



Welcome to the February edition of Breaking Free

Whilst we welcome the focus on trauma experienced in institutions, aged care and by First Nations People and people with disability, it is important to not lose sight of childhood abuse in the home. Our lead article delves into the impact that childhood abuse and neglect has as a child develops, and how these impacts can have lifelong implications. We would also like to thank all of the people who have spoken out recently in a series of articles to raise awareness around abuse in the home and family. Some of these articles are included here. Fortunately, with the right support and resources, children who have experienced neglect and trauma can grow into adaptive, resourceful and resilient adults. Blue Knot Foundation supports adult survivors of complex trauma in their path to recovery. Our counsellors are trained and experienced in supporting survivors of complex trauma, and we have a plethora of resources to inform and educate survivors, supporters and carers.

Friday March 5 is Dissociative Identity Disorder Awareness Day. Dr Cathy Kezelman will be speaking on behalf of Blue Knot alongside An Infinite Mind and Beauty After Bruises in a webinar convened by International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, and you have the opportunity to attend. The webinar is open to the general public and will provide attendees with useful information around, complex trauma, dissociation and DID including how to support friends, loved ones and more. Tickets are \$10USD and all proceeds will be distributed to the presenting organisations. Your support is greatly appreciated. Go [here](#) to book now!

Also, there has been a lot in the media over the past few weeks about sexual assault, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse. Many survivors are coming forward and speaking out. We would like to acknowledge the courage they have shown and we at Blue Knot stand alongside them in solidarity. If you have experienced violence, abuse or neglect in childhood and would like to speak to a counsellor please call one of our trauma specialist Blue Knot Counsellors on 1300 657 380, Monday – Sunday, between 9am – 5pm AEDT.

As always, we thank you for your continued support of the work that we do. We hope you enjoy this month's edition of Breaking Free.

Warm regards
The Blue Knot Team



Abuse, neglect and exploitation in the home and family

While there has been a much-needed focus on violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation in institutions, aged care, and for people with disability and First Nations peoples, it is additionally important to focus on trauma in the home and family. The damaging effects of family violence, and children ‘witnessing’ such violence and the fear and helplessness it invokes have been the subject of many inquiries and community responses. Needless to say, there is still a lot to do to achieve the attitudinal and behavioural change needed to make a real difference.

This article however focusses more on the scourge of childhood abuse including online exploitation in the home and family - sexual, physical or emotional abuse as well as the effects of neglect - what a child does not receive physically and emotionally. The home is often seen as sacrosanct and what happens within it as ‘family business’ alone. Caregivers and parents have ready access to their children, and children depend on them for their very survival. Children are less likely to disclose, more confused and conflicted, overwhelmed

by shame and self-blame, fundamentally betrayed, and often unsafe. Secrecy and silence abound, and society and governments have historically often been ‘hands off’. However the home and family are often not so safe, and abuse, neglect and exploitation occur not uncommonly.

The harsh reality is that trauma, in all the above forms, in childhood, can affect the way a child develops – brain, body and mind. If a child experiences a traumatic

event/s during a critical developmental period, it can take longer for the child to develop the skills that most other children develop at that age. The good news is that with support, care and nurture later on, the child, young person and/or adult they become can still build those skills later in life.

Every child ideally has at least one reliable caregiver or parent – a person to help the child to feel understood and build a healthy bond with them. This helps the child to develop a secure attachment as a model for safe and healthy relationships through life. It is also a time when the brain is growing and changing rapidly, and when trauma can impact a range of developmental activities at different ages. When a child does not experience consistent or reliable caregiving, the child can find it harder to cope with everyday stress as well as trauma. The child might learn how to regulate their emotions or to self-soothe when they experience distress. These are skills which can definitely be learnt later on, once the person feels and is safe and supported.

Of course, not every child does have a reliable caregiver – someone who is attuned to them and who can help them make sense of their feelings and reactions, and the world around them. It is important to understand that lack of a reliable caregiver does not mean that a person cannot acquire new skills later on. While it can take time, and hope can be elusive, repair and healing is always possible.

