

It happened to me

Women talk about child sexual abuse

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Introduction

Family life

The majority of participants in the consultation were abused by someone they knew, most commonly by close family members such as fathers or brothers. For most, the sexual abuse was not an isolated incident but occurred over periods of months or years, often starting when they were four or five years old.

The participants came from a variety of families, some from professional and others from working class backgrounds. Some families experienced other social problems, such as alcoholism or psychiatric illness. In many families the sexual abuse was accompanied by physical violence.

The way in which the family presented to the outside world was usually quite different from the experience of the child who grew up in the family. All reported family relationships were lacking in trust, sharing and safety, and characterised by secrecy, isolation and fear.

'It's not just stranger danger. Children need to be warned that it could be people close to them who abuse them.'

'It isn't only dirty old men who do it, it's often professional or middle class men.' 'My father was very violent. He used to hold you down, he used to hit first and ask questions later. He was violent to all three of us but I was the only one he used to sexually abuse.'

'My father was not a violent man. When I was younger my parents were going through a difficult time. My brother was my mother's favourite and that made my father very jealous. I was my father's favourite and that in turn made my mother very jealous. The family structure was very manipulative. My father protected me a lot when I got into trouble from my mother. He was my ally. There was always a lot of screaming in our family. My role was that of pacifying.'

'My father's role in the family was the breadwinner. He was very strict, and had little to do with outside activities. He was not a loving and caring father. You could not go to him and talk over a problem. I had a fear of him.'

'My brother was in a position of authority, my mother worked and he was responsible for looking after us. He would bring his friends around to abuse us.'

'My father was an abusive alcoholic. He was violent with the older children and my mum but used to bribe the younger children for their affection. My father would abuse you and could switch, if someone came to the door. He was like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.'

'I wasn't aware that it was sexual abuse. It was just something that happened at home after school and I really didn't like going there.'

'I remember being too scared to go out to the toilet because it meant going past where Dad was sitting watching television and I knew that he would follow me out. So I would either wet the bed or use the wash basin in the bathroom.'

'The fact was that I came from a very academic family. The family was not isolated, we had a very open family, it was not a closed system. In some ways I could live another life, particularly when I was at school. I could pretend it was not happening.'

'Trust is the main issue here, trust betrayed often by those they believed had their best interests at heart, trust that was shattered at an extremely vulnerable time of life.'

Silence

'To be able as a child to tell someone, anyone, and be heard and then to be helped would have been a great and wonderful achievement.'

Sexual abuse of children thrives in an atmosphere of secrecy and children are very reluctant to speak up about the abuse. Very few of the survivors told anyone about the sexual abuse as children. They spoke of being silenced by their fears of what would happen if they did tell, often as the result of threats made by the abuser.

The belief that they were somehow to blame for the abuse also contributed to their reluctance to speak out. Most did not think they had anyone they could trust and were afraid they would not be believed if they did tell.

'You don't tell because of fear, it's dirty, it's wrong, you have some awareness that it's a secret.'

'He told me that if I ever told my mum she would hate me for the rest of my life and I believed him.'

'A child's mind would still fear, 'I've ruined the whole family now.' You carry that whole burden. You can tell a child a hundred and one times 'I'm here for you' but if you're caught up in it your mind is not that rational. You have all these beliefs: I am totally responsible, the whole world will fall apart, I'll lose my mother, they'll all say that I'm a maniac and lock me up.'

'Kids need to be aware of the processes so they don't think they'll be dragged away. I always thought that I'd go into a home and that mum would lose the house or that she would have a heart attack and it would all be on me.'

'Children believe what a parent abusing them says. It carries a lot more weight than any advertisement to speak up. With my father, he always used to say, 'I've got a gun in the yard and if you ever tell anyone then I'll use it'. There were five children and he was going to kill us all. It took me thirty-five years to speak up because I had this fear.'

'You know it's a secret because they sneak up on you. They wouldn't sit on the couch with you actually doing it. "My father used collusion to abuse me. He used to tell me that my mother wouldn't do these sorts of things to him and that if I told her it would kill her.'

'I didn't tell anyone until just recently. I didn't have anyone I could trust. I knew what was happening was wrong but I didn't know how to stop it or who to talk to.'

