



National Centre of Excellence
for Complex Trauma



Welcome to the March edition of Breaking Free

In recent weeks we have witnessed a turning point in bringing the issues of sexual assault, gender equality and accountability to the fore. For too long survivors have remained silent or have been ignored when they have tried to speak. For many the shame and fear and the burden of not being believed, not being supported, and the real possibility of losing their job and other opportunities have kept them silent.

That burden has often been overwhelming but now with the groundswell of public outrage, many survivors are coming forward and telling their story. Their voices and those of others supporting them are getting louder and are demanding change. But we need these changes to occur systemically and culturally and throughout all levels of society: in our homes, schools, workplaces and even in politics.

Our lead article this month focuses on this issue. It delves into the impacts of sexual assault on survivors, and complexities around consent, navigating current societal perceptions, the justice system and disclosure. It talks about the inherent struggle for survivors in telling their story, and the self-blame that is common when issues around consent are blurred. It is not straightforward, and many survivors carry this burden for a long time. But there is help and hope.

We share some resources in this edition of Breaking Free including our newly released fact sheet around Coping Strategies. We have also included a link to our publication Talking about Trauma: Guide to Everyday Conversations with the General Public. This publication from our Talking about Trauma series can help support and guide safe trauma conversations, and inform an understanding on the ways in which people cope with trauma. These resources are free to download, and we invite you share them with others who may also find them useful as well. We have many more resources on our website www.blueknot.org.au which we may also help.

As always, the Blue Knot Helpline is available should you need to speak to a trauma specialist counsellor for support. They are highly trained and trauma-informed. They can be contacted on 1300 657 380, 9am – 5pm Monday to Sunday AEST.

Until next time, take care.
The Blue Knot Team



Sexual assault in the news

Sexual assault and child sexual assault are far more common than our community has been prepared to acknowledge. They occur most commonly in the home and family when secrecy, ready access and dependence on the perpetrator often mean that these crimes continue unabated. Sexual assault is also far too common in the workplace as is currently being highlighted.

The women's March 4 Justice on March 15th was an Australia-wide protest against sexism and gendered violence, supported by thousands of people. With Brittany Higgins, who has spoken out about alleged crimes in Parliament House addressing the rally in Canberra and Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, child sexual abuse survivor speaking in Tasmania the message was powerful, united and consistent. Sexual assault is never acceptable, anywhere or any time, and action is needed to ensure due process and accountability, regardless of who is implicated.

The reality is that many survivors struggle to disclose their experiences, and, as a result of the shame and self-blame, which survivors so often carry, silence themselves. Others, when attempting to disclose, either as a child, young person or adult, have been dismissed,

or had their concerns minimised or denied. The present collective action aside, as a society we have historically been reluctant to acknowledge the scourge of sexual assault.

While sexual assault is more common amongst women, girls, transgender and non-binary people boys and men are also victims. This is often unacknowledged and the stigma for men and boys including gender norms, and pervasive shame makes speaking out very challenging. While perpetrators are most often men and young men, they can also be women and girls. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse evidenced more victims were male.

These are serious crimes – abuses of power, betrayals of trust and violations of personal boundaries. They

are often also secret crimes, in which victims are often blamed and perpetrators given the benefit of the doubt. Sexual assault is generally about power and coercion. It is not about sex but rather about sex being weaponised.

Power imbalances and the blurring of workplace boundaries can create the dynamics in which the need for consent is annihilated, accountability absent and cover-up, victim blaming, secrecy and lies common. There has been a lot of stigma in our society around sexual assault, which feeds into the self-blame victims often experience. Retaliation against people speaking out against sexual harassment and victimisation in the workplace has been not uncommon. Myths around sexual assault contribute to victim blaming and a social fabric in which sexual assault becomes tacitly excusable.

Issues of consent are poorly understood. A person who is sleeping, intoxicated, cognitively impaired, or a young child, without the language or level of development cannot give consent. In these situations, the person is not able to say 'no' but nor can they say 'yes' or give consent. The right to sex cannot be assumed or snatched. It requires active and definitive permission.

Sexual assault is a crime in which there are usually no witnesses. The reality is that false reports of sexual assault are rare. Many sexual assaults go unreported or stay undisclosed for a long time. This can mean a lack of physical evidence and a questioning of the motives of the alleged victim, in not coming forward immediately. Delayed reporting makes sense. If the person was a child, dependent on the perpetrator, and with no one to trust, the child has often been threatened into silence, and groomed into compliance. Others victims are sexually assaulted as adults by partners, spouses, ex-partners, friends – adding another layer of shame and confusion. Shame, self-blame and victim blaming are additionally silencing.

There have been a number of high-profile abusers e.g. Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein where many victims have progressively come forward, with each new person speaking out 'giving permission' for others. It has been a time of the #Metoo, End Rape on Campus, #Let Her speak driving significant social change. Speaking out against power, hierarchy, influence, societal judgement and internal shame and self-blame take incredible courage. Understandably it is not something all victims can do. It is very challenging and requires a lot of support. It is about choice as well and not everyone chooses to speak out either.

Many victims blame themselves for not fighting back and stopping the assault. But in situations of terror the body often goes into freeze mode, unable to move or speak let alone fight or flee. Very often people's experiences are minimised, both by themselves but also by others. "It wasn't that bad." "Others had it worse." "It was only once." Victim blaming must stop. It is time for us all to stand up and say that this is simply not acceptable – ever!

Not being believed or further marginalised in society all make paths to justice and recovery so much harder. While recovery is possible, many victims/survivors struggle to trust enough and be safe enough or have the resources to seek help and support to help them heal. Therapy and counselling can help many victims to cope and feel less overwhelmed and fearful. That said therapy is not for everyone. There are many paths to recovery including EMDR, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, art therapy, drumming etc. Recovery can take time, but the support of friends and family are also critical. Being believed is bottom line and having a society which is more compassionate is the first step to reducing the stigma that sabotages healing and costs lives. Thank you to those who are so publicly saying : "Enough is enough."



New Fact Sheet Coping Strategies

The recent stories in the media have brought more attention to sexual abuse, and many survivors are finding it challenging as their capacity to cope is overwhelmed. We have developed a new fact sheet which outlines how people use coping strategies when faced with these challenges. The fact sheet is useful for survivors, as well as others, to help better understanding how some coping strategies can have an impact on their behaviours in daily life.

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FACT SHEET:

Coping Strategies



- Trauma which is ongoing can overwhelm a person's capacity to cope.
- A person experiencing ongoing trauma needs to adapt to survive. These adaptations are called coping strategies.
- Coping strategies form pathways in the brain which become familiar. They become the person's 'go to' (default) responses during times of more stress and trauma.
- People in 'survival' mode cope the best way they can. They adopt coping strategies to help manage their strong feelings and changes in arousal.
- Some strategies do not stay helpful. While they were protective at first, they become risks for health impacts.
- Even when coping strategies are no longer protective, we need to understand and respect them. That's because they initially helped the person to survive.
- People use different coping strategies to reduce the pain and distress of trauma. Coping strategies include addictions and compulsive behaviours e.g. alcohol, drugs, self-harm, suicidality, anger and aggression. Others are withdrawal, avoidance and dissociation.
- Coping strategies can cause challenges both for the person and for the people with whom they interact. The person is not trying to be difficult; they are trying to manage as best they can.
- Coping strategies are often automatic and effective in the short term but can also be harmful and become risky over time.
- Children develop coping mechanisms to deal with the effects of childhood trauma. It is normal to want to feel better and 'escape' strong and challenging feelings.



Blue Knot Helpline 1300 657 380 | blueknot.org.au | 02 8920 3611 | admin@blueknot.org.au

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FACT SHEET: Coping Strategies

- It is critical not to try to remove a person's coping strategies until they have developed different resources to help them cope.
- When people are in a trauma response they are outside of their 'window of tolerance'. People can learn to widen their 'window'. This can help them cope and manage their strong emotions and behaviours. It can also help them better manage their triggers over time.
- People can develop new coping strategies over time – coping strategies which are less challenging and risky.



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How to cope with increased media reporting around sexual assault

*Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

While the publication and dissemination of stories and survivor experiences help to ‘break the silence’ and secrecy around sexual assault, doing so can also raise a lot of issues for many, especially for survivors. Given the recent March 4 justice and high-profile campaigns there have been a lot of reports in the media and accompanying commentary.

Reading sexual assault reports and commentary can bring past traumatic experiences and feelings to the surface. At times, it can threaten to overwhelm us. This is completely understandable for us all but especially for people who have experienced their own abuse or other traumas. To help support you to manage the possible negative effects of media reporting about abuse or trauma, we thought it might be helpful to include the following tips from our Blue Knot Helpline counsellors. We hope some of the self-care and other strategies might be of help.

Firstly, what is a trigger? For survivors, triggers are anything in their daily life that reminds them of prior abuse, violence or trauma. While sometimes a survivor can connect the trigger what they experienced but at other times the connection is not so obvious. The person may experience bad and

upsetting feelings reacting to something in the present, but without understanding where their reaction comes from.

If the person is unable to connect their present reactions to a past situation or events they may feel as though they are going ‘crazy’ or that something is wrong with them. This can be scary and confusing and can lead to feelings of fear, anxiety and shame, emotional numbing, social withdrawal, nightmares, eating problems, self-harm and suicidal ideation. If this happens to you, it is important to remember that you are not going ‘crazy’ but that you are experiencing a “normal response to abnormal events.”

If you have been ‘triggered’ by a story or an event in the media, consider the following suggestions to see what might help you feel more grounded:

- Stop what you are doing and try to tune into what is happening in your body and/or mind. See if you can identify the trigger.
- Pay attention to your senses – to images, smells, tastes, sounds and tactile experiences that remind you or your body of the original traumatic experience. Can you see a connection between the present event and past experiences?

- Remember to breathe and stay connected to your body. Focus on calming yourself. Tell yourself some reassuring things. Check that you are taking slow and deep breaths. Relax your body. Do whatever works for you.
- Reconnect with the present moment. Make an effort to notice what is around you, touch things, notice smells, and see where you are and who you are with.
- Remind yourself that what you are doing and experiencing now is different to what happened during your abuse or other distressing experience.
- Create a safe area in your home – a place you can go when you are feeling frightened or upset. Make an agreement with yourself that you will stay in that space until the feeling passes, one breath at a time. You may also set up objects in your safe area that calm and soothe you. Your safe space may be at a window seat, in your bed or in a comfortable chair.
- It is important to know that you do have a choice and that it is OK to switch the television off or to avoid reading the newspaper and scrolling through social media. You may decide to limit your exposure to the news or to avoid it altogether particularly if you are already feeling overwhelmed.
- Find a trusted person to talk to. It may be a relative, friend or neighbour or consider speaking to a trauma-informed counsellor on the Blue Knot Helpline by calling 1300 657 380 9am – 5pm Monday to Sunday AEST. The counsellor can support you to help you identify and understand your possible triggers, to feel safe and develop additional ways of coping. They can also help you with a referral for ongoing support if you feel you want or need it.



Talking About Trauma

As survivors are increasingly coming forward to tell their story, members of the general public are becoming more aware of the prevalence of trauma and how it can affect people. However, many people feel poorly equipped to have everyday conversations with people they know or suspect have actually experienced trauma.

Talking About Trauma: Guide to Everyday Conversations for the General Public provides a simple guide, in plain English, to support these critical conversations. Whether you are starting the conversation yourself (because you suspect a person is experiencing/has experienced trauma) or you are responding to a person telling you about their trauma. The information, evidence and tips contained within the guide will help you manage the challenges and minimise the risks.

Register and download the free guide here: https://www.blueknot.org.au/Resources/Publications/Talking-about-trauma/Talking_About_Trauma_Public

Congratulations to Blue Knot President, Dr Cathy Kezelman AM

Finalist in the Pro Bono Impact 25 Awards

The Impact 25 Awards were launched in 2014 to create a platform for those in the sector to celebrate their peers. Since then, Impact 25 has grown into an esteemed accolade, recognising the most influential people in the Australian social sector, as voted by their peers.

We are delighted and proud to announce that Blue Knot Foundation President, Dr Cathy Kezelman has been recognised as a top 25 finalist from a shortlist of 150 nominees in the sector. The awards are open to all those engaging across the social economy: from charities and not for profits, philanthropists, social enterprises, impact investors and corporates looking to do good.

Some of Australia's best-known CEOs, politicians, advocates and innovators, along with students and refugees, have been recognised in previous years for their influence on a sector that employs over one million people.