A big step to healing is connecting what happened in childhood to current challenges, and learning self-compassion to negate the strong feelings of self-blame and shame many survivors of family abuse, in particular,

experience. Being told repeatedly that you are worthless and having your feelings negated, or being brutalised by the person who is meant to care and nurture you creates fear, distress and a lot of confusion. It is a primary betrayal and growing up finding it hard to trust others and feel safe makes a lot of sense if that was your experience. Part of healing is finding a reality and sense of safety and learning how to trust others.

When a child is hungry, caregivers usually feed the child. When a child is upset, caregivers usually comfort the child. When a child is frightened, caregivers usually help the child feel safe. Sometimes however caregivers may have their own difficulties which prevent them from providing the support that the child needs and wants – often despite the best intentions. Some caregivers might misuse drugs and alcohol, experience violence and abuse or have mental health issues. These difficulties can mean the caregiver cannot always notice and understand what the child needs. Constantly missing or misunderstanding the needs of the child can affect the way the caregiver and child attach or bond.

Children with trauma experiences can and often develop into adaptive, resourceful and resilient adults. This is because the brain is neuroplastic and can repair right through life. Good support can support the process of repair, with a path to healing, acquiring and strengthening the skills, internal resources, and support networks which were not available when they were children.



Childhood trauma survivor urges others to reach out

- Hannah Neale, Southern Highland News

CONTENT WARNING: Childhood trauma, abuse, alcoholism and drug use

Lisa* battles to overcome her childhood experiences everyday.

The woman, who lives near the Southern Highlands, was born into and raised in a family affected by alcoholism and domestic violence. Lisa said that up until her late-teens she experienced trauma, abuse and neglect on a daily basis.

Now in her 50s, Lisa wants to tell her story. She hopes to inspire others to reach out for assistance.

"There is not one facet of your life that is not affected when you've experienced childhood trauma," she said.

"Trauma is something I have to live with, but it can't be something that stops me from living."

Growing up Lisa said she didn't have a strong attachment to her family and as a result found it difficult to relate to

her peers at school. Even from a young age she felt like an outsider.

As the years passed Lisa began to engage in risk-taking behaviour. She started drinking alcohol in her teens and moved onto drug use in her 20s. For Lisa these behaviours stemmed from her sense of self-worth.

"When you get hit enough times the message you receive is that you are worth nothing," she said.

"Even though I am not responsible for what happened to me in my childhood, I've come to understand it is my responsibility to do something about it.

"You have to be willing to put the effort in to have a better life."

Lisa reached out for assistance when she was in her mid-20s and since then has engaged with the Blue Knot Foundation. The Blue Knot Foundation is a national organisation focused exclusively on empowering recovery

and building resilience for the one in four Australian adults who have experienced the impacts of complex trauma.

Lisa became involved with the foundation when she was still in contact with her biological family. She said she was struggling at the time and her family “couldn’t validate her experience”.

One of the hardest hurdles in recovery is for people to recognise they need support.

“It is really difficult to accept yourself as someone who has experienced abuse and neglect,” Lisa said.

“People need to accept and understand that these things happened to them.

“You are not going to heal by yourself, you need support.”

Lisa wanted people to know that even though her experiences were challenging she still has a great life.

“You can recover from trauma,” she said.

Lisa stressed that people who have experienced childhood trauma are all around us. She said they could be from different backgrounds and carried out a wide variety of jobs in the community.

“Don’t discount us, don’t think just because of what we’ve been through we are not worthwhile,” she said.

“Make sure there is space for us in the world.

“Sometimes our value comes from what we have experienced.”

*Name has been changed to ensure anonymity

**If you or anyone you know needs help:
In the case of an emergency call Triple Zero 000
Call Blue Knot Foundation 1300 657 380**



Grounding strategies

We can all benefit from different strategies for us to use when we're upset or distressed, or when we've been triggered by a situation reminiscent of past trauma. Grounding techniques can help bring us back into the present, to help us feel safe, and out of danger.

There are many strategies to choose from so it is important to see what works for you. Some work with the body and others with the mind but either way the goal is to return to the here and now, as much as possible. These are all ideas – you can choose what suits you.