Blame and responsibility

Blaming the victim is a common way of dealing with situations we feel uncomfortable about. A research study commissioned in 1991 by the Department of Human Services into community attitudes to child sexual abuse, showed one in four people believe the child should take the blame for sexual abuse in some cases. Nearly four in ten men believe the child victim is to blame in some way for the abuse.

One of the strongest messages from the survivors' experiences is how effectively this attitude of blame can silence victims and allow the abuse to continue. Abusers make many excuses to avoid taking responsibility for the abuse, most commonly that the child somehow provoked the abuse or enjoyed it. We are often willing to believe these excuses rather than recognise the powerlessness of the child. Acknowledging the abuse can be very threatening as we are confronted with the reality that some adults take advantage of trusting relationships with children. The abuser often tells the child that they are to blame, and this is reinforced by the reactions of others.

As these survivors point out, the community must take responsibility for stopping child sexual abuse and this includes being aware of our own attitude and misconceptions and their likely impact.

'You feel it's your fault. I would get the blame. People would say, 'What did you do to cause this?' I was the youngest and the lowest on the ladder. It was always going to be turned around to be my fault. I didn't have a counsellor or anyone at school to tell.'

'Society is also under the misconception that people can't control their behaviour toward children or that people are not responsible for their actions. Responsibility is shifted toward children or they think that people sexually abuse because they are not getting satisfied by their spouse.'

'My mother even approached my father's doctor and told him about sexual abuse. The doctor responded by saying to my mother that she was very lucky her daughter told her because many little girls like it.'

'People say, how could you not have stopped it, if I was in your situation I would have stopped it.' 'I was told by my mother and by my father's sisters that he was ill and I had to forgive him. I had nowhere to place my confusion, frustration and fear. I turned it inward.'

'It is a myth that some children enjoy it; children do often feel aroused but that is a natural bodily function and should not be confused with wanting it.'

'On the occasions my mother confronted him with the sexual abuse he inflicted on me he tried to justify it to her by saying he was teaching me and preparing me for my eventual marriage, all just part of my education.'

'The community needs to know that it is never the child's fault, never the child's responsibility.'

'Society needs to put more responsibility on perpetrators. Some men use childhood abuse as an excuse for doing it.'

'I was told, 'you have to understand his feelings dear, he is oversexed.'

'There needs to be more focus on the perpetrator as the dysfunctional one so that no guilt or shame is attached to the child. 'There is still a belief that it must somehow be the child's fault, that it's something you've worn, for example.'

'There's still a lot of shame and guilt as an adult. You can't really tell your friends.'

'Never trust an abuser. They are expert manipulators. You are not responsible for their recovery – they are.'

'Perpetrators would not be guilty. They have no concept of 'the other'. But they would know that other people may not approve and they need to keep quiet. There is a difference between knowing that you've done something wrong and taking responsibility.'

Breaking silence

To overcome the secrecy surrounding child sexual abuse it is essential that we not only encourage children to speak up, but also ensure that adults are listening when children tell of their experiences.

These survivors feel that the increasingly open discussion about sex and sexual abuse in our society has been a positive step. They felt it may be possible to direct specific messages to children to overcome fears, threats and feelings of blame which otherwise lead them to suffer in silence for years. Some survivors suggested that as well as being educated to tell someone about the abuse, children could be taught to say no to the abuser. It was felt, however, that it is very difficult for a child to say no to an adult in a position of power and authority.

Educating children

'We have to make it okay for children to talk we have to make them aware that children are not to blame and that they will not be punished if they do tell.'

'We could give the message that there's someone you can tell who will believe you. Older kids could tell someone but younger kids, like four year olds, probably won't.'

'It's difficult to disclose, you tend to protect the person who's doing it. We didn't have the education. You need to educate children: don't be afraid to tell.'

'It's hard for kids to say that their father did it. There has to be more awareness that there are places they can go for help. If I had known about places where I could get supportive help when I was younger, I would have done something.'

'If children were taught from a very young age that it's wrong, what he's doing is wrong, then they're on the way to saying something about it.'