We congratulate Cathy on this distinguished award and recognition.





Berated and beaten: At 66, Steve still lives with the scars of his cruel, abusive mother

Originally published by Mamamia

*The subject of this article is known to Mamamia, but has chosen to remain anonymous.

Warning: the following details instances of child abuse and may be triggering to some readers. As Blue Knot Foundation National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma notes, unresolved childhood trauma negatively impacts emotional and physical wellbeing in adulthood.

Survivors can experience a range of issues including anxiety, depression, health problems, disconnection, isolation, confusion, being ‘spaced out’, and fear of intimacy and new experiences. “There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’, but reduced quality of life is a constant,” the foundation states.

Warning: the following details instances of child abuse and may be triggering to some readers.

“Get on the ground!”

The thieves had already knocked the manager of

the McDonald’s unconscious when they turned towards the diners. One among the four thumped his baseball bat on a table in warning.

“Get on the ground!”

Diners scrambled under their tables, some screamed. But one, who we’ll call Steve*, just sat there. Even as one of the thieves approached and wound up to strike him, he stayed put.

One blow came, then another, and another.

He looked closely at the attacker’s face, making observations that later proved critical to police catching the group. But there was no fear coursing through him, no urge to fight or flee; he felt little other than perturbed that they’d interrupted his lunch.

In between the strikes, a thought echoed in his head.

My mother used to hit harder than that.

Steve knows his reaction that day, some two decades ago now, was not exactly 'normal'.

'Normal' is something he's been approximating his entire life.

As a survivor of childhood physical and emotional abuse, the 66-year-old father of two is still grappling with the effects of what he endured. For years, he'd hide it in professional and social settings; he'd pretend. But the numbness he felt that day in McDonald's roughly two decades ago, compelled him to better understand why.

Along with conducting countless hours of research, he's more recently become involved in moderating forums in which other survivors tentatively reach out to one another, looking for validation and a sense they are not alone in their ongoing struggles.

"We manage to cling to the hope that all will be okay one day," Steve said. "We enter the workforce, we partner up, and if that works, we try to have families. We try so hard to fit in. I can't emphasise that enough. We bury this stuff so deep, but the effects of it are there and they cannot be hidden forever."

"...But I love you."

There is no comprehensive data on the prevalence of child abuse in Australia, but the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Personal Safety Survey estimated that about 2.5 million Australian adults (13 per cent) experienced physical and/or sexual abuse during childhood.

Steve's perpetrator was his mother.

Between the ages of 5 and 12, she made him strip naked and struck him with wooden canes across his backside and legs between 15-20 times a year.

The beatings were so brutal, his mind entered a dissociative state to protect itself from the trauma, almost disconnecting from what was happening. As a result, Steve can only clearly remember a handful of canings.

One of them, he was aged somewhere between nine and 11, and was struck more than 20 times for leaving a tissue in his pocket on wash day: "Afterwards I lay on the floor, tears flooding down my face, barely in control of my body, and I say what?

"But I love you."

Another involved his mother letting him choose between being beaten with a stiff cane or a flexible one: "I clearly remember debating their merits... At the time, I actually thought she was being nice."

He was repeatedly slapped across the face, too. So hard that it left him with nerve damage and breathing

difficulties.

Steve says his mother claimed to be seriously ill, and spent much of her time laying in and reading romance novels. She also told him he would never love her, and that he was lazy.

He did everything to prove her wrong. In his final years of primary school, every morning before he left, he'd make his own lunch, vacuum and dust the entire house. In the afternoons, he'd do the shopping and water the garden. And on the weekends he mowed the lawns.

Still, the beatings came for him and his big brother.

No one intervened. Not even when his mother was institutionalised for three months when he was in Year 7, leaving the boys entirely on their own (their father — "a very nice, gentle man" — left when Steve was seven years old, and their maternal grandparents were elderly and unable to provide full-time care).

"Anyone looking at the kid with a safety pin holding up his pants, or the sick notes signed by his brother, should have known something was wrong," he said. "It was the 60s, and I think in those days they blamed children for these things."

The legacy of abuse.

It wasn't until Steve was 33 that he truly realised what he'd been through.

His mother lived with Munchausen syndrome, a disorder in which a person repeatedly acts as if they are sick in order to earn attention. And one Saturday evening, three decades ago, she was detained after becoming aggressive toward a sceptical hospital triage nurse.

She was sent to a psychiatric institution, where doctors confirmed Steve's fears. His childhood had been anything but normal.

Like many survivors, Steve found coping mechanisms for his trauma.

He became addicted to exercise and, later to work ("I have clocked 30-hour shifts"), which he speculates may be a hangover of his mother's taunts about laziness. And from the age of 18 to 40, he drank excessive amounts of alcohol on weekends: "I was a very quiet introspective drunk, and after (drinking), I slept knowing I would not have any nightmares."

After years of avoiding his mother's gaze, he now struggles to maintain eye contact with new people. He doesn't embarrass easily. He feels empathy for stray dogs but struggles to see why people cry at funerals.

And until a decade ago, he would often walk around with loose or undone shoelaces.

"Looking back, I remembered: one day, when very young, I had tied my shoelaces too tightly for my mother to undo easily. Even at that very early age, I knew not to make my mother angry," he said. "Incredible how the mind and body work."

As Blue Knot Foundation National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma notes, unresolved childhood trauma negatively impacts emotional and physical wellbeing in adulthood.

Survivors can experience a range of issues including anxiety, depression, health problems, disconnection, isolation, confusion, being 'spaced out', and fear of intimacy and new experiences. "There is no 'one-size-fits-all', but reduced quality of life is a constant," the foundation states.

In fact, according to 2015 estimates by the Federal Government's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, if no one in Australia had ever experienced child abuse or childhood neglect, there would have been 26 per cent fewer suicide and self-inflicted injuries that year, plus 20 per cent fewer depressive disorders and 27 per cent fewer anxiety disorders.

Yet resources for survivors of at-home abuse are notoriously scarce and under-funded.

Steve's path.

Steve lives with post-traumatic stress disorder and has, in his words, "very poor social skills" and low emotional intelligence.

He learned to appear 'normal' by watching.

At 21, he would go to a local wine bar on Saturday nights and sit with a book for several hours, just observing.

"I would just watch people in the room," he said. "I would try to understand, try to reduce my own personal intensity, and just try to see how people interacted."

He then followed the 'normal' path. Career. Marriage. Children.

His wife is also a survivor ("It's extraordinary how often abused children partner up with other abused children," Steve said), and while their marriage hasn't been perfect, Steve credits his "amazing" wife with their longevity as a couple.

He says he's worked extremely hard at his relationships with her and their children, and has never perpetuated the cycle of abuse. But he acknowledges his shortcomings.

He once broke a table in anger. And he was barely involved in his children's lives until one started playing sport during primary school.

"I wasn't a parent; I was a coach," he said. "I could never get the warm, love thing. I was the one that, when the child was hurt, I would basically tell them to get back on the field... I really hope to get a second shot as a grandparent to learn from my mistakes. Because I'm always learning."

Steve's mother is still alive and living in an aged-care facility. He only visits once or twice a year, and last time she didn't recognise him.

In truth, he doesn't know who he is beneath the trauma she inflicted on him, what parts of him and his behaviours are innate and what are a product of what he went through.

He tried counselling, but prefers to engage with other survivors. He's been involved in online forums for more than seven years now, and draws on the resources of Blue Knot Foundation.

It's all shown him the capacity for healing, if you work at it. In his view, that means understanding and managing your coping mechanisms, seeking out resources and support, and engaging in a hobby or interest into which you can escape occasionally (say music, or fitness, or fandom).

"If you're not willing to really try to work to improve, it ain't gonna get any better," he said. "It's no good standing back and going, 'Life is unfair.' Life is unfair; that's a given. But you can make it a lot better. If you work at it, you can have a wonderful life. And I think you appreciate it much more, because of where you've come from."

And it's shown him he doesn't always have to pretend. "Numerous people will come on to the forums and say, 'yeah, this is what happened,'" he said. "And every time someone posts one of these stories, I look at parts and go, 'yep, that's my path.' It's that validation..."

"You're not sick, you're not disturbed. Don't be ashamed of who you are. "You are a normal person who has lived an extremely abnormal life."

If you experienced abuse as a child, resources and support are available via Blue Knot Foundation. Visit the website or call 1300 657 380 between 9am-5pm AEDT to speak to a trauma counsellor.

*The subject of this article is known to Mamamia, but has chosen to remain anonymous.

Feature image: Getty.



'We need to be heard unconditionally': Aden's story of healing and recovery

Trigger warning: child sex abuse

Article originally published in 9Honey

Aden Hemmerling's story, like so many others, is an important one.

After surviving childhood sexual abuse and embarking on years of gruelling, trauma-related recovery as a result, Aden has dedicated his life to helping others and wants to use his experiences to instil hope.

With a passion for human rights, Aden lives by the mantra that everybody has a story. Now, he celebrates his own story of healing, and calls on all of us to break the pervasive stigma that is still so stubbornly attached to abuse.

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In the wake of experiencing sexual violence as a child, and speaking out legally against his perpetrator, Aden's life then followed a tragic string of abusive relationships and substance abuse.

His story serves as a jarring reminder that perpetrators are often those in positions of authority and that heinous crimes occur often in spaces that we expect to be safe for our children.

Describing himself as "always a little different to the other kids" and with vivid memories of playing with his sister's Barbies, Aden reflects on the many hardships he faced as a young person, coming out as a gay teenager and wrestling with the aftermath of his assault.

He describes an "ongoing sense of not knowing who I was meant to be, or how to fit into the world." This cost his emotional wellbeing and relationships greatly.

Heartbreakingly, Aden believes that many people in his life interpreted his sexuality as a “result” of his abuse, which only deepened his silent shame and isolation.

We are reminded why young survivors find it so difficult to reach out and seek the help that they desperately need to lead full lives. For too long, our world has refused to acknowledge the harsh realities of child sexual abuse and, with this, we position dangerous messages about coming forward to young people.

Aden remembers feeling “dirty, scared and lost” and having “little to no access to support” in dealing with his trauma. He says that adequate support services did not exist in the early 90s, and that he was forced to find other methods for healing. As his brother was also a survivor, Aden notes that it was largely up to his parents and other family members to support them in their early years.

Aden describes living as an adult survivor as an ongoing and often difficult journey, and one that relies on reaching out to move forward. As part of his recovery, Aden has taken the time to learn, read and engage in educational services for his healing.

“I have my trigger points and, at times, have moments of emotional distress. I have now come to terms with my experiences and continue to grow every day.”

“I engage with regular support to reflect and discuss the many factors which can impact me at any given time, and now feel I have an array of strategies to maintain my wellbeing.”

The shame tied to speaking out about trauma is still so entrenched in our world and seeking help can be extremely hard. Breaking the stigma tied to abuse is a difficult task but Aden says that it starts first and foremost with better understanding, empathy and taking care of yourself.

For Aden, taking care of himself comes in many different forms. From prioritising attending to his own emotions, to turning down certain environments or events that he knows could be distressing, Aden describes a newfound self-awareness that “only enhances (his) capacity to cope”.

“I do not feel the shame that I once did. It took me a long time for me to get to where I am. As an adult survivor, what I have learnt is that I cannot take my trauma away, but I can transform it into a life full of meaning and purpose.”

In order to heal, Aden was forced to engage with his “inner child” and explore the devastating impacts that his abuse has had on his life. This has been a journey of self-reflection, counselling and minimising emotional distress wherever possible.

Years later, Aden still finds himself grappling with the weight of his trauma, and notes that memories of his abuse reveal themselves in various ways.

“My healing journey has never stopped. There are still moments where I might remember an experience that I had forgotten, or it could even be a smell which triggers me.”

Aden can now recognise when he isn’t “doing well” and expresses that he now has the resources and tools to properly communicate when he needs support.

He references Blue Knot Foundation as a service that has not only helped him to better educate those around him about his own trauma and how it has negatively impacted his life, but one that has enhanced his ability to support others.

When asked what he wishes the world knew about traumatic experiences like his, Aden reiterates that he wants us to reject the common myths tied to surviving sexual assault.

As our news feeds and television screens fill with traumatic accounts of sexual abuse and harassment across Australia and around the world, Aden urges for empathy and compassion.

“I am proud to state that I am a survivor without a diagnosis. I wish people knew we don’t necessarily need a diagnosis to survive, we need to be heard...”

