



Engaging sensitively with survivors of abuse

- A guide for faith organisations

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Foreword

Engaging sensitively with survivors of abuse: A guide for faith organisations is intended as a resource to help the faith sector re-engage positively without causing further harm to survivors.

It is heartening and gives hope that some positive outcomes are emerging from the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission).

The underlying principle of this guide is to recognise that survivors are individuals and their requirements should be central in all dealings and considerations related to them. It offers practical advice, using a trauma-informed approach to respond to their experiences in a sensitive, effective way. This allows for a tailored response to each survivor's individual reactions.

Although often difficult, it is important for organisations to acknowledge and understand the legacy of past harms and to respond to survivors with integrity and compassion.

This guide is a powerful tool that I hope will support people working in this sensitive and challenging environment. It was created by the NSW Ombudsman, who worked with the Survivor and Faith Group Child Safe Standing Committee. The Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG) took over the project in late 2019. The OCG is proud to have overseen the final stage of its development and thanks the following people and the organisations they represent for their contributions:

- Craig Hughes-Cashmore and Julie Blyth, Survivors & Mates Support Network
- Dr Cathy Kezelman, Blue Knot Foundation
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- Anna Tydd, Implementation Advisory Group
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Survivors are individuals and their requirements should be central in all dealings and considerations related to them.

1 Introduction

Engaging sensitively with survivors of abuse: A guide for faith organisations provides information for faith leaders and their representatives to engage with adult survivors of abuse (including sexual abuse) in ways that ‘do no harm’, promote wellbeing and support healing and recovery. It also includes guidance on how to sensitively engage with the faith community when dealing with this issue. It has been developed in close collaboration with survivor advocacy groups in NSW in recognition of the fact that many faith organisations fail to support survivors in the best way.

Faith or faith organisations are defined as those organisations with values that are based on faith and religious beliefs, although not all faith organisations are classed as ‘religions’. They may have a sense of purpose that is based on social values or ideals that are shared by members of the organisation. Faith organisations range in size from local to global.

The primary purpose of this guide is to support positive communication, engagement and collaboration between faith organisations and survivors. It is not intended to provide detailed advice about organisational procedures such as Direct Personal Response, redress or how to handle complaints.

The Royal Commission found that survivors took more than 23 years (on average) to begin talking about their abuse.¹ Members of your faith community may have experienced abuse within your organisation, their family or elsewhere. To provide a safe environment, it is important that you use trauma-informed practices so that all aspects of your ministry are sensitive to their needs.

Faith organisations need to demonstrate that all survivors who come forward will be safe and supported. They also need to show that those who choose not to engage will also be respected. It’s a sad legacy of the history of harm that many survivors were abused in faith organisations, so it’s vital that those same organisations take a proactive stand to be sensitive and responsible.

Making genuine efforts to focus on survivors’ needs supports a child safe culture. This involves helping survivors to feel safe, validated and welcomed. It also means taking responsibility for any crimes that have been committed in your organisation in the past. It is critical that this translates into action so that errors are not repeated and trust can be rebuilt. Survivors and survivor advocacy groups will often be willing to collaborate with you to achieve these goals.

In some places this Guide references the term Forgotten Australians, which was used by a Senate Inquiry on institutional and out-of-home care in 2004. Some prefer it to the term ‘care leavers’ as they felt they weren’t cared for. Others use ‘Homies’ (from children’s homes), ‘Wardies’ (from wards of the state), ‘Clannies’ (from CLAN), or ‘Remembered Australians’. While the Royal Commission used the term survivors, for some it does not reflect historical identity.

Having a supportive conversation with someone who experienced childhood trauma can be life-changing. Individuals, services and social institutions can become trauma-informed and interact in a positive way, using sensitive language with survivors.²



Using this guide

It is important that faith leaders and their representatives have the knowledge, skills and confidence to respond sensitively to survivors in their community. This guide provides foundational information to prepare for the range of ways in which faith organisations connect with survivors.

You may be contacted because a survivor wants to tell you about their experience when they were younger. They may want to make a formal complaint. You might represent your faith organisation by providing a direct personal response to survivors, or you might be approached unexpectedly by a past or present member of your faith community. You may be engaging with survivors as part of a collaborative project with individuals or an advocacy group. You could be contacted after delivering training or speaking at an event. A survivor might phone you or just walk into your organisation off the street.

You will not always know when you are engaging with a survivor or when survivors are present within a group of people.



With more than one in 10 adult Australians having experienced some form of abuse before the age of 15, the chances are that someone you engage with has been affected.³

It is likely that there are members of your faith community who have never spoken about their abuse, who have not identified that what happened to them was abusive, or who may have chosen not to identify themselves to the organisation. All these people require appropriate levels of support from you and your organisation.

Language considerations

Some words may have negative connotations for some survivors. There is no way of knowing in advance what words may unsettle or 'trigger' a survivor of abuse. It can be helpful to check with each individual to find out whether they are comfortable with particular terms – especially if you notice a reaction to something you have said. Showing respect for their language choices is essential.

Abuse



Abuse takes many forms. It can be physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse, and/or neglect. It can occur through physical interaction or in online environments.

Survivor/victim



Some people prefer to be referred to as a 'victim' while others choose 'survivor'. The word 'victim' can imply powerlessness and passivity, whereas 'survivor' can denote strength and resilience. However 'survivor' may also assume a degree of recovery that feels unobtainable for some people. You should show respect and ask each person which word they prefer.

Story



For some, the word 'story' does not begin to capture their experience and can feel belittling. A story might also be thought of as something children tell, and traditionally implies a level of make-believe. Many survivors have struggled to be believed and for this reason it can be better to talk in terms of a person's 'experience'.

Healing



The word 'healing' can have a religious meaning (such as requiring forgiveness), which may offend or distress some survivors. For some, the term is associated with the 'Towards Healing' process, which may have been a negative experience. On the other hand, many First Nations people may consider 'healing' a positive expression embracing '... a holistic process, which addresses mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs and involves connections to culture, family and land'.⁴ Consider using 'recovery' if the word 'healing' is not acceptable to the survivor with whom you are engaging.

Harmful practices

In this resource, we use 'survivor' when referring to adult survivors of abuse and 'victim' to refer to a person who was a child at the time of the abuse.

We refer to First Nations people rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We also recognise that First Nations cultures are very different and many First Nations people object to having their identities and cultures merged. In NSW, there are around 50 distinct Aboriginal language groups.

It is essential that faith organisations engage with survivors in a respectful way that acknowledges the abuse was not their fault. The Royal Commission heard that some faiths had ostracised survivors and described the harm caused by 'shunning'.

If you are concerned that your faith organisation is engaging in harmful practices, seek advice from your professional standards body (if you have one), the OCG or one of the organisations listed at the end of this guide.



2 Collaborating with survivors to build safer faith organisations

Child safe organisations learn from the past. The Royal Commission, which ran from 2013 to 2017, found that faith organisations accounted for 58% of all institutions where abuse occurred and were the source of 32.2% of offenders. These findings led to the development of this document to assist faith organisations to provide better trauma-informed responses to survivors of abuse. You should respond to the experiences of survivors, whether they are from your faith community, no longer connected to your faith community or are represented by survivor advocacy and support groups.

It's a big thing for people to listen and take note of what we went through.⁵

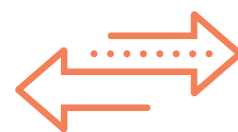


Collaborating with survivors and survivor organisations can build trust and understanding, and provide valuable insights to improve safeguarding practices and policies.