'I don't know what sex education is being taught in schools now but it needs to be taught at a younger age than when I was at school. For me that would have helped. I thought it was what life was all about even though there was a lot of pain and terror. Then when I was in form one I got a book from the library and I worked out we shouldn't be doing that. I told the perpetrator (my brother) I know what you're doing and I don't want you to do it to me again.'

'In messages we give to children they need to be taught to say no ... to learn techniques of saying no.' 'The way abusers operate is based on the assumption that they own your body, they could do anything to you, so the concept of confronting an adult and saying 'no' is difficult.' 'The myths around the perpetrators' threats need to be dispelled, for example, I will go to jail, Mum will get sick, the family will break up, no one will listen to you, you will die. Strong messages would need to be given because the fears are very deep.'

Educating adults

Educating children is only part of the picture. It is essential that adults are receptive to the messages that children give. Many of the women felt that although they did not use words to tell of their abuse, the abuse was evident from their behaviour. However, commonly, these signs were not picked up and they carried the burden of abuse alone.

Picking up signs

'If an adult had picked up the signs and asked what was wrong it may have helped to encourage me to say something.' 'Let's face it, it's not really up to the child to have to tell. It's up to the adults to pick up the signs, but they probably won't. They often know but don't want to get involved.'

'It's so difficult for children to speak up. They feel so trapped. It should be adults who should be more sensitive to picking up signs from children rather than putting the responsibility on children to tell.'

'Children who have spoken up who haven't been believed. It's okay to say tell, but you have to educate people to believe them. You've only got to not be believed once to shut you up again for twenty years.'

'The first person you disclose to is very important in determining whether you go further. You've got no self-esteem so you just try it on one person and it reinforces your low self-esteem if you're not believed.' 'People need to be aware that children don't lie. How does a child make that up? Where does a child get that from?'

'It's essential to believe the child, even in some cases where people think the child is not telling the truth they always will be.'

'People don't realise that they can talk to young kids. They just don't listen. You hear judges and magistrates say, 'well he's only a child, they have such imaginative minds. 'What hope has a child got?'

What are the signs?

'People need to know what things to look for, such as acting out, promiscuity, illness, urinary tract infection. "A very important sign is when a child wants to avoid a certain adult. The man across the road was abusing me and I would try to get out of visiting him. I was virtually forced to go and see him. People should be aware of that.'

'Little school kids show the signs, for example little boys or girls who want to be very sexual with other kids. It's because it's happening at home.'

'Indicators include a change in personality or behaviour, withdrawal, unaccountable fears, for example fear of the dark or of going to the toilet.'

'You need to be alert to the signs, for example, a change in self-esteem, becoming really reserved, a sudden interest in Playboy magazines. Often when they do see a change they blame everything but sexual abuse.'

'We need to watch for any change in a child's behaviour that is not typical of the child.'

Talking with children about sexual abuse

The main message from survivors is about the importance of paying attention to children's behaviour and, if they appear to be under stress, encouraging them to talk about what is concerning them. Children often tell of the abuse a little at a time, to test out the reaction of the person they are telling. It is necessary for there to be a relationship of trust before children feel able to speak up.

From the survivors' point of view, the most important response is to know that they have been believed and that something is going to be done to stop the abuse. The way family members, friends and professionals respond at the time of disclosure will have a major impact on the long-term consequences for the child.

A supportive and believing response to disclosure is very helpful to the child while a non-supportive reaction can be devastating.

'You need someone to ask you directly. A teacher asked me if everything was okay at home because I was so reserved. He didn't say 'is anyone abusing you?' He let me tell him and I skirted right round the actual area. It made me feel a bit better but it didn't do anything to stop the actual abuse.'

It can be scary for children if people are really direct. When I was about thirteen a doctor asked me whether I was sexually active. I just ran out the door. I bolted. I thought: My God, she knows all about me, I can't handle this. I think she was too direct for me anyway.'

'I'm sure there are ways you could approach it sideways, provide an opening for the child. People need training to do this.' 'It's difficult to tell a trusted person exactly what happened. If they can't talk to you in a skilled manner they need to refer you to someone who can.'

The response of professionals

'The closest kind of help other than a home is school. We know that people are often not going to get help at home where it's all happening. If school isn't helpful there's no one else.'

