

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

- Presented by: Kim Robinson
- Senior Counsellor/Advocate
- Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault
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“I would like to acknowledge the Traditional owners of this land, the Wurundjeri People.

I would like to pay my respect to these people, their culture, and their traditions.

I pay particular respect to their Elders, past and present, and to any other Aboriginal people here today.”



Overview of presentation

- 1. Definition, prevalence and impacts of sexual assault
- 2. Brief introduction to the counselling approach by Northern CASA
- 3. Barriers for clients to disclose sexual abuse experiences
- 4. Principles for responding to disclosures
- 5. Unhelpful responses
- 6. How support workers/practitioners might support disclosures
- 7. NCASA contact details for referral or secondary consultation.

Self Care

Self care is the deliberate act of taking care of your body, mind and spirit. Please be **kind** and **gentle** to yourself!



CASA Definition of Sexual Assault

Sexual Assault is any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened.

It is sexual behaviour that someone has not agreed to, or to which that person is not capable of giving consent (e.g. substance affected, mentally unwell), or where another person uses physical or emotional force against them.

It includes hands on and hands off offending behaviours.

Quick Facts about Sexual Assault

* up to 30% of Australian children experience some form of childhood sexual abuse [The Australian Institute of Criminology]

* reports that almost 1/5 women and 1/20 men have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 years [The Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (2018)]

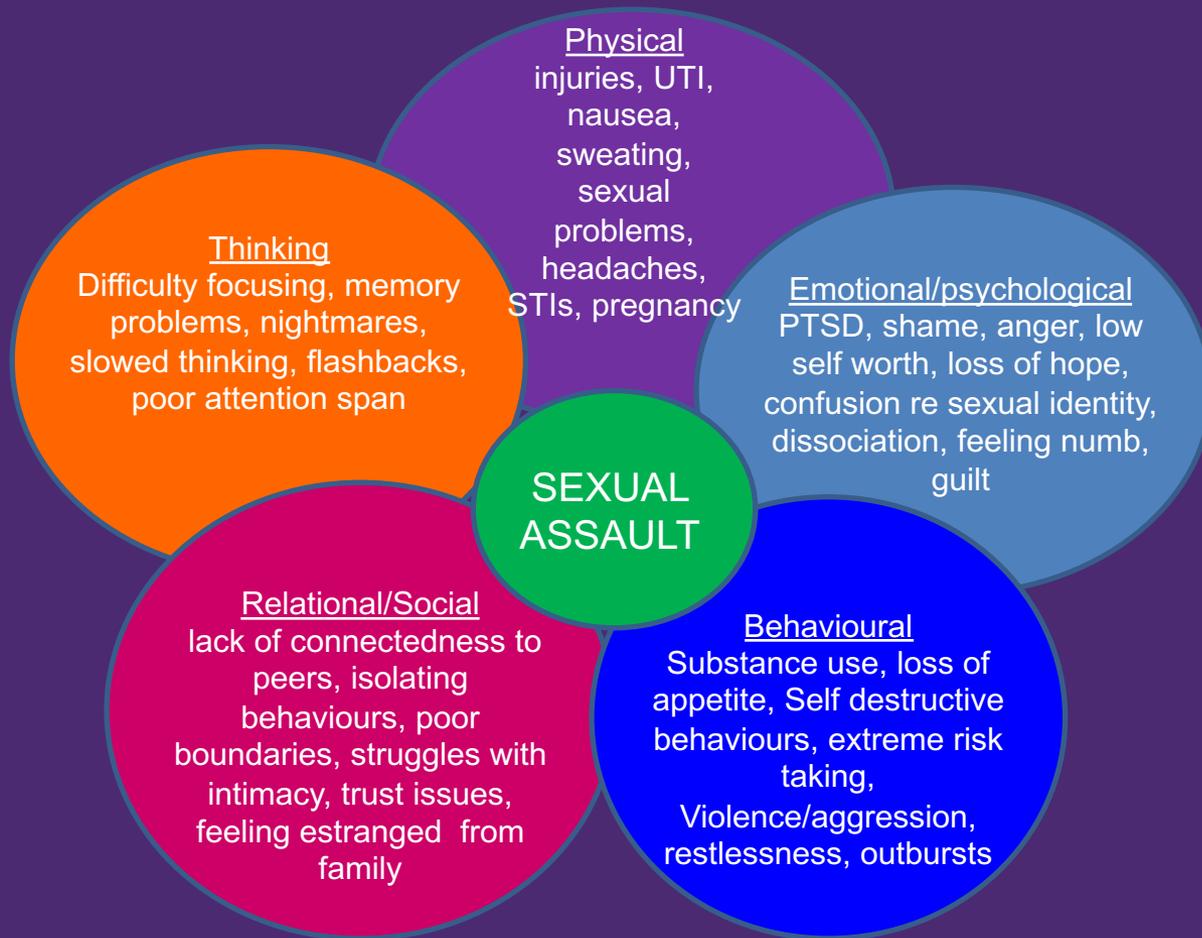
*69% of female psychiatric inpatients were victims of CSA and/or physical abuse [Read et al 2005]