And when I state that we need to be heard, we need to be heard unconditionally. No matter how hard it is to hear a story, it is most likely harder for the person having to tell their story.”

Dr Cathy Kezelman, President of the Blue Knot Foundation, expresses that being listened to is not only fundamental to recovery, but a crucial part in bettering our world. “Being listened to is the bottom line. Having a society that is more compassionate and understanding is the first step to reducing the stigma that sabotages healing and costs lives.”

Dr Kezelman reinforces the growing need for adequate support services and general compassion when supporting people dealing with long-term impacts of complex trauma.

"We of course need to invest in public awareness campaigns around sexual assault, but we also need to emphasise responding compassionately to survivors and through trauma-informed care. We need to equip healthcare professionals and practitioners with the tools and resources to appropriately support the people that need it."

Dr Kezelman reminds us that many survivors find themselves in positions where they are blamed, or their experiences are minimised, and with such mindsets comes additional trauma.

"We have repeatedly seen the human cost with victims taking their own lives and using dangerous strategies to try and numb their pain. Not being believed, being publicly humiliated, decimated in legal proceedings and marginalised in society, all make recovery so much harder."

Now, in his role as a mental health worker, Aden has built a career on his high level of compassion and unshakeable urge to help. He hopes that his journey of recovery and healing will encourage other survivors to access support services and to not face the debilitating weight of trauma alone.

"No matter your distress or your experiences, healing is possible."

"Even though we can feel helpless, lost and like no one understands, it is possible to transform your story. No matter where you are on your journey, you are doing your best."

"It is okay to not be okay. It is okay to reach out - don't do it on your own"

Survivors of childhood trauma can contact the Blue Knot Foundation on 1300 657 380 between 9am-5pm AEDT or visit their website. Resources can be found here.

Contact bfarmakis@nine.com.au

If you, or anyone you know is struggling, please contact: Lifeline 13 11 14; beyondblue 1300 224 636; Domestic Violence Line 1800 65 64 63; 1800-RESPECT 1800 737 732



Panel Discussion: Complex Trauma in Multicultural Communities

This conversation about complex trauma in multicultural communities was held during Cultural Diversity Week, a Victorian celebration of multicultural communities. It features Blue Knot Foundation President, Dr. Cathy Kezelman together with Rida Aleem Khan, its multicultural Ambassador. Special guests on the panel were Dr. Judy Tang, Victorian Multicultural Commissioner and Jude Eadie, Founder and CEO of Global Youth Mental Health Awareness.

Together these leaders in complex trauma, mental health and multicultural communities explore opportunities to work together to raise awareness and possibilities for support around people experiencing repeated violence abuse, neglect, as a child, young person or adult in multicultural communities.

Rida Aleem Khan, a multicultural and youth advocate was crowned winner of Miss South Asia Australia Miss Community pageant 2020 and this year she is a finalist in Miss Diamond International Australia, both in recognition of her community

work. As part of the Miss Diamond International Australia competition, Rida is fundraising for Blue Knot Foundation to extend its work into multicultural communities.

View the panel discussion here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYBPkk-TDx0>

Please support Rida in raising funds for Blue Knot Foundation by donating here: <https://chuffed.org/project/support-rida-on-her-quest-to-raise-funds-for-blue-knot-foundation>

Survivor Contribution

I Was Born Into Captivity

I was born into captivity,
with wild beasts for my keepers.

They were unable to abide me,
unable to rise to their responsibilities.

Themselves isolated in their cage,
they isolated me further.

No-one came to look through the bars
as they tormented me.

There were no visitors to this
particular zoo of relentless assaults.

And now I cannot abide to see
any bird or other animal trapped in a cage.

Helpless. Unable to move.
Its body bruised and spirit crushed.

Because I know that,
even if it breaks free,
it carries the wounds of its confinement
forever, inside its beaten body and soul.

And forever it will fly or limp on the outside
of the flock,
of the herd,
easy pickings for predators.

Victim Impact Statement

You damaged me irretrievably

You stole any possibility of my feeling safe, contented, warmed, loved, wanted, precious

You condemned me to a lifetime of isolation and loneliness

You deprived me of human touch and acceptance

You made me feel I was living in a war zone - hungry, thirsty, frightened

And you did it with malice aforethought

You were evil

- Robyn



2021 ISSTD Webinar Series

Dissociative Identity Disorder Awareness Day

On 4th March, Blue Knot Foundation President Dr Cathy Kezelman joined presenters from ISSTD, an Infinite Mind and Beauty After Bruises for a DID Awareness Day Webinar. The webinar was a huge success, and may be viewed here on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2QtK9uRohU>



Victoria's truth and justice commission must offer trauma support, assembly member says

People who speak out at the Yoo-rook commission will need 'a lot of support', Troy McDonald of the First Peoples' Assembly says

The commissioners appointed to Victoria's truth and justice commission will need "a really grounded understanding in trauma" and to offer victim support similar to the royal commission into child sexual abuse in order to gain the trust of Aboriginal Victorians, a member of the treaty assembly has said.

The Yoo-rook commission was announced this month and will examine the ongoing impact of the genocide and dispossession of Aboriginal people in Victoria, as well as the impact of current-day racist policies.

Troy McDonald, a Gunai Kurnai man and member of the First Peoples' Assembly Victoria, told an Ebony Institute roundtable on truth and justice commissions in Melbourne on Wednesday that people would need "a lot of support" to

speak out.

"The east coast of Australia really took the brunt of the invasion full on and the effects of that filtered down to families, communities and individuals across this country, right up to this very minute," McDonald said.

"We're very cognisant in the First People's Assembly ... that this process is going to elicit vicarious trauma in many of our people. And we need to be able to have a system and a process in place that supports those people. Because in my lifetime, just in my lifetime, hurting Aboriginal people in really severe, punitive ways is a fact."

Victoria is the first jurisdiction in Australia to announce such a commission, but other states and territories are expected to follow suit. The Northern Territory is aiming to begin a three-

year truth commission by mid-year, and Queensland is also moving toward a treaty process.

To date the federal government has sidelined calls for a national truth and justice commission, which was one of the demands of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. But a national commission is still the aim of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – which means that communities face the prospect of going through a painful public truth-telling process at a state or territory level, then repeating the process for a national commission.

The Yoo-rook commission is currently advertising for commissioners. Hearings are expected to begin before the end of the year, with an interim report to be handed down within 12 months.

Dr Jackie Huggins, the co-chair of the Queensland pathway to treaty working group, said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would “keep talking, talking and talking and telling our truth until there is some traction”.

“This is the graciousness of our people and the absolute dedication that we want to extend to the wider community, the 97%, about finally listening to our truths, finally hearing us and finally giving us voice,” the Bidjara and Birri-Gubba Juru elder said. “So we’ll just keep doing it.”

Prof Gregory Phillips, a Waanyi and Jaru man, is the chairman of the Ebony Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Institute, which hosted the roundtable. It has released a discussion paper comparing international and national inquiries and is preparing to hold community consultations on the formation of truth and justice commissions in Australia.

Phillips said there was a risk that a truth-telling commission would “re-traumatise people”.

He said the international experience, looking at post-genocide inquiries in Germany, Canada, South Africa and Rwanda, was that any process of truth-telling must be followed by concrete steps to address issues raised and bring a sense of both justice and healing. That would include changing the school curriculum to accurately reflect the history of Australia.

“You can’t change 200 years of ignorance and denial with an ad campaign. That’s a good start. But there needs to be mass public education,” he said.

Phillips said the process would help not just Indigenous Australians, but non-Indigenous Australians. It should be viewed not as a symbolic gesture, or something to be done for the sake of political expediency, but as a foundational step in becoming a strong nation that was skipped in the colonial creation of Australia.

“The truth must be told not just to set us free, but to set non-Aboriginal people free,” he said. “Non-Aboriginal people from Scotland and Ireland will tell you that they have had similar things happen to them with colonisation. And then they were put on ships and bought here – the convicts were rejected. Australia has not dealt with the feelings of that, the psychological hangover of what are the white foundations of this country.

“So healing is not just for blackfellas. We need whitefellas to know who they are and where they come from.”

Steve Rossingh, a Kamaroi man and the director of the Northern Territory Treaty Commission, said truth-telling commissions should be viewed as a “nation-building exercise”.

“Look at treaty and truth-telling as a marriage not divorce,” he said. “That’s the ethos in mainstream Australia that I think really needs to change”.



Sexual assault victims can easily be re-traumatised going to court — here's one way to stop this

As federal parliament has been rocked by allegations of sexual violence, one of the frequent questions has been “why don’t victims go to police?”

But this is not a straightforward or easy solution. And victims can easily end up being re-traumatised by going through the criminal justice system.

How can we make going to court better for those seeking justice? One critical way is to provide victims with their own lawyers.

What many people may not realise, is that throughout the legal process, victims are simply assigned a lawyer through the Director of Public Prosecutions. This means they do not have access to their own lawyers to protect their privacy and individual interests at trial.

Women’s fears and community mistrust

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost 90% of women do not report their sexual assault to police.

One of the reasons victims do not report sexual violence — or delay reporting — is fear they will not be believed. This does not come out of nowhere.

According to a 2017 national survey, there is a widespread mistrust of women’s reports of violence by the community,

even though evidence shows false reports are rare.

The DPP has significant powers

Even for those who do report, the ability for victims to get justice is out of their hands.

The Director of Public Prosecutions has significant discretionary powers, including the ability to decide whether a criminal case should proceed and how it will be prosecuted. The reality is victims have no control or ability to challenge prosecutors’ decision-making.

For cases that proceed to prosecution, victims’ experiences are generally negative. This is due to insensitive treatment by criminal justice personnel, including defence lawyers.

Compounding this are the myths and stereotypes that underpin (intrusive defence questioning) at trial. These include questions about victims’ sexual history, used to create a false perception the victim consented to sexual activity or is the “type” of person who is more likely to consent.

This is also a reason why so few convictions are reached.

Women are re-traumatised

Given victims are disclosing highly personal and distressing details about their assaults, and potentially being subjected to fierce cross-examination at trial, they are often re-traumatised by going to court.

This intensifies the barriers women face reporting and having their stories heard, which further denies them validation and control.

As US psychiatrist Judith Herman has noted, if one set out intentionally to design a system for provoking symptoms of traumatic stress, it would look very much like a court of law.

The adversarial system

The adversarial nature of Australia's criminal justice systems means crime is contested between two parties: the state who prosecute in the public interest and the accused person.

This means the victim is not considered a party to proceedings, despite being directly impacted by the offence, and therefore does not have an active role or voice.

Courts have a duty to protect victims from certain misleading, intimidating and humiliating questioning, such as in relation to victims' sexual history and character.

However, research shows defence counsel continue to ask such questions to undermine victims' character and testimony.

Calls for victim lawyers

Scholars and victim advocates, including women's specialist and legal services, have raised concerns over the lack of judicial intervention.

This has led to calls for government-funded legal representation to enhance victims' treatment in the legal process and reduce the likelihood — or extent of —re-traumatisation.

If victims can be assured their privacy and interests will be protected, they might be more inclined to report and/or stay engaged in the criminal justice system. Having a lawyer present at trial may also decrease victims' feelings of stress and anxiety and improve their confidence when testifying.

As former South Australian Commissioner for Victims' Rights, Michael O'Connell, has argued, legal representation can allow victims to feel like integral players (...) rather than mere bystanders in the criminal justice system.

Victim lawyers around the world

There are several different models of legal representation for victims around the world.

In the German system, victims of sexual offences can engage lawyers who have rights to represent them, including the ability to elicit evidence and ask questions of the accused person at trial. In Denmark and Sweden, victims of sexual offences also have the right to engage a lawyer from as early as the police reporting stage, to receive advice about the legal process and compensation claims, as well as moral support.

The right to victim lawyers in adversarial systems - like Australia's — is less common. Victim lawyers are available in Ireland to prevent the disclosure of victims' sexual history evidence in court. England and Wales also recently piloted provision for victim lawyers, as has Northern Ireland.

In Queensland and New South Wales, sexual assault victims can be legally represented when challenging defence applications for the disclosure of their counselling notes and other confidential therapeutic records. However, this representation does not extend to the actual criminal trial.

Resistance to the idea

Despite the benefits of lawyers for victims, concerns about practical implications remain.

This is due to the perceived threat a third party — a victim's lawyer — might pose to the two-sided contest between the state prosecutor and the accused person. There are concerns the system would become unbalanced.