'Teachers need to be trained about the myths. That was one of my biggest let downs. I told a student counsellor who went straight to my parents. They just thought of protecting the family and said I made it up. I felt like I had lost everything.'

'Teachers and doctors don't need to know how to deal with it but to pass it on to someone else. They do need to believe you and to have the right degree of compassion, not to dismiss it and say 'it's not my problem.'

'There are a lot of behavioural signs of sexual abuse. Professionals should be made aware of them so that they can follow them up. It should be an integral part of training of professionals such as doctors or teachers.'

The tendency to do nothing

The survivors talked about the general reluctance of the community to report child sexual abuse to authorities, and the community's concerns about the possible consequences of reporting, in particular, the possibility of the child being removed from the family. There was strong support for the removal of the offender from the home rather than the child wherever possible. This is now accepted child protection practice.

These survivors felt it was important to stress that while action taken to protect the child was likely to be traumatic, the greatest harm would occur if no action was taken to protect the child and the abuse continued.

'People have to know the damage of doing nothing. They are sentencing the child to enormous pain and damage and harm. "The concern about removing the child from the family, it's such an idealistic notion of what families are like. They're seen as sacred. I would have quite liked not being in my family. They're making all sorts of assumptions about family life.'

'If removing the offender rather than the child from the family was more likely, more people may disclose.' 'We shouldn't minimise the impact of removal on a very small child. A lot of people won't report because they won't believe the child is better off out of the family.'

'Society doesn't want to know or deal with it. Where I work there is a child who is being abused. They're talking about getting someone else to view them or of reporting it if something else happens. They think that reporting it will make it worse, that the child will be taken from the family. It's a bit of a cop out.'

Telling doesn't necessarily stop the abuse

A small number of survivors told of their abuse before they reached adulthood. In most instances they told their mother. Sometimes this was successful in stopping the abuse. However, often the abuse continued, either because the child wasn't believed or the steps taken to protect the child were not effective.

We know that if a child continues to live with an abuser protection is difficult, if not impossible, and that it is very difficult for families to deal with sexual abuse without expert assistance. Some survivors expressed considerable anger at their mothers' inability to protect them. However, there was also recognition of their mothers' powerlessness and the lack of support services to assist parents in dealing with the situation.

'I told my Mum and she fronted Dad and she said it won't happen again. The Church said the same thing. They assured her that it wouldn't happen again. I had a local parish priest who spoke to Dad. She then sent me down the street with Dad to buy something and he threatened to kill me. It went on for years after that.'

'I told my Mum when I was about 14 or 15. I had to tell because I couldn't stand it. The abuse stopped but he let me know that I had betrayed his trust. My mother was supportive of me and angry at him.'

'I disclosed first to my mother at the age of five years that my father was abusing me. My mother's initial reaction was to tell me that she would speak to him about it. She appeared to be upset but there seemed to be no rage, more of a complacency. I was frightened that when she told my father what I had said that he would be angry and hurt me. The abuse was kept a family secret, no one talked about it, which increased my feeling of isolation and shame. The sexual abuse continued throughout my childhood. I remained in constant anxiety never knowing how to relate to members of my family or anyone for that matter.'

'I was four and it was my mother's lover who abused me. This man pulled down our pants and we told my mother and we got our bums smacked. He then started really abusing us. I then told my mother again when we were about eight. She told me not to be so stupid and then that went on until that man died. I got married when I was about eighteen and I re-told mum when I was about twenty and she still wouldn't believe me.'

'My situation was a bit different. It was someone outside the immediate family. My parents must have sensed that something was going on and stopped it.'

'Mothers feel powerlessness, particularly in the rural sector, where there are few networks, isolation and large families.' 'My mother didn't want to admit what was going on. She said being the mother of six kids, married to an abusive alcoholic (he used to sexually abuse her), she didn't know where to go. There were no refuges. The Church said that you married for better or worse and you had to stay there.'

'I know that my mum was scared of my father. She knew what was going on. She knew if she talked she would be abused. It's just fear of being alone too.' 'Mum and I don't really talk much about what happened but we have more of an understanding now. If there's something that's really bothering me that Mum has done or didn't do to protect me as a child I'll say something to her. She just says 'it was my way of surviving'. As a child I tried to tell her and she knew I tried to tell her I've confronted her on that but that's an old story. So I've just accepted, knowing she had to survive, she didn't have much of a choice.'

