

ADULTS SURVIVING CHILD ABUSE

Millions of Australian adults have experienced the devastating effects of childhood trauma. Three survivors share their stories.

Words by **Donna Duggan** Photography by **Ellis Parrinder**

When you contemplate the official statistics of adults who have survived child abuse, it's nothing short of devastating. According to the World Health Organization [WHO], one in five adults have suffered some sort of abuse when they were a child. This abuse may have been physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Abuse also includes neglect or negligent treatment; and commercial or other forms of exploitation. The result of this abuse, according to WHO is the potential or actual harm to the individual's health, survival, development, or dignity. Consider a standard Year 4 classroom of 30 children and you can appreciate how enormous the problem of child abuse is still today.

CATHY'S STORY

When Dr Cathy Kezelman was in her mid-40s, her young niece was killed in a car accident. While grieving for her niece, Cathy started experiencing flashbacks. "It was horrific," she says. "My body would

writhe with pain. I didn't have words for what I was experiencing – just a sense of fear and pain that would overtake me." As a general practitioner and a mother of four, Cathy was used to feeling in control. "But when my niece died," she says, "I was constantly gripped by anxiety. It was like grieving her death unlocked emotions that I had long ago buried. I ended up falling into a deep depression, and I considered ending my life a number of times. I couldn't see a way out."

Cathy had always been aware that she had very little memory of her childhood until the age of 14. "I used to get angry when people reminisced about their childhood because I couldn't remember mine," she says. "But the flashbacks forced me to remember what I had tried to suppress for so long – years of emotional and sexual abuse by close family members and others." She sought help from a therapist to process the memories. "I owe my recovery to my therapist," Cathy says. "After several years of therapy, I started to feel safe enough

to explore my story and start the healing process, which took many years."

Cathy is now the president of Adults Surviving Child Abuse (ASCA), a national organisation that supports adults dealing with the long-term impact of child abuse; she is also a director of the Mental Health Coordinating Council. ASCA, with Cathy's involvement, is also developing programs to help therapists more

effectively support survivors with issues associated with complex trauma. "Trust, feelings of safety, and firm boundaries are the most important things when dealing with abuse in therapy," says Cathy. "But we have also found that some therapists are not equipped to deal with other issues common to complex trauma, so we aim to help professionals with these issues, too."

SURVIVOR Cathy Kezelman survived years of abuse and now helps other child-abuse survivors.

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"One in five adults have survived some form of abuse in their childhood – a horrific statistic when you consider that there are approximately four million adults in Australia who are survivors of childhood trauma," Cathy reiterates. "The affect of this trauma is complex and far-reaching." The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study published by the US Centers for Disease Control and





Prevention shows that childhood trauma can cause a multitude of negative health and social outcomes, from health-risk behaviours (such as alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, and smoking) to chronic conditions (including heart disease and frequent headaches).

“Many adult survivors learn coping mechanisms to deal with childhood abuse, but they are not always positive

in adult life,” says Cathy. Research by Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota in the US and colleagues shows how a caring and secure environment can help moderate the negative impact that stress places on the developing brain. Because safety and bonding are important factors in the brain’s early development, childhood trauma can compromise brain function.

Without a secure base, adult survivors can then find it difficult to manage stress, making them more prone to coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drug abuse. Survivors of childhood abuse also often experience poor relationships and chaotic lifestyles, and frequently report difficulties forming intimate adult attachments; they can also display behaviours that threaten and disrupt

close relationships because they haven’t developed the necessary skills or neural pathways that allow them to form healthy relationships.

Cathy says she learned to cope by compartmentalising different aspects of her life. “I was very organised – the typical supermum – but I was also emotionally detached and often sarcastic. I let my job as a GP define me, because

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FROM THERAPY TO THERAPIST After years of therapy, Sophie Lippell now works as a psychotherapist, where she sees lots of evidence of childhood wounds in her clients.

I had no real sense of self. I worked compulsively but never stopped to smell the roses. I was oblivious to much of what was happening around me. I appeared successful, but I felt empty.”

As harrowing as the years of therapy and healing were, Cathy is thankful that she made it through them. “I’m now a lot more emotionally connected with my kids; we are a very honest and open family unit,” she says. “My friendships are also a lot deeper. I still struggle knowing what I want and nurturing myself, but I’m still evolving.”

Through Cathy’s work with ASCA, she wants to deliver the message loud and clear that there is hope and optimism, with pathways for recovery. “For survivors of trauma, healing is possible,” she says, “and there are people who can help – particularly with all the research that is going on now in neuroscience, and the evidence that it is possible to create new healthy neural pathways and change the brain in positive ways.”

