Welcome

Welcome to our June edition of Breaking Free, a monthly newsletter that features helpful articles, stories, resources and news of interest to adult survivors, supporters and community members.

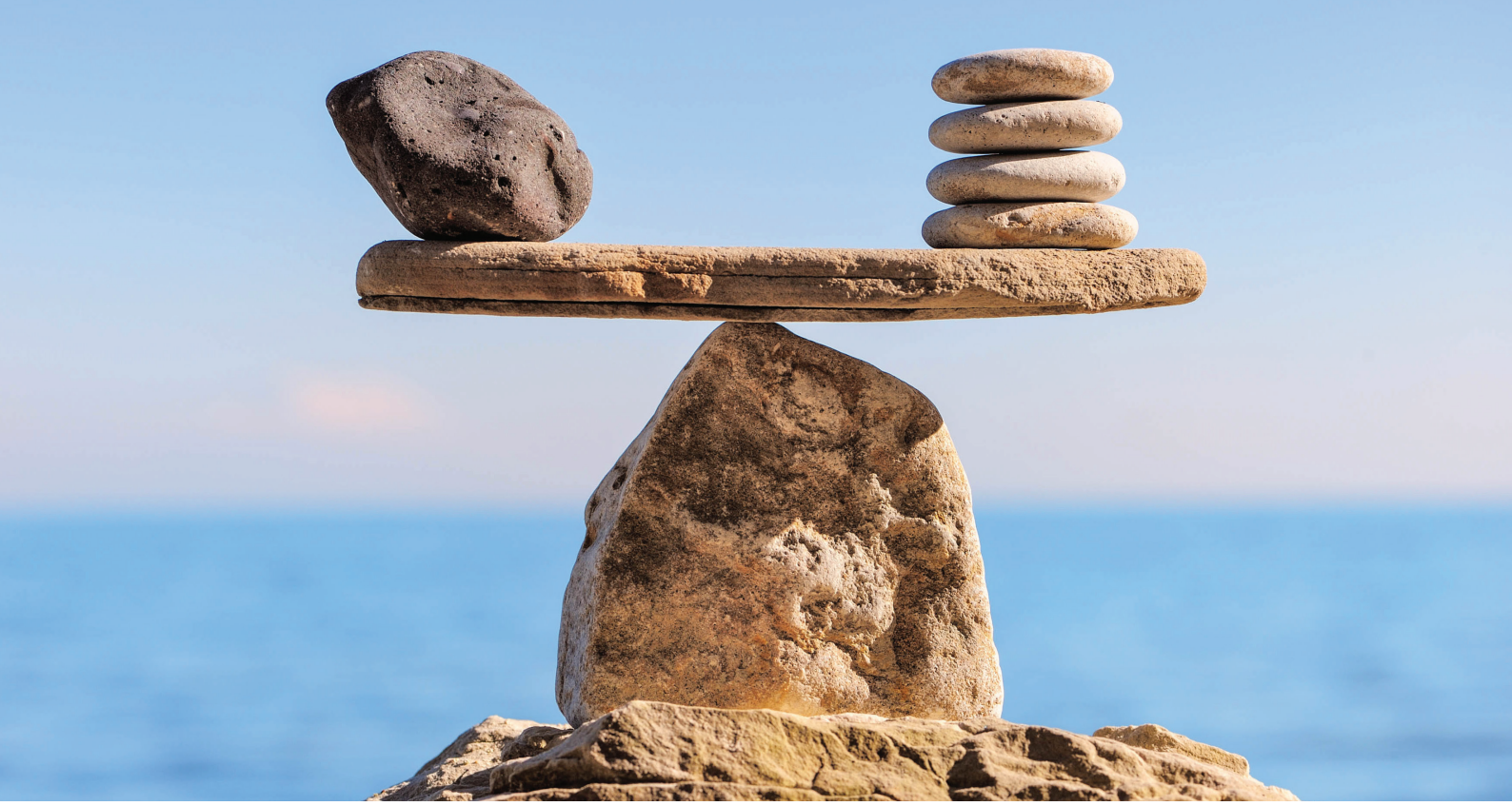
This month our lead article builds on that in last month's newsletter and the link between childhood trauma and addiction. It draws on findings from the pivotal Adverse Childhood Experiences Study and the work of Gabor Maté, a physician who is expert in childhood trauma and addition. This is presented in relation to the new film Rocketman, about Elton John and the impacts of childhood trauma on his life.

We also feature our Fact Sheet for survivors called Towards Recovery and a call to support our EOFY campaign and Survivor Workshop program. Importantly, we additionally call for volunteers to support our upcoming national awareness day, Blue Knot Day, to be held this year on October 28th.

