

Don't panic, attacks can be dealt with Jamie First

Being perpetually anxious was something comedian Felicity Ward had to live with for years before she found out she had a mental health issue.

Now, although she isn't "cured", she's able to handle the pressures and wants others — especially young people — to become more aware of what nearly one in two Australians will face at some point in their lives.

Ward puts it all on the line during a series of candid conversations in a documentary, *Felicity's Mental Mission*, that will air on ABC2 on Monday at 8.30pm.

"I didn't know I was in a fight. It was just happening to me and sometimes I was comfortable with it and sometimes I wasn't," Ward, 34, said.

She said she didn't realise she'd been having panic attacks for 20 years until she spoke with her sister as part of the doco.

"It was the '90s — it's just not a conversation that you have. We never talked about mental illness in high school.

"I don't think I could have even told you what anxiety was back then or that it was a condition."

Ward said she first saw a therapist because she got to the point where she was thinking about stopping stand up, which is her life blood.

The point of the doco is to try to break the stigmas surrounding mental illness.

Along the way, Ward chats with a number of her comic friends, including Celia Pacquola, and with musos Missy Higgins and rapper 360.

She shot the footage over a few weeks while on a national comedy tour which, she said, presented its own challenge.

"To talk to people about mental illness for 10 hours a day and then do my show, I just about had another breakdown."

Some of the scenes in the documentary are gut-wrenching as the strain takes a toll.

Ward said she was frustrated by the lack of money set aside for personal wellbeing.

"The thing about mental illness is that it gets about a third of the funding that cancer does, but it affects a similar number of people.

"If that isn't a national emergency, I don't know what is."

She said she believes early intervention is the most effective treatment, with a primary focus on youth.

“I don’t think there is a downside to investing in mental health ... especially education in schools and resources for teenagers.”

Ward said she hoped viewers got an idea of what it was like to live with the condition and that it was manageable.

Felicity’s Mental Mission will screen during ABC’s *Mental As...*, a week-long initiative (from October 5 to 12) to encourage Aussies to join the conversation and support more research in the field.