

## ***Four new resources for those working with survivors of child sexual abuse***

Anne van Loon

Four new resources have been produced as outputs of a two-year capacity building participatory action research project funded by Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation. We worked with two groups of women survivors of childhood sexual abuse and two groups of service providers to this client group. The first resource is a work book titled *Reclaiming myself after child sexual abuse* (van Loon and Kralik, 2005). It is aimed at supporting survivors dealing with the impacts of abuse/assault and the subsequent life issues the women face. The second resource is another 200 page book *Facilitating transition after child sexual abuse* (van Loon, 2005). It is aimed at service providers and group facilitators working with this client group. The third resource is the final report of the research project which provides an extensive literature review and recommendations for service provision proposed by participants (van Loon & Kralik, 2005). It will be useful to inform policy and planning for governments and health and social service agencies. The final resource is a poster that describes the transition process through life's disruptions. This poster has received accolades in every forum in which it has been presented, because it resonates with people, helping them make sense of disruptive life changes (van Loon & Kralik, 2005). All four resources are available for free electronic downloading from the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) Research Unit website <http://www.rdns.org.au> and the Catherine House website <http://www.catherinehouse.org.au>.

### **Why we commenced this project**

There is a plethora of research demonstrating people who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are at increased risk of mental illness, and drug, alcohol and gambling addictions. These issues are directly linked to this group being over-represented in the homeless population (Anderson & Chiocchio, 1997). Catherine House, an inner-city supported accommodation provider, state that over 90 per cent of the women seeking emergency accommodation have experienced sexual abuse in childhood. While these women were receiving support for their addictions and mental health needs, the underlying cause was not being adequately addressed. They teamed up with the RDNS Research Unit to work with homeless women to find ways to help them to move forward from such adverse childhood experiences. The RDNS Research Unit has expertise in researching with people regarding life, health and social transitions. They are particularly interested in working with people who are experiencing chronic illness and/or social disadvantage.

The team wanted to locate a way to build the personal capacity of these women by helping them work through their past pain so they may reframe their current responses to life's problems. The aim was to facilitate the women's transition toward independence and a life where drugs, alcohol and gambling were less likely responses, because these behaviours were contributing to the women's homelessness. Additionally, the team wanted those working with this client group to increase their awareness and sensitivity of the women's specific needs.

The team received a grant from the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation and together they commenced working with two groups of women survivors of childhood sexual abuse (n=16) and two groups of service providers (n=24) to work out a process that could help these women survivors to create change in their lives. The groups allowed the women to find their voices about deep and painful life stories that had been carried in silence for many years, yet the disrupting influence of that life story had dominated most of the women's life choices.

The process the team used and the content of what the groups discussed are presented in the two books that were launched in November 2005.

### **The research process**

We used participatory action research because we wanted to do more than obtain information (Banks-Wallace, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Aranda, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Koch, 2005; Koch, Mann et al., 2005). We worked with the women childhood sexual abuse survivors for two to three hours each fortnight for 18 months to generate the data together. All interactions were taped and transcribed verbatim and analysed and returned to the women by post for their considered action. The books were formulated as a direct response to the women's request for an

accessible “self-help” workbook. The women participated in every aspect of the research process. The team did not dictate the content of what was to be discussed at each meeting, rather the women explored current issues in their lives using a simple process called “Look, Think, Act”.

In this process the women work back from the present to see how situations have been managed in the past and what effects those responses have had on the woman’s life. The process focuses on locating issues or problems that people wanted to change. The approach provided women with a safe space and regular time to work through situations to develop a clearer understanding of how their current behaviours and responses might be linked to thoughts, feelings and attitudes that they had learned, many of which were grounded in their experiences of sexual abuse in childhood. We located the strengths and wisdom each woman brought to her current situation, which was an empowering process. At the end of the project the women benefited from their participation and we as researchers had an authentic product that could be used by other organisations to benefit survivors of childhood sexual abuse and possibly survivors of other forms of abuse.

### The “Look, Think and Act” process

This process first coined by Stringer (Stringer 1999; Stringer & Genet 2004), is a simple three-step method that can be used by any person. It’s called “Look Think Act”:

**Look** This step basically involves working out “What is going on?”

**Think** This step addresses the questions “What do I want to do about it?” and “What can I feasibly do right now that will provide me with the best outcome now?”