You should actively seek input about how to create more supportive and informed faith environments as well as how to build strategic partnerships with survivor advocates and leaders. A primary motivation for many survivors telling faith organisations about their experiences in childhood is to try to ensure that no other child experiences the harm they did. Many survivors are passionate about changing systems and practices to improve child safety and will work with you to drive positive change. There may be opportunities within your organisation to include the diverse voices of individual survivors and survivor networks in forums, meetings, events, training and publications.

A critical component of creating child safe faith institutions involves developing effective pathways and processes for ensuring that input is obtained from survivors in relation to all core elements of child safe practice. This would include actively supporting and promoting collaboration between faith groups and survivor groups through the co-design of critical child safe initiatives and community events.⁶





Many survivors are passionate about changing systems and practices to improve child safety and will work with you to drive positive change.

Ways to involve survivors and advocacy groups

Invite a survivor advocacy or support group to:

- co-design and co-deliver child safe codes of conduct, policies or procedures
- contribute regularly to your newsletters and social media
- provide information and training material about themselves that you can publicise
- facilitate discussions between survivors and your organisation to develop activities and events that can foster healing and identify ways to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for survivors
- be represented on relevant committees or boards
- address your governing body or broader community or provide a speaker for an event.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to ask a survivor advocacy or support organisation for feedback on policy development or review, governance and management, particular practices or event planning. On other occasions it may be appropriate to ask individual survivors who have previously engaged with you to contribute to a particular project or event. Be prepared for a range of responses if you ask individual survivors for input. You may get knockbacks, be met with a range of emotions (including anger or distress) or receive an enthusiastic response. Remember, once you have invited a survivor it is up to them to identify the level of their contribution. The main thing is to ensure that your invitation is not tokenistic but is in the spirit of true collaboration and power sharing.

Survivors and survivor organisations may sometimes have limited financial means, and it is important to acknowledge this when asking them to contribute their time and energy. Remuneration or covering expenses may be a relevant consideration.

Ways to connect and support survivors

Start by educating yourself and your organisation about abuse, particularly if your organisation is linked to historical abuse.

Be prepared to listen to the experiences of survivors without becoming defensive. Whether abuse occurred in the past or more recently, its ongoing impact is felt in the present and should be understood and acknowledged.

If you don't feel comfortable or adequately prepared to engage with survivors directly, seek assistance from an experienced colleague.

Ways to support survivors:

- Seek training and use trauma-informed principles.
- Invite a survivor, an advocate or a support group to speak at a staff development session.
- Provide links on your website and social media to trusted survivor organisations.

Complex childhood trauma plays out in relationships, and relationships are at the centre of recovery.⁷



Respecting and responding to survivors' diverse experiences and backgrounds

When engaging with survivors it is important to avoid making assumptions about their priorities, experiences and beliefs, and how they have dealt with their situation. It is always important to be attuned to each person's culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual preference and lived experience.

Survivors represent diverse groups of people with differing needs relating to the following factors:



Age



Gender



Sexuality



Physical or psychosocial disability



Mental health



First Nations heritage



Cultural and linguistic background



Identification with a group such as the Stolen Generations, child migrants or other associations of people who were placed in institutions or a family which did not contain their parents.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study explored the strong link between childhood abuse and subsequent physical and mental health challenges. See <https://vimeo.com/41156294>

The following information provides some insights into potential differences in the experiences, preferences and responses of survivors.

Spirituality

Given the high rate of child sexual abuse perpetrated in faith organisations and their history of poor responses (re-traumatising many survivors), it is important that they are aware of their history of abuse and previous responses to survivors.

For many of these survivors, damage to their relationships with other people in the faith community, including their family and God or another higher being, has resulted in feelings of 'spiritual' abuse.

Survivors may have distanced themselves from their faith or organisation because of the abuse that occurred while they were connected to their faith, or because of the response of the organisation to their experience.

Being sensitive and considerate to anyone coming forward means respecting their choices, needs and decisions. As much as possible, let the survivor take the lead in any interactions. They may not be seeking any spiritual component in their engagement with you, and introducing these elements without clear invitation from the person may be damaging or re-traumatising.*

Be supportive of survivors having as much or as little contact with your faith as they choose. Your goal should always be about supporting them with their recovery goals, rather than reconnecting them with your faith.

In this context, it is also important to be sensitive about the religious status of the person engaging with the survivor as this may be particularly significant to them. Survivors may not be comfortable engaging with people in religious roles because of the context of the abuse they experienced. It is common for survivors to request no involvement with anyone in a religious role – individual survivors should always be asked about their preferences or needs.⁸

For many faiths, forgiveness is an essential element – or even the pinnacle – of healing. However, for survivors of child sexual abuse, the notion that they should or could forgive their abuser or the faith institution may be met with anger, dismay or distress. Feelings of outrage and sometimes an inappropriate sense of self-blame and responsibility for the abuse are far more common responses than a desire to forgive. Many survivor advocates recommend that 'forgiveness' is such a personal issue that it should not be raised by faith representatives when they engage with survivors. If a survivor wants to explore it, then it is important to do so cautiously and only after they have raised it with you.

For some, this will be challenging. You may feel that you are not being true to your faith if you are silent on the issue; however, a trauma-informed approach puts the survivor and their needs at the heart of your engagement. It is important not to impose your beliefs about forgiveness and its role in recovery or healing.

Instead, acknowledge that each survivor determines their own recovery journey. Provide space for them to ask for what they need and honour their decisions.

Being abused in faith-based communities can particularly tarnish concepts of God and create additional confusion.⁹



* See the section on 'Triggers' on page 29 for more information.

Men and women who are survivors may have different experiences and needs

Men and women who have been abused as children experience long-term effects, including ‘impacts on mental health and relationships, such as depression, anxiety and difficulties with trust and intimacy ...’¹⁰ However, different social norms and gender roles also influence how people understand, experience, disclose and live with the impacts of abuse.

*There are ... cultural beliefs and attitudes which effectively reject the notion of males as victims, classifying victimisation as a uniquely female destiny. This makes it difficult for men and boys who are victims to acknowledge their abuse, even to themselves, and doubly difficult for them to tell anyone else. In the context of child sexual assault, the consequences of these beliefs and attitudes are profound.*¹¹



Different social norms and gender roles also influence how people understand, experience, disclose and live with the impacts of abuse. Regardless of gender, the effect of abuse for both men and women is profound.

*I guess one thing I would say: I was abused by someone of the same sex so there's that additional thing of confusion. I was thinking, 'does that mean I'm a lesbian?' I think there's an additional stigma attached to it and it makes it harder to say something. People don't think women abuse. Not as many women do but they can, they do ...'*¹²



In contrast to the evidence about child sexual abuse more broadly, most victims of abuse in faith organisations are male. Men who were abused when they were boys and adolescents face issues and with their feelings specific to being a man and social understandings of masculinity. For example, men may fear they will be regarded with suspicion if they disclose they were sexually abused as a child because of the false belief that victims (especially male victims) will become perpetrators in later life. They often face confusion in regard to their identity and sexuality, as well as struggling with gender stereotyping about what constitutes masculinity. Women may also experience physical impacts of sexual abuse such as gynaecological problems. The Royal Commission noted that female victims may also experience ‘disempowerment and re-victimisation’ later in their lives, which may have contributed to them under-reporting.



The Royal Commission’s Catholic Data Project indicated that of the 4,444 claimants who reported abuse from 1980 to 2015, 78% were male compared to 22% who were female.¹³

As a result of the circumstances described above, survivors may have strong preferences about engaging with a person of a particular gender. They should be able to exercise choice in relation to this.