'Like I said before, I told my mum and she thought that by talking it would stop. She then honestly believed it never happened again and when I finally let it out at the age of 25 when I was having problems with my marriage, she was horrified. She said, 'why didn't you tell me?' I just screamed at her and said, 'why didn't you pick up the signs? Why didn't you listen to me?' She said, 'I never thought.'

'My mother made an effort to get help at various times when I would report yet another act of sexual abuse from my father. She would, on occasion, take my brothers and myself from my father for several days to her mother or one of her sisters-in-law's homes but we always came home again and the cycle of violence, sexual abuse and terror would eventually erupt again. Being a mother of five children, unemployed with no appropriate support she was as much of a victim of my father and society as I was.'

'People will not disclose because of embarrassment, shame or feeling responsible. We need to tell non-abusing parents it is not their fault and that they are not responsible. We also need to provide them with ongoing support.'

'It's about the breakdown of the family. Mothers are not willing to sacrifice everything for their children. They are willing to sacrifice the children instead. There is also the stigma of abuse and the lack of resources available for non-abusing parents. We need to say it is okay to admit that their guilt needs to be addressed.'

'Mothers may have been abused themselves which leads to a massive entanglement which is really difficult to understand.'

Disclosure as an adult

Most of the survivors did not tell anyone about the sexual abuse until they reached adulthood. In some instances memories of childhood were very limited and the women had to go through a process of remembering that abuse had taken place. Sometimes this process started as the result of flashbacks with vivid memories of the original abuse.

It is very common for survivors to repress some or all of the abuse as a way of coping with the abuse. This is known as protective denial, as it is a protection from the intense emotional pain which would otherwise be experienced when the abuse was taking place. Sometimes the gaps in memory protect the survivor from recalling the details of the abuse, and in other situations from remembering that any type of abuse occurred at all.

It is important that survivors are met with belief and compassion when they tell of their experiences and that they receive assistance and support.

'I had no memory of my childhood. Things come to me but I can only remember a few things. "I had practice runs. I told a friend ages ago and she told me that she had also been sexually abused. I dropped hints to my family over the years. But I didn't actually disclose to people until I had an anxiety attack. Then I went to a counsellor and spoke to him. I could just tell that we had a trusting relationship.'

'I blocked it out for fourteen years and then when I first started talking about it, it all came back. It was traumatic and scary to experience it again.' 'The hardest thing was to admit that this was a problem. It had been shoved away for so long. It was the result of a freak meeting that I had with someone I had empathy with.'

'I disclosed when I was a teenager. I was in a psychiatric hospital because I had tried to commit suicide. I tried to tell a male nurse and he laughed at me. I then decided I wouldn't tell anyone ever again and I didn't actually talk about it for over twenty years. That just held me back so much. I felt like I grew physically but not mentally. I feel as though I have only just started growing now. After twenty years I somehow found out about Centres Against Sexual Assault and I remember getting on the phone and just crying and wanting help.'

'I disclosed to my mother and the verbal confrontation I had with her and the guilt that was thrown on me I think that I just blocked it out for some time, and it was only when I went to see a psychiatrist to give up smoking that I thought this is my opportunity, if I don't say anything now I've blown it.'

'I experienced a lot of fear. Once I was twenty-five and I started to talk about it, well, my first marriage broke up. I was scared people wouldn't believe me because they didn't originally. I blocked it out for fourteen years and then when I started talking about it, it all came back. It was traumatic and scary to experience it again.'

'The friends I've told as an adult tend to react with horror but they don't really understand.

I could never go into details with them.' 'My experience was that my family blamed me and isolated me rather than blaming the perpetrator.'

The long-term effects of abuse

The effects of child sexual abuse do not cease when the abuse stops, but continue into adulthood. Research indicates that the long-term negative effects of abuse are lessened if the abuse is detected and stopped during childhood and the child receives assistance and support. Lasting emotional distress is most likely when disclosure is met with disbelief or where the abuse remains undetected.