If you are able, tell yourself that you have been triggered or are having a panic attack or flashback (whatever the circumstance). That this is normal and that you are okay. This can be difficult but do what you can to reassure yourself that the bad things happened in the past and you survived.

Try and focus on the present. Open your eyes and look around you. Notice what is around you – colours, objects, people. Listen to the sounds – birds, traffic, voices

Notice your body – your feet on the ground, the chair under you or your clothes against your skin.

Stand up, if you can and put your feet firmly on the ground. Try and walk mindfully – noticing your feet on the ground

and the way your legs move, your arms swing, your breath as you walk, the air on your face.

Think about 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and take 1 deep slow breath – a mindful breath.

If possible, move around – try and jump up and down or run on the spot. Clap your hands together or rub your arms and legs. Remind yourself of where you are and what is actually happening.

You might find it helpful to carry a grounding object with you – something which is soft and comforting or which has a special meaning for you.

Reach out for support if you can and want to – a trusted friend, a neighbour or a safe family member – someone who you can speak with and who can help you feel safe and nurtured. For help and support you can call the **Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service on 1300 657 380 Monday-Sunday 9-5 AEDT**

And remember to be gentle with yourself, when the flashback or panic attack is over. Do what helps you feel calm – for some it's a warm bath or music, for others it's a gentle walk in nature. As always you choose.



Malika was four when she was first groomed. It took her years to get over the ‘shame’.

This post deals with child sexual assault and might be triggering for some readers.

“Could I have stopped it?”

That’s the question Malika asked herself, as she dealt with crippling shame after suffering from sexual assault as a child at the hands of her stepfather.

Malika is one of the 2.5 million Australian adults – more than one in 10 – who experienced physical or sexual abuse during their childhood, according to ABS.

She was four years old when her perpetrator began grooming her. She remembers it started with his penis falling out of his pants and pornography being left around the house. When she was six years old, he forcibly performed oral sex on her. When she was 12, the penetration started.

Her stepfather told her it was “their” secret.

It wasn’t until a 15-year-old Malika wrote on her bedroom wall, “Fathers are for hating,” that her family discovered the abuse occurring under their roof.

Malika’s mother told her stepfather to stop. He did. But the deep-rooted pain he had caused his step-daughter stayed with her long after the abuse stopped. Part of that pain was a deep shame for what had happened.

It’s this shame that Malika says is not spoken about enough when it comes to victim-survivors of sexual abuse.

“There was a lot of shame, which was one of the biggest hurdles to get over – this feeling of shame that I should have done something; I should’ve stopped it; I should’ve said no; I should’ve spoken out,” Malika tells Mamamia.

For her, it was crippling.

"It was a long time of not doing anything, because that shame stops you from doing anything. I just wanted to live in denial and bury my head in the sand about it."

It made her feel worthless, too.

"I wasn't worth being taken care of," she thought. "I wasn't worth the police investigating what had happened to me."

It wasn't until Malika was 35 years old that she decided to take her perpetrator to court.

There were a number of reasons she felt the court route was a necessary step. When her own daughter had turned four years old, Malika realised just how innocent she was when her stepfather had began the grooming process – sparking a desire to hold him to account.

"I had kind of accepted the abuse myself but I looked at it outside of myself and I thought, wait a second, a four-year-old girl? That's not right. That's not okay."

Adding to this, her perpetrator was being named Armidale's Senior Citizen of The Year – Malika knew then she couldn't let a man responsible for sexually abusing her as a child be publicly celebrated for his contribution to the local community.

Malika had also been in counselling by this point – helping her understand her worth and gifting her the courage to walk into a police station and tell her story.

"The counsellor helped a lot, because she would get angry about what happened to me. And I would think, 'Oh I'm worth getting angry about? It wasn't okay?'"

"That really helped to just unpack things with the counsellor and have those neutral eyes reinforce that I did matter and I was worthy and that shouldn't have happened. And, you know, and what happened to me was worth getting really angry about."

So she went to the police.

Richard Peter Maddox pleaded guilty to three counts of assault and committing an act of indecency with a girl under 16 and one of carnal knowledge of a girl between 10 and 17 years old.

Mamamia can publish his name because Malika had the suppression order lifted so that her perpetrator could be outed and his community would know his crimes.