For more information

For information about the issues faced by men who are survivors of child sexual and other abuse, contact Survivors & Mates Support Network (SAMSN). For information about how gender can influence the impact of child abuse, contact the Blue Knot Foundation. Contact details for both organisations appear in the ‘Further information and support’ chapter on page 45 and page 48 respectively.







Grief and loss can be part of the fabric of day-to-day life for many First Nations people.

Survivors from First Nations communities

Grief and loss can be part of the fabric of day-to-day life for many First Nations people. The Royal Commission appreciated that the sexual abuse of First Nations children needs to be understood in the context of the 'historical legacy of colonisation, racism, deprivation, forced removal of children from their families, and ensuing inter-generational trauma'.¹⁴ As a result of this and current experiences of inequality, First Nations survivors may be particularly distrusting of faith-based organisations and government agencies.

First Nations survivors who want to engage with faith organisations may prefer to speak with another First Nations person and may not be comfortable with individual therapy and counselling. Sometimes, because of concerns about anonymity or privacy, First Nations people might prefer to speak with a non-First Nations person or someone outside their community. It is always important to ask each person how they want to proceed and what kind of healing practices they might prefer to engage in. If appropriate, you may want to explore what kinds of culturally specific programs and supports are available. It is also important that your organisation as a whole takes steps to become more culturally sensitive and aware. Many First Nations people may embrace a more holistic approach to healing.¹⁵



For more information

The [Healing Foundation](#) is a First Nations organisation that helps people address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children.

The [Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet](#) healing portal brings together information about what is working in First Nations healing. It includes examples of best practice healing initiatives, the latest research from around Australia and tools people can use to develop healing opportunities in their communities.

For more information to equip organisations to provide a culturally responsive, flexible and consistent service to First Nations people, and to promote a positive workplace culture, go to the [NSW Ombudsman](#) website.

For many First Nations survivors, the trauma of child sexual abuse could not be separated from the inter-generational trauma associated with child removal ... other First Nations survivors pointed to connections with family, community and culture as sources of strength and resilience.¹⁶

Survivors from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

NSW, like the rest of Australia, is comprised of people from a variety of countries with different faiths, beliefs and experiences. This includes refugees, asylum seekers and others who may have experienced harm and who may have lost the support of their family. Isolation and vulnerability meant that many of these people relied on faith organisations for support.

The Royal Commission found that people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds experienced a range of barriers when disclosing abuse. These barriers included lack of access to appropriate translation services, fear and mistrust of authorities as a consequence of persecution in their country of origin, insufficient information about child protection laws and services in Australia, and compromised educational outcomes as child migrants or while in residential care.

Some said they did not disclose because their parents held the institution and the perpetrator in high regard. They said their parents had risked a lot – sometimes their lives – to come to Australia and felt very connected and loyal to the religious or cultural institution that had offered them support during their early years in the country.¹⁷



Survivors need to feel that their sense of self-identity is valued by the people around them. Creating a culturally safe organisation and one that respects diversity requires a willingness to learn, understand and respond to a diversity of experiences. Be sensitive to the different cultural backgrounds in your organisation. Reach out to other cultural groups to better understand what services are available and what issues individual communities are facing. On a practical level, it is important to know how to access and use interpreters and translation services when they are needed.



For more information

Seek advice from community organisations about how to ensure your communication and practices are inclusive of the diverse people you engage with:

[Ethnic Communities Council NSW](#)

[Ethnic Community Service Cooperative](#)

[Multicultural NSW](#) can help with cultural competency training, and interpreting and translation.



Survivors with disability

The Royal Commission heard from survivors with disability about the additional challenges they faced in disclosing child sexual abuse. 'Almost one-third did not disclose due to shame and embarrassment, and a similar proportion also feared retribution from the institution.'¹⁸ Children with disability are particularly vulnerable to abuse – especially those whose disability impacts communication.

Many people with intellectual disability face discrimination and misunderstandings when they attempt to communicate their experience of abuse. There is a feeling that they cannot be 'credible' witnesses. This is compounded when those within the criminal justice system do not have suitable skills to conduct effective interviews in these circumstances. People with disability, and those who care for them, can let you know what support is available to ensure that those who wish to engage with your faith organisation are able to do so.

To provide an open and inclusive environment, it is essential that organisations are physically accessible and that communication is conducted using a range of formats to suit people with linguistic, communication or complex support needs. For example, you may choose to publish your policies and contact details for staff in safeguarding roles in Easy English.

It is also important to be aware that some disabilities are 'hidden', and that not all people with disability wish to be regarded as a 'person with disability'. Whether or not you are aware of someone's disability, it is always OK to ask what they need to be comfortable so that they can get the most from their engagement with your organisation.

For more information

For advice and information about engaging with people with disability, and particularly people with communication support needs, contact:

[Council for Intellectual Disability](#)

[Intellectual Disability Rights Service](#)

[People with Disability Australia:](#)

[First Peoples Disability Network Australia.](#)



We were told of disclosures being misinterpreted as a part of the disability or as 'bad' behaviour rather than the child communicating their distress. We heard of complaints being dismissed on the basis of incorrect stereotypes that children with disability (especially those with intellectual disability) are asexual or incapable of feeling harm.¹⁹



Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, questioning and intersex survivors

The Royal Commission heard that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, questioning and intersex (LGBTQI) survivors can experience judgement, intolerance and misinformation, which can be barriers to disclosing abuse. Some people believe that gay men who have been abused often become abusers themselves, although research has shown that this is not the case.* For others, beliefs that their abuse is linked to their sexuality can lead to confusion and struggles with identity.

*'If something good can come out of what I'm saying - [it's] to recommend that churches rethink their position,' Joey told the Commissioner. 'I'm still a Christian and I still go to church - obviously I've accepted who I am and my sexuality ... I guess one of the things is that I would like to speak out for children who are gay or lesbian; that if you grow up in a church environment where you're told all the time it's wrong, you've got to be able to speak to someone to get proper advice. [Otherwise] it leaves you vulnerable ... and that is my concern. That I was more susceptible to him because of having to deal with my sexuality. I don't want to use the word confusion because I wasn't confused. I just needed someone not to take advantage of me ...'*²⁰



For some survivors who engaged with the Royal Commission, the abuse they experienced disrupted their process of understanding their gender identity.²¹ 'Gender identity refers to one's deeply held internal and individual sense of gender, whether a man or woman, both, neither or in-between. Gender identity can correlate with assigned sex at birth or can differ from it completely.'²² Being transgender or questioning gender identity may make a victim vulnerable to being targeted by perpetrators. These people may also be even less able to disclose because they already feel isolated.²³



The Royal Commission heard that LGBTQI survivors can experience judgement, intolerance and misinformation, which can be barriers to disclosing abuse.

* Research indicates that men who identify as gay are no more likely than men who identify as straight to perpetrate child sexual abuse.



For more information

Engage with LGBTQI support and advocacy groups for information and advice.

QLife provides a range of guides and other resources as well as peer support and referrals.

Twenty10 provides counselling and support.

ACON provides confidential fee-based short-term counselling (up to 12 sessions) for LGBTQI people seeking support in relation to their mental health and wellbeing.



Trauma-informed
practice underpins
safe engagement
when supporting
survivors

3 Engaging safely and being trauma-informed

The Royal Commission affirmed that trauma-informed practice underpins safe engagement when supporting survivors. There are many useful guides, factsheets and training programs that can help you to be more trauma-informed.* This approach helps avoid the kinds of relationships that mirror the dynamics (including abuse of power, secrecy and betrayal) of the institutional environment in which abuse occurred. If this is not done, you may face situations where you are potentially re-traumatising survivors.