Considering that the problem is so widespread and that the damage can be so deep, ASCA still finds it challenging to get ongoing funding and media coverage. “It’s a confronting subject that few people want to be associated with,” says Cathy. Apart from a small amount of sporadic government funding, ASCA has little financial support.

“It’s still a taboo subject,” she says. “This is due to many factors. Abuse often

happens within a family or closed unit, so there is often a lot of shame and fear that society reinforces. There’s also a lot of pain and discomfort around the issue that people may want to avoid. People may feel that there is no point talking about the issue, because it may cause feelings to resurface or make life more complicated. And there have been a lot of disappointing cases in which people undergo further harassment if their story is dismissed, ridiculed, or not believed.”

JOHN’S JOURNEY

John (not his real name) had just turned 15 when he was raped by a male friend and work colleague of his father. His parents had just separated, and John was living with his father. “I was coming to terms with my sexuality, and the perpetrator knew I was never going to tell my parents about the abuse, because I was petrified they would find out I was gay,” John says.

The abuse continued for another 12 months. Shortly before he turned 17, John disclosed the situation to one of his teachers, a man whom he trusted and had taught him throughout high school. Devastatingly, the teacher also sexually abused John and introduced him to another man – this one married with children – who ended up sexually assaulting him. “It was a very traumatic and confusing time,” says John. “My life revolved around secrets. I didn’t

know where to turn.”

At the age of 40, John decided to report the sexual assaults to the police. After a lengthy police investigation and a wait of nearly two years, John's offenders finally faced a criminal court. “The court cases, particularly the first one, were the most humiliating and traumatic experiences of my life,” he says. “I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I had a prosecutor that barely knew the case.”

To further compound John's disappointment, the schoolteacher, although found guilty and sentenced to a four-year prison term, received a \$1000 good-behaviour bond and a wholly suspended sentence. “Court isn't for everyone,” says John. “For anyone considering this route, I highly recommend the book *Surviving the Legal System: A Handbook for Victim/Survivors of Sexual Assault* by Caroline Taylor.

“I had to work through many issues before I was ready to deal with the actual abuse,” says John. “I started spiralling out of control in my early 20s. I used drugs and alcohol and developed a gambling addiction. I battled with depression for years. I was also a workaholic. After hitting rock bottom and being hospitalised, I found a therapist I felt comfortable with and started working on my recovery. It was only when I got clean and sober that I thought, *Okay, now I have to deal with my past*. It wasn't until I was in my late 30s that I even could even mention what had happened in my teens.”

VICTIM NO MORE

“Typically, most guys will start talking about their abuse at around the age of 40 or perhaps when they have their first child,” John explains. “Disclosure can be extremely challenging for men for two main reasons. First, it may have led to confusion around their sexuality. For men who were sexually assaulted by a male, it can make them question

“Many men can often blame themselves for the abuse, believing that they are weak for being ‘tricked’ into an abusive relationship or that they didn't fight hard enough to prevent the abuse.”

whether they did anything to ‘encourage’ the offender. Second, many men often blame themselves for the abuse, believing they are weak for being ‘tricked’ into an abusive relationship or that they didn't fight hard enough to prevent the abuse. And when it comes to dealing with abuse, they may have unrealistic expectations that they need to ‘man up’ and ‘just get on with it,’ which can lead to men feeling that they have to work through their problems alone and continue the cycle of isolation they experienced during the abuse.”

John points to the myth that male victims of child abuse are more likely to become perpetrators. Although many perpetrators have been subjected to abuse, most men who have been abused do not go on to abuse. “It's an important distinction,” he says. “Some guys who didn't experience a safe childhood can experience huge fears centring on how to be around their own kids and children in general; that is a huge tragedy. I've heard many fathers talk about avoiding being left alone with their children and never showing them any affection, even though they knew they would not abuse their children or anybody else's. It's one of the many terrible legacies of abuse and an example of the extent to which abuse affects not just the victim but their families, too.”

John has just turned 45, and although the road to recovery has been difficult, it's been worthwhile. “I don't feel like

a victim anymore; I'm a survivor. The depression and denial are gone. The addictions are gone. I want people to know that healing is possible and definitely worthwhile. The guilt and shame belong to the perpetrators – not their victims. At whatever age they start their journey towards healing, people can move beyond the pain and experience life in ways they could never imagine. Start reading and talk to someone you feel you can trust. Another really useful booklet, *Living Well: A Guide for Men* [available from livingwell.org.au], provides information and support to men who have experienced sexual abuse.”