He went to jail for a total of 18 months.

Now, Malika says she has recovered from the shame she suffered as a result of the sex abuse. And she believes other victim-survivors can too.

"It's like a scar – it just becomes a part of you. It's not something that necessarily goes away, but it heals over and it becomes a part of your makeup and who you are," she tells Mamamia.

"I think it's really important for victims to know that the abuse that happened is the full responsibility of the perpetrator and the abuser. Even with my stepfather, he tried to say, 'Oh, but she wanted it'. That's just to make themselves look less bad.

"The important thing is to realise that survivors are innocent, and you do whatever you can to heal. So if you disassociate or if you don't tell anyone for a month, a year or 10 or 20 years, it's because that's your survival mechanism."

If you have experienced childhood trauma, you can speak with a Blue Knot Helpline trauma counsellor on 1300 657 380.



Gentleman keeps promise to rename William Slim Drive to prevent further hurt

William Slim Drive in Belconnen has been renamed, as promised in 2019 by the ACT Government, in response to claims that the former governor-general, in whose honour the road was named, sexually abused boys at the Fairbridge Farm School in NSW in the 1950s.

The abuse claims came to light when victims gave evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, although the Slim family has denied the allegations, which were never proven.

Sir William Slim was a former British military commander and the 13th governor-general of Australia. The abuse was alleged to have occurred when he visited Fairbridge, which was a notorious home for British child migrants who were trained as farmers and servants.

A media report pre-empted a planned announcement of the name change to Gundaroo

Drive, as a continuation of that road to Ginninderra Drive and coinciding with the start of duplication works.

Minister for Planning and Land Management Mick Gentleman said the renaming followed careful consideration of representations from the community alongside findings from the Royal Commission's final report, which found institutions should review their existing institutional honours, dedications and memorials.

"The ACT Government is making sure that the commemoration of people through place names is consistent with an inclusive and progressive Canberra," he said.

The 2019 decision also followed an ACT Legislative Assembly review into place names in the ACT.

Mr Gentleman said at the time that the government needed to ensure "our public place naming does

not cause ongoing hurt to Canberrans”.

Dr Cathy Kezelman, CEO of the Blue Knot Foundation – Australia’s National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma, said then that the minimal act of changing the name had a significant effect on survivors.

“Each time a survivor confronts a reminder of their trauma, it can throw them back and be a trigger. Seeing William Slim Drive would be a fairly significant trigger for many people,” she said.

Roads Minister Chris Steel said Roads ACT would commence an audit to identify all the road signs that reference William Slim Drive.

“Once the legislative process has taken effect and the change of name is formalised, a procurement process will commence to update all the required road signage,” he said.

The 3.2 km dual carriageway project between Ginninderra Drive and the Barton Highway will also include intersection upgrades at Dumas Street, Owen Dixon Drive and Chuculba Crescent, and on-road cycle lanes in both directions.

It has been split into two stages – the Barton Highway to Chuculba Crescent and Baldwin Drive to Ginninderra Drive, and Chuculba Crescent to Baldwin Drive, for which a tender has recently closed, with work due to get under way by the middle of the year.

The upgrade will provide access to new housing, reduce traffic congestion and improve safety.

ACT Minister for Transport and City Services Chris Steel said the ACT Government was investing significantly into road network upgrades to keep Canberrans moving and to support better public transport and active travel, and providing employment opportunities in the process.

“As Gungahlin continues to grow, and with the future release of several new suburbs on the former CSIRO site, we are acting to augment this important arterial road to Belconnen,” he said.

“With more than 20,000 vehicles on the road connecting Belconnen and Gungahlin daily, this duplication will ensure that we have greater road capacity to keep the northern part of our city moving.”

The Federal Government has contributed \$20 million to the \$44.5 million project, which is due to be completed by mid-2023.

Woman Coping Well

Survivor Story

I fell into deep, black water. The well is a metaphor, but I truly felt as if I were drowning. A few days later I went into terror. I felt like my mind was churning in a food blender as I frantically tried to process the scary ideas and make them safe.