Our self-help article this month focusses on different ways we can try to help ourselves feel grounded.

As always, if you have comments about what you have read in this issue, contributions for the My Story section, or topic suggestions for future issues, please be in touch by emailing newsletter@blueknot.org.au

With warm regards,
The Blue Knot Team.



Understanding trauma, coping strategies and resilience

Many of our readers will have heard of an ongoing study in the United States called the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study or the ACE Study. This study has helped identify how common trauma early in life is (Felitti, Anda et al, 1998; 2010), as well as how such trauma can affect us not only in childhood but also as an adult.

The ACE Study shows that adverse experiences in childhood can have an effect on our physical and emotional health and wellbeing. It also shows how the coping strategies we often adopt in childhood to deal with overwhelming experiences can become risk factors for ill health later in life. This can happen if the underlying trauma is not resolved or, in other words, if the person has not found a path to recovery.

It is important to know however that even severe childhood trauma can be resolved. This is called `earned security'. It is also important to know that hope and optimism about the possibility of recovery is not just `wishful thinking'. Rather it has been proven by clinical and neuroscientific research, as well as survivors' stories of resilience and healing. The brain is neuroplastic; that means that it can change in both structure and function.

We also know that supportive relationships and healthy interactions play a big role in any process of recovery – these are relationships with friends, family, neighbours, colleagues as well as professionals. And that just as negative interactions can be detrimental, positive interactions can assist healing and repair.

`That even those whose sense of self has been most brutally shattered can learn to reunite the broken parts of themselves and thereby heal, is a lesson that gives hope and wisdom to us all' (Steinberg, 2001).

In our last edition of Breaking Free our lead article asked the question: "Is there a link between childhood trauma and addiction?" It detailed how addictions of all sorts are types of coping strategies people adopt to help soothe their distress and angst. The struggle of addiction related to childhood trauma has been depicted on screen in the recently released biopic about Elton John. Elton, a well-known celebrity had experienced abuse at home and the divorce of his parents. In a quote from the film, Egerton who plays Elton John says, "I'm Elton Hercules John and

I'm an alcoholic, cocaine addict, sex addict, bulimic, shopaholic…", that is… a whole range of addiction.

The enclosed article talks about the ACE study and the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and addictions, as well as chronic pain in relation to this film.

Dr. Gabor Maté, who is quoted in the article is a physician who specialises in the area of trauma and addiction. He believes that all addictions are grounded in trauma and emotional loss. Maté has developed a theory of addiction related to childhood abuse and its effects on the ability to process chemicals in the brain. According to Maté people become addicted as a replacement for the brain chemicals their own bodies fail to process.
Gabor, in his book In The Realm Of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters With Addiction defines addiction as "any behaviour that a person craves, finds temporary relief or pleasure in but suffers negative consequences as a result of, and yet has difficulty giving up." The story of Elton John shows his struggle with many addictions.

While the ACE study focusses on 10 different categories of childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect, family violence and growing up with a parent with a mental illness or their own addictions, it is now apparent that the situation is still more complex. This includes the compounding impacts of adverse community experiences such as poverty, discrimination, lack of opportunity, community disruption, violence (Ellis and Dietz, 2017). Adverse childhood experiences and adverse social and community environments can interact to exacerbate trauma and affect resilience.

In Gabor Maté's article, he speaks personally about his own trauma, not one of which were ACEs but which impacted him all the same and were passed onto him across the generations.

Recent research *"has not only chronicled the existence of intergenerational trauma but has demonstrated some of the epigenetic, molecular, and biochemical mechanisms responsible for such transmission" (Levine, 2015: 161)*

Trauma can be transferred from the generation who directly experienced or witnessed the trauma to the next. This is intergenerational trauma. Trauma can also be transferred not only to the next generation but to subsequent generations (Atkinson et al. 2010) and is known as transgenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002).

For example, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, transgenerational trauma extends well beyond the person and their family and includes the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism, dispossession, racism and the Stolen Generation.

As Gabor Maté highlights, whole groups of people (e.g. holocaust survivors, refugees and asylum seekers) also experience collective and transgenerational trauma. Collective trauma is trauma which happens to large groups and which can cross generations and communities.

Regardless of the origin of the trauma it is possible to find a path to healing and building resilience is paramount. This involves finding a sense of safety - both for each individual and for parents and their children, communities and groups. This can be fostered through safe healthy relationships and making sense of one's experience over time so each person, and each family and community, can build a story which captures their experience and their path to recovery.