Being trauma-informed means being aware of the impacts of stress on the body and brain. It also means that you understand that people with experiences of interpersonal trauma have had their trust violated and may treat even your well-meant conversation with suspicion.²⁴



Survivors can be harmed by ineffective or inappropriate behaviour, even if it is well meaning. Genuine and compassionate engagement with survivors, offering choices without judgement or assumptions, is better than avoiding engagement for fear of saying the wrong thing. Expect to make mistakes and acknowledge when you get things wrong – but don't give up!

A trauma-informed approach is 'systemic', which means that all aspects of the organisation are responsive to the impact of trauma on individuals and leaders. Trauma-informed practice involves critically examining the organisation's culture, governance, management, policies, practices and programs. Sometimes, routine practices that are seemingly innocuous are damaging or distressing to survivors. Often it is possible to make changes that optimise the likelihood that everyone, and especially survivors, feels comfortable and welcome.

* See resources at the end of this guide.

Six principles of trauma-informed practice



Safety

Understanding what makes a safe environment for each unique survivor's experience, given the context of their abuse, is critical. Safety also relates to relationships, the experience of authority figures and psychological wellbeing. Never assume that a particular environment is perceived as being safe - always be mindful and ask survivors about where, by whom and in what context they would like to meet.



Trustworthiness and transparency

This is usually the antithesis of a survivor's experience of abuse, which comes from a history of secrecy, manipulation and betrayal of trust, all of which carry the weight of trauma. Trust that is broken takes time to rebuild. It's important to start by admitting the organisation's responsibility for the abuse. Consult with survivors and think carefully about what they need and how you can prepare to help them.



Collaboration and mutuality

Recognising that abuse of power is paramount in the deliberate harm of children, organisations should critically examine their role in creating and maintaining power relationships. They should seek to reverse them by identifying and balancing power differences to recognise the value and contributions of survivors. Empowering children in organisations also helps to prevent the ongoing misuse of power relationships.



Empowerment, voice and choice

Offenders may 'steal' both trust and power from children, so faith organisations should recognise and honour the resilience of survivors and their ability to heal. They should create opportunities for survivors' voices to be heard, including sharing their experiences of abuse. The knowledge they have gained from their experiences can help make children safer in faith organisations.



Peer support

Abuse can be an extremely isolating experience as it is often driven by offenders trying to instil secrecy by making survivors feel guilt and shame. Peer support can help break down this isolation and create pathways for understanding and healing.



Cultural, historical and gender issues

Recognising these factors and the part they play in creating an environment in which abuse can flourish is critical. Faith organisations must explore their own biases, stereotypes and role in creating historical trauma - and address them.

Barriers to disclosure in faith contexts

The Royal Commission found that common barriers to disclosure include:

- fear of being disbelieved
- experience of inappropriate and disbelieving responses when disclosing as a child
- inadequate avenues for disclosure
- fear of disclosing to devoutly religious families, often because of attitudes to sex and sexuality in that religious community
- fear of being ostracised or shunned, and reluctance to 'bring shame' on the faith organisation
- grooming and psychological manipulation by the perpetrator
- institutional barriers to disclosure, including cultures of secrecy and abuse
- the feeling that the revered status and authority of people in a religious ministry made them unapproachable and their behaviour unquestionable.

While it is not possible to predict what responses will be distressing for any individual survivor, certain comments are best avoided, such as the following examples:

- There is never a need to ask why the person waited 'so long' to tell their story. Instead you might make a supportive statement like, 'You have carried this secret for so long. Talking about it now takes a lot of courage and resilience'.
- Don't judge or evaluate the person's decisions by saying something like, 'Couldn't you have fought them off?' or 'It's better for you not to worry about it anymore'.
- Don't make statements like, 'We are all victims too'. Members of the faith community may feel that they are also victims of the damage done to their faith by abusers. However, raising this with a survivor redirects the focus away from the survivor's experience and may imply that the faith leader's experience is equivalent to the survivor's.
- Avoid probing questions. There may be issues that the survivor has not yet addressed. Probing questions may expose a subject that the survivor is not emotionally ready to confront.



Alastair explained why he did not make an official report about the abuse. 'To this day, I always thought that no one would believe me. The Church was God, after all. I did not even consider trying to report the matter myself to the Church or the Christian Brothers. I had been beaten up and abused enough by them. I didn't consider the police either as I did not want to get into trouble from them either. There was no avenue to complain to about anything. So, I just lived with it'.²⁵

Understanding the impact of trauma

The first step in being trauma-informed is being mindful that abuse causes trauma. Abuse perpetrated on children at a time their brains are growing can mean that they focus on survival. This means they are unable to develop in the same way as children who are not abused.

In general, survivors of childhood abuse report poorer health and lower levels of life satisfaction, have lower levels of educational attainment, are more likely to receive government support and are more likely to experience financial stress.²⁶

Financial support

For a range of reasons, including mental and physical health challenges that may be incompatible with steady employment, many survivors have limited financial means. Attending forums where they can find support, such as conferences, can be prohibitively expensive when faced with the costs of transport, attendance fees and accommodation. Consideration should be given to subsidising travel and admission costs.

Survivor organisations may have limited budgets, so it may be appropriate for your organisation to remunerate survivors and those representing survivor organisations for their contributions and for any professionals providing services.

Practical ways to be trauma-informed

Be aware that survivors may struggle to feel safe and may start from a position of very low trust and confidence in your faith organisation. Rebuilding trust can take years.²⁷

Survivors can struggle with depression, anxiety, sleep disorders and other mental health issues. Children and the adults they become adopt coping strategies, which can include addictions, self-harm and suicidality. They may struggle to regulate their emotions and levels of arousal, can be easily startled or agitated, or become numb and shut down. This can contribute to challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships because of ongoing distress, aggression, anger and patterns of violence. Poor physical health, poorer educational and occupational opportunities and achievement, are also common. Abuse 'does not predict any one condition or set of difficulties'. However, it is important not to make assumptions about the impact of trauma on an individual or their response to it.

Understanding the connection between prior trauma and current behaviour is an important step towards healing. Often people do develop the skills necessary to survive. At times, people can feel as though they are barely surviving. That they're barely functioning or not functioning at all. It is important to acknowledge that 'good enough' functioning is an achievement.²⁸



Be aware that a meeting in which a person's prior trauma and its impacts are shared is highly personal and often very traumatic. It's unusual for this to be a one-off, and this would not usually be appropriate. Rather, it is the start of a process of building trust and a sense of safety. If you are involved in a redress process with a survivor, it is important to provide space for the survivor to continue to engage with the organisation after the official process is complete - if this is what the survivor wishes.

We can't always know what will impact on a survivor engaging with a faith organisation in which they were abused. Sometimes survivors don't know either!

Survivors may be 'triggered' when fragments of a past traumatic experience are suddenly re-experienced.

Triggers may include smells, sights, sounds (such as certain music), faces, uniforms, authority figures or things that are said to them. Re-engaging with the faith organisation where abuse took place can itself be a trigger.

If a survivor is triggered, respectfully ask how you can assist them to keep a focus on the present. Don't presume to know what they need. Remain attentive, but don't pry.

You should also be aware that responses to negative experiences such as abuse can sometimes build strength and resilience in survivors as they learn to cope with having undergone trauma.



Providing a safe environment

Safe practices and physical spaces are important considerations to help survivors feel comfortable. The Royal Commission received submissions from a range of agencies highlighting the importance of a secure, welcoming environment, in a non-institutional setting, and that the 'first contact experience' is friendly, informal and personalised. Providing choice is important. This may include the gender or religious status of the person the survivor engages with (for example a 'layperson' rather than a person in religious ministry).