In 2016, the Victorian Law Reform Commission opposed the idea on the basis police and prosecutors are already obliged to keep victims informed about the legal process and victim lawyers might lead to "dual representation".

However, this fails to recognise victims have legitimate interests that might compete with the interests of the prosecution, who represent the public interest. These include rights to privacy about their personal records and prior sexual history, and to be free from character attacks during cross-examination at trial.

While it may not be viable, at present, to introduce victim lawyers throughout the entire prosecution process, there is certainly scope to introduce them at specific stages.

Change that is positive and possible

In the first instance, we need social and cultural change to quash the myths and stereotypes about sexual violence. They prevent victims from reporting and undermine investigations, prosecutions and victim experiences.

In the meantime, introducing victim lawyers is a practical, possible change we can make to enhance victims' well-being, safety and access to justice.



Questioning of sexual assault victims during trials ‘worse’ than in the 1950s, criminologist finds

Criminologist Andy Kaladelfos is blunt in their assessment of how Australia’s justice system deals with sexual offences.

“It is demonstrably not working in every way,” they said.

The University of NSW researcher has watched the issue of sexual assault and the harassment of women dominate news and politics in recent weeks.

Now, they are calling for a “wholesale re-evaluation” of how the justice system itself handles these crimes.

Dr Kaladelfos wants lawmakers to address the reasons why nearly 90 per cent of sexual assault victims don’t engage with the justice system.

They said the experiences of victim-survivors who do go through the court system also needed to be examined.

They are concerned trials have become so “awful” for victims, the justice system itself is deterring some people from reporting sexual offences to police.

“They (victims) often describe it as like another rape or sexual assault because of the kinds of questions they are asked, the kinds of details they are required to answer about their appearance, their behaviour, their past experiences,” they said.

It’s a sentiment echoed by sexual assault victims and victim advocates across Australia, but often not shared by those working within the justice system.

Law lecturer Roman Fida teaches at Victoria University and also runs his own legal practice where he works as a criminal defence lawyer.

He has concerns about how sexual assault complainants are treated during trials, but views the performance of the justice system differently.

“It is a criminal justice system within a liberal democracy and with that comes a lot of protections, particularly for the accused,” he said.

“As I always say, I would prefer to see a guilty person walk free than an innocent person be found guilty.”

Victorian barrister Fiona Martin spent nearly a decade as a prosecutor specialising in sexual offence trials, and now takes on criminal defence work.

She said sexual assault trials needed to consider the fairness of the trial process for both the complainant and the accused person.

"It is very much a balancing act between making sure victims are not unnecessarily traumatised through the process, but balancing the right of an accused person to put forward his or her case," she said.

She believes the courts do have the balance right.

"We have to be careful the pendulum doesn't swing too far either way."

The findings that shocked a criminologist

Dr Kaladelfos has spent years researching the way adult and child sexual assault victims are questioned during criminal trials.

In 2017, they and their colleagues published a study that compared the questioning of adult sexual assault complainants in contemporary trials, to trials run in the 1950s.

The researchers wanted to know if decades of law reform had improved the way victims were being questioned while giving evidence.

"We were expecting to find an improvement now, 70 years on," Dr Kaladelfos said.

"What we found, which was troubling and surprising to all researchers on the study, was that things are much worse now than they were historically."

In that study, the researchers compared historic transcripts from NSW to contemporary transcripts from New Zealand, because the academics found "contemporary Australian transcripts are subject to access restrictions that make research untenable".

Dr Kaladelfos acknowledged this could be a criticism of their research, but said New Zealand was chosen because of its similar legal system and history of sexual assault legal reforms.

Dr Kaladelfos and their colleagues used historic and contemporary trial transcripts from within Australia for later studies, where they examined the questioning of child victims in sexual abuse cases.

Lawyers ask young girls about their appearance before alleged assaults, study finds

Much of Dr Kaladelfos' research has focused on cross-examination — it's the part of a criminal trial where a defence lawyer questions a witness.

It's a key part of a sexual assault trial, because it is where defence lawyers are able to test the evidence or allegations against the accused person.

But it is also the part of a trial many victims find most difficult to get through.

Dr Kaladelfos said their research raised issues about the breadth of questions put to sexual assault victims during cross-examination in contemporary trials.

They said most victims were questioned about their behaviour leading up to an alleged assault and were often asked questions that went well beyond the alleged assault itself.

"Is cross-examination an examination of your character as a person? For example, your mental health history, your previous relationships?" they asked.

"I mean, to me, that is not actually the purpose of cross-examination at all, but often that is the reality of it."

But Ms Martin said cross-examination should not be restricted to questions that were only about the alleged offence.

"Context is important and so whilst a question might not seem relevant to the particular witness, it might be relevant to the prosecution case or it might be relevant to the accused," she said.

Mr Fida agreed that the lead-up to an alleged assault could be important context to a case.

"Basically, if someone is facing trial for very serious offences — and there are not many more serious offences than sexual offences — and you have an accused (person) who is denying the charges, then it is relevant, the lead up to what is going on," he said.

But Dr Kaladelfos said it was important researchers asked why some questions were being asked.

They said when they examined cases involving offences against children in historic and modern trials, it was clear that the questions put to girls were far broader than those asked of boys.

"The questions to young boys tended to be about the facts of the event," they said.

"Whereas the questions involving young girls were about everything in this person's family background, history, dress, appearance.

"The boys were never questioned about dress."

Lawyer says questions designed to 'slut shame' victims being asked in trials

In Victoria, there is a section of the Evidence Act that lists the types of questions deemed to be "improper" to ask a witness during cross-examination.

These include questions that harass or intimidate a witness, as well as questions that are misleading, confusing or "have no basis other than a stereotype".

Mr Fida says Victoria also has what is known as Rape Shield Laws to protect sexual assault complainants from being questioned about their sexual history or reputation.

But he said some lawyers still put questions to adult female sexual assault complainants that were commonly referred to as "slut shaming questions".

It's a term Mr Fida dislikes, but he said it referred to questions by defence lawyers that make inferences about a female sexual assault complainant.

"That she is promiscuous, that in some way she is asking for it, or that she has lured the person into thinking she has consented or that she wanted it — all of the sorts of things that the Rape Shield Laws were brought in to stop and rightfully so," he said.

He believes there is a gap between what the legislation says can be asked of a victim, and what is actually asked of a victim in courtrooms.

He said sometimes inexperienced legal practitioners would ask questions they should not.

"Sometimes a defence lawyer, attorney will keep going down that line of questioning because even though they know they are wrong, even though they know there is a good chance they will be halted, they believe it is important to get that point across to a jury or the like."

"So it is a calculated risk, I have seen that a lot."

He said those questions were not usually about a complainant's sexual history, but were often about "what someone is wearing, or the way they were dancing or the relationship they had with the accused."

Mr Fida said lawyers asked these types of questions to "discredit the complainant to a degree or demonstrate that they were complicit with the particular sexual conduct leading up to (the alleged offence)."

Those views were different to those held by Ms Martin.

She said in her experience, it was rare for legal practitioners to go outside the rules of the courtroom.

"Parliament has put in place a number of procedures to protect victims from improper questioning," she said.

"That is something that is generally followed pretty strictly."

She said courts were not "open slather" when a victim gave evidence.

"A question might get asked about a particular item of clothing, but that is only if it is relevant to the logistics of a particular allegation being made," she said.

"But by-and-large those sorts of questions are just not asked."

Child victim asked 1,000 questions during cross-examination

Dr Kaladelfos' research showed defence lawyers in contemporary sexual assault trials used more tactics during cross-examination than they did historically.

They said their studies showed defence lawyers these days usually focused their questions around the reliability of the witness, the plausibility of an alleged assault or the credibility or consistency of evidence.

"If we are talking about historically, it was the case that lawyers would target questions towards a particular part of the account that they thought were problematic, so for example consistency of complainants," they said.

"Now we have lawyers trying any tactic they can. In fact, three times as many tactics are used today as were historically."

That, they said, was blowing out the length of time cross-examinations were now taking,

"In adult cases, we have found they (cross-examinations) have expanded by about 30 per cent or so longer than they were historically," they said.

"In child cases, we found children today, despite our vulnerable witness protections, are questioned for three times as long as they were in the past."

In one trial, Dr Kaladelfos said a child victim was asked 1,000 questions during cross-examination.

"It is shocking to me that we are asking three times as many questions as we were in the past. It is shocking to me that no-one has realised that," the academic said.

But Ms Martin said a long cross-examination wasn't necessarily an unfair cross-examination.

"Sexual offence trials can be very complex and there might be good reasons why cross-examination needs to take longer than it did 20 years ago or 30 years ago," she said.

"Certainly as the law develops, so to does trial practise, and lengthy cross-examination doesn't necessarily mean unfair examination."

Lawyers, researchers come to very different conclusions about justice system

In Victoria, the Law Reform Commission is reviewing how the justice system responds to sexual offences with a report due to be handed to the state's Attorney-General in August.

Mr Fida said he believed there was room for improvement.

"I believe everyone should have their day in court, the evidence should be given and all those protections should be afforded to the accused absolutely," he said.

"However, the level of stress, the cost, the consequences, the embarrassment of having your family there for rape victims or alleged victims, I think we could do better with that."

There has already been much work on legal reform in this area — with changes including the use of remote witnesses boxes for sexual assault complainants, reform barring a sexual assault complainant from being questioned directly by their alleged perpetrator, and greater access to support services for the complainant.

Ms Martin said she believed the justice system had improved in the decade she had worked in it.

"There has been a lot of work in this area," she said.

"There are really good procedures and practises in place to try and minimise the delay and to try and provide as many support services as is possible to a victims," she said.

But Dr Kaladelfos said it was time to for the justice system to consider significant changes to how it dealt with sexual offences.

"We need to really think about some of the bigger questions about what are we actually doing with a trial? What is the purpose of this? And if we know it is not working, we need to do something else."

A woman with short dark hair, arms crossed, looking concerned.

Victoria's Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes did not comment to the ABC on the low reporting and conviction rates of sexual offences in Australia.

She said the Victorian Government wanted to ensure "our laws respond effectively to sexual offending, so victim-survivors feel supported coming forward to report their experience" and that was why a review had been commissioned.

Ms Symes said she understood that the trauma caused by sexual offending was profound for victim-survivors.

"The last thing we want is for that to be compounded by their experiences in the justice system."

Almost 90% of sexual assault victims do not go to police — this is how we can achieve justice for survivors

On Monday night, Four Corners investigated how Brittany Higgins's alleged rape at Parliament House was kept quiet for almost two years.

Once again, it highlighted the huge barriers to justice faced by victims of sexual assault.

This comes barely a week after tens of thousands of Australians marched, demanding justice and an end to the harassment and mistreatment of women within federal parliament and beyond.

With sexual violence in the media spotlight on a daily basis, we need to reflect on how far we have come — and what still needs to be done — to achieve justice for victim-survivors.

Almost 90% of women don't go to police

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one in five Australian women and one in 20 men have experienced sexual assault since the age of 15. Most assaults occur in private spaces, and most are against women by a man known to them.

Yet, almost nine in ten women (87%) do not contact the police.

Many are worried their experience won't be taken seriously.

They also worry they will face repercussions, whether personally, professionally or from the perpetrator themselves, if they report the assault.

What survivors want

According to Australian research, victim-survivors say they want to have their experience heard, to have the wrong against them acknowledged, and to know that something will be done to stop the perpetrator from harming others.

Sadly, we know often the opposite occurs. Whether it is workplaces and other organisations responding to sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, or formal responses in our criminal justice system, victims are often left feeling silenced and sidelined.

But a formal report to police is not the only option. There are alternative ways a victim-survivor can either seek support or talk about what happened to them. There's a national helpline, and sexual assault counselling services in every state and territory.

Some states also have an option for victims to make an anonymous or confidential informal report to police. Importantly, research shows a positive experience making an informal report can encourage a victim-survivor to report formally.

Another option, currently under consideration by the Victorian Law Reform Commission, is restorative justice. In broad terms, this allows a victim and a perpetrator to meet with expert support to acknowledge the impacts of the crime and find a way to repair the harm.

Reforming laws around consent

Of course, these alternative ways of responding to sexual assault do not mean we should ignore the formal criminal justice processes. There are ways to improve it — and the last several weeks have demonstrated the urgent need to do so.