Judy Atkinson captures this well speaking in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: ``the creation of safe places for sharing where the unspeakable can be given voice, where feelings can be felt, and where sense can be made out of what seemed previously senseless'' (Atkinson J, 2002). As relationships grow a sense of connection and belonging can follow, and so too a sense of agency and empowerment – for each person and their communities. And always holding onto the hope that it can and will be better for you, and for those you care about… and when you can't hold the hope to reach out and connect with someone who can support you along the way.

To find support and possible referrals call the Blue Knot Helpline on 1300 657 380 between 9am and 5pm AEST seven days or email helpline@blueknot.org.au

My Story – A poem

"From the outside looking in, you can never understand

From the inside looking out, you can never explain

Sometimes I feel I am not enough

But other times I feel we are too much"

*Name withheld on request

Trigger Warning

Warning: This article may contain content that could disturb some readers. If reading this story causes you distress and you need support, please call the Blue Knot Helpline on 1300 657 380 (9am-5pm AEST, 7 days). Calls that cannot be answered directly will be returned as soon as possible, so please leave a message with your phone number, and state of residence

Self Care Resources

In this section, we review self care/help resources our Blue Knot Helpline counselling team collects to share with people who call the Helpline. We are delighted to share these ideas with our Breaking Free readers. What is helpful for one person may not be right for someone else so please experiment, explore and find what suits you.

Enclosed you will find this month's Self Care article.

BlueKnot Day

Our 10th annual national Blue Knot Day, a day on which Blue Knot Foundation asks all Australians to unite in support of adult survivors of complex trauma is fast approaching.

If you'd like to donate your time to volunteer to help coordinate a Blue Knot Day event in your community, please email events@blueknot.org.au for more information.

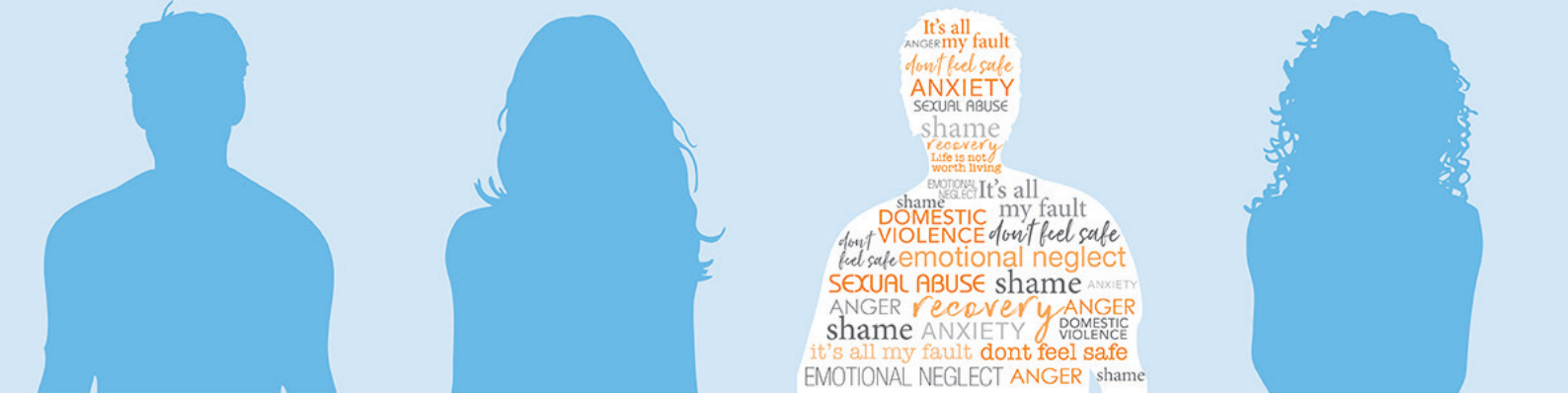
Fact Sheet Profile - Towards Recovery

The enclosed Fact Sheet has been designed for people who have experienced childhood trauma including abuse. If you were abused or traumatised as a child this Fact Sheet can help you understand more about what happened to you, how it might have affected you and some options for what you can do now.

Based on the latest research, it includes information about childhood trauma and abuse, its different forms, and how it can affect people. It also describes the ways people respond to stress and the coping strategies some survivors use.

The Fact Sheet is one of a suite of resources to support survivors on their healing journey.

We hope that you find the information useful yourself or can share it with someone you think may benefit from it. Should you wish to speak to a counsellor please call our Blue Knot Helpline to speak with one of our Helpline counsellors on 1300 657 380 or by emailing helpline@blueknot.org.au



Survivor Workshop Appeal

It's not too late to donate to our annual Survivor Educational Workshop appeal, if you haven't already. Many of the people who Blue Knot Foundation supports have experienced complex trauma in childhood – abuse, neglect and the impact of growing up with other adverse childhood experiences. In fact, 1 in 4 adult Australians have experienced childhood trauma, abuse and neglect.