On the evening of the sixth day I emerged into sanity. Suddenly my mind was as clear as a cool, still pool. I asked myself 'how am I feeling right now?' and 'what do I need right now?'

I realised I wanted to sob, as if there were a girl inside me howling. I wondered, 'What would happen if I let it out, let the emotions flow?' I turned my music up loud so no one could hear, sat in a hot bath, with candles, and cried as long and loud as I wanted. Surprisingly, it didn't take long.

When children feel overwhelming emotions they need someone 'bigger, stronger, wiser and kind' to let them know the feelings are not dangerous, and to help them return to calm. As this is repeated over and over, the child learns that it's safe to feel emotions, and how to bring themselves out. This is called 'emotional regulation'.

Woman coping well

Complex trauma is underlying, cumulative and interpersonal. It's what happens when you grow up constantly anxious and afraid, when you feel unsafe with those whose job it is to protect you. There is no 'bigger, stronger, wiser and kind' person to rely on.

Later in life, this leaves you at the mercy of extreme emotional reactions. You feel 'out of control' on the inside, and look to others like a 'drama queen', always reacting as if everything's a crisis. It's humiliating and scary.

As I let myself cry in the bath, my adult self was doing for the crying girl what adults did not do for me when I was a child.

My adult self had waited until I was feeling safe, out of the black water and the blender. She waited until my son was at his father's, when it was safe for others as well as myself.

This is 'emotional regulation' at an advanced level – the ability to acknowledge an emotion: "Hello, I know you're there and I know you need attention," but set it aside to return to when it's safe and appropriate. Even people not affected by trauma often can't do this. They either can't postpone the emotion, or don't come back to it later.

Woman coping well

After I got out of the bath I danced in my living room. Dancing is a non-verbal way of connecting with how I feel, and a gentle therapy for body. The extreme emotional states resulting from complex trauma have a high toll on the body, as well as the mind. My body sighed with relief as everything stretched that needed stretching, everything loosened that needed to be released.

Then I got dressed and went out dancing. Despite crying my heart out an hour before, I had a great night. After letting all that emotion out I felt clean and clear beyond words.

This is not the story of a woman at the mercy of the chaotic effects of her past. This is the story of a woman taking charge of her experience, rather than letting it be defined by people who had power over her life in the past.

This is a story of pride. Gone are the shame and mortification of being a person affected by trauma – drama queen, crazy woman, crumbling mess. This is the triumphant story of a woman coping well.

by Julia C



Benefits of Mindfulness for Recovery

In this article we take a look at the benefits of mindfulness and share a couple of simple, colourful and creative mindfulness ideas. With the colours of autumn on their way, we discuss ways to spend the cooler days ahead.

Mindfulness is a practice. Like any skill it needs to be learnt, but for many of us that can be really difficult. We often don't feel comfortable in the early stages of practice and that can deter us from trying again. Perhaps you have incorporated mindfulness into your daily life and are enjoying the benefits, however if you would like some fresh ideas, read on...

Why mindfulness?

Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, who first developed mindfulness in a therapeutic setting, says: "Mindfulness can be cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, non-judgmentally and openheartedly as possible".

In mindfulness we are paying attention to whatever we choose to attend to.

The present moment and the reality of being in the 'here and now' means we observe and become aware of the way things are, as they are now. Nothing need change our experience. It is okay just as it is – it is valid, it is correct.

Non-reactively. A reaction is automatic. We have no choice; however a response is a deliberate and considered action, thereby being non-reactive.

Non-judgmentally. We are constantly thinking and judging each experience as good or bad, something we like or dislike. In the moment-to-moment experience of mindfulness we let go of judgment. This helps us see things authentically, openly and honestly.

Openheartedly. Mindfulness is an action linking the mind and the heart. To be open-hearted is to bring

a quality of kindness, self compassion, warmth and curiosity to our experience. See if you can experience this.

Mindfulness can lead to relaxation but remember that the aim of mindfulness is not relaxation. In mindfulness, you can't fail because you don't have some experience you have to achieve. You simply practice paying attention to whatever your experience is, as best you can, and whatever happens, happens. You gain an understanding from your experience.

Reference: Kabat-Zinn, Dr. Jon "Full Catastrophe Living"

Remember those coloured pencils?