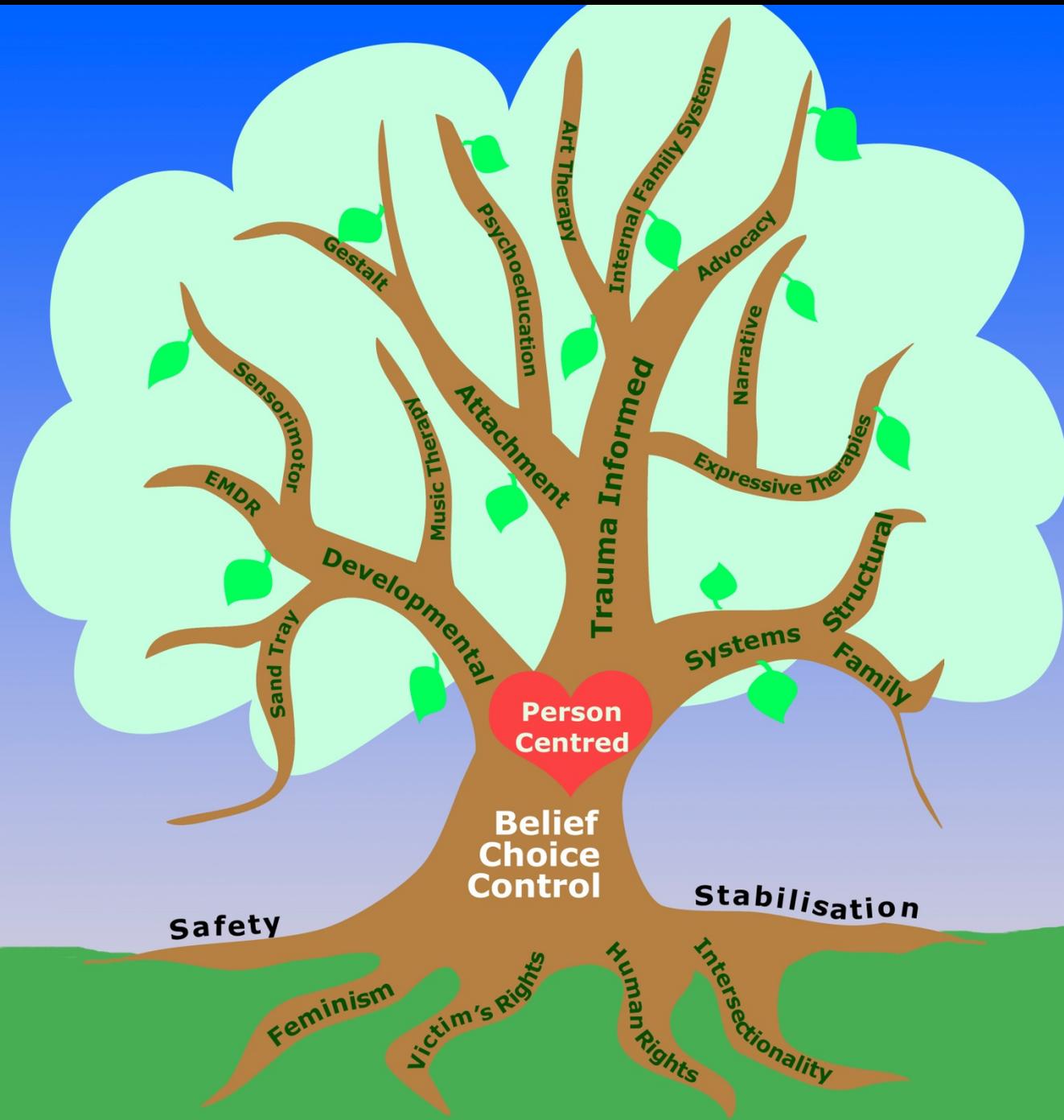
*59% of male psychiatric inpatients were victims of CSA and/or physical abuse [Read et al 2004]