This appeal highlights the need for and value of workshops which provide information which helps survivors understand the connection between what happened to them in the past and their current struggles, while providing strategies for their everyday lives.

Blue Knot Foundation provides these workshops around the country at no cost to attendees. We hope to raise enough funds to deliver 8 full-day workshops for up to 30 attendees each, for adults who have experienced childhood trauma, abuse and neglect – one in each state and territory.

If funding permits, we will also extend 4 workshops, free of charge to family, friends and loved ones. Because those supporting survivors on their journey also need their own information and support. If you are supporting a loved one on their healing journey you might find the information here useful.

If you're in a position to make a contribution to this appeal please phone us on (02) 8920 3611. Thank you for your support for fellow Australians in need.

What can we do to help ground ourselves when we are feeling stressed or spaced out?

People who have experienced repeated trauma, violence or abuse can find themselves responding to triggering situations in different ways. This can vary from being hyper-aroused or agitated, anxious and easily startled to being hypo-aroused or numb and shut down.

When these responses occur, our thinking and problem-solving brain shuts down and our ancient reptilian brain takes over. Much of the trauma that we have experienced is stored in our body. The tone of a person's voice, a smell, a sound or a feeling might trigger us in a way that sometimes doesn't make sense.

There is a zone which we call the 'window of tolerance' which is a space where we are able to manage what is happening around us in a way that allows our frontal cortex (thinking and problem solving brain) to stay engaged. The optimal way of travelling through life is to be able to stay within our window of tolerance, as this enables us to function as well as we can.

One of the main techniques in helping us to stay within, and return to, the window of tolerance is called grounding techniques. These techniques are used to help us move to the present moment and back to our bodies.

For this reason, we have developed the following suggestions for you to gently explore. As we are all unique and have different needs, we also all find different techniques useful. We hope that some of the following exercises will help support you to feel calmer and more present.

'Grounding' is the act of connecting more deeply and completely to the body, strengthening the feeling of

being inside the body and connected to the ground or earth.

Being grounded is important for feeling centred and connected with your world. Some people find that grounding can help them feel less anxious or more present. The following exercises can help foster connection between the mind and body. You might find one or two that work for you, or you may choose to come back to them later on, if now is not a good time for you to focus on them.

As you explore the grounding exercises suggested here, remember, only to use the exercises with which you feel comfortable.

- Stop and listen to the world around you. Notice and silently name what you can hear nearby and in the distance.
- Stamp your feet. Notice the sensation and the sound as you connect with the ground.
- If you are sitting, feel the chair under you and the weight of your body and legs pressing down onto it.
- Focus on your breath - notice your in-breath - count as you exhale, and repeat. Be aware of your body relaxing.
- Look around the room and notice familiar objects and name them.
- Have a special object on your bedside table - something soothing. Perhaps a photograph, memento from a holiday, a piece of nature… something that has a special meaning to you that is soothing. Look for this when you wake up and recall why you selected this object and how it makes you feel.
- Lying down, feel the contact between your head, your body and your legs. Notice where they touch the surface on which you are lying. Starting with your head, notice how each muscle feels, all the way down to your feet, on the soft or hard surface.
- Hold a mug of tea or hot drink in both hands and feel its warmth. Don't rush, take small sips and take your time tasting each mouthful mindfully. Notice how you swallow and enjoy each sip.
- Get up, walk around and take your time to notice each step as you take one then another.
- Clap and rub your hands together, hear the noise and feel the sensation in your hands and arms.
- Step outside, notice the temperature of the air and contrast this with inside. Feel the surface on which you're walking, is it soft (grass, sand) or firm (concrete, pavers or bitumen)?

You might find it useful to record the sensations that you notice. If you engage in an activity it might help to reflect on that activity and notice how you feel. Do you feel calmer or more connected with your body? If you don't or if you feel more stressed, leave this activity, for now.

This activity has no right or wrong answers. Keeping a record or a journal writing down your observations may be useful and provide you with some activities you can revisit and also some observations that might assist you with understanding what works for you and what doesn't.

What do you use to help ground you?

What do you find helpful?

What did you notice about yourself when you did these activities?

It might be a good idea to make your own list and keep it handy for those moments when you might need reminding. Some of these exercises are good to do anywhere when you start to feel triggered. Others you might want to do at home or in the right space. It does take time for these to start having a benefit. Like anything it is similar to exercising a muscle - it takes repeated efforts for it to grow strong.