SOPHIE'S SECRETS

Another challenge of dealing with abuse is that it is not always easy to identify. Abuse can be overt, such as physical attacks, open aggression, and persecution through threats, or it can be covert, which isn't always as obvious. Such abuse includes neglect and other situations in which the boundaries of healthy child/adult relationships are blurred.

“I'm the youngest of six children and come from a comfortable and privileged background,” says child-abuse survivor Sophie Lippell. “Only through therapy as an adult did I recognise that within my own family, there were covert sexual-abuse issues. There were terrible boundaries in the house in terms of sexuality – knowing too much about my parents' relationship and issues

with my own father. One of my earliest memories is of standing in the nude having my photo taken by my father and having feelings of enormous shame and knowing this was wrong. Because it was a family norm, I didn't question it, and because it was covert, it was difficult for me to understand. I call it the ‘family trance,’ where there is a lot of unspoken instruction. I was also repeatedly told that my childhood was wonderful and not to question things. But I knew something wasn't right because I wasn't feeling valued or good about myself.”

On top of the covert abuse at home, Sophie was raped by a close friend of her father's. This abuse continued until Sophie went to boarding school at the age of 10.

In her late teens, Sophie developed an eating disorder and went into therapy. “Therapy wasn't accepted at that time, and it wasn't something I was proud of,” says Sophie. “But it was only in therapy that I realised my upbringing hadn't been particularly healthy and that my ideas of sex and relationships were very different from those of my girlfriends.”

Therapy was a long and slow process for Sophie. “For years, I didn't like myself, and I couldn't sustain a relationship,” she says. “I did try a couple of therapists, and eventually, I was referred to someone who helped me. My therapist gave me clear boundaries and provided a safe space where I wasn't judged and where I was really listened to by someone who wanted to help me. It was like a ‘good mum’ experience. I didn't even talk about the abuse for the first few years. I had repressed the really serious stuff, and I was still confused about the family stuff. I loved my father very much, and I wasn't ready to admit that some of the things he had done were wrong. I was carrying a lot of shame. Children don't have a boundary system like adults do, and they often take on their perpetrators' shame and carry it on.

Today, Sophie works as a

psychotherapist, mostly dealing with issues associated with addiction. She has found that a lot of problems with addiction are the result of childhood wounds. “As more people come out of the shame shadow, I think we will see an even higher incidence of abuse than is currently reported,” Sophie says.

She has also worked for the child-protection agency, where she worked as a therapist for perpetrators. It was here that she began to see them as humans who were damaged. “It was during this time that I learned to forgive my father,” Sophie says. “But I will never excuse what he did.”

“Although I don't know if the wound ever fully heals, you learn how to manage it,” she continues. “Now I'm much less fearful. I also have the ability to love and respect myself. Before therapy, I was very compliant. I now feel safe in the world, and I have great boundaries. I can now have intimate relationships. The main consequence of my abuse is that I've never had children. The reason for this is twofold: I didn't want to risk the same thing happening to my child, and my ability to choose good relationships has taken a long time to develop. By then, it was too late. With abuse, intimacy is the biggest challenge because it has been so corrupted, and what you believe love is can be very toxic. Now I've learned to trust myself enough to be vulnerable with other people. All of us create masks, but for survivors, often the mask is all there is. For me, the healing is that I've learned to love me; then it is safe to come out and say, ‘This is me. And if you don't love me, that's okay, because I love me.’”



MINDFOOD RADIO

Hear our interview with SAMSN [Survivors & Mates Support Network] on male survivors of child sexual assault.



Blue Knot Day

The Adults Surviving Child Abuse (ASCA) symbol is the tangled knot. When children are abused, they become confused. Life – even in adulthood – can be chaotic and tangled. ASCA helps untangle the knot of child abuse for adults who suffered abuse as children. Every year on Blue Knot Day, ASCA asks all Australians to unite in support of adult survivors of childhood trauma. This year, Blue Knot Day is October 29, and activities will take place from October 29 to November 4. For more information, visit asca.org.au and for support, call 1300 657 380.

Bravehearts

Bravehearts is Australia's leading child-protection organisation. It aims to “break the silence,” provide healing and support, engender child-sexual-assault prevention and protection strategies, advocate for understanding, and promote increased education and research. According to the organisation:

1. One in five Australian children will be sexually assaulted before their 18th birthdays.
2. In 85 per cent of cases, the offender is known to the child and is a relative or trusted friend.
3. Child sex offenders rarely, if ever, offend against only one child at once.
4. Child abuse ignored is child abuse.
5. A disclosure today protects a child tomorrow.