Many measures are needed, and one of them is reform to consent law. Criminal law is left to the states and territories, and so, confusingly, there are many definitions of consent across Australia.

In response to the confusion, as well as the low threshold for accused persons to claim they had a reasonable belief there was consent, advocates, academics and survivors are calling for affirmative consent laws.

Affirmative consent requires consent to be actively given by actions and/or words before, and continuously throughout, a sexual act. Under such laws, consent cannot be inferred from the behaviour of another person, such as what they were wearing or that they (supposedly) flirted with the perpetrator prior to the rape. Instead, a perpetrator must show they took active and reasonable steps to make sure the other person was consenting.

Yet, most Australian states do not currently require a person to take such active steps to determine another's consent. Both the New South Wales and Queensland Law Reform Commissions recently failed to recommend the inclusion of active steps in proposed rape law changes.

More education for police, juries

There is a host of other concrete changes that can improve justice for victims of sexual assault.

Other possible measures include greater training for police investigating sexual assaults.

There is also independent victim legal representation in sexual assault trials, initiatives to reduce the trauma of giving evidence for victim-survivors, along with inclusion of expert testimony on the nature of sexual violence, and education for potential jury members.

Changing our broader culture

The ongoing national public conversation about sexual violence has made a further problem abundantly clear.

Too often bystanders, who had an opportunity to either intervene or provide support to a victim, do nothing.

The National Community Attitudes Survey on Violence Against Women shows us many Australians blame victims, minimise abuse, and excuse the actions of perpetrators.

We can all do better to educate ourselves on how to respond supportively if a colleague, friend or loved one discloses that they are a victim of sexual violence. We can also speak up and challenge victim-blaming attitudes when we see them, whether it is at the office, at the sports club, at the pub, or at a family BBQ.

Sex and respectful relationships education needs to start early, be consistent, inclusive, positive about sex and sexuality, and promote consent as a normal practice in all our interactions with others.

Modelling respect

But if the past few months have taught us anything, it is the importance of leadership that models respect: both for victim-survivors and for women generally.

Sadly, the best laws and the best prevention education in the world may not be enough to create lasting change if our leaders and institutions don't also step up, stop walking past sexual violence, and set a new standard for respect and justice.

If this article has raised issues for you, or if you're concerned about someone you know, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732



Scott Morrison embroiled in row with News Corp after being accused of ‘weaponising’ complaint claim minutes after fighting back tears

News Corp has taken aim at Prime Minister Scott Morrison, accusing him of wrongfully claiming the company was dealing with a harassment allegation.

The row erupted after an emotional press conference which saw Mr Morrison fight back tears as he pledged to improve the treatment of women in Parliament.

Speaking inside Parliament House, the Prime Minister defended himself against criticism stemming from his justification for his response to the Brittany Higgins rape allegation and how his wife had told him to imagine it was his daughter.

“Criticise me if you like for speaking about my daughters, but they are the centre of my life. My wife is the centre of my life,” he said.

But he also angrily rejected questions from journalists suggesting he may have lost control over the ministerial staff.

The Prime Minister said he was stunned and disgusted after it was revealed Coalition staffers were accused of filming and sharing sex acts in Parliament House.

One staffer was last night fired after allegedly engaging in a

lewd act on the desk of a female Liberal MP.

Mr Morrison said he would address all Coalition staffers on Tuesday to discuss the matter and the broader issue of the treatment of women.

PM’s harassment allegation dismissed by News Corp boss

In a fiery exchange at the press conference, Sky News reporter Andrew Clennell put it to the Prime Minister that the situation made it look like he had lost control of ministerial staff.

“Right now,” Mr Morrison responded, “you’d be aware in your own organisation, that there is a person who has had a complaint made against them for harassment of a woman in a women’s toilet and that matter is being pursued by your own HR department.

“Let’s not, all of us who sit in glass houses here, start getting into that.”

Sky News, which is owned by News Corp, later said no employee was subject to such an investigation.

In a statement, News Corp's executive chairman Michael Miller said the Prime Minister was "wrong" and no such complaint had been received.

He said that in recent weeks, "following the reporting of matters of sexually inappropriate behaviour at Parliament House", News Corp's human resources team "proactively" reached out to staff "to talk to us in confidence about their well-being".

During those discussions, he said the HR team learned of a "verbal exchange" between two News Corp employees at Parliament House last year.

"The exchange was about a workplace-related issue, it was not of a sexual nature, it did not take place in a toilet and neither person made a complaint," Mr Miller said.

He said Mr Morrison's claim was "simply untrue" and undermined "the principle that people must be able to raise issues safely and in confidence".

PM accused of 'weaponising' supposed complaint

Mr Morrison said "no one individual" could control what happened in Parliament, and that the incident involving the staffer and the desk happened before he became Prime Minister.

"What I am held accountable is for what I do now, and that's what I'm outlining to you today," he said.

"You're free to make your criticisms, and to stand on that pedestal, but be careful."

During a Senate committee, Labor senator Katy Gallagher said that in raising the issue of a supposed News Corp complaint, Mr Morrison was "weaponising" it as a defensive strategy.

"It's just unbelievable, and it's no wonder women are so angry because you say one thing and then the Prime Minister goes out and retaliates like that when he's questioned," she said.

"What about the woman at the heart of that complaint now? National news."

In Question Time, Mr Morrison rejected the notion that his raising of the confidential complaint might make other women afraid of coming forward.

He said he was trying to make the "broader point" that all parties and all workplaces had work to do in this area.

"The way I referred to these matters today was an anonymised way."

Morrison was close to tears

Earlier, the PM became emotional when explaining how important the female members of his family were in his life.

He has faced criticism over his handling of the Brittany Higgins rape allegation and the historical rape allegation denied by Attorney-General Christian Porter.

"Women who have put up with this rubbish and this crap for their entire lives, as their mothers did, as their grandmothers did," he said.

"I acknowledge that many have not liked or appreciated some of my own personal responses to this over the course of the last month."

The Prime Minister revealed he had received advice from the Solicitor-General and had sought further advice from his department about Mr Porter and his status under ministerial standards.

Mr Porter is currently on medical leave.

Industry Minister Karen Andrews said on Tuesday morning that it was time to seriously consider bringing in quotas for female Liberal candidates in winnable seats.

Mr Morrison said he was "very open" to that.

"We've tried it the other way, it's not getting the results we would like to see," he said.

"I would like to see us do better on that front."



Advocates dismayed after government further delays urgent privacy reforms for disability royal commission witnesses

Labor, the Greens, and disability advocates have called for greater privacy safeguards for disability royal commission witnesses to be passed urgently amid fears key whistleblowers are opting not to come forward.

Disability advocates say they are disappointed by the government's failure to legislate urgent reforms to strengthen privacy safeguards for witnesses at the disability royal commission during this week's Senate sitting period, delaying the changes for more than six weeks.

The amendments to the Royal Commissions Act, introduced in the Senate on Wednesday, would address a loophole that allows the identity of witnesses to be released following the conclusion of the inquiry.

Advocates say the lack of privacy protections have stopped potential whistleblowers from coming forward.

Labor and the Greens have called on the government to pass the amendments as a matter of priority, more than a year after the chair of the disability royal commission, Ronald Sackville, first requested the changes.

The amendments will now be delayed until both houses sit again on 11 May at the earliest, giving rise to fears the

commission will continue to miss key evidence 18 months after it commenced.

"The government has had plenty of time to have resolved the issue, it should have been put in place at the start of building the disability royal commission rules," Sam Connor, president of People With Disability Australia (PWD), told SBS News.

"There needs to be adequate consultation time, it needs to be prioritised, and it should have been done a long time ago."

If passed, the Royal Commissions Amendment (Protection of Information) Bill will allow certain witnesses who disclose instances of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation to have their identity sealed indefinitely.

Currently, witnesses are able to participate in private sessions and request confidentiality only for the duration of the inquiry.



Greens Senator Jordon Steele-John has long campaigned for a royal commission into the treatment of people with disability in Australia.

Source: AAP

But Greens senator Jordon Steele-John, who lives with cerebral palsy, said there are concerns the bill in its current form will not cover whistleblowers who wish to anonymously disclose instances of systemic abuse as opposed to the mistreatment of individuals.

"If the government had produced this legislation at any point before 48 hours before the parliament rose, I think we would have been able to consult with experts properly, offer suggested amendments, amend the legislation, and pass it through," he told SBS News.

There is an "incredible amount of frustration among the disability community" who want to see the issue addressed, he added.

"It's yet another delay in something that has taken 18 months, which could have been done in a matter of weeks."

Labor's NDIS spokesperson, Bill Shorten, said it was "bewildering" that the government hadn't acted to legislate the changes after he wrote to the Acting Attorney-General Michaelia Cash urging her to prioritise the reforms this week.

"Unfortunately, the government, when it had a chance yesterday to prioritise improving the confidentiality and privacy rights of people wanting to give evidence to the royal commission, has just put it on the backburner," he said.

"The bill isn't everything that we want, but it would be better than nothing at all."

He also questioned why the government did not support a private bill introduced by Senator Steele-John in October last year - which passed the Senate last month with the support of Labor - despite expressing support for the amendments.

Senator Cash did not respond to SBS News' request for comment before publication.

Last week she said there were "a number of ways that a royal commission can protect information provided and

the identity of witnesses even after the royal commission has ended".

"This could include the use of private sessions or pseudonyms or the making of do not publish orders," she said. "It is clearly a matter for the Royal Commission as to how it applies these protections."

A disability royal commission spokesperson has previously told SBS News it welcomes the government's plans to amend the legislation - which they said should encourage further participation of people with disability in the inquiry - but declined to comment on the recent delay.

'This is what it looks like for people with a disability'

Advocates have long-campaigned for witnesses at the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability to be afforded the same privacy protections as those who gave evidence to Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission.

They say the lack of privacy safeguards has contributed to people with disability feeling they cannot share their stories, especially if they still live in the setting where the alleged abuses occurred.

"When your disability service provider is your landlord, as well as the person who provides your support, we're talking about support that ranges from making sure you have food, making sure that you have shelter, making sure you're able to go out every day," Ms Connor said.

"Can you imagine what it's like having to rely on that person to make sure you're able to tell a story about them ... and then know you wouldn't have privacy and they would find out exactly what you have said about them."

'This is what it looks like for people with a disability.'

Announcing the planned changes in October last year, Attorney-General Christian Porter - who is currently on medical leave - said the government would "work swiftly" to introduce the amendments during the Autumn sitting of Parliament.

He said the changes would be an important step in ensuring the royal commission "is guided by people's experiences and that its outcomes are based on a true reflection of those experiences".

"We want people in the community to engage fully with the royal commission," he said.

'Urgent' extension still not granted

The government has also faced criticism over its delay in approving a request for a 17-month extension to the commission, first requested by Mr Sackville when he handed down the inquiry's interim report in October last year.

At the time, Mr Sackville said the Commission was not "a sprint, it's a marathon" - noting the terms of reference covered by

the inquiry were larger than any other royal commission in the past 20 years.

Mr Sackville wrote to Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Mr Porter again in December last year stressing the urgency of the request, but is yet to receive a decision.

If granted, the final report would be handed down on 29 September 2023 - almost a year and a half after the original deadline of April next year.

Last week, Senator Cash told SBS News a decision on the commission's request for an extension would be announced in due course.

"The fact they have delayed on this issue as well is a further demonstration of a really concerning pattern of delay when it comes to this commission," Senator Steele-John said.

"They are setting the thing up to fail, and that is not okay."

About 2.4 million people with a disability aged between 18 and 64 had experienced some form of violence in their lifetime as of 2016, the inquiry's interim report found.

The commission's next public hearing, which will examine the NDIS and service providers, is due to begin in Sydney on 24 May.

A free national legal service has been established to assist people to share their story with the commission. The service, called Your Story Disability Legal Support, is independent of the inquiry and funded by Legal Aid.

People with disability who are impacted by violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation are also able to contact the National Counselling and Referral Service on 1800 421 468 for counselling support or to be connected to a counsellor or advocate near you. Support is free, independent and confidential.



Sydney's March 4 Justice sees Indigenous women rise up and speak their truth

When Marie Barbaric walked up to the microphone at Sydney's March 4 Justice event on Monday, all she could think was that she wanted to leave.

The Dunghutti woman, who lives in Wilton in Sydney's south-west, listened to the speakers go before her and felt a sense of unease wash over her.

"I actually thought, 'Just go home,'" she said.

