

## **Submission to the Australia Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to child sexual abuse**

**Re: Institutional redress to survivors of child sexual abuse**

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I have been working with survivors of sexual abuse in sexual assault services for many years. I am now in private practice and continue to support survivors in individual counselling and support groups.

Working with survivors have given me the privilege to hear their stories and learn about their needs as stated by them and their families and other supporters.

I would like provide some input into how institutions can redress survivors of child sexual abuse suffering while under the care of these individuals.

- 1. Counselling and psychological care:** It is very well documented that most survivors benefit a lot from having proper counselling and support. As a counsellor, I have been a witness to that. However, specialist counselling is highly important to address their needs in this area. It is my recommendation that specialist sexual assault counsellors must be employed by these services in order to provide the best help. Such is the case of church-funded services. One of my clients told me that when she was accessing counselling in a church-based community service, the counsellor advised her not to get angry as it was a sin and the best 'cure' was to pray. This only caused de-compensation and a suicide attempt. Counsellors need to understand the huge impact of sexual abuse on children as well as how to keep the counselling space emotionally safe. It is also important for sexual assault counsellors to have access to external supervision provided by people who have experience in this area. This counselling needs to be provided free of charge and with no time limitations. It takes time for survivors to develop trust in the therapeutic relationship. On the other hand, many survivors stop accessing counselling due to financial difficulties. It has also been the case of generalist counsellors to try to impose the church's belief system on survivors, making them feel, once again, powerless and with no way to go. Counselling should also be offered to family members and other people close to the victims and affected by the abuse. It is well known that sexual abuse also has a huge impact on the family.

2. **Apology:** Although an apology cannot take back the abuse and the consequences of it, it is a symbolic way to acknowledge that the abuse took place and it was not the victim's fault. For some survivors, it can even bring closure to this part of their lives. Institutions should publicly apologise for the wrong-doing.
  
3. **Civil litigation:** Survivors need to be compensated for injuries, and emotional pain suffered at the hands of these institutions. Many victims have past and present expenses for medical care and counselling. Monetary compensation can have a positive effect on survivors because it might provide a level of resolution realizing that the institution is acknowledging the abuse that took place and is addressing financial issues. **Victims have the right to have access to funding for civil litigations. The government should provide funding for survivors who want to begin a civil litigation process against the institution. No limitation period should apply. The government should review the current statute of limitations legislation and remove these restrictions for survivors.** Many survivors do not disclose the abuse until later, sometimes years. They might not be ready, they experience fear and are still processing the trauma. This is why many survivors do not disclose within statutory time limits. Limitation periods should not be a barrier.

I want to thank the Royal Commission for giving the community this opportunity to have a say in such an important matter.

Thank you

Adela Brent  
Sexual Assault Counsellor