Most of the survivors consulted during this study received no assistance as children and had only begun to deal with the abuse as adults. Many had been encouraged by the abuser to see themselves as bad or dirty, or to blame for the abuse, and, not surprisingly, this had a lasting impact on their self-esteem and often on their adult relationships. Some also developed alcohol or psychiatric problems as a consequence of the abuse.

Recovering from sexual abuse is a complex process. There are a number of stages survivors pass through as part of the recovery process and the survivors involved with the consultation were at different stages of this process. Some had only recently begun to remember and talk about the abuse. Others were coming to understand that the abuse was not their fault, or were directing anger at their abuser and those who did not protect them. Others were close to a stage of resolution and moving on. Most of the survivors did express optimism about the possibility of resolving the major issues associated with the abuse if the necessary help and support were received.

‘Any sexual activity between an adult and child is completely unacceptable and damaging to the child.’ ‘Child sexual abuse effects you for the rest of your life. It causes long-term harm. People don’t understand the need for long-term counselling.’

‘I shudder to think of the millions of people who have never used their full mental capacity in making this a better world because they were using all their energy for mere survival as a result of childhood abuse.’

‘People think it’s something that will effect your childhood. I didn’t even start to deal with it until I was twenty-five and then it was a catastrophe. Professionals don’t understand the impact on you in stages during your life.’

‘A great many people have no conception of the effect on us as parents nor the effect on you as the child, our sense of helplessness. I find in the community people have no idea of the effect on you in your job, or everyday life.’

‘Adults, even some family members, make the comment to me that it happened years ago and it shouldn’t be having an effect on your life any more. People have a thing that you can forget about it.’

‘The effects of sexual abuse do not stop when the abuse stops. Abuse hurts for life and children are not the resilient little people they are thought to be.’

‘I believe most of the problems older kids have with drugs and prostitution are related to what happened to them when they were younger. If they had someone to deal with there and then, rather than find out their own way, a lot of them wouldn’t be on the streets later on.’

‘I have days when I can’t stop crying and I need to get on the phone and talk to someone. Other days I bash the hell out of a shed and throw rocks into the river.’

‘Seeking help is the beginning of personal growth. You can become a contributor to society rather than the other way around. It’s a rite of passage.’

‘It’s a life journey, it stays with you forever.’

'But it's significance shifts, it's not as primary.'

'That's my aim, to have a little space for it and that's where it belongs.'

'There is an enormous cost to the community, drug and alcohol abuse, psychiatric problems, either self-abuse or abuse of others. Something happens one way or the other. You either abuse yourself or abuse your child.'

'I don't think I could cope in a relationship now. I was with my husband for ten or eleven years. He physically, emotionally and sexually abused me. My main fear was what I was going to do if I left. How was I going to live. I know for myself it was petrifying. When I did it, I was fine.'

Help and support

All of the survivors had sought and received formal assistance or support. The value of the assistance varied considerably. The general view was that what was most valuable at a particular time depends where the individual was in the process of recovery from sexual abuse.

Counselling by professionals who had no specialist knowledge of sexual abuse was considered of limited value: the counsellors often reflected the myths and misconceptions held by the general community. The survivors reported difficulties in finding an appropriate counsellor and often there was considerable expense involved with using private counsellors. The specialist Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) were viewed very favourably, although did not offer sufficient long-term counselling.

Counselling

'I have found that counselling by many psychiatrists and psychologists is like having delicate brain surgery performed by a general practitioner.'

'In terms of unhelpful experiences I went to a psychiatrist for a number of years. He listened to me but that was about it. He didn't help, in fact he intimidated me. I tried three—the first two put their hands on me and that was it for me. I was off and out of there.'

'Some professionals don't believe you or say, 'most of them end up as prostitutes so you're doing quite well.'

'A friend went to a psychiatrist and she was told, 'you were abused by your cousin and that is not as serious as father-daughter incest.' It is important not to devalue other forms of sexual abuse.'

'I found counselling helpful but it was hard to find a good counsellor and hard to pay for it.'

'My original psychiatrist wanted me to go back to work after I started attempting to deal with my past. I felt this was an attempt to jolly me up, and it felt like he was blaming me. That was unhelpful.'

'Other says, 'get on with your life, stop thinking about it,' that's certainly not helpful.'