If you are meeting with a survivor:

- Provide choices about the venue and include non-faith settings without religious iconography, statues, memorabilia or texts. Ask the person if they would prefer meeting in an open space, such as a park or quiet café, rather than an office or faith-related environment.
- Ensure that the venue allows sufficient privacy. Give details about how the information discussed will be managed, and reassure them if they are concerned about confidentiality.
- Be open to how survivors want to share. Survivors may want to talk while walking alongside you or while participating in another activity, rather than sitting face to face.

Consider all aspects of the meeting place, time and environment:

- Make sure it is accessible via public transport and check whether the survivor has accessibility needs.
- Offer a choice of meeting times including after hours or on weekends.
- Allocate sufficient time.
- Have tissues within reach, as well as water or other refreshments.
- Advise others that you will be unavailable during the meeting and turn off your phone.
- Ask whether the person would like to be accompanied by a support person.

- If you have a reception area, be sure staff know to expect the person and that you will come to meet them. This will avoid those at reception asking about the purpose of the meeting. Reception staff may be the first point of contact with your organisation for survivors and it is important they are suitably trained about this aspect of their role. Offer the option of meeting somewhere else as survivors may prefer not to engage with reception staff.
- Survivors may delay and reschedule meetings, sometimes on numerous occasions. Be flexible and understanding about this.
- Be sensitive to the person's comfort and check by asking questions such as the following examples:
 - Seating arrangements - 'Would you like to face the window or be close to the door?'
 - Set up - 'Are you happy for me to close the door?'
 - Attire - 'I'm happy to wear plain clothes rather than my formal robes and religious insignia for this meeting - would you prefer that?'
 - Timing - 'I have set aside two hours for us to talk today, but we can stop whenever you like, take a break or meet again another time.'

Considerations - privacy concerns

Survivors may be sensitive about revealing personal details such as email addresses, names and other contact details - particularly at events where survivors and faith representatives are present. Before you make name tags, share meeting attendance details or circulate a contact list for meeting participants, consider that you may need to offer discreet alternatives. Allow anonymous RSVPs to events - often numbers are required for catering and venue capacity, but it's not necessary to know names.



Provide accessible information about what support your organisation offers survivors.



Practical tips

Ask the survivor how you can help if they become distressed by asking: 'If you find that our conversation today triggers something, is there anything I can do to help you feel more comfortable?'

What are their expectations? They may just want to be heard. On the other hand, they could be seeking practical support, counselling or financial or other assistance such as information about the National Redress Scheme. They might want to take legal action against the abuser.

Be transparent about what you can and can't provide, and where they might be able to access other support.

Some people find it difficult to articulate their expectations because they are experiencing high levels of stress. In these cases, it can be helpful to do some grounding* activities to help bring them back to the present.

When starting the conversation, it can be useful to gently ask whether something happened that brought the person to you – sometimes people are motivated to disclose by a significant event like the death of a family member or by a child turning the age they were when they were abused. This can provide a gentle way to start the conversation.

Do you:

- recognise institutional harm and betrayal?
- address the needs of survivors?
- listen to and value survivors' knowledge and courage?
- take full responsibility?
- value whistle-blowers?
- support and build places of healing and connection?²⁹

Institutional courage and responsibility

Jennifer Freyd, a professor of psychology and founder of the Center for Institutional Courage, has coined the term 'betrayal trauma'. This is defined as the wrongdoings perpetrated when an organisation fails to prevent or appropriately respond to wrongdoings by other individuals in the organisation, resulting in a fundamental betrayal of trust in a necessary dependent relationship.

Addressing the injury takes courage. It's not just saying, 'We're sorry this happened to you', but acknowledging that changes need to be made to prevent it happening again. Survivors, however, are not always able to 'move on' so easily. Many carry the scars of health impacts, or losses of relationships, connections or faith.

Organisational courage means:

- recognising organisational betrayal and publicly speaking out against it
- having representatives of the organisation take responsibility for the organisation's part in the abuse or failure to act on it
- having leadership with a depth of understanding of the harm done, and which is informed by survivor's wisdom
- demonstrating transparency by valuing whistle-blowers and recognising the risks they take in speaking out
- working with survivors to create pathways to recovery that embrace physical, emotional and spiritual healing.



*Grounding techniques are suggestions that prompt survivors to try to bring their awareness back to the current moment.

Triggers

People who have experienced childhood trauma often find that seemingly unrelated events, sensations or sensory cues can trigger unwanted thoughts, feeling and memories of their traumatic experience. Strong associations with past experiences can persist and the survivor can relive details of the abuse, or be reminded of the environment in which it occurred, or the perpetrator. For the survivor, this can feel like the trauma is occurring in the present, and can be frightening, confusing and overwhelming. It is not possible to predict every trigger.

Triggers can be words, symbols, situations, objects, sounds, smells, colours – just about anything the mind correlates to a negative past experience and causes a reaction based on it.³⁰

It is important to have a sense of how prior trauma, responses to it and resultant emotions may have evolved into coping strategies and current behaviours. While these may sometimes include resilience, some survivors may feel as though they are only just getting by, and can struggle to identify any of their strengths. It is important to acknowledge these – even when they can't – and to offer hope.



The onus is on you to periodically check in with the survivor about whether they are comfortable.

Responding to triggers in the faith setting

You can't mitigate all potential triggers and you will sometimes get things wrong. Be up-front about this. It is OK to ask the survivor if you have inadvertently said or done something that causes pain, offence or distress. Ask what they want you to do now. The onus is on you to periodically check in with them about whether they are comfortable.

- Don't assume that a person wants to engage in the faith practices of the organisation. Survivors may continue to practice their faith but choose never to attend a place of worship.
- If a survivor has actively expressed their desire to engage with your faith, allow them to participate in ways that are meaningful to them. For example, let them choose (where they position themselves, who they are near, what they do, and whether they stay seated rather than kneeling or standing). The ease of entering and leaving a service may also be a factor for them.
- It can be helpful to provide service sheets so that people who might struggle with certain aspects of worship have the opportunity to mentally prepare or leave before a particular part of the service.
- Ask a survivor's permission to be touched if doing so is part of a ritual.
- Be aware that some areas within a place of worship may be places where abuse occurred. These places may cause distress. If this occurs, ask what the person wants.
- Places of worship themselves or previous institutional residences of children or faith leaders may also trigger a traumatic response.

Some First Nations people experience trauma when visiting the site of a former mission or dormitory, for example. Hearing stories about these sites can also trigger trauma.³¹



'I was unprepared for the effect of being in that place again. I felt sweaty and could hardly breathe. My friend saw what was happening and stayed near and drew my attention to having my feet on the floor and suggested I should breathe slowly and deeply ... he didn't *tell* me what to do though'.

4 Responses to disclosure

How you react to a disclosure about a traumatic experience is critical. Positive, supportive and validating responses can promote recovery and wellbeing by reducing shame, self-blame and isolation. At the same time, feelings of safety can be increased. Judgmental, disbelieving or disempowering responses can exacerbate trauma and become an obstacle to recovery. Many children and adults who tried to disclose abuse were not believed. Some were even punished. Keep this in mind if someone discloses to you.