Once upon a time we all (in Australian schools) had access to a generous supply of coloured pencils and pens. Many of us carried a pencil case every day to school – how marvelous were those moments?! As children, throughout the day, we would get out our colours and use them in our schoolwork and play.

As children we were more: Creative, playful, delighted, absorbed, decorative, mindful.

Why colouring in? Colouring-in is a stress reducing activity. Once you settle down to colour-in and focus on the activity, your mind switches onto the task and you become mindful. As you focus, your heart rate decreases and breathing slows as you create calmness inside your body.

In cultivating mindfulness by colouring-in, you keep your thoughts in the present moment. The activity is non-reactive as you deliberately choose colours and

concentrate on staying between the lines. There is no-judgment as there is nothing right or wrong in the activity. I have no doubt that you will enjoy a sense of openheartedness in this childlike space of pencils and paper. Just like Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn explained above.

When there is a joyful, absorbing task involved then mindfulness 'just happens' without you noticing.


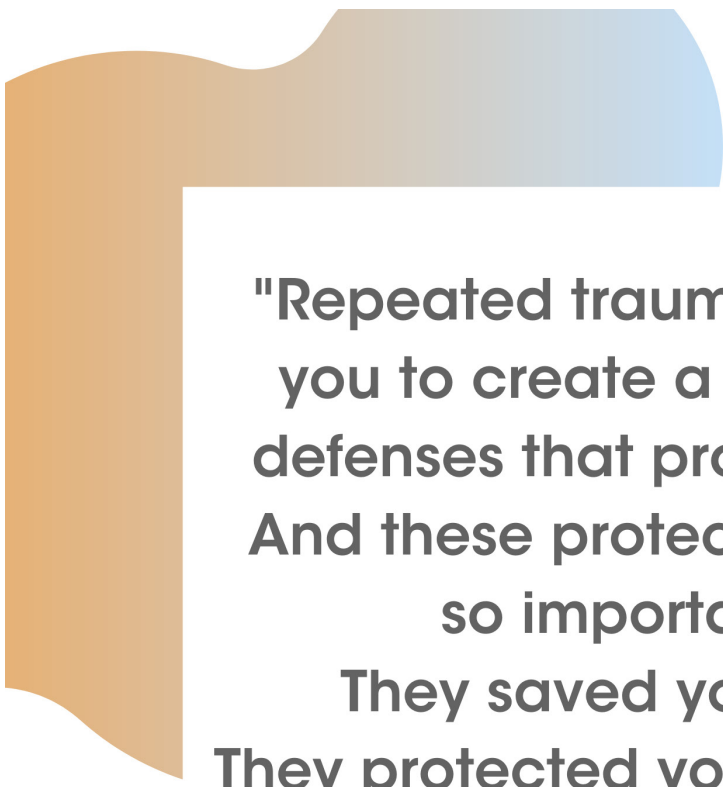
The amygdala (the fear centre of the brain) relaxes – and your brain gets the rest it needs. (See 3D Brain App in later article to locate the 'amygdala and learn more about the brain)

* TRY colouring-in on your own, with friends or family around the dining table – it's fun, you can relax and talk. Unlike drawing, colouring is easy to do for all of us.

* STAYING between the lines, focusing on the shapes and choosing colours encourages us to focus on the task and slows down the rush of thoughts. You can forget your worries mindfully.

* IDEAS for books and free colouring pages are included in the SELF CARE RESOURCES section of this newsletter.

Please remember that what is helpful for one person may not be for another so experiment, explore and find what suits you.



**"Repeated trauma requires
you to create a system of
defenses that protects you.
And these protections were
so important.
They saved your life.
They protected your real self."**

-Gretchen L. Schmelzer, PhD.





Greens Royal Commission privacy bill to be debated

The Senate will next week debate legislation introduced by the Australian Greens last year aimed at fixing the lack of confidentiality protections for witnesses giving evidence to the Disability Royal Commission, ensuring that disabled people are able to tell their stories safely.

Senator Steele-John promised last year that if the Attorney General did not take action urgently to protect witnesses and give the Royal Commission the safeguards it needs, then the Greens would introduce the necessary legislation and bring it on for debate.