If you'd like to read more about available support resources, you'll find Fact Sheets, Videos and Book recommendations at blueknot.org.au.

Children Are Often The Silent Victims Of Family Violence

The following article explores the impacts of growing up in a domestic violence situation, and its effects on children and on the adults they become. Told through the voices of survivors who courageously speak out, it acknowledges that children are often the silent victims of family violence but offers the possibility of hope and healing.

'Out of the blue, Dad threw a beer bottle at me'

Nicole Partridge | May 31, 2019

'Out of the blue, Dad threw a beer bottle at me'
While we know that domestic and family violence can lead to emotional and psychological trauma for the victim, what happens to the children? We asked four men and women — who each grew up with family violence — to share the impact this cruelty had on them.

Natalie (25) became an advocate

Ours was the model family. My parents were both professionals, we lived in nice homes and I went to private schools — but behind closed door it was a different story. Dad could go from being nurturing and funny to manipulative, narcissistic and cruel. At first, dad's abuse was emotional and psychological and then it became physical.

One time, I was walking to my bedroom and out of the blue, dad threw a beer bottle at me. It missed my head and smashed against the wall. I ran into the bedroom and locked the door. I thought dad might kill me.

Mum and I lived in a constant state of fear. Some nights, dad would lock mum and I out of the house and we'd be forced to sleep in the car. I suffered with significant developmental delays as a result of the abuse. As a teenager, I often felt isolated and alone — but thankfully, I had adults around me who recognised my gifts and who encouraged me to go on school camps and participate in excursions. I did well at school, went on to university and recently won a scholarship to study at a prestigious university overseas.

Children are the forgotten victims of domestic violence. The domestic violence figures that are just shocking.

I have not just survived family violence, but thrived, thanks to therapy; access to good education; a network of strong friendships and practising self-compassion. I am also in a great long-term relationship with a partner who is kind and compassionate. My work in advocacy is deeply personal and my goal is to help other young people find their own place in the world despite past trauma.

Clare (55) suffered from PTSD

The PTSD started eight years ago. I was trimming the hedge when I heard a story about domestic violence on the radio. I just fell to the ground, curled up in a foetal position and crawled under the bush. There have been other triggers: breaking glass, crowds, loud noises and yelling. These sounds can transport me back to my childhood and the systematic abuse perpetrated by my father.

One weekend, my cousins were staying over and we were playing in my bedroom. It was f*cking chaos outside. The three of us pushed my dressing table up against the door so dad couldn't come in. I knew mum was copping it, but I couldn't do anything to help her. I was a kid. As I got older, the violence got personal. One night, I was heading to the movies with friends and I called out, "I'm going Dad." Dad stormed over and slammed my head against the wall. It wouldn't be the first time. When I told mum what had happened, she looked at me with fear in her eyes and said, "Clare, please don't tell me when your dad does this — because if you tell me, I'll have to say something and he'll hit me."

Somehow I got through it all, managed to get myself an education and marry a wonderful man who was the polar opposite to Dad. When the PTSD hit in my 40s and I wasn't coping. I reached out to the Blue Knot Foundation for counselling. My message to survivors of trauma is this: It is not your fault. Do not turn it on yourself and please seek help when you need it.

Mary (56) ended up in a violent relationship

I grew up thinking I never want to be like my mother. Mum had a raft of mental health issues and was very violent. After she and my dad separated, she married a man who was mentally, physically and sexually violent. I've seen him drag mum down the hallway by her hair, throw furniture at her and on several occasions, put her in hospital. One time, he deliberately drove his car over her prized rose garden. I was livid. I yanked a stake out of the ground and screamed, "Leave Mum alone!" He turned around and punched me.

I grew up feeling powerless, frightened and unloved. As I got older, I latched onto men who I thought might somehow save me — usually those who were charming, but who had a dark side. In my 40s, after a failed marriage, I dated a man who was a lot like my stepfather: controlling, emotionally unavailable, manipulative and mentally abusive. Soon into our relationship, which moved way too quickly, he began questioning my friendships and my whereabouts. There were the nasty put downs and the stonewalling. Post separation, he became threatening and verbally abusive. The relationship nearly destroyed me.

Healing has come about through group therapy, meditation, sharing my story, starting a choir for survivors of family violence, education and surrounding myself with empowered women. I am no longer looking for a relationship to give me nourishment and I am determined to break the intergenerational cycle by letting my own children know they are loved, validated and they do have a voice.