Sometimes, if a survivor discloses abuse, you will need to comply with any legal responsibilities you have to report child abuse offences to police. 'All adults in NSW are required to report information to police if they know, believe or reasonably ought to know that a child (under 18 years of age) has been physically or sexually abused'.³² Please be aware, however, that a person with a 'reasonable excuse' for not reporting the information will not be guilty of an offence – this includes situations where 'the victim is now an adult and doesn't want the offence reported'.³³



Work with survivors to build trust and rewrite feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Responding to people's traumatic experiences

Validation and acceptance without judgement

It is essential to accept the person's experience without judgement. Often survivors fear that they will not be believed because many times in the past, they weren't. A positive experience of disclosure – of being listened to, believed and treated with compassion and respect – can be an important element of recovery. It is essential that whatever you say in response to a disclosure is genuine. Depending on the circumstances, helpful messages to convey might include:

- 'It takes great courage to tell someone'.
- 'Abuse is never a child's fault or responsibility'.

If you don't know what to say, be honest: 'I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say'. Show the person you are there for them. Ask them what they want. Provide them with choices. Don't promise what you cannot deliver. Supporting the person to feel safe is very important.

Implementing and promoting safe and supportive systems to facilitate adult survivors' disclosure of historical child abuse needs to be a priority for faith organisations.³⁴



Supporting the conversation

Listen and be attentive. It can be hard to understand all the implications of what you are being told, especially if the narrative is fragmented and the person is upset. Trauma can affect a person's ability to fully tell their story. You may not understand everything they are telling you, but you should keep listening. Allow people to talk about their experiences in their own words and at their own pace. If they start to go into a lot of graphic detail, you may want to gently encourage them to describe how they are feeling right now, rather than going into the trauma. Ask them what they need. If you are very confused, ask an open question but avoid probing for details that have not been volunteered. (Examples: 'This is important and I want to understand more', or 'Could you tell me a little bit more about how you think that has affected you?').

Stay calm, but not distant. This can be hard when you are shocked, angry or upset, but an overly emotional response may not be helpful. If you do have an emotional response, acknowledge this and take time to settle. There is no need to apologise. However, if you are not able to calm down, it is better to explain that you can't continue. Be mindful that some survivors feel responsible for other people's pain when telling their story. It is important to seek support for yourself to help you process your own reactions after you have done your best to support the survivor.

Reassure and validate. Conversations about abuse are challenging – especially for the survivor. Genuine statements of compassion and recognition that the person has been deeply hurt are validating. Reassure the person that it is OK if they are upset, angry or distressed.

Use attentive body language. As far as possible, your body language should be open and engaging. Be aware of your facial expressions and posture – nod, lean slightly forward and use open gestures. Avoid interrupting, grimacing or frowning. Maintain consistent – but not constant – eye contact. The body language will come automatically if you are genuinely engaged.

Offer choices about continuing or taking a break.

Support silences when they occur and show you are listening by responding accordingly. If the person appears tired or distressed, ask if they would like a break or to meet again at another time.

Reflect on emotions. ('That sounds so frightening', or 'I can hear that made you angry'). It is also helpful to occasionally reflect back what you have been told to show you are listening and have understood. ('This was in the afternoon?').

Try to keep the stress level manageable. Attune to the person's emotions and try to monitor if they are becoming distressed. Support them to be in their 'window of tolerance' (a state where they can feel emotions but not be overwhelmed by them) as they describe their memories and response to them. If they remain outside this window, then it is best not to continue with retelling at this time.³⁵

Be ready to provide referrals if requested. Provide referrals to appropriate professionals or support groups, and offer to contact them.

Unhelpful (and potentially harmful) responses

Disclosing abuse is challenging for any survivor and they are likely to be particularly vulnerable at this time. For many people, disclosure involves a risk, especially if they have been threatened, they feel they will not be believed or the abuse was perpetrated by someone close to them. Some survivors can feel that the perpetrator still has power over them, even if they are dead or in gaol. Disclosing may involve pushing through the fear instilled by their abuser that there will be terrible consequences for them or those they love if they tell anyone about the abuse. This is a time that risks further trauma for survivors. How you and others respond to disclosure is critical.

Responding to survivors with strong emotional responses

Re-engaging with a faith organisation where abuse has taken place may raise strong memories and emotions for survivors. These emotions may be expressed verbally or through tears or angry outbursts: all signs of understandable distress.

Actions that may help when responding include:

- listening without trying to interrupt or explain
- staying calm
- taking responsibility for harm caused, including organisational failures, where appropriate
- conveying respect
- walking or having a drink.





5 Events, activities and memorials designed to contribute to healing

Many faith communities have offered survivors symbolic gestures of healing and acknowledgement, as well as practical support or financial assistance. Some have done this with the help of other survivors.

Examples of events organised to contribute to the healing process are provided below. For survivors who choose to be part of the process of organising a healing event, the way the faith organisation collaborates with them, and listens to and acts on their concerns and ideas, may be just as important or more important, than the actual memorial, plaque, liturgy or other symbolic gesture. The principles of trauma-informed practice should always guide how you collaborate with survivors – as equal partners in the process and with their needs at the forefront of any interaction.



Be aware that healing events and memorials that are based within the grounds of the faith institution may exclude survivors. It is also important not to assume that survivors and their families will want to engage in a religious event. The spiritual trauma of some survivors who were abused in a religious context may make revisiting the faith institution impossible for them.



The principles of trauma-informed practice should always guide how you collaborate with survivors.

Examples of events, activities and memorials designed to contribute to healing

On 22 October 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison apologised on behalf of all Australians to the victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse as well as their families, supporters and anyone else affected.

He acknowledged that this abuse was perpetrated by the people who were supposed to be caring for them.

The date 22 October marks the anniversary of the apology and is a day that survivors and their supporters honour.

There are many ways to show support and memorialise those who have been affected by abuse.



Members of the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Reference Group.

Left to right: Hetty Johnston AM, Chrissie Foster AM, Cheryl Edwardes AM, Prime Minister The Hon Scott Morrison MP, Craig Hughes-Cashmore and Caroline Carroll OAM. Photo courtesy Craig Hughes-Cashmore.

Memorials or plaques

Marist Hamilton memorial and event. On 27 March 2019, a memorial was unveiled to those who were sexually abused at the Marist Brothers school at Hamilton in NSW. The memorial was ‘dedicated by survivors, their families, their friends and those who stand in solidarity with the survivors, silently placing their hands on the memorial stone – thereby investing the memorial stone with their stories and their love’. The memorial includes an inscribed 1.5-metre circular wall, garden and private area of reflection. ‘It’ll be a perpetual reminder of the tragedies that occurred there’. The project was jointly funded by Marist Brothers and the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.³⁶

The Healing Garden of the Archdiocese of Chicago in the US is dedicated to the healing, recovery and reconciliation of child abuse victims and their families. The Healing Garden was created by a committee of survivors, diocesan priests and others, and is intended to be a place that invites reconciliation, hope and healing. The garden was dedicated on 9 June, 2011, and each year hundreds of children, high school students, teachers, clergy members, and families attend a prayer service in the garden during National Child Abuse Prevention Month.³⁷



St Peter’s Sacred Space at Mintaro in South Australia’s Clare Valley is a church that has been restored especially for those who have been betrayed by crimes in religious institutions. The inside has been altered so that it doesn’t look like a church, to support people who might be triggered by a religious setting. Its only cross has arms of equal length painted with First Nations artwork. Its vision is to support people who have suffered church abuse so they can re-establish direct communication with God.³⁸



Photos courtesy of Joseph Johns, spiritual carer at St Peter’s Sacred Space, in Mintaro, South Australia.

