

## Adults talking about childhood sexual abuse: responding to disclosure and help-seeking

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## Scope of this Presentation

This presentation presents findings from in-depth interviews with:

- 33 clients, and
- 5 counsellors

from a designated agency dealing with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in South Australia.

*Focus:* past experiences of disclosure and help-seeking.

*Rationale:* Mapping helpful and unhelpful responses and recognising client experience will facilitate discussion of improved service provision.

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## Background

- *Respond SA*: 1st service in South Australia designated for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.
- Established in July 2004 by Relationships Australia (SA). Funded by state government.
- Evaluated December 2004. Post evaluation workshops with management, workers & research consortium. Focus on service development and best practice.
- Discussions identified the need for research into:
  - clients' and workers' experiences of disclosure and help seeking
  - experiences and patterns of usage of designated service.

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## Background

Evaluation Report (2005) literature review revealed:

- Children and adults frequently do not disclose their experiences of CSA
- Adult survivors often seek help from generic organisations and choose not to, or cannot, always disclose their past childhood abuse.
- Survivors often re-present repeatedly to generalist services for the same or substituted symptoms because the underlying issue of trauma has not been addressed.
- Outside of designated services, survivors are frequently seen by workers who are not specialised or trained to deal with the direct effects of CSA.

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## Background

- There is little or no Australian data documenting the pattern of clients' usage of services in designated agencies.
- There is little or no Australian research that explores client expectations and responses to counselling for adults subjected to CSA.
- Research funded July 2005.

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## Research Aims

- To map the pattern of, and responses to, disclosure prior to accessing *Respond SA*
- To explore clients' past help seeking – eg. helpfulness of counselling, groups etc.
- To explore workers' experiences and understanding of adult survivors' disclosure and help seeking
- To examine what prompted individuals to approach *Respond SA* and to explore their hopes and expectations
- To map clients' patterns of service usage of this designated service.

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## Methodology

Participatory research – Involvement of managers & workers in deciding aims, methodology, implementation.

Collection of qualitative and quantitative data

Extensive literature review

Semi-structured interviews with 33 current clients by counsellors

Semi-structured interviews with 5 counsellors by the external researchers

*Premise:* that workers' skills and experience would contribute to richer understanding of participants' lives and best practice for service delivery.

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## Disclosure: What the literature tells us

- Most children do not disclose their experiences of sexual abuse at the time.
- A proportion do go on to disclose later, usually as adults.
- Incidence of childhood sexual abuse is underestimated because disclosures not usually made (initially) to a professional or organisation.
- Disclosure is a process, not a static event, and may occur in many ways, both implicit and explicit.
- Delays in disclosure are common. Many children choose not to disclose until adulthood, if at all.

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## What inhibits disclosure

- fear of not being believed
- shame
- fear for safety of self and others
- concern for family wellbeing (where the perpetrator is related to the victim)
- repressed memories

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## Who is disclosed to?

When children disclose they mostly do so to family and friends first

Adult survivors tend to disclose to friends and partners

Mothers are the family member most often disclosed to

Children and survivors often fear that professional intervention may result in family dissolution and/or chaos in their lives

Victims/survivors are often not aware that professional help is available.

Further disclosures may also be inhibited by previous negative reactions from professionals.

Family, friends and partners often chosen as confidantes but do not necessarily have the skills or training to respond appropriately. 9

## Help Seeking: what the literature tells us

- Very few children who disclose are offered professional intervention outside of a child protection context.
- What children perceive as a helpful response is still relatively unknown.
- It is crucial to recognise inadequacy of past professional responses to children and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse.
- Importance of developing specialist services and wider notions of helpfulness, including social support, social action and community education.

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## Research sample

### **33 clients interviewed:**

- 28 females 5 males
- Age: 21 to 55 (two thirds were between 31 and 55)
- Most had had 7 or more counselling sessions with Respond
- Mostly from metropolitan area
- Sample included 1 Indigenous client.
- Sexual abuse had occurred at various ages in early childhood and/or adolescence
- For at least 14 of the 33, the abuse lasted in excess of a year.
- For at least 10 of these people it lasted 5 years or more.