"I thought about what I would say – how do you share your story? But you don't want to talk too much about your story."

This would be the first time she would publicly tell her story as a survivor of institutional sexual abuse.

"As a 55-year-old woman, I carry 50 years of shame and humiliation in my heart," she told the 10,000-strong crowd.

"I'm angry ... I'm angry."

At the age of six, Marie was taken from her family under government policy, becoming a member of what would come to be known as the Stolen Generations.

As a teenager, she was abused and had her "dignity and self-respect" taken from her, and as a young woman, she was sold.

"Can you believe in this country I was sold by my foster-father to a 70-year-old man and our government knew," she

told the crowd.

"I cannot tell you what my personal value is as a human being nor can I tell you my worth as a woman, or as a mother, or as a grandmother — but I can tell you what dollar value my perpetrators put on me – \$20,000."

For Marie – a mother of five and a grandmother of eight – the nerves didn't stop after her reveal: she worried about how her daughters would feel and how they would be impacted by her words.

But those fears were unwarranted.

"They said, 'Mum, we're so proud of you, we sat there and cried, it must've been so hard for you to tell your story,'" she said.

"So I feel OK now, but at the time I was very scared."

On Monday, tens of thousands of survivors and their allies marched across the country calling for gender equality and justice for victims of sexual assault.

Marie, who runs her own cultural services business, said the strength of the women surrounding her at Sydney's march helped her tell her truth.

"When you're standing amongst all those people, you realise that you're not alone and that there are so many others that have suffered as well," she said.

"You felt the anger, but you felt a real true bond — a strong bond with every woman there."

"(It was) just this beautiful sisterhood of women coming together of all races, all ages, supporting each other."

It's the same sentiment felt by Wiradjuri elder Cheryl Penrith.

She performed a Welcome to Country at Wagga Wagga's march in the state's west.

"We want a different country for women to be in and to live in," she says.

She thinks it's critical that Indigenous women are among the voices heard during this pivotal time.

"Our women, we've borne the brunt of all of this stuff from colonisation," she explains.

"We're up the top of the list in statistics for all of these things and even if (Monday's) march brings that to people's centre of their thinking – it might make a change."

Our Watch, an advocacy group which works to prevent violence against women, says three in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have experienced sexual or physical violence by a male partner.

First Nations women are also 11 times more likely to die as a result of an assault and 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to assault.

Cheryl says she marched for Indigenous women in the past who didn't have voice.

"But I'm also walking to empower our young women and girls for generations to come," she says.

For Marie, she says she felt her mother and grandmother were right beside her in the impassioned march.

"I felt like I was their voice as well as my own, and the voice for my daughters and granddaughters," she says.

"I really felt their anger and their emotion ... We've been surviving for two and a half centuries."

She hopes the next generations of women see the change that continues to be fought so hard for.

"There has to be government reform.

"I don't ever want my daughters, or my granddaughters or even my great-granddaughters to think they can't speak out, that they haven't got a voice."

"I want my girls to know: You're not alone."

"If you speak your truth, you're never alone."





'Urgent' extension to disability inquiry 'ignored' by Morrison and Porter for four months

Government yet to respond to two letters from the royal commission's chair requesting extension to the inquiry

Scott Morrison and Christian Porter have been accused of ignoring the disability royal commission's "urgent" request for an extension to the inquiry, after failing to reply to the commissioner for more than four months.

In its interim report in October, the commission said it needed a 17-month extension, acknowledging the scope of the \$527m inquiry may have been underestimated and noting the impact of the pandemic on the hearings.

Guardian Australia can reveal the government is yet to respond to two letters from the commission chair Ronald Sackville requesting the extension, despite him stressing the "urgency" of an early response.

Sackville said in a statement to Guardian Australia that he wrote to the prime minister and attorney general on 30 October about the matter.

"On 14 December 2020, I wrote again to the prime minister and the attorney general explaining the urgency of an early

response to the request for an extension," he said.

"The royal commission has not yet received a written response or indeed any substantive response to either letter."

The commission is due to hand down its final report in April next year. If an extension is granted, the deadline would be pushed out to the end of September 2023.

Jordon Steele-John, a Greens senator who lives with cerebral palsy, said it was "not for this government to decide" how much time the commission needed.

He said the inquiry was the "largest of its kind in Australian history" and the government should immediately grant its request for more time.

"Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lack of privacy protections, many disabled people have been unable to tell their stories and the commission itself had been unable to hold hearings in my home state of Western Australia, or

indeed anywhere outside of Queensland and New South Wales,” Steele-John said.

“For the royal commission to be forced to make its final recommendations in just over a year’s time would be to deny disabled people and their families the justice they deserve.”

Bill Shorten, Labor’s NDIS spokesman, said the government should heed the commission’s request for an extension.

“This government has a tendency for announcing royal commissions into problems of their own creation,” he said.

“But if they are serious about hearing the voices of Australians with disability the least they could do is heed the request of the commission instead of rudely ignoring it.”

A spokesman for the acting attorney general, Michaelia Cash, said “a decision in relation to the commission’s request will be announced in due course”.

The royal commission’s interim report found people with disability experience “often shocking” levels of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, but said it was “too soon” to outline any recommendations.

“The terms of reference are extraordinarily broad, much broader than any royal commission appointed in this country since well before the turn of the 21st century,” Sackville said at the time.

“That means the commission is not a sprint, it’s a marathon.”

The government has also faced criticism over its failure to legislate protections that would allow the royal commission to permanently seal confidential submissions, as occurred during the child sexual abuse royal commission.

Sackville first wrote to the government asking for the change on 14 February 2020, but the government only agreed to act in October, and is yet to introduce the legislation to parliament.

Some disability advocates have expressed concern Porter’s leave of absence from parliament may further delay the reforms.

But Cash said the government still hoped to introduce the bill this month.

“As indicated late last year, the Attorney General’s Department had been instructed to draft amendments to the Royal Commissions Act, which the government hopes to introduce in the March sitting period,” she said.

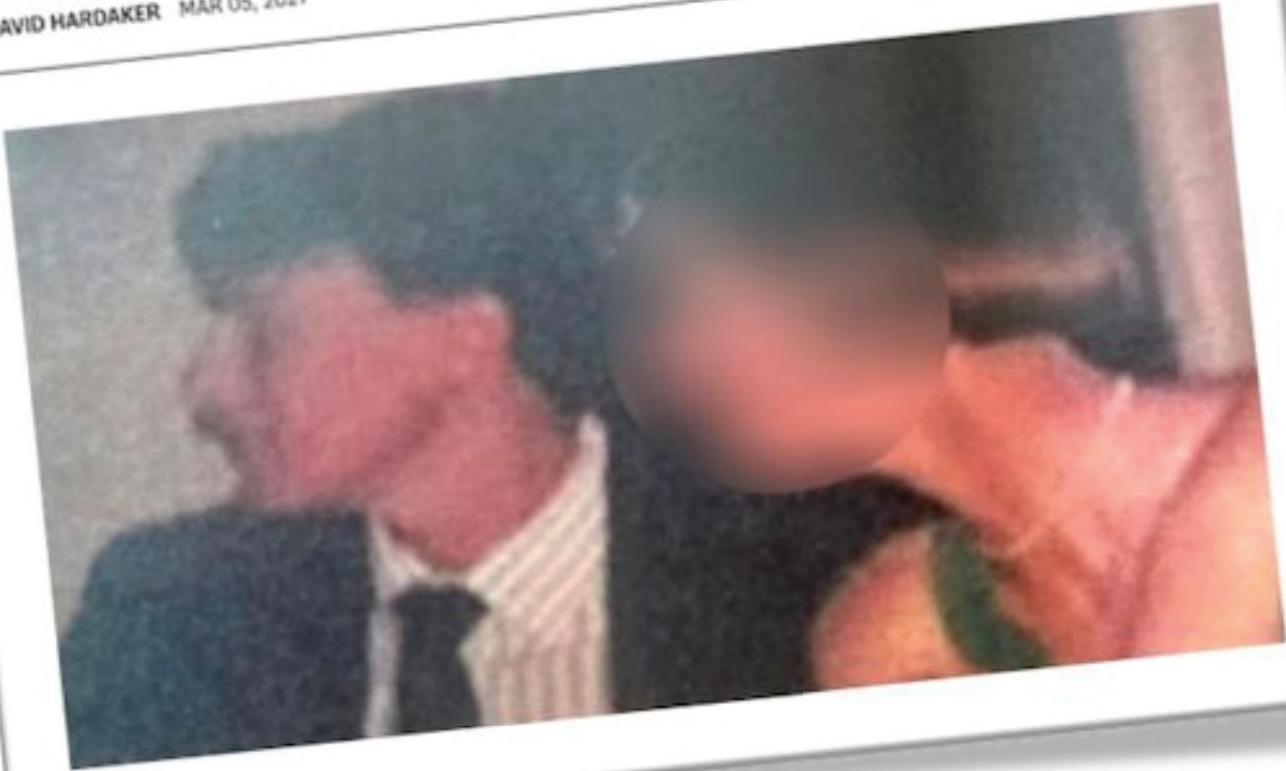
“In the meantime, there are a number of ways that a royal commission can protect information provided and the identity of witnesses even after the royal commission has ended.

“This could include the use of private sessions or pseudonyms or the making of do-not-publish orders. It is clearly a matter for the royal commission as to how it applies these protections.”

A whistleblower told the Guardian last year they felt they could not share their evidence of alleged abuse within disability accommodation with the commission due to the lack of confidentiality provisions.

The inquiry’s next session, on 24 March, will examine pathways to employment for people with disability.

DAVID HARDAKER MAR 05, 2021



Crikey's malicious attempt to discredit victim in Porter rape allegation

Crikey has published an appalling confection, promoted by others in the media, to cast doubt on the victim's account and engender sympathy for alleged perpetrator Attorney-General Christian Porter, writes Dr Jennifer Wilson.

CONTENT WARNING: This article discusses rape and suicide

BY NOW, most readers will be familiar with the allegation against Federal Attorney-General Christian Porter claiming that he anally raped a 16-year-old girl when he was 17. Porter has denied the allegation and both he and Prime Minister Scott Morrison have refused to consider the possibility of an inquiry.

The alleged victim, who has been identified simply as Kate, took her own life in June 2020. (Kate's surname has been withheld out of respect for her family's request for privacy.)

In what can only be understood as a wilfully malicious attempt to discredit Kate's account of her experiences,

Crikey published a piece by David Hardaker on March 5 titled, 'Here's one for an independent inquiry: did recovered memories target Christian Porter?'

Hardaker's piece suggests that Kate's recall of the alleged rape came about as a result of reading a book in 2019 on Recovered Memory Therapy (RMT), a technique that claims to uncover repressed memories of severe trauma. That is, memories relegated to the unconscious and unavailable for recall without therapeutic intervention. The technique has been widely discredited but Hardaker uses the controversy surrounding the practice as "evidence" that Kate's account cannot be regarded as reliable.

Whatever your opinion of the practice – and that's a whole other article – Hardaker's point is that Kate did not actually experience rape as she claimed, but that her memories came about as a consequence of her reading a book in 2019.

In fact, Kate did read a book on this topic in 2019, after consulting a therapist who practised EMDR therapy, a strategy that has nothing at all to do with RMT, and one that is used widely to treat victims of trauma — for example, war veterans. The link takes you to a comprehensive explanation of this therapy from the American Psychological Association, a body not known for promoting outlier treatment methods.

Hardaker's entirely uninformed opinion leads him to this description:

'EMDR and other pseudo-science therapies.'

Hardaker's implied connection between the discredited RMT and the mainstream (refundable by Medicare) EMDR treatment is just one of the examples of his use of conflation and disinformation to build his case against the validity of Kate's allegations.

It has now emerged that Kate consulted a sexual assault counsellor in 2013, long before she had any knowledge of or contact with, as Hardaker alleges, the practice of RMT. She sought advice in 2013 as to how to proceed with a complaint of rape against someone she called "Christian". In other words, Kate did not know of RMT when she first approached the sexual assault counsellor for help, so she obviously had not forgotten or "repressed" her memories of the alleged rape.

Sexual assault counsellor says Christian Porter's accuser told her of alleged rape eight years ago <https://t.co/341UINh8PM>

— ABC News (@abcnews) March 7, 2021

Hardaker is apparently unaware of this. Or he has chosen to deliberately withhold that information in order to prosecute his thesis.