"The Attorney General has known about the need for these confidentiality protections for more than a year, yet he's done almost nothing about it. We're still yet to see a government bill put before either house of Parliament," Steele-John said.

"I'm hopeful that we'll garner enough support during the debate to bring this incredibly important issue to a vote in the Senate, putting further pressure on the Attorney General to ensure that that people's privacy is protected beyond the life of our Royal Commission.

"The disability Royal Commission Chair Ronald Sackville AO QC wrote to the Attorney General in February of last year

formally asking him to change the law, and in the Royal Commission's second progress report, released in August last year, the Chair dedicated an entire section (page 37) to the limitations this issue was placing on the scope of the Royal Commission.

"So many people in our community have lost all faith in the system because of the violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect they, or their family, have suffered; they want to know that it is safe to tell their stories.

"Now, as public hearings start again next week, it's more important than ever that our Royal Commission can hear evidence from as many people as possible.

"We need to urgently change the law and give people the peace of mind that telling their stories won't cause them more harm. If this government won't do it, then the Australian Greens will."

The Royal Commissions Amendment (Confidentiality Protections) Bill 2020 will be debated during Private Member's time between 10am and 12:20pm on Monday 15th February.

Work needed to improve COVID-19 messaging for people with disability

Research is underway to increase the effectiveness of tailored COVID-19 communication for vulnerable people

Australian governments must improve their COVID-19 public health messaging to ensure people with disability receive clear information during any future outbreaks, service providers say.

There was a high level of frustration in the disability community last year at the slow response of government during the start of the pandemic, with people with disability and their families reporting feeling forgotten.

A disability royal commission report in December found that the federal government failed to make any significant effort to consult with people with disability or their representative organisations during the early stages of crisis.

Alex Sar, who is deafblind, said the communication and support from the government during the initial stages of COVID left him feeling helpless at times.

He said he found it very difficult to decipher the facts and was quite overwhelmed when trying to find clear information for the deafblind community.

"There could have been better communication. It was disappointing that the disability community was left out and wasn't receiving the same level of attention and support as the aged care sector," Sar said.

"For me personally, there were a lot of mixed messages, conflicting rules and I found it very confusing. As someone who is deafblind, how am I meant to know how far one metre away is when I rely on touch?"

Noting the possibility of another major COVID outbreak in the community, service provider Able Australia is calling on governments to ensure they are better prepared this time around for the unique communication needs of people with disability.

Able Australia national director of marketing and engagement Chandi Piefke told Pro Bono News that governments should learn from the communication issues that arose during the first COVID wave last year.

"One of the challenges was that the language being used was quite complex... and messages were changing on a daily basis," Piefke said.

"So it's not that there was any shortage of information coming out. I think it was more in the way that it was often delivered.

"I think this probably just added to the feeling of anxiety that everyone was feeling at the time."

To help combat this issue, the federal government recently committed more than \$4 million for the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) to support six new COVID-19 research projects.

One of these projects is aimed at improving the effectiveness of tailored COVID-19 messages for vulnerable Australians, including people with disability.

Able Australia played a role in securing this funding, and will help with the research so tailored communication strategies for the disability community can be co-designed.

Piefke said researchers were working in partnership with providers so they can work directly with people who have a disability and understand what their specific communication needs are.

"So for example, we work very closely with the deafblind community and the challenges that they face can often be quite considerable," she said.

"These researchers will be talking to deafblind people and understanding first-hand how exactly we can best support them and get information out to them in a way and format that they can understand."

Piefke said she hopes this research will help the disability community be better informed and receive more targeted information during any future outbreaks.

She said it was important that a co-designed template was created to help governments communicate with vulnerable communities.

"This way, when governments have important messages they need to convey to the community, they understand how to translate that into different ways that will be better understood by the different cohorts within the community," she said.

"Governments (must realise) that a one-size-fits-all approach just doesn't work."



Breaking Free is Blue Knot Foundation's monthly eNewsletter for survivors of childhood trauma, their supporters and community members. For feedback or to contribute, please email newsletter@blueknot.org.au or call (02) 8920 3611.

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