

# ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE.

## ISSUES PAPER NO 10

### Advocacy, Support and Therapeutic Treatment Services

1. What advocacy and support and/or therapeutic treatment services work for victims and survivors?

When the Royal Commission Enquiry was first announced I was sceptical. In my life of 60 years I had seen little reason to delve into the murky depths of my past experiences of sexual abuse which happened in the Catholic church environment when I was very young.

Those experiences were well buried and vaulted and I lived with the consequences.

In my sub conscious it was a rumbling life sentence.

With all the attention and media coverage it became clear that there would be a spotlight into the crevices of historical abuse in churches and institutions and their failures to act. It was going to be comprehensive. I tried to turn off from it all. It felt uncomfortable. It seemed that to engage might be jumping into an abyss.

I was incensed by the early reactions of the Catholic church especially by Bishop Pell. In spite of my attempts to ignore it all and then tiptoe around the abyss I fell into it.

Here are my thoughts about my ongoing journey through the ***advocacy, support and therapeutic treatment services*** that are working for me.

### Advocacy

The Royal Commissions ongoing work and investigations are for me a symbol of advocacy. I am continually gratified and amazed by the work being done by the commissioners and support staff.

The ongoing commitment to uncover and expose abuse that has occurred and to make this public in the community is a beacon to survivors.

In the private session I attended I was debilitated but empowered. I felt listened to and supported. As a result of this session I was referred to appropriate legal services and able to access the help that I needed to move forward.

The Commission has played a successful role in exposing the perpetrators of child abuse in church and institutional settings. Where possible criminal charges have been laid but in many cases including mine those responsible have died.

*A publication could be produced listing all perpetrators and their institutions with the years and places they were active.*

*Included should be institutional responses detailing actions taken to acknowledge the damage done to survivors.*

*Details should also be provided of what strategies have been taken to ensure that the abuse never happens again.*

*The continuing adequate resourcing of the Commission is crucial to meeting the needs of survivors.*

*At the end of the Commission processes there should be a huge celebration attended by all who contributed, survivors and friends to honour and celebrate what has been achieved.*

## **Therapeutic Treatment Services**

I feel fortunate to have been able to access counselling sessions with a skilled clinical psychologist. Initially those sessions were through a referral from my GP on the Mental Health Program. More recently they have been provided as part of my ongoing legal claim through negotiation.

The counselling sessions have been invaluable in helping me to sort through the tangle and mystery of trauma resulting from my abuse. It is a slow process. I never enjoy going to counselling but for the future I can't imagine not being able to go.

Through her wisdom my counsellor helps me to unlock my own. Like many survivors I wrestle with shame, guilt, and self depreciation. I appreciate the guidance and training for strategies such as CBT and Relaxation and the continual validation of self and acknowledgement of the courage it takes to move forward.

*Recovery from the trauma of childhood sexual abuse is a long process. Survivors need access to ongoing counselling with skilled practitioners of their own choosing. This process should be easily accessible and funded by organisations responsible for the abuse which occurred. In the event that those organisations do not have financial viability a central fund should be available.*

*The scheduling of the sessions should be negotiated between the parties depending on need and continue beyond the life of the commission .*

*There are still many older survivors who have not reached a position of being able to talk about their experiences. Pathways should be maintained to assist them to access support and counselling if they decide to come forward.*

*A list of suitable skilled practitioners could be made available. This would be especially useful in regional areas and should be promoted in a range of community and health networks.*

*All practitioners working with survivors need to have appropriate training in Trauma Informed Care.*

## **“Healing” the missing link?**

I find it hard to think about future support needs without considering the need for *healing* and access to opportunities to facilitate that. It is one thing to be supported and have access to therapeutic services that are mostly mind based and time limited. It is another thing to be transformed from the trauma of abuse and to move on from it to a different and better way of being.

A great challenge for me has been to sort through the labels “victim” and “survivor” “Victim” has the association of “helpless child”. A “survivor” is in a much better space, but still could be a person fighting to breathe after a near drowning. The next step is a big one, from survival to being able to flourish.

I have been fortunate to become involved in the NSW Heal for Life Program run by the Heal for Life Foundation. This innovative program has been integral in helping me to look at the effect that the trauma of abuse has had on my life.

I have attended programs as a guest and also as a volunteer supporter after completing training. Attending my first week I found myself in a safe environment surrounded by other childhood abuse and trauma survivors being skilfully taken on a journey of sessions run by skilled facilitators.

The Heal For Life model is a unique program run by survivors for survivors. The approach is a holistic one placing equal importance on spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual healing. The way the program is run makes it accessible to women and men of any educational background. Attending informal workshops on topics such as the effect of childhood trauma on the brain helps to confront and release emotions, unlock the trauma and integrate new knowledge.

Spending a week with others in a safe, beautiful remote natural environment away from all of life's distractions is at first daunting and then inspirational. The program is based on mutual respect and aims to empower survivors to recognise their own self worth and potential.

For me it was one of the first times in my life that I had time and space to really *feel* feelings. So much of my life had been spent cutting off from feelings that it was like meeting a stranger. My head and brain were always in control usually so articulate, addicted to humour to resolve any personal discomfort, a competent confident professional. At Heal For Life I came undone. It was a safe place to take a risk to *feel* and to process the *feelings* with the loving support that was offered. I felt like a toddler on a bike with training wheels. I couldn't fall off because the feelings were real and it was ok to feel them. I started to be able to do it. It felt wobbly but OK.

The extended training offered by Heal For Life has been really useful in giving me the opportunity to investigate the effect of trauma on my life, to commit to my own healing journey and to look at the role I can have in walking beside other survivors in their healing. After completing Heal For Life training I have been a volunteer on healing programs and have seen how others have experienced life changing processes as a result of attending the program.

Many participants have had extensive negative experiences in the mental health system but have been able to move forward in this unique model.

*Survivors need access to independent programs which are focused on healing from their abuse as an adjunct to therapeutic treatment and support.*

*Encouragement and financial support should be given to programs that are authentically run by survivors for survivors and have a proven achievement record.*

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Consultation.