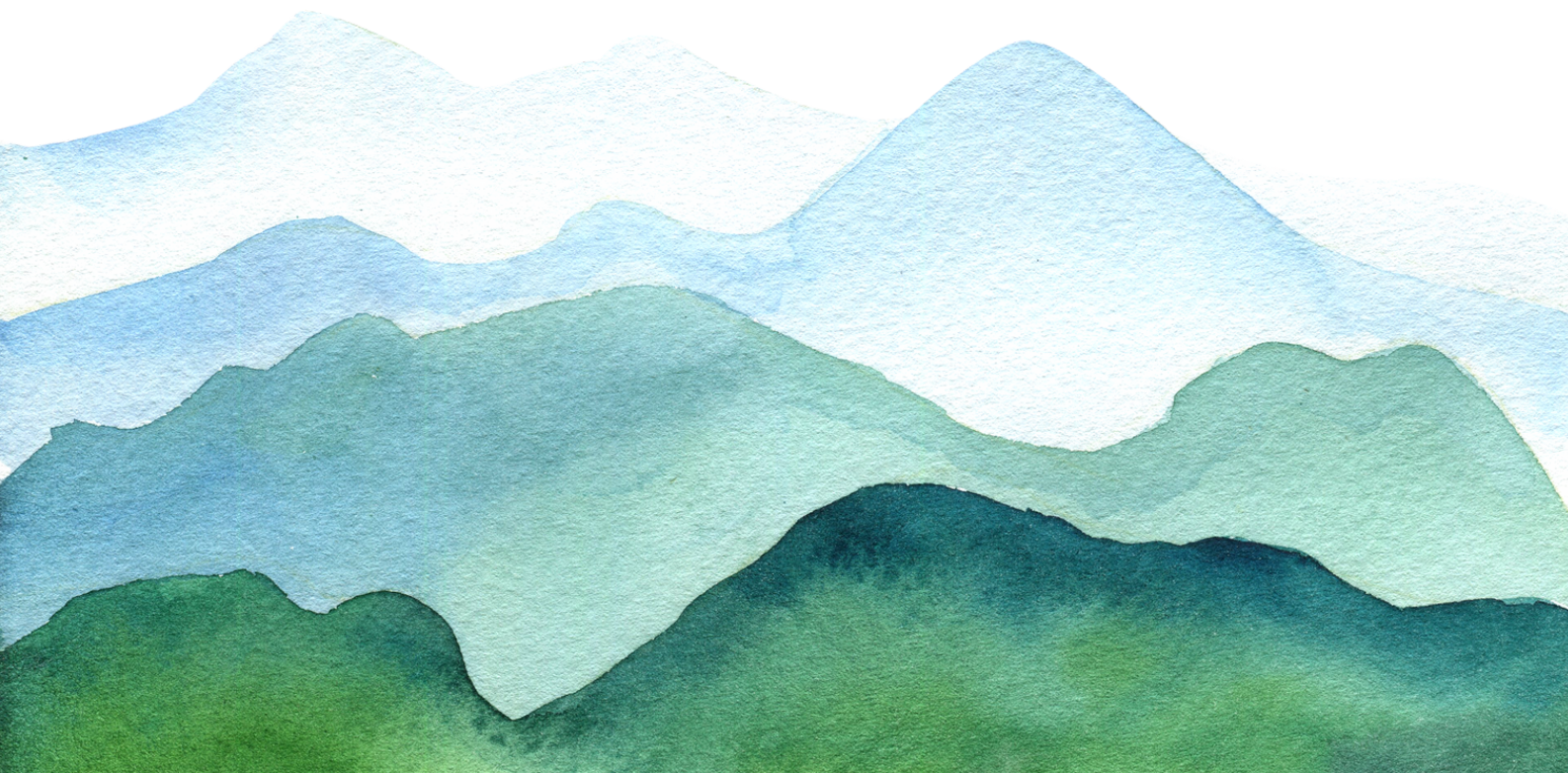
Engage (again, once you're ready)



On my drive home from mahi, I sometimes stop at the top of the mountain, get out of the car briefly, and just breathe out, let it go. Other days, I just drive with the window down, feeling the breeze. This is part of me separating my mahi from home, so I'm not carrying it with me all the time. That's really important, otherwise it can get too heavy – we need to be able to go again tomorrow, and continue the tautoko we give to tamariki and whānau.



**We've used a different name to protect the identity of this kaimahi who has bravely and kindly shared her story. As told to Social Service Providers Te Pai Ora o Aotearoa in August 2023.*



Places to find support

Even though every day in our mahi as social services workers we're caring for and helping others, sometimes we need some help ourselves. If any time you're feeling distressed or need some immediate support, you can free text or call [1737](https://www.1737.org.nz) the National Telehealth Service to talk to or txt with a trained counsellor at any time.

For additional support if you need it at any time, you can get in touch with one of these organisations:

Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Tāmaki Makaurau

Anxiety New Zealand – 0800 ANXIETY (0800 269 4389)

Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Healthline – 0800 611 116

Rural Support Trust – 0800 787 254

Samaritans – 0800 726 666

For free counselling support for children and rangatahi, get in touch with:

0800 What's Up – 0800WHATSUP

[whatsup.co.nz](https://www.whatsup.co.nz)

YouthLine – 0800 376 633 / free txt 234