Scott (40) became a perpetrator of domestic violence

I have known fear and violence my entire life. My dad was a six-foot-two, 120 kilos of hulking man who could explode at any time. Without much provocation, he would bash me and my brother. He's thrown me through walls and he was physically and verbally abusive towards my mum. At school, I was a bully and in my teens, I used rugby union as a violent mask. Violence and intimidation became my default and it permeated all my relationships.

When I met my ex wife, I had no idea of the impact. A year into our marriage, we moved to the UAE for my job and she was struggling with isolation. I wasn't aware or emotionally strong enough to support her. The behaviours I learnt in childhood surfaced. I got violent and abusive. One time, I had my hands around my ex wife's throat and thought, F*ck, I am my father.

For me, my violence came from deep-seated fear and insecurity, which was often fuelled by alcohol and prescription drugs. Eventually, my ex wife left me and gave me a counsellor's number. At first I told the counsellor it was her fault and then I took a good hard look at myself. Several years ago, I embarked on a journey of healing - spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. My healing involved a process of understanding and owning my behaviours, and then being willing to change. If I hadn't chosen to look within myself my life could have been a continuous cycle of violence.

* All of our subjects are now advocates against domestic and family violence.

The experts weigh in

Maria Hagias, Chief Executive Officer of Women's Safety Services SA said reaching out and finding support was crucial for young victims to recover from abusive upbringings.

"For young people who have grown up in these unstable and unsafe households, having support is a key factor in overcoming this trauma. Support might look different for each individual. It might be your extended family, it might be a therapist, it could be a teacher at school or your case worker. It may be a program that you get involved with, designed specifically to teach you life skills or put you in contact with other people who have experienced similar trauma. One of the first steps in healing is realising that you are not alone in what you have experienced, and there are people out there who understand and want to help. Learning more about the dynamics of domestic & family violence, including its relationship to gender inequality, can also help young people to understand that what happened to them wasn't their fault.

"If you are a parent who is experiencing a violent relationship, it is important to keep an open dialogue with your child. Talk to them about what they are feeling. Try to take steps that will make them feel safer. Be open about what is going on, but in a way that is appropriate for your child's age. Most of all, make sure you are seeking support for yourself.''

Dr. Cathy Kezleman, President of the Blue Knot Foundation said that trust is the key to healing after abuse.

"Many people who experienced trauma as a child often struggle to feel and be safe, and to trust others. This can make it hard to reach out, find and accept help, and leave survivors feeling isolated and alone. Because childhood trauma happened within relationships, healing also happens within relationships. And people can and do heal with the right support. Learning to trust others, to feel safe and to turn to them for support is a crucial step in recovery. It is important to learn to trust your feelings.

"Choose people who are available for you, connected to you and who can engage with you and your experience. This can include a counsellor or therapist who is experienced in working with adult survivors of child abuse and trauma. It can be helpful to keep a list of your support people and phone numbers. It might also remind you to do some activities that nurture you like remembering to breathe, having a cup of tea, going outside and being in nature, connecting with your pets, having a shower, listening to music, drawing, colouring in etc. Whatever works for you. Keep it on the fridge, on your phone, or anywhere you can easily find It."

WHERE TO GET HELP:

Childhood trauma:
For support around abuse and trauma, contact the blue knot helpline 1300 657 380 or go to www.blueknot.org.au.

For men:
https://www.samsn.org.au
https://www.heavymetalgroup.com.au/contact-us/

Domestic and Family violence help:
https://www.safesteps.org.au
http://dvnsw.org.au
https://womenssafetyservices.com.au/

If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence, call 1800RESPECT ON 1800 737 732 or visit 1800RESPECT.org.au

* In its 2016, Personal Safety Survey, the Australia Bureau of Statistics revealed an estimated 2.4 million Australians aged 18 years and over reported witnessing their mother or father experiencing violence by a partner, before he age of 15.

Child Abuse Survivors Keep And Break Their Silence

The article reveals some of the reasons why it can be so hard to talk about the abuse one experiences as a child. Again, through the honesty of survivors, speaking out to highlight the issues, this article speaks to the importance of being heard and reaching out for support.

If you are in need of support and would like to speak to a counsellor at Blue Knot please call our Helpline between 9am and 5pm AEST seven days a week on 1300 657 380 or helpline@blueknot.org.au

'You grow up hating yourself': why child abuse survivors keep – and break – their silence

Earlier this year Erin Delaney revealed on Facebook a secret she'd kept from almost everyone.

As a child she suffered physical and emotional abuse and severe neglect. The neglect had significant consequences, including a fractured skull from falling – which was only picked up when, after she vomited at school the next day, a member of her extended family intervened and took her to hospital.