'It's certainly not useful for people you know to have judgmental attitudes about how you should have handled it and what you should have done.'

'I've been seeing a psychiatrist, but I could not have done that in the past. I wouldn't have been ready.'

'I also found out that in the last ten years I have paid out over \$10,000 in private psychologist fees. On average I was paying out \$50 per week.'

'I've been going to therapy with a psychologist. Counselling can be good as long as the counsellor understands, is not embarrassed, does not condemn and is not just ghoulishly interested.'

'The best thing is to be believed and listened to ---someone who will actually sit down to listen to you.'

'I don't think there is effective therapy available at the local community level. I haven't had a lot of unhelpful assistance because I've seen it coming and sent it away. I'm good at protecting myself. I've learnt to take care of me.'

'I didn't know where to go for so long. Over the last ten years I had many major crises in my life including back surgery. As part of the rehabilitation for my back injury, I had pain management. The counsellor in charge of that

felt I was very angry and gave me an anger management book. When I read it, it included discussion about sexual abuse. This activated a lot of memories. I began by talking to my minister. He found a counsellor to see. It took a lot of courage seeing the counsellor.'

'CASAs are very helpful but unfortunately provide only short-term counselling and often that just isn't enough.'

Support groups

Most of the survivors had attended a support group, and nearly all were positive about this experience. Support groups were considered to be particularly valuable as they provided the opportunity to meet with others with similar experiences.

'The most helpful thing is talking to people who understand, who have experienced abuse themselves. Some people will listen, sympathise, say a few appropriate words, then shelve it. That's not what I need. I need understanding and mainly to talk to someone who has experienced sexual abuse.'

'The group that I participated in wasn't just female members. There were males who were very angry about my experience and that helped, knowing there were men who cared about sexual abuse really helped.'

'The support group was even better in the sense that you were with people who have been there and done that. It gives you more trust in those individuals. You realise you can talk about what you want to without being judged or blamed or labelled. You also know that you are not on your own.'

'I rang Lifeline and they referred me to a private psychologist. I saw her twice and then she got a group together. I found the group informative and interesting but it was not really for me. We worked through a lot of things though.'

'The support group is very valuable. It's more helpful than any worker to see other women and think that I'm not the only one. It takes away a lot of the alienation.'

'It was really good to have a facilitator, someone trained.'

Criminal justice system

Few of the women had been involved with prosecution of the abuser as most had not disclosed their abuse until many years after the abuse had stopped. There were, however, strong views about the lack of sensitivity of the legal system towards victims of abuse and the difficulties in prosecuting child sexual abusers.

'People forget that it's a crime. They just don't think of it as a crime. It isn't taken seriously when it's reported. You're always hearing about minimal punishment which is outrageous. We do need to change the whole system. It has to be hardened up.'

'It's humiliating, it's embarrassing. You're the one that has to put up with it all your life and they just walk around like nothing happened and they can do it over and over again. It's not fair.'

'It's terrible when you're not told what's going to happen. If you get involved with the legal system you need to know all the processes.'

'The legal system is terrible. Cases keep on getting dropped because kids don't know dates.'

'The legal system needs education, in particular judges and decision-makers. The judicial system needs to be more compassionate towards victims of abuse.'

Treatment for abusers

Concern was expressed about the lack of appropriate treatment services for abusers. It was felt that abusers would continue to abuse if they did not receive effective treatment. Most effective treatment programs involve a commitment of eighteen months to two years and involve working towards the abuser accepting responsibility for keeping their sexually abusive behaviour under control.

‘There need to be more services for offenders and potential offenders. My father might be interested in something like that.’

‘Adults who are sexual with children must receive intervention and treatment.’

‘There should be compulsory counselling for offenders.’

‘The perpetrator must be supported in going along an alternative path. Don’t reinforce the alienation and aggression.’

Where to from here?

There was a feeling of optimism that people are at last beginning to discuss child sexual abuse more openly. The survivors felt that sharing their experiences would assist in educating the community about child sexual abuse and the need for the community as a whole to take responsibility for protecting children.

'It's great to have the opportunity to tell people of my experiences, and to know that I am playing a part in making people more aware of what child abuse is about. "We are standing on the threshold of tremendous reform in an age where many women are desperately seeking to end male domination and gross misuse of power against women and children.'