### **5 counsellors interviewed.**

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## Perpetrators

- In all cases, but one, the perpetrators were male.
- Mostly family members (8 fathers, step fathers or foster fathers), 4 uncles, 2 grandfathers, 1 brother, 6 unspecified family members.
- Ten clients named family friends or neighbours.
- Four named counsellors, doctors or psychiatrists.
- Three named church ministers, officials or church youth leaders.

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## Childhood disclosure: patterns

- 22 participants (66%) said they had not attempted to tell anyone as children.
- However, about a third of these qualified this by saying that they had attempted to indicate it in non verbal ways
- Some were unaware (as children) that they had been abused – either because they had no name for it, or because they repressed memory of it.

*Before 15 I didn't name it as abuse. Violence was a usual daily occurrence for everyone in my family.*

*It wasn't named as abuse at the time...I wish I'd known then as a child that it was abuse and I could have started working on it – the damage it caused...it would have answered lots of questions – my behaviour and other effects.*

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## Reasons for not disclosing as children

- Fear – fear of reprisals, of how it would reflect on themselves, or fear of family being fractured.

One woman, now in her 20s, said:

*As a child I was too afraid to tell. I didn't understand what was happening and I thought I'd get into trouble. I was scared of being judged, of being looked at differently. I was afraid the people who did it would take it upon themselves to hurt me and others. As a teenager my fears were more involved. I thought about telling the police but I feared he [the perpetrator] would hurt my family and myself.*

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## Reasons for not disclosing as children (b)

- Low self esteem, feelings of self blame and shame:  
*I was considered a problem kid anyway, a waste of space.*
- Fear of not being believed.
- Fear of mother seeing it as a criticism of herself.  
*The pattern I have seen emerge with some clients around disclosure is the feeling of anger toward the mum who is not able to hear the information without connecting it to herself in some way [from a counsellor].*
- Strongly ingrained beliefs about the sanctity of the family – 'dirty laundry should not be aired in public'. Family should stay together.
- Perpetrator tactics used to silence children and perpetuate feelings of guilt and self blame.

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## Reasons for not disclosing as children (c)

- Wanting to protect others in family (including the perpetrator) – what one client called ‘the heroic conscience’

*Not speaking up because you don't want to 'hurt Dad' speaks to a child's division in holding acts of abuse in one hand and acts of love in another. If the Dad was outright mean and abusive it would not be so hard for a child to speak up. But if it's a 'loving' Dad, and the child knows on one level that it was not right, then fears getting Dad into trouble, or being in trouble herself – it makes it difficult for a child who does not have the capability of full logic to comprehend what to do. She is silenced by her lack of understanding and the only way she can take it on and rescue Dad is to blame herself.*

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## Reasons for not disclosing as children (d)

- Misinformation – in particular the myth of stranger danger:

*One client was so cross that she'd heard about stranger danger at school, yet heard nothing that helped her in her own situation where her brother was sexually abusing her. She believed it was only sexual abuse if some stranger approached you in a public place. This was so different from what was happening to her that she didn't relate it, she didn't even know it would be called abuse. She had been given no information that was of any help to her – in fact you could say that it was counterproductive in that it helped to keep her silent [from a counsellor].*

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## Reasons for not disclosing as children Maternal Alienation

All counsellors mentioned the tactics used by perpetrators to secure silence. These often involved maternal alienation:

*'She already knows about it ... she approves of it'.*

*'Look your mother doesn't want to have sex with me any more but she said that it would be fine for you and I to do this, but she doesn't want to have anything to do with it because it makes her feel sad'.*

*'Your mother is sick and if you say anything about this she'll end up in the mental hospital'.*