**Act** This step encourages each woman to take some action toward making her plans happen. We suggest she takes the “easiest” steps that are likely to give her the best results. However, this is actually difficult because the woman must have the courage to step out of an identity that is “victim” oriented. In this state the woman believes she is in a powerless position where everything happens to her and she has no options at her disposal. With encouragement we invite her to consider she has enough power to start to change her situation and reclaim the territory of her own life.

The women experienced validation in sharing their life experiences and found they had much in common. In speaking about the situation the women made sense of aspects of their life story. Their past disruption and the ensuing chaos has had them feeling like “flotsam and jetsam in the sea of life”, as one participant put it, but in the narrative work they started to find anchor points that reflected stronger and more able women than they believed they were. This helped them work out who they were and where they were going, so they could decide how they wanted to live and create change accordingly. As their future plans unfolded, hope was rekindled and the woman’s motivation to work at creating change grew. They understood how past and present were connected and became able to separate themselves from the things that had been toxic to their wellbeing. They could see they were more than the sum of their past experiences and this ignited the hope required to create change.

This was not a quick fix process. It takes dedicated time to help a woman face her pain, feel her pain, name it, grieve her losses and then work out how she wants to live and be in the world now. Using the process takes practice and the women need encouragement to work with it until it becomes more second nature. Over time their own progress provides the motivation they require to keep moving forward with their life. The process, however, is accessible to everyone. Service providers and volunteer community groups can use it with good effect, providing they create a safe group within which to work and have people committed to working with the women for around 12 months.

### The research outputs

Along with several published papers (van Loon, 2004; van Loon et al., 2004), the first book (~200 pages) is aimed at women survivors of childhood sexual abuse and can be used in conjunction with a support group, or a worker with whom the woman is comfortable. The book contents came from our group work which was led by issues the women were encountering. They said the book should cover the impacts of childhood sexual abuse and work with the reader on various common issues, emotions and feelings that may be linked to childhood sexual abuse. Through exploring these issues the women are assisted to separate themselves from the abuse experiences and move toward reclaiming an independent identity with which they are comfortable. The book does not claim to be an authoritative text that guarantees healing. It provides a process that we know to be empowering and helpful, about issues that we know are common struggles.

The second book is aimed at service providers. It gives a background to the problem of childhood sexual abuse with an extensive review of the literature necessary for understanding the issues. It discusses important factors in creating a therapeutic relationship with this client group. It gives a brief overview of how to create the space for participation in a group that is handling such sensitive issues and helps service providers to understand how to use the “Look, Think and Act” process to facilitate transition.

Five hundred hard copies of each book were distributed free to key services in South Australia who work with this client population. The book is also available for free downloading from the Royal District Nursing Service Research Unit website <http://www.rdns.org.au>, and the Catherine House Inc. website <http://www.catherinehouse.org.au> so the package is accessible for everyone in the community to use.

### More research is planned

The women in this study wanted to hear the stories of ordinary women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, who had been able to move on and reclaim their lives in order to live a life that they were content with. The RDNS research team received a small grant from Community Benefit SA and are interviewing 12 women to obtain narratives of hope by locating in these stories the strategies, attitudes and processes the women used to transition into a future of their choosing.

The RDNS Research Unit can offer their expertise to partner with other service providers to use this research process with other vulnerable client groups, in order to improve health and social service provision. Additionally, the RDNS Foundation gratefully receives donations to support their research program that seeks to promote health and prevent illness for marginalised groups within our community. More information can be obtained by phoning (08) 8206 0111 or emailing [researchunit@rdns.org.au](mailto:researchunit@rdns.org.au). Similarly, Catherine House continues its excellent support to vulnerable women who find themselves homeless for a variety of reasons, and their work can be supported by phoning (08) 8232 2282 or emailing [director@catherinehouse.org.au](mailto:director@catherinehouse.org.au).

**Anne van Loon** is a Senior Research Fellow and Project Manager of the Royal District Nursing Service Foundation Research Unit, Catherine House Inc, Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

All four resources are available for free electronic downloading. The two work books, *Reclaiming myself after child sexual abuse*, and *Facilitating transition after child sexual abuse* are online at the Catherine House website at: <http://www.catherinehouse.org.au/research.htm>

The poster can be downloaded from the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) Research Unit website at: [http://www.rdns.org.au/research\\_unit/research\\_focus.htm](http://www.rdns.org.au/research_unit/research_focus.htm) and the research report (and workbooks) at: [http://www.rdns.org.au/research\\_unit/research\\_projects\\_current.htm](http://www.rdns.org.au/research_unit/research_projects_current.htm)

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