'Women's groups have been really useful in changing community attitudes towards child sexual abuse.'

'I can help by standing up and being counted.'

'It should be more accepted to talk about it. It should be on television all the time and just really well known so that people know they can do something about it.'

'Perhaps the statistics will change dramatically in the near future. One can only hope.'

Contacts

Child protection

If you suspect that a child you know is being abused, contact a Department of Human Services office to discuss your concerns.

After Hours

13 12 78

During business hours ring the number covering the local government area where the child lives.

Divisions

East

East metropolitan

Boorondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse, Yarra Ranges

Intake Unit 1300 360 391

East rural

Alpine, Benalla, Greater Shepparton, Indigo, Mansfield, Mitchell, Moira, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Towong, Wangaratta, Wodonga

Intake Unit 1800 650 227

North

North metropolitan

Banyule, Brimbank, Darebin, Hume, Melbourne, Moreland, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Yarra

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

North rural

Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Greater Bendigo, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Mildura, Mount Alexander, Swan Hill

Intake Unit 1800 675 598

South

South metropolitan

Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip, Stonington

Intake Unit 1300 655 795

South rural

Bass Coast, Baw Baw, East Gippsland, LaTrobe, South Gippsland, Wellington

Intake Unit 1800 020 202

West

West metropolitan

Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley, Wyndham

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

West rural

Cola, Coranamite, Glenelg, Greater Geelong, Moyne, Queenscliff, Southern Grampians, Surf Coast, Warrnambool

Intake Unit 1800 075 599

Ararat, Ballarat, Golden Plains, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Moorabool, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, West Wimmera, Yarriambick

Other resources

Victoria Police

Sexual Offence and Child Abuse Investigation Team Coordination Unit

Telephone (03) 9611 8800

Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs)

These centres offer a specialist support, advice and counselling service for all victims of sexual assault, male and female, adults and children.

Metropolitan CASAs

South Eastern CASA

Moorabbin Campus
Monash Medical Centre 867 Centre Road, East
Bentleigh
Telephone (03) 9594 2289
Website: www.secasa.com.au

The Gatehouse Centre

Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road, Parkville
Telephone (03) 9345 6391 or 9345 5222
Website: www.rch.org.au

CASA House

Royal Women's Hospital
270 Cardigan Street, Carlton
Telephone (03) 9349 1766 (After Hours Crisis Line)
Telephone (03) 9344 2210 (during office hours)
Website: www.rch.org.au/casa

Northern CASA

Building 26, Repatriation Campus Austin Health
Banksia Street Heidelberg
Telephone (03) 9496 2240
Website: www.northern.casa.org.au

West CASA

53 Ballarat Road Footscray
Telephone (03) 9687 5811

Eastern CASA

17 Ware Crescent Ringwood East
Telephone (03) 9870 7330

Rural CASAs

Bendigo-Loddon Campaspe CASA

Bendigo Base Hospital
Corner Lucan and Arnold Streets Bendigo
Telephone (03) 5441 0430

Ballarat CASA

115a Ascot Street South Ballarat
Telephone (03) 5320 3933

Barwon CASA

291 Latrobe Terrace Geelong
Telephone (03) 5222 4318

Child Assault Management Program

P O Box 63 Moe
Telephone (03) 5127 5555

Davey House Family Resource Centre

P O Box 120 Wanthaggi
Telephone (03) 5671 3278

Goulburn Valley CASA

130 Nixon Street Shepparton
Telephone (03) 5831 2343

Gippsland CASA

PO Box 1124 Morwell
Telephone (03) 5134 3922

Latrobe Community Health

Morwell Centre Morwell
Telephone (03) 5136 2400

Mallee Sexual Assault Unit

Suite 1, 144–146 Lime Avenue Mildura
Telephone (03) 5025 5400

Upper Murray CASA

38 Green Street Wangaratta
Telephone (03) 5722 2203 Toll Free: 1800 806 292

South West CASA

299 Koroit Street Warrnambool
Telephone (03) 5563 1277

Statewide 24 Hour Access

Telephone 1800 806 292

Workers at this centre can refer you to local community based organisations and self help groups, and advise on specialist counsellors in your area.