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## Ways children disclose

- The minority of children who did disclose mostly told friends.
- Many did not try to tell of the abuse in words. Instead they indicated it in non verbal ways – e.g. 'acting out' behaviours, rebelliousness, running away from home, withdrawal.
- These behaviours were typically not acknowledged by others as indicators of abuse.
- One woman poignantly reported that as a girl she had told only her horse:

*... He let me talk and talk and talk for hours...wouldn't even bother putting on the saddle...I would just lay up his neck and we'd walk slowly for hours and I would just talk to him...I knew he was listening to me...he had his ears back...I told him everything...If only he could talk, he'd be able to tell everything...I wouldn't be alive without him.*

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## Responses to disclosure by children

- A small minority described their childhood disclosure as liberating
- Most described negative repercussions
- Children's disclosures were often met with disbelief, sometimes followed by bullying and harassment:  
*I learned only to keep my trap shut*
- Frequently the confidante (especially, if the mother) did not want to believe the child
- A common scenario was for disclosure to meet with no response. A blind eye was turned and the matter was never spoken of again.
- Several met with judgemental attitudes suggesting their own culpability.
- Effects of denial and disbelief are profound: *I felt my memories were not valid since no-one was taking them seriously.*

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## Responses to disclosure by children (b)

- Disclosure (or non disclosure) in childhood generally put victims 'between a rock and a hard place'. It was difficult to tell. It was difficult not to tell.
- As one woman expressed the dilemma: *I wanted someone to know, but I didn't want to be judged.*
- For some the answer was to distance themselves – *to ignore it as if it were a dream*, as one male victim said.

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## A Story of Retribution

A woman, now in her early 40s, was abused by her foster father in her early childhood. The records of a church welfare organisation noted that as a young child she talked explicitly about sexual acts 'in hushed tones'. But there was no follow up of these disturbing revelations. When this child told a friend (another young child), the friend's mother confronted the foster father. The child's foster mother subsequently physically bullied the child into denying the allegations on tape. When the gossip spread to the child's school the child was also bullied and harassed at school and made by the school principal to remove graffiti, written about her, from toilet walls.

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## Consequences of disclosure by children

- Disclosure in childhood can have very adverse consequences
- Children are rarely in a position to make appropriate choices about disclosing.

*I think this is a really big issue for the field generally speaking... A lot of education has been encouraging children to tell... But the responsibility for managing it is left with children. But children have no say about the response they get to the disclosure. They're not able to influence it, they're not able to make a decision about when to disclose, where it's safe to disclose, who with.*

*It just seems to roll out of control for children when they disclose... It just feels like chaos. And although from a distance they might say it was a good thing to be out of that, and to have been rescued, the process of the rescue is really hard. There needs to be lots more thinking about how we do that. [from a counsellor]*

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## Why do children and adults disclose?

- The main expectation that children had about disclosure was that they wanted the abuse to stop.

*Young people don't usually think of intervention or police action or anything of that sort. They just want it to stop because they don't like it. If they want Mum to hear, they want her to stop it. I don't think a child thinks past that. [Counsellor]*

- Both children and adults want someone to listen to them, they want to be believed and they want someone to stay connected with them.

*Some people have told me that they've disclosed to someone who they thought would be really supportive and then that person hasn't contacted for a couple of months. This felt really hard, like a betrayal.*

*That's why I say it's important to stay connected. I think for a lot of people it's hard to hear a disclosure and they feel they have to do something. If only they realised that no, they don't have to do anything, they just have to be there and listen openly. [Counsellor].*

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## Adult disclosure: patterns and responses

- As adults, people disclosed to a wide range of people other than counsellors.
- Many reported they had disclosed to close friends and partners.
- Only one person had disclosed to no-one other than the counsellor.
- Many expressed regret that they had caused their friends hurt and upset.

