



# Pull up a chair

By RYAN MALCOLM

MALCOLM Bradbury was like many other men throughout the Wangaratta region during the COVID-pandemic, lacking social connection through extended periods of isolation.

While social lives quickly shifted online, the disruption of face-to-face conversations resulted in a high-stress environment, which Mr Bradbury said manifested and, following a spread of pro-men's health sentiment throughout society in recent years, saw him seek a social change of scenery earlier this year.

His escape was the Men's Table, an upstart social initiative with roots in Sydney more than a decade ago which aims to bring together local men for a monthly catch-up, and encourages them to share and listen to the highs and the lows the other members have gone through each month.

Having attended an 'entrée' evening with 15 other local residents in April, Mr Bradbury is now a co-host of the town's very own table, meeting with five others on a monthly basis for an informal chat over a meal and a drink at the Wangaratta Club.

"I personally went through - because of COVID - a bit of mental stress, and I was looking for something - I thought through helping myself, I can help others, because I've always been that sort of person," he said.

"I've been hearing a lot about mental health with our youths, and the fact that there's a lot more of that prevalent these days and lot more being diagnosed - back then it used to be just a case of get over yourself.

"Now it's a case of how can we help you through this situation? Women tend to do it quite well through their own networks and have a lot of good support mechanisms through that sort of thing, whereas for men it's just never existed or it's been in small pockets.

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◆ SEAT AT THE TABLE: Wangaratta resident Malcolm Bradbury has forged new friendships amid personal discussions through the Men's Table initiative. PHOTO: Kurt Hickling

FEATURE STORY

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 "(The Men's Table) is just guys getting together, having a chat, venting if we need to vent or if I just want to listen then that's all it is - it's a great opportunity just to maybe get something off your chest."

While Mr Bradbury said Wangaratta's table had developed an informal rapport over the last eight months, the table could benefit from an expansion to 12 members, or even the development of a second table within the rural city, to provide more opportunities for men to connect in a trusting setting.

The sentiment was shared by Men's Table regional host Shaun Stevens.

"Even though the men regard it as healthy, we want (the Wangaratta table) to be sustainable," he said.

"If you have smaller numbers on a continuous basis, men can become a

little disenfranchised, or how do you keep that interest for that small group of men amid the ebbs and flows of the table?"

"The underlying theme is connection for men, so that doesn't change from rural, to regional to metropolitan - men want to connect and have opportunities to share what's going on in their lives."

While many who expressed interest at the initial 'entrée' evening elected to leave their interest at the door, Mr Bradbury noted that members who had remained had formed friendships well beyond the surface-level discussions many men glean from regular social interaction.

"There's no pretence or anything like that - you don't have to know about football, you don't have to know about sports or motor vehicles - it's just chatting about being yourself," he said.

"I've always been lucky in that I've largely worked in a lot of female environments so I've learnt the gift of the gab a bit, I do a lot of networking.

"But because I have a lot of acquaintances I actually don't have a lot of friends, or close friends, and that's a key thing, because who do you go to when you really want to get something off your chest?"

"I've got a mate in Melbourne, a mate in Cairns, but they're a bit far away and you can't have that one-one conversation - this is just another way of communicating with guys at that level and they don't have to be close friends but they're more than acquaintances."

A further entrée evening for prospective members will be held at the Wangaratta Club from 6:30pm on December 7, with more information about the initiative available at <https://themenstable.org>.



◆ TAKING A STAND: Malcolm Bradbury believes the lack of pretence around the Men's Table initiative allows men to voice their experiences to a group of trusted confidants. PHOTO: Kurt Hickling