The emotional abuse included both parents telling her at different times that the other was dead, or that they weren't her real parents; the physical abuse – the hitting, the kicking – depended on their drug use and moods.

"It was," the 36-year-old Sydneysider says now, "a challenging journey through life. I never felt safe and I never felt grounded. You grow up hating yourself and thinking you caused it and you deserve it."

Wondering if she'd lose all her friends once they "knew the truth", the usually articulate and witty writer withdrew. "I knew it would impact how people thought about me and I was terrified," she admits. "I began to doubt myself and believe no one would be interested, that someone might use it against me somehow."

Delaney had always felt like she had two different selves: her secret, real self and a superficial, public persona cultivated to blend in. "I want to hear my real voice because it's been silenced for 36 years."

Her decision to post her story was inspired by a Guardian article about the widespread misdiagnosis of trauma survivors and her desire to educate people about trauma.

She attributes internalised self-blame, hurtful reactions and dehumanising labels from professionals for why she kept silent so long. She first told her story to the daughter of a Christian family she was staying with as a teen and was reprimanded. At 18, she attempted suicide. The psychiatric registrar told her to do it properly next time. "That pushed me back into my shell for years," she says.

Delaney, who suffers from complex post-traumatic stress disorder, says society treats different medical conditions unequally. "One of my old school friends had cancer a few years ago and everyone offered to help, while my emotional injuries are a source of shame and isolation."

Many people have since shared their own secrets of abuse with Delaney. "What broke my heart was it was all in private messages," she says. "They were too scared to share it openly. I want to take the power away from

my abusers and the only power they have over me is my silence and shame. To adult survivors, don't let the fuckers who stole your joy keep stealing it even one more day."

Kelly Humphries, a 37-year-old Queensland senior police constable, went to the police about her uncle's sexual abuse when she was 19, but she didn't speak publicly about it till her 30s. She has written a memoir, Unscathed Beauty, about her recovery.

"I want people to know they're not on their own," she says. "There's so much happens behind closed doors (that) nobody ever talks about. I've always known since I was a child I didn't want it to happen to anyone else."

Humphries, who worked in child protection for six years, first spoke out about her abuse at Toastmasters in 2015. "It was a bit controversial for them but I think they recognised the courage it took. It's hard to know how people are going to respond when you've had an experience like that but I've grown in the process of sharing and writing, reaching out to others and others reaching out to me."

She recommends having a support system and good self-care practices when sharing traumatic information. "You don't have to tell everyone but it's important for the people who matter most in your life. People can't support you if they don't know what's wrong."

Disclosing has enabled others to share their stories, including her mother. "She revealed to me that it's happened to her as well. She hadn't spoken about it ever. All of a sudden, people start making disclosures and it doesn't become shameful any more."

Dr Cathy Kezelman, president of the Blue Knot foundation, a national organisation helping adults recover from childhood trauma, says Australia's royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse had found it takes an average of 24 years for people to speak about their abuse. "Some never do," she says. The Blue Knot helpline has received calls from people disclosing for the first time in their 70s, 80s and 90s.

"We have a society that hasn't wanted to hear about it," she explains. "As we saw in the royal commission, a lot of people giving testimony spoke about trying to speak out as a child. Many were punished, they weren't believed and their concerns were dismissed or minimised.

"Thinking about abuse or neglect of a child is inherently discomforting for us all. Often people hearing the disclosure don't know what to say. Counsellors with insufficient training, despite the best of intentions, can retraumatise victims."

It takes a long time for victims to process and recognise what happened to them was abuse, Kezelman adds. "They are often abused by people supposed to care for them. Some people don't remember their abuse, or only parts of it. And often they haven't made connection between the struggles they're having in their life and what happened to them as a child."

Mellita Bate, a manager and counsellor with Interrelate, provided support to victims coming forward to the royal commission. She says the insidious nature of the grooming process is behind why most people keep sexual abuse bottled up inside. The egocentric nature of children feeds into self-blame. "Most perpetrators start touching just a little bit inappropriately to see if they can get away with it and to work out if that child has the capacity to tell an adult," she says. "When they start to perpetrate the abuse they use threats and emotional blackmail."

Another disincentive for disclosing abuse is the pain of reliving it. "We have in our human nature a way of dealing with trauma by just holding it locked away somewhere," Bate says. When people do disclose, it's for various reasons in different environments. Triggers, such as the #MeToo movement and royal commission, and the desire to obtain justice, are common motives for finally speaking out, she says.

It's especially hard to disclose sex abuse if you're male. A 2014 paper by Sydney Law School found males are much less likely than females to disclose child sexual abuse at the time it occurs, take longer to disclose, and make fewer and more selective disclosures.