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## Adult disclosure: patterns and responses (b)

For a significant number of people there was a 'double burden' attached to the abuse and its disclosure. One woman, now in her thirties, who had been abused by her grandfather, said she had mixed feelings about telling her parents:

*They were supportive but were worried and upset. I felt guilty about their worry. At times I wished I hadn't told them, but there was also a sense of relief that I had told them.*

Another said:

*I wish I hadn't told my boyfriend because he got too upset. He's emotional, he's sensitive. I didn't need to hurt his feelings.*

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## Adult disclosure: patterns and responses (c)

- The most troubling responses seemed to come from parents.
- Several people described their parents' reactions as guilt-ridden, angry and lacking in empathy.
- Adults had multiple and complex fears of disclosing which went right to the heart of their identity. As one woman, now in her forties, put it:

*I had a fear that if I face this demon and get it out of me there'd be nothing left...Would I still exist?  
That's all I've known for so long.*

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## Adult disclosure: positive responses

- Some spoke of relief, of pressure being taken away, a 'huge burden being lifted'.
- Others said that disclosure had helped their partners to understand their reactions and mood swings.
- People who had disclosed in facilitated groups reported feeling affirmed and supported by other group members. Sharing their experiences with others who had been abused reduced their sense of isolation.
- The benefits of disclosure as an adult depend very strongly on the friendship networks people have developed, their access to appropriate groups and their own sensitivity in knowing when, how much, and to whom, to tell.

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## Previous experience of counselling & help seeking

- Many spoke of unhelpful past experiences.
- Some said they were just not ready at the time.
- Others spoke of counsellors or psychiatrists not specifically addressing childhood sexual abuse.
- Several felt that there was a lack of understanding of childhood sexual abuse, e.g. knowledge of offenders' tactics around maternal alienation.

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## Previous experience of counselling & help seeking (b)

- Where people spoke of helpful experiences they mentioned 'being helped to feel worthwhile' and the relief of 'speaking up and letting it out'.
- The affirmation that what had happened was not the child's fault was mentioned a number of times:

*I had a brick wall (of self blame and self hate) and they helped me chip away.*

*Counselling made me aware that I did not consent and was not responsible.*

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## Why do adults seek help from a specialist service?

- Clients' hopes and expectations had much in common. People frequently mentioned that they wanted affirmation and resolution.
- Specifically, they wanted to:
  - move on
  - deal with emotions or depression
  - deal with triggers
  - feel normal/ordinary
  - be happy/comfortable
  - get answers
  - be a survivor, not a victim
  - make relationships work
  - increase self worth
  - deal with shame and self blame.

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## Views on the need for a specialist service

While 1 person talked of the value of general (psychiatric) therapy as well as Respond SA's counselling, almost everyone else was empathic that a specialist service was the only really helpful response.

*'You wouldn't go to a GP for dental stuff'.*

*'In a specialist service you're not labelled ... everyone's in the same situation'.*

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## Implications for service delivery

*Why specialist services are necessary*

- Specialist services were seen by clients as able to provide sensitive, non-judgemental, sufficiently complex responses that understood the impact of childhood sexual abuse and the secrecy, shame and fear surrounding it.
- They also remove the inhibition of having to broach the topic. They legitimise the complaint.

*'I'm very much in favour of it. It's a normalising thing, knowing that others have also had this experience and come to this service. Knowing that you see lots of people in this situation has me thinking I'm not that weird'.*

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## Implications for service delivery (b)

### *Capacity building*

- Clients and counsellors also identified the need for better information about childhood sexual abuse for generalist service providers and the wider community. Strategies:
  - Community education campaigns to debunk myths
  - Basic information about how to respond to disclosures – practical tips
  - Information for parents
  - Workers' information line, workforce development training

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## Last word from a counsellor

*I think the idea of power has to be talked about a lot more in the context of sexual abuse. This is not discussed very much at all.*

*Power works to privilege some people over others. An important part of the work is to make the context of abuse more visible. Then it can be reframed for what it is, which is about entitlement and privilege.*

*Then men's and women's responses can be named differently. Instead of depression and anxiety it can be outrage. What was done to them can be named for what it was...it was violence, it was torture, it was abuse.*

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