Memory projects such as public collections of survivor accounts

Renaming buildings or removing statues and other tributes honouring known abusers

Knox Grammar School removed a plaque from the school gates that commemorated an accused teacher, and renamed a school building following the evidence a previous school principal gave to the Royal Commission in 2015.³⁹

In 2017, Hobart's St Mary's Cathedral removed a plaque honouring a convicted child sex offender. Former Catholic priest Julian Punch, who said he was also assaulted by the man, publicly called for the removal of the plaque and received the support of survivors. Mr Punch has said 'It's about self-determination, it's about people being able to negotiate their situation rather than the church, from the top down, controlling people, dominating and abusing people'.⁴⁰

In 2018, the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania in the US removed from campus buildings the names of bishops who covered up 'the crimes and misdeeds of men who were under their jurisdiction and placed children in harm's way' and rescinded their honorary degrees. The university said it made the choice 'with sympathy for and in solidarity with victims of sexual abuse in the Diocese of Scranton'.⁴¹



Message to Australia

Message to Australia gave those who bravely told their story to the Royal Commission an opportunity to share their experience and hopes for creating a safer future for children. Their messages were published in a commemorative book that was handed to the National Library of Australia during the final sitting of the Royal Commission on 14 December 2017. More than 1,000 contributions were received and will remain as a tribute to survivors' courage in coming forward to tell their stories and provide a public record of their experience. The book is on display at the National Library and in all state and territory libraries.⁴²

The Atonement: Lina's Project

Lina, a victim of child sexual abuse at the hands of a member of clergy in the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, conceived a project of atonement that was facilitated by the diocese. The Atonement: Lina's Project included a community gathering of more than 500 people on Friday, 15 September 2017 at Newcastle City Hall. The event included a powerful audiovisual presentation about child abuse in the diocese, which was later projected onto the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newcastle each evening for a week. As a continuation of Lina's Project, the presentation was later projected onto the façade of St Joseph's East Maitland for five consecutive evenings in February 2018.⁴³

Exhibitions and creative events

Taken

The 2019 Head On Photo Festival in Sydney included a photographic and creative arts event that explored the history and experience of institutional child abuse. The project used black and white portrait photography combined with barcode patterns arranged to create a 3D effect – the full features of each person were only revealed when the viewer stood at a particular angle. ‘The barcode pattern acknowledge[d] how the participants feel they have been treated – as a faceless statistic known only by a registration number.’⁴⁴

What you can do

- Develop a statement of acknowledgement and apology from your faith group. There may be an appropriate place within the institution or local places of worship or other faith facilities to publicly display the apology.
- Provide access to relevant faith institution records, copies of publications (like yearbooks) or reproductions of photographs to those who request them. Include an account of a survivor’s experience in official faith records.
- At the centre of organisational (and other forms) of child abuse is a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim, and often the faith institution and the victim as well. It is important that apologies on behalf of the organisation address this power imbalance and are a genuine demonstration that the organisation is taking responsibility for the harm caused to people in its care.
- Support and encourage any survivors within your faith who want to share experiences and support one another.
- Help with family tracing and reunions. Reunions are often initiated by a survivor or group of survivors, but are sometimes supported by faith organisations, either financially or by sending representatives to speak to survivors and hear their stories.
- Provide individual financial assistance, offer to pay for counselling or case management to assist survivors to access support services, or give practical assistance with employment, housing, literacy, and drug and alcohol issues.

Some thoughts about apologies

- An apology to a survivor of abuse may occur formally as part of the National Redress Scheme or on behalf of a faith group, or it may simply occur as a genuine response to a survivor disclosing or sharing their experience with you. A sincere and personalised apology can be a meaningful and positive experience for survivors.

*When I received [the personalised letter of apology from the Bishop] it was very – it was very empowering to the point where it had made such a difference to me that I actually wanted to ring and tell him personally, ‘Thank you for that letter’.*⁴⁵



- Survivors also told the Royal Commission that although they had received an apology from the institution, ‘they considered it meaningless because it failed to acknowledge or recognise the abuse or the harm done to them’.⁴⁶

*I didn’t feel that the ‘sorry’ meant anything. You can say ‘sorry’ for anything. I would have appreciated it if they’d tried to really engage with me, and made an effort to understand what I’d gone through. That would have meant more to me than the word ‘sorry’ in a letter.*⁴⁷



... most important of all is to openly, honestly and fully acknowledge the sexual abuse perpetrated against innocent children within the Church, without hesitation or qualification. This acknowledgement must, above all else, avoid the use of the word 'but', seek to nit-pick over irrelevant details, draw attention to the actions of others as a means of diverting the focus off our own Church or peddle hurtful untruths. Why? Because a genuine acknowledgement of the abuse perpetrated and the immeasurable hurt it has caused opens and prepares our hearts to truly hear the voices of those victims and survivors deeply wounded by our Church. Most profoundly, without it there can be no trust.⁴⁸



- The most appropriate form and method of communication of an apology will depend on what the survivor wants. This will vary with the circumstances of the particular person, the harm suffered and what is hoped will be achieved by giving the apology (for example, acknowledgement of the wrong done, reconciliation or an assurance that a problem has been addressed or will not recur). Some survivors also seek an explanation or recognition of systemic issues that led to abuse occurring. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Complaint Handling Guide: Upholding the rights of children and young people, 2019, p 80. Apologies are especially powerful when the giver accepts ownership of a problem, assuring recipients that they were not at fault.
- For some survivors, it will be important that the person providing a formal apology is aware of the details of what happened to them. Thought needs to go into how to strike the right balance between providing a personalised apology and causing further harm by going into too much detail.⁴⁹



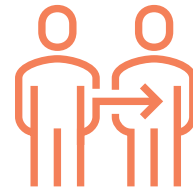
Meaningful apologies

A meaningful apology flows from the faith organisation accepting responsibility for the abuse and recognising that it failed to respond with compassion, justice and respect.

Apologies can make a difference when faith representatives appreciate the nature of the harm experienced by the survivor at the time of the abuse and as a result of the institutional response. Providing an apology without this is often meaningless and ineffective.

Apologies need to be accompanied by actions that safeguard against future abuse and meet the expressed needs of survivors.

The giver of the apology should not request forgiveness, as this shifts the focus of the apology away from addressing the needs of the survivor.



Apologies are especially powerful when the giver accepts ownership of a problem, assuring recipients that they were not at fault.



6 Vicarious trauma and resilience

Those who work closely with survivors, listen to personal experiences of abuse, and read or hear from others about traumatic material may be at risk of vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is not a sign of weakness, but a possible response after repeated exposure to traumatic material. It can result from hearing details of traumatic experiences or witnessing the systemic and individual injustice that is intrinsic to this issue.

Signs of vicarious trauma

It is important to be aware of the early signs of vicarious trauma so that you can lessen its likelihood and minimise its impact. If you are experiencing the symptoms of vicarious trauma, this is not a reflection on your abilities.

Vicarious trauma often involves experiences such as:

- feeling that the world is no longer a 'safe place', being distrustful of other people and the world in general, becoming increasingly vigilant about your and your family's safety, and feeling alienated
- questioning your identity, world view, spirituality, safety, control, and intimacy
- feeling helpless, anxious, depressed, or irritable, which may be combined with diminished autonomy, and loss of joy or pleasure in daily activities
- feeling jumpy, easily startled, irritable or impatient, or experiencing increasing heart rate or perspiration
- feeling overwhelmed by emotions such as fear, grief, despair, shame, or guilt
- feeling increasingly cynical, sad or serious
- experiencing increased sensitivity to violence and abuse; for example, when watching television

- experiencing difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and feeling withdrawn and isolated
- having trouble sleeping
- abusing substances
- dreaming about survivor's experiences and worrying that you are not doing enough
- experiencing changes in work performance (for example, lateness, absenteeism, conflict or avoiding work)
- feeling helpless in relation to taking care of yourself or others.