Craig Hughes-Cashmore, chief executive of Survivors and Mates Survivors Network, a not-for-profit assisting male survivors of sex abuse, frames the discussion around gender stereotypes: "Women are victims and men are perpetrators; men don't cry; men don't seek help," he says.

The added fear and confusion about sexual preference adds to their silence. "The bulk of perpetrators are male, so if you're a boy and are sexually abused by a same-sex person and you have a physical response, you're left very confused about your sexuality," he says.

Hughes-Cashmore was himself abused as a child. It began in his early teens when his parents were going through a separation and a friend of his father's moved into the family home.

"He was a friend and a work colleague of my father's," he says. "So it was nice to get that attention. My dad had met a new woman and my mum was freaking out. It kind of suited them for this guy to take an interest as well because they were trying to piece their lives together."

Of his experience, he says "your own sexual development is taken from you and that's a really horrible legacy to be left with. We (survivors) didn't have that exploration thing kids talk about, the first kiss and that sort of stuff is denied,

and I don't think we talk about that much but I think it really, really sucks if your first experience, like mine, is being raped."

Apart from the destruction of natural sexual development there is the damage done to mental and emotional development.

"You're talking about interrupting the development of the brain of a child and their education. It's a major rewiring of the brain that can often leave people in a perpetual state of alarm, a heightened sense of who's around me, what's happening and constant vigilance. I was like that for years and depressed and suicidal because the world wasn't safe, and everyone had an ulterior motive and who do you trust?

"Trust is a massive issue for people who've been abused. Because often these people were people we looked up to and admired."

More damaging than sexual confusion and a potent reason for long-held silence, says Hughes-Cashmore, is the abiding belief that victims are more likely to become sexual predators themselves. "It's kind of demonising victims."

Regardless of gender, associations with mental health instability and the view the victim didn't do enough to stop the abuse is another obstacle to potential sharing of the subject. "This shows a lack of understanding on the behalf of the public about the grooming process and the power imbalance between children and adults," Hughes-Cashmore says.

Owing to their own sense of shame, many survivors expect judgment from society, he says.

One man who found the strength to speak out is Adam Savage. The 40-year-old Newcastle resident was sexually abused by two older teenagers and a Catholic priest. It took him until he was 37 to reveal it.

In 2016 Savage drove past his abuser's house with a friend. "I said, 'That was the house where the two brothers abused me,'" he recalls. "It was really impulsive. I'd completed enough healing where I found the inner strength to speak my truth."

After that, Savage reported the abuse to police, then told family and friends. In 2017, as part of his healing and to get the perpetrators to confess their crime, he met them to ask why they had abused him. This resulted in them pleading guilty in court.

Savage kept the abuse to himself for years owing to denial, guilt, shame, fear and trust issues. "I didn't love myself and I didn't want to burden anybody else. I self-medicated with drugs, alcohol, sex and rugby."

For Savage, speaking out has been about healing, justice, forgiveness and helping. "I believe communication is key with all forms of trauma. The three individuals stole my power and it was time for me to get my power back. That will form my legacy – communicating and speaking my truth to empower others. This has been a long journey, a lot of hard work, many tears and a lot of inner reflection. I can honestly sit here right now and say I love myself from the heart for who I am."

Hughes-Cashmore says: "We're just coming out of an age where this was incredibly taboo as a subject. People's response to disclosure is often key to people's recovery." A 2018 study found social support buffers the negative risks associated with child abuse including suicide, health problems in later life and a reduced lifespan.

On the downside, Hughes-Cashmore reveals discrimination can be real for child abuse survivors. "I've helped men who have absolutely been discriminated against when their employer find out they're a survivor."

Ultimately, the need to share oneself often prevails. As Blue Knot's Kezelman sums up: "We all want to be heard for who we are, survivors particularly, because it is so traumatic and has affected the trajectory of their life so incredibly."

Helpful numbers and links in Australia

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or chat online lifeline.org.au

Blue Knot Foundation: 1300 657 380, Monday to Sunday, 9am-5pm AEST; blueknot.org.au

Survivors & Mates Support Network: 1800 4 SAMSN (72676), Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm; samsn.org.au

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636; beyondblue.org.au/forums

Mensline Australia: 1300 789 978; mensline.org.au

Interrelate: 1300 473 528, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm; interrelate.org.au

blue knot foundation

National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma

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

In-house Training for the second half of 2019

You can browse through our In-House training options for the second half of 2019 here. Please email trainingandservices@blueknot.org.au or call (02) 8920 3611 to find out more.