Hardaker's piece is a master class in conflation. He suggests that the belief that the body retains memories of violent trauma is the same thing as recovered memory, which it is not. Hardaker describes the concept that vaginal pain can be related to a 'long-forgotten rape', as a 'quack approach to treating trauma'.

Here I will take the liberty of speaking personally. It has become very clear to me over years of therapy that I have physical symptoms that directly relate to the prolonged period of sexual abuse I experienced as a child.

The narrative of a mentally unstable woman bringing down a damn fine man with allegations of rape and other sexual offences is a core trope of misogyny.

I have never had RMT. I never forgot the abuse. I did, however, forget details, many of which are triggered by a variety of stimuli that for me represent the circumstances in which I was raped. This is not the same thing as recovered memory. It is a sudden flood of disturbing feelings and sometimes images that come quite unannounced, in

response to a stimulus that may be entirely innocuous, but was present in some form at the time of trauma, or related to the trauma. This flood can include intense bodily sensations, sometimes of pain, nausea, trembling and fever. This is not "recovered memory" under the influence of a therapist. I never forgot.

Hardaker goes on to conflate dissociative states with dissociative identity disorder:

'The ordeal was so shocking, she said in her statement, that she entered into "dissociative states" to cope. The idea of dissociation — that the mind fragments into different entities as a shielding mechanism — is fundamental to recovered memory therapy.'

In fact, 'the mind fragmenting into different entities' is only one type of dissociative state. There are at least two others, both of which I have and occasionally continue to experience, as a survivor. Both are commonly described by people suffering trauma during and after powerfully disruptive events and are also described by people in the normal process of intense grieving. I have never fragmented into different entities — which is not to say others don't have this experience but to emphasise that a dissociative disorder does not, as implied by Hardaker, necessarily include this symptom.

Dissociative identity disorder is, however, much loved by those attempting to dramatise and discredit those of us who suffer dissociation as a consequence of sexual trauma.

Hardaker's article is an appalling confection, created for one reason only, and that is to cast doubt on Kate's account of her experience and to engender sympathy for the alleged perpetrator, Christian Porter.

Even more alarming are the numbers of senior male journalists who linked to this article through other media, including social. Peter van Onselen, Jonathon Holmes, Phillip Adams and David Crowe all contributed to the spread of this disinformation — several of them describing the article as "important". None of these men, or indeed, Hardaker, have expertise in any of the relevant areas.

In general and without casting any aspersions on any particular men, women have every reason to be deeply suspicious of the motives of those who aid the discrediting of female victims. The narrative of a mentally unstable woman bringing down a damn fine man with allegations of rape and other sexual offences is a core trope of misogyny.

It is devastating to see that those willing to engage in this form of gaslighting are among our most senior male journalists.

If you would like to speak to someone about sexual violence, please call the 1800 Respect hotline on 1800 737 732 or chat online. Or you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Dr Jennifer Wilson is an IA columnist, a psychotherapist and an academic. You can follow Jennifer on Twitter @NoPlaceForSheep.



Ex-Victorian MP says sexual harassment culture has not changed in 40 years

A former Victorian Liberal MP, now living on the New South Wales north coast, says little has changed in the past 40 years in regard to workplace harassment in politics.

Prue Leggoe (formerly Sibree), who served in the Victorian Parliament from 1981 to 1986, was in the audience at Grafton yesterday to hear an address by the Federal Minister for Women.

Ms Leggoe, who was awarded an Order of Australia Medal in 2019 for her service to women through community job readiness initiatives, said the sexist culture in parliament had not changed since she raised concerns about harassment in 1982.

"When I made my first maiden speech in parliament, a drunk Member of Parliament came up behind me with his walking stick, and put his walking stick up my skirt," she said.

"That was the start ... if you try and stop it, which I did, you get castigated and you end up front-page news.

"You may probably not get promoted if you're outspoken, you're doing the right thing but that's what happens, and I don't think much has changed in 40 years."

Minister wants more women in politics

The Federal Parliament has been rocked in recent weeks by allegations of sexual harassment, including those of former staffer Brittany Higgins who says she was raped inside the building.

But Minister for Women Marise Payne told the crowd at yesterday's event in Grafton that she would still encourage young women to consider a career in politics.

"My message would be that our job as governments, state and federal, is to ensure that workplaces are safe for everyone, and that includes mine," she said.

"So I definitely want to encourage more women, and more young women, to see politics as a career.

"The world has been through too many of these issues in different workplaces and industries in recent years.

"This is a difficult time for those of us who want to ensure we have a safe workplace and a positive culture, but it's nowhere near as difficult as it was for those who have experienced the harassment or assault that has been reported.

"It is unacceptable any time, ever.

"It is the behaviour of perpetrators that must stop and must stop now."



Sex discrimination commissioner says Australia at 'turning point' on sexual harassment and assault

Kate Jenkins will consider whether ministers should have the power to hire and fire staff as part of a review prompted by Brittany Higgins' allegation

Australia's sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins says she believes Australia is now "at a turning point" in the public conversation about sexual harassment and assault, emphasising the need for "victim-centric" approaches and responses.

Jenkins has been appointed by the Morrison government to lead a review into workplace culture in parliament, a review triggered by the rape allegation levelled by former government staffer Brittany Higgins against a co-worker.

The sex discrimination commissioner told the ABC on Sunday the ground was shifting. "In my time working in this area and particularly looking in workplaces over the 30 years, I've never seen any moment like this," Jenkins said.

She said cultural change was happening "across the board".

"I think our community is changing, so we're at a turning point – that is my sense."

In response to the sustained furore triggered by the Higgins allegation, Jenkins has been asked to consider legislative, cultural, structural or other barriers to reporting incidents in parliamentary workplaces, and also examine the current response and reporting mechanisms in parliamentary workplaces.

Additionally she will consider the operation of the Members of Parliament Staff Act – the legislation under which political staffers are employed – and "assess the extent to which current legislation, policies, processes and practices promote or impede safe and respectful workplaces".

Higgins initially made a police complaint after the alleged assault in March 2019, but she dropped the action a month later as the government prepared to go to an election. She says she felt that pursuing the complaint would end her career in political staffing.

In a television interview in the middle of February, Higgins said the handling of her complaint by her then employer Linda

Reynolds and senior staff, including some in Scott Morrison's office, made her feel as though she had created a political problem for the government.

"There is a strange culture of silence in the parties and you just don't ... the idea of sort of speaking out on these sorts of issues, especially around (an election) campaign, is just like letting the team down, you are not a team player," Higgins told Ten.

Jenkins signalled the likely end point of her inquiry – which will report publicly in November – was a new, "more independent" complaints mechanism for parliamentary staff to handle human resources issues.

The sex discrimination commissioner said she was not in a position to say definitively what the outcome of her inquiry would be, but based on comparative work she'd seen internationally, more independence seemed a logical direction to help change the power dynamics in the parliamentary workplace.

Jenkins said it would be important to examine the employment instruments governing parliamentary staff because conditions were out of step with human resources norms that exist in corporations.

"We often hear parliamentarians say (the workplace is) unique and everyone thinks they are unique, but I do think there are some unique things," Jenkins said.

"One of them is that layer of employment arrangements because it is so unusual who has the power to hire and fire – all of that is slightly different to the average community, so I think that's relevant."

Jenkins was asked on Sunday whether there should be mandatory reporting of sexual assault allegations to police. The Australian federal police commissioner, Reece Kershaw,

has urged parliamentarians to report any allegations to authorities promptly, "taking into account the rights and privacy of the victim, and irrespective of the jurisdiction in which the alleged conduct has occurred".

In a recent letter to parliamentarians, Kershaw said any delay in reporting criminal conduct could "result in the loss of key evidence, continuation of the offending and/or reoffending by the alleged perpetrator" and also had "the very real potential to compromise the rights of victims and other parties to alleged offences".

Jenkins said approaches needed to be victim-centric. "It should be the individual's decision," she said.

But she said her review would examine the issues. Jenkins said reporting "shouldn't be taken out of the hands of the victim, but, again, I do think our inquiry will look particularly at that question because I think it is a really wicked problem for those ministers as to what they should do".

She said her review would take submissions from interested parties, which could be confidential. She said complaints of harassment raised during the process would not be examined "to find a justice outcome" but to consider what systemic changes would be necessary to improve the workplace environment.

In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, family or domestic violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit www.1800RESPECT.org.au. In an emergency, call 000. International helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org

'Share your truth, it is your power': Grace Tame's address to the National Press Club

The 2021 Australian of the year and sexual assault survivor says 'we are on the precipice of a revolution'

In April of 2010, I was battling severe anorexia. Truth be told, I still am. This illness had nearly taken my life the year prior and seen me hospitalised twice, bedridden and tube-fed. Bone thin and covered in fine down hairs from malnourishment, I was picked on for the way that I looked.

I just stopped living with my father for the first time since I was born. And my mother was eight months pregnant at 45. I was a 15-year-old student at a private girls' school in Hobart.

One morning, after an outpatient check-up, I arrived later to discover the rest of my year 10 classmates were attending a driving lesson off-campus that I had completely forgotten about. Lapses like these weren't uncommon at this time. I was barely there.

One of the senior teachers noticed me walking around aimlessly in the courtyard. He was well respected, the head of maths and science, at the school for nearly 20 years. He taught me in Year 9. I thought he was funny. He told me he had a free period and asked if I'd come and

chat with him in his office. He asked me about my illness. I talked, he listened. He promised to help me, to guide me in my recovery. As a teenager with no frame of reference, and therefore thinking nothing odd of this, I told my mother about our conversation when I came home that day.

My parents had a meeting with the school principal soon after, requesting the teacher stay away from me. But in the meeting that I then had with the school principal and this senior teacher, I remember having to apologise. I had to apologise to him for putting him in this position in front of the principal. I was told I had done something wrong. Baffled though I was, I believed I had.

Thus, the first seeds of terror, confusion, and self-doubt had been sewn in my mind. Indeed, it didn't make sense. In secret, he was adamant that I still come to see him to talk. My parents were against me, he insisted. I was not to tell them, because they simply wouldn't understand. Pregnant women, he said, were full of hormones. That must've be why my mother and I were arguing. He gave me a key in

his office where there was always music playing, and it was always the same music, Simon and Garfunkel.

Over a period of months he built my trust to a point where I felt safe sharing my fears and past trauma that underpinned my illness, like my experience with being sexually abused as a six-year-old by an older child who told me to undress in a closest before molesting me. He told me he would never hurt me. Until he did by way of a masterful re-enactment I didn't see coming, with a closet and an instruction to undress. Most of you know my story from there. That is, how I lost my virginity to a 58-year-old paedophile and spent the next six months being raped by him at school nearly every day on the floor of his office.

When I finally reported him to police, they found 28 multimedia files of child pornography on his computer. But as per the lasting impact of intense and manipulative grooming, and a mere four months after the abuse, I effectively defended him in my statement. Still only 16 then, I was terrified he would find out that I had betrayed him and that he would kill me. He was sentenced to two years and 10 months in jail for maintaining a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 17.

Repairing myself in the aftermath of all this was certainly not a simple, linear undertaking. For every step forward, there were steps back, to the side, and some almost off the edge. I saw counsellor after counsellor, but I also abused drugs, drank, moved overseas, cut myself, threw myself into study, dyed my hair, made amazing friendships, got ugly tattoos, worked for my childhood hero, found myself in violent relationships, practised yoga, even became a yoga teacher. I starved, I binged, and I starved again.

One of the toughest challenges on my road to recovery was trying to speak about something we are taught is unspeakable. I felt completely disconnected from myself and everyone around me. Many people didn't know how to respond. That said, the ones who listened, the ones who were eager to understand, even when they couldn't, made all the difference.

Still, the doubt lingered. How could I have been so stupid, as to not see what this man was doing from the outset? Was it my fault? Should I have known it was a lie when he said that he learned more from me than any of his other students? Maybe I should have been more alarmed when he asked me if I knew where my clitoris was and then laughed at me when I said no. It was when the perpetrator was released after serving only 19 months for abusing me almost every day – correction, maintaining a sexual relationship with me as a 15-year-old, and then spoke freely on Facebook and to the media about how awesome and enviable it was, that I realised we had this all around the wrong way.