It is often the families, long-term supporters of survivors of abuse and regular staff who experience vicarious trauma. It is unlikely to be experienced by someone hearing a single account – although some representatives may feel fear because of what truth is being revealed about their organisation. Sometimes people working with and supporting survivors may be inspired and in awe of the survivors' responses to abuse. Some may even feel vicarious resilience at the honour and inspiration they feel hearing someone's story and feel stronger because of it. It's also important to remember that survivors are just that – they should not be seen as 'victims'. Many survivors live and work among us – they may be our work colleagues, fellow commuters or team members.



Vicarious trauma is not a sign of weakness, but may emerge after repeated exposure to traumatic material.

Reducing the impact of vicarious trauma

The distress of hearing about personal experiences need not necessarily result in vicarious trauma.*

Some organisations provide training about vicarious trauma and it is strongly recommended that anyone engaging with survivors participates in a course. Debriefing, support, self-care, supervision and organisational cultural change for those engaged with survivors are essential to mitigate the risks of vicarious trauma. These measures can help you to stay healthy while engaging sensitively with survivors.



Self-care tips

- Make a plan for yourself that includes adequate breaks, holidays, time off for illness, exercise, a healthy diet, relaxation, rest and socialisation.
- Be aware of your internal dialogue. Reflect on your emotional responses to situations and people. Question where these feelings come from. Are your feelings and responses different to how you normally react?
- Supporting those who have experienced abuse can be emotionally draining. Supervision and mentoring by an experienced trauma-informed supervisor can provide a safe space in which to reflect about stressful and distressing information and your responses. Faith organisations should put arrangements in place to ensure that support is available for those who are engaging regularly with people who have experienced abuse. This may need to take place outside the faith to maintain appropriate boundaries and confidentiality.
- Reach out to trusted friends or colleagues. Talking about your feelings and responses – without breaching the privacy of the survivor – is a good strategy to help lessen the emotional load. Keeping a journal can also help you to reflect on your feelings and feel less burdened.
- Share the load when you can. The amount of exposure to trauma is one predictor of vicarious trauma risk. If more than one person trained in supporting survivors it can be good to share the load. Larger faith organisations should take steps to monitor exposure among staff and leaders, and ensure the right supports are in place.

* If you are working to help people and end up being witness to stories of abuse and violence, it's good to remember that an emotional response is also a human one.

7 Further information and support

Blue Knot Foundation



Blue Knot Foundation website



Helpline phone: 1300 657 380



Email: helpline@blueknot.org.au



Helpline hours:

Monday to Sunday, 9am to 5pm
(02) 8920 3611
(for training and other enquiries)

Blue Knot Foundation is the National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma. The foundation provides short-term phone counselling, support, education and resources for survivors, including support through the redress process. It supports the families and communities of adult survivors of childhood trauma, including child sexual abuse. It also develops and disseminates best practice and research evidence around complex trauma; and has an extensive professional development training, supervision and consultancy arm to build the capacity of workforces and management to embed trauma-informed policy and practice throughout their organisation.

Bravehearts



Bravehearts website



Support Line: 1800 272 831

Support line hours: 8:30am to 4:30pm
Monday to Friday AEST



Email: bisl@bravehearts.org.au



Phone:

(07) 5552 3000
(for training and other enquiries)

Bravehearts is a not-for-profit organisation providing advice and support to those affected by child sexual abuse. Bravehearts specialises in child protection training and education initiatives; and specialist child sexual abuse counselling and support services. It conducts research and reform campaigns to work holistically to prevent child sexual abuse.

Broken Rites



Broken Rites website



National hotline: (03) 9457 4999



Email: brokenritesaustralia@hotmail.com

Broken Rites Australia has been researching the cover-up of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church since 1993. It is not connected with any religious denomination.

Care Leavers Australasia Network



Care Leavers Australasia website



Phone: 1800 008 774 or 0425 204 747



Email: support@clan.org.au

Care Leavers Australasia Network is a national, independent, peak membership body that represents, supports and advocates for people who were raised in Australian and New Zealand orphanages, children's homes and in foster care.

Heartfelt House



Heartfelt House website



Phone: (02) 6628 8940



Email: info@heartfelthouse.org.au



Office Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 9am to 3pm

Heartfelt House is a not-for-profit organisation that provides therapeutic group program services for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and seminars for family and friends of survivors as well as professionals in the community.

Child Migrants Trust



Child Migrants Trust website



Phone: 1800 040 509

Child Migrants Trust is a registered charity providing a range of social work services, including counselling and support for family reunions. The Trust's offices offer information, advice and family research to former child migrants and their families.



In Good Faith Foundation



[In Good Faith website](#)



Phone: (03) 9940 1533

In Good Faith Foundation is an independent charity that provides case management and advocacy services to survivors, families and communities impacted by institutional abuses. It also conducts research and community education, information forums, community development and survivor support through the Melbourne Victims' Collective.

National Redress Scheme Support Services



[National Redress Scheme website](#)

The National Redress Scheme provides support to people who experienced institutional child sexual abuse. It acknowledges that many children were sexually abused in Australian institutions. It holds institutions accountable for this abuse and helps people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse gain access to counselling, a direct personal response, and a Redress payment.

Knowmore



[Knowmore website](#)



Free advice line: 1800 605 762

Advice line hours: Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm AEST/AEDT



Email: info@knowmore.org.au



Office Hours: (02) 8267 7400

Knowmore is an independent service giving free legal advice to assist survivors of abuse. Knowmore has a First Nations Engagement team involved in outreach and community engagement activities, including working in regional, rural and remote areas.

Lotus Place/Micah Projects



[Lotus Place website](#)



Phone: (07) 3347 8500

Find & Connect: 1800 16 11 09



Email: lotus@micahprojects.org.au

Lotus Place is a dedicated support service and resource centre based in Queensland for people who experienced abuse in an institutional setting, including out-of-home care. It provides Find & Connect Support Services, which have been established by the Australian Government to help people trace and reclaim their identities, restore relationships with their families where possible, come to terms with their past and help build a positive future.

SAMSN (Survivors & Mates Support Network)



SAMSN website



Helpline: 1800 4 SAMSN (72 676)
Helpline hours: Monday to Friday,
9am to 5pm



Email: support@samsn.org.au



Phone:
(02) 8355 3711 (for training and other
enquiries)

SAMSN provides free services for adult male survivors of child sexual abuse and their family and friends. These services are both professionally and survivor led, and include eight-week men's groups, supporters and survivors workshops, and individual support (including National Redress Scheme support).

SAMSN provides groups and workshops in NSW, South Australia and Tasmania, and individual (planned) support across Australia.

Say Sorry



Say Sorry website

Say Sorry is a website aimed at supporting survivors and holding accountable the Jehovah's Witness organisation.

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians



Alliance for Forgotten Australians website



Phone: 0488 460 646 or 0419 854 980



Email: admin@forgottenaustralians.org.au

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians is an organisation that promotes the interests of those who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as children and young people in the last century in Australia, many of whom suffered physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse while in 'care'.



Tzedek



Tzedek website



Phone: 1300 TZEDEK (1300 893 335)

Tzedek (which means 'justice' in Hebrew) is an Australian-based support and advocacy group for Jewish survivors of child sexual abuse. It promotes their needs and interests, and offers them and other relevant stakeholders a range of services.

Wattle Place



Wattle Place website



Phone: 1300 364 277



Email: enquiries@ransw.org.au

Wattle Place provides support services for anyone who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as children, people of the Stolen Generations, former child migrants who were placed in institutional or other out-of-home care, and people seeking support with understanding the National Redress Scheme

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