In 2017, I connected with ground-breaking freelance journalist and fellow survivor, my dear friend, Nina Funnell. I felt I needed to share my story publicly under my own name to raise awareness and educate others about sexual abuse and the prolonged psychological manipulation that belies it. Yet after months of recounting, re-traumatising details, tirelessly transposed by Nina, we discovered we were barred from sharing them by Section 194K of Tasmania's Evidence

Act, which made it illegal for survivors of child sexual abuse to be identified in the media, even after turning 18, even with their consent. Using my case as the foundation, Nina created the Let Her Speak campaign to reform this law. We were then joined by 16 other brave survivors who lent their stories to the cause. The law was officially changed in April last year, almost 10 years to the day from the beginning of my story. It is so important for our nation – the whole world, in fact – to listen to survivors' stories. Whilst they're disturbing to hear, the reality of what goes on behind closed doors is more so. And the more details we omit for fear of disturbance, the more we soften these crimes, the more we shield perpetrators from the shame that is resultantly misdirected to their targets.

When we share, we heal, reconnect, and grow, both as individuals and as a united strengthened collective. History, lived experience, the whole truth, unsanitised and unedited is our greatest learning resource. It is what informs social and structural change.

The upshot of allowing predators a voice but not survivors encourages the criminal behaviour.

Through working with Nina, finally winning the right to speak, and talking with fellow campaign survivors and countless other women and men who have since come forward, it has become clear that there is the potential to do so much more to support survivors of child sexual abuse to thrive in life, beyond their trauma. And more so, to end child sexual abuse. It is my mission to do so. And it begins right now.

As a fortunate nation, we have a particular obligation to protect our most vulnerable, our innocent children, and especially those who are further disadvantaged through circumstance, being part of a minority group, or geographical location. And there are three key areas that we can focus on to achieve this.

Number one, how we invite, listen, and accept the conversation, and lived experience of child sexual abuse survivors. You've heard me say it before, it all starts with a conversation.

Number two, what we do to expand our understanding of this heinous crime, in particular, the grooming process, through both formal and informal education.

Number three, how we provide a consistent national framework that supports survivors and their loved ones, not just in their recovery, but also to disempower and deter predators from action.

So, what is it that we must do? First and foremost, let's keep talking about it. It's that simple. Let's start by opening up.

Every story is imbued with unique catalytic educative potential that can only be told by its subject. Let us genuinely listen, actively, without judgement, and without advice to demonstrate empathy and re-ensure it is and never was our fault.

Further to this point, while I must express my unflinching gratitude for this newfound platform and the unique opportunities for learning and growth that come with it,

I would like to take this particular opportunity to directly address the media with a constructive reminder - the need for which has become starkly apparent to me this past month. Hosts, reporters, journalists, I say to you - listening to survivors is one thing, repeatedly expecting people to relive their trauma on your terms, without our consent, without prior warning, is another. It's sensation. It's commodification of our pain. It's exploitation. It's the same abuse. Of all the many forms of trauma, rape has the highest rate of PTSD. Healing from trauma does not mean it is forgotten, nor that the symptoms never felt again.

Trauma lives on in ourselves. Our unconscious bodies are steps ahead of our conscious minds. When we are triggered, we are inevitably at the mercy of our emotional brain. In this state, it's impossible to discern between past and present. Such is re-traumatisation. I cried more than once while writing this, just because I've been recognised for my story does not mean it's fair game anywhere, any time. It also doesn't mean it gets any easier to tell. I may be strong, yes, but I am human, just like everyone else. None of us are invincible.

By definition, truths cannot be forced. So, grant us the respect and patience to share them on our own terms, rather than barking instructions like take us back to your darkest moment and tell us about being raped.

On average, it takes 23.9 years for survivors of child sexual abuse to be able to speak about their experiences. Such is the success of predators at instilling fear and self-doubt in the minds of their targets. More so than they are masters of destroying our trust in others, perpetrators are masters of destroying our trust in our own judgement, in ourselves. Such is the power of shame. A power, though, that is no match for love.

Certainly, talking about child sexual abuse won't eradicate it, but we can't fix a problem we don't discuss. And so, it begins with conversation. Which brings me to my second point, from there, we need to expand the conversation to create more awareness and education particularly around the process of grooming.

Grooming - it's a concept that makes us wince and shudder and as such, we rarely hear about it to the benefit of perpetrators. While it haunts us, and we avoid properly breaking it down, the complexity and secrecy of this criminal behaviour is what predators thrive on. In turn, we enable them to charm and manipulate not just their targets, but all of us at once, family, friends, colleagues and community members, and this must stop.

Our discomfort, our fear, and resulting ignorance needs to stop giving perpetrators the protection, power and confidence that allows them to operate. As a start, we should all be aware of what has been identified as the six phases of grooming, which certainly ring true in my experience.

Number one, targeting. That is, identifying a vulnerable

individual. In my case, I was an innocent child but I was also anorexic, with significant change happening at home.

Number two, gaining trust. That is, establishing a friendship and falsely lulling the target into a sense of security by empathising and assuring safety. For me, that was what I thought was listening to my challenges, empathising with my situation, and providing me a safe space to retreat to when I needed it.

Number three, filling a need. That is, playing the person that fills the gap in a target's mental and emotional support. In my case, although I was surrounded by an incredibly attentive family and team of medical professionals, most of their support came in the form of tough love. The teacher thus assumed the role of sympathiser, telling me everything I wanted to hear.

Number four, isolating, that is driving wedges between the target and their genuine supporters. This involves pushing certain people away, but exploiting others.

Number five, sexualising. That is, gradually introducing sexual content so as to normalise it. In my case, in conjunction with subtly explicit conversation, I was carefully exposed to material that glorified relationships between characters with significant age differences.

Number six, maintaining control. That is, striking a perfect balance between causing pain and providing relief from that pain. To condition the target to feel guilt at the thought of exposing a person that also appears to care for them. By way of physical intimidation, combined with veiled threats, abusers scare you into silent submission.

But, as we talk more about child sexual abuse, our lived experiences and what we know, our understanding of this premeditated evil will continue to develop. We need to warn our children, age appropriately, of the signs and characteristic behaviours, whilst educating how to report it, should it happen to them, or to those around them. This is a serious enough topic, unfortunately too common in occurrence for us to hope that kids know this. So, I challenge our education system to look for ways to more formally educate our children. Because we know that education is our primary means of prevention.

And finally, to my third point, we need structural change. A national system that supports and protects survivors and deals with crimes in proportion to their severity. Let's start by considering the implications of linguistics related to offences. Through Let Her Speak campaign efforts, we saw the wording of my abuser's charge officially changed from maintaining a sexual relationship with a person under 17, to the persistent sexual abuse of a child. Now, think about the difference in the crime according to the language of both of these. Think about the message it sends to the community. Think about the message it sends survivors, where empathy is placed, where blame is placed, and how punishment is then given. We need to protect our children not just from

the physical, mental, and emotional pain of these hideous crimes, but from the long-lasting, sometimes lifelong trauma that accompanies it.

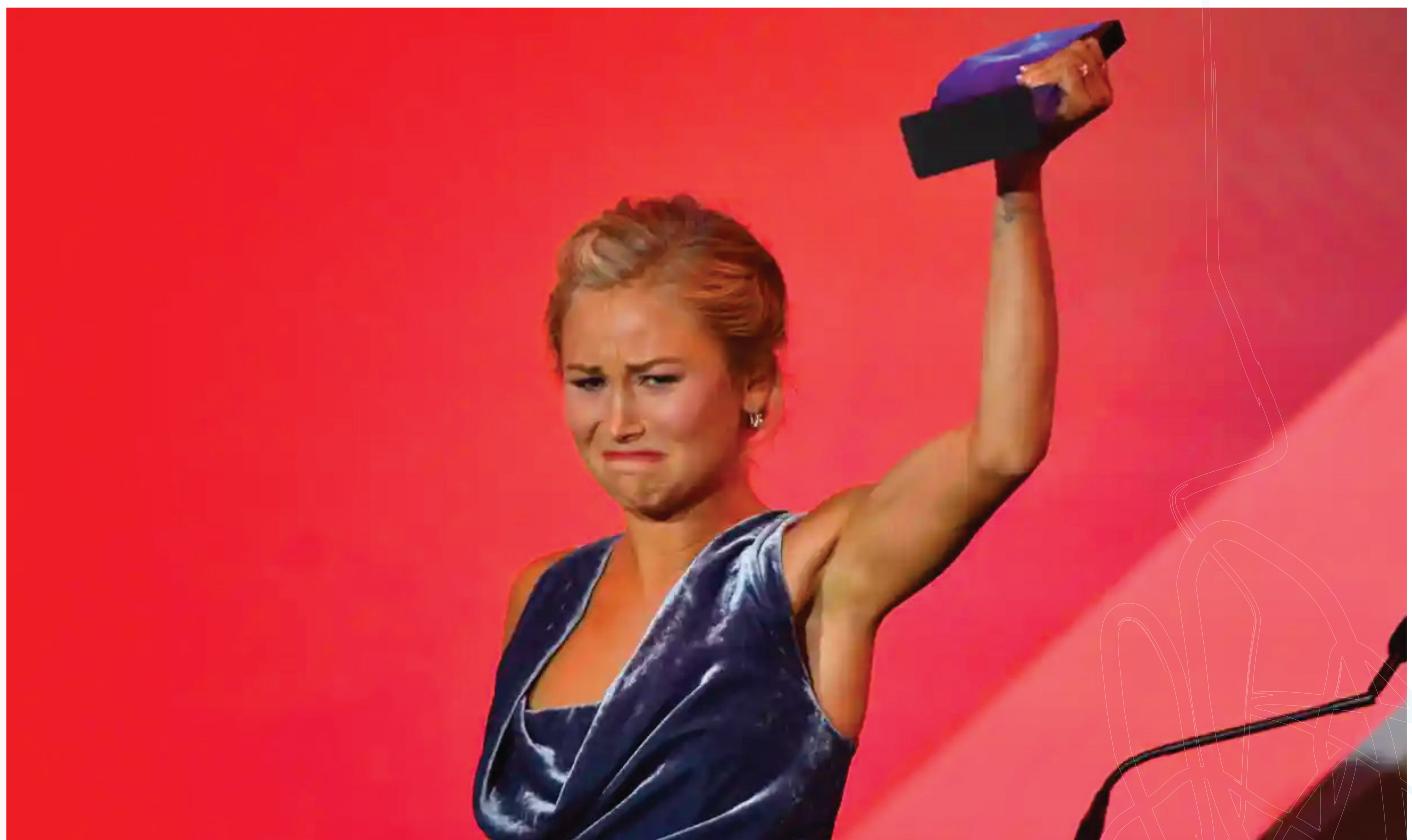
In Australia, we have eight state and territory jurisdictions and eight different definitions of consent. We need to agree on something as absolute as what consent is. We need a uniform, state and federal, national standard and definition of consent. Only then can we effectively teach this fundamentally important principle consistently around Australia.

Since I was announced as Australian of the Year just over a month ago, hundreds of fellow child sexual abuse survivors have reached out to me to tell their stories, to cry with me. Stories they thought they would take with them to the grave, out of shame for being subjected to something that was not their fault. Stories of a kind of suffering they had previously never been able to explain. Stories of grooming. I am one of the luckiest ones, who survived, who was believed, who was surrounded by love. And what this shows me is that despite this problem still existing, and despite a personal history of trauma that is still ongoing, it is possible to heal, to thrive, and live a wonderful life. It is my mission and my duty as a survivor and as a survivor with a voice to continue working towards eradicating child sexual abuse. I won't stop until it does.

And so, I leave you with these three messages - number one, to our government, our decision-makers, and our policymakers. We need reform on a national scale; both in policy and education, to address these heinous crimes, so that they are no longer enabled to be perpetrated. Number two, to my nation, the wonderful people of Australia. We need to be open, to embrace the conversation, new information, and take guidance from our experiences so we can inform change. So we can heal and prevent this happening to future generations. Number three, and finally, to my fellow survivors. It is our time. We need to take this opportunity. We need to be bold and courageous. Recognise we have a platform on which I stand with you in solidarity and support. Share your truth, it is your power. One voice, your voice, and our collective voices can make a difference. We are on the precipice of a revolution whose call to action needs to be heard loud and clear. That's right. You got it. Let's keep making noise, Australia.

This is an edited version of the address delivered at the National Press Club on 3 March 2021.

In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, family or domestic violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit www.1800RESPECT.org.au. In an emergency, call 000. International helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org.



▲ Grace Tame at the 2021 Australian of the Year Awards at the National Arboretum in Canberra. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/EPA



National Centre of Excellence
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TELL US YOUR
STORY!

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