Many victim/survivors of sexual assault do not disclose until many years afterwards, and some will never disclose

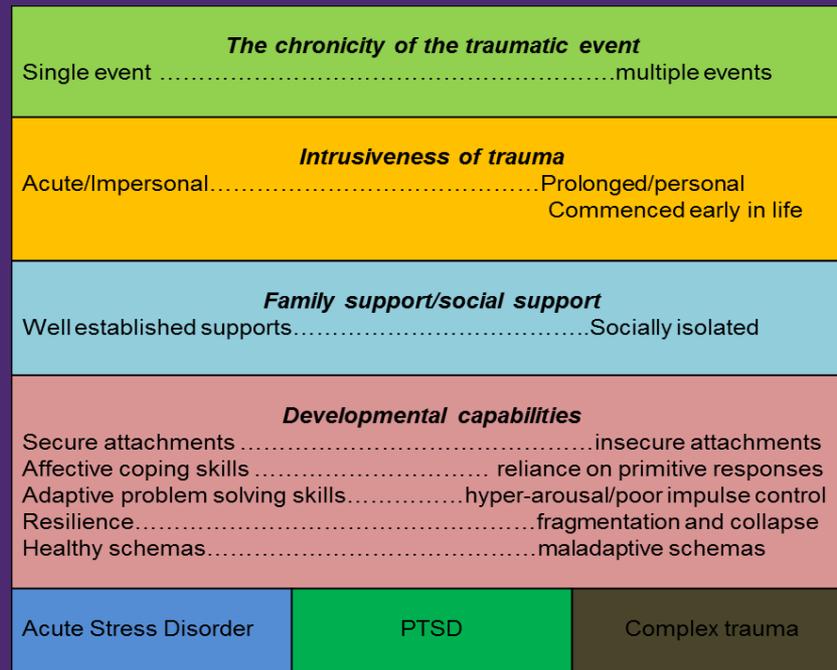
Royal Commission into Institutional Childhood Sexual Abuse found that survivors of childhood sexual assault taken on average 23.9 years to tell someone

Impact of Sexual abuse/assault





Using a trauma and developmental lens to understand the complexities of sexual abuse impacts



Adapted by Robyn Elliot

“Early onset trauma requires the brain to shift its focus from learning to survival and disrupts the neural integration necessary to respond flexibly to daily challenges. The effects of complex trauma on individual functioning are pervasive and deeply disruptive to the key developmental [*tasks*] of attachment, self-regulation and the development of competencies.”
(NSW Kids and Families, 2014, p. 84,)

“The Noticing Brain” - responsible for awareness of thoughts and emotions, sensations and movements. Because of its direct connections, activation of the ‘noticing brain,’ calms the amygdala and restores a sense of safety to the body.

WORKING MEMORY -

Problem solving, planning and insight. Insights, draw conclusions. [No direct connection to the amygdala]

Thinking brain

Emotional brain

AMYGDALA

Smoke detector – sounds the alarm if in danger

The reptilian brain



Our Role as Counsellor/Advocates

- *Collaboratively assess and understand client's needs and hopes for how we might help them move forward.
- *Establish safe therapeutic relationships with clear boundaries.
- *Offer psycho-ed for the victim/survivors about the impact of sexual assault and human responses to traumatic experience
- *To offer validation, support and reflection within a safe context to help v/s understand and overcome the impacts of sexual assault/trauma
- *The work is to improve a person's quality of life – this may or may not necessarily involve “processing” traumatic memories

“Remember that we are here because of what happened to us and not because of what is “wrong” with us. My emotions might be running wild but I’m still here and I’m an expert in my life. Instead of telling us what we need you should ask us what we need. Trauma impacts us as a whole person: physical, mental, financial, spiritual, social.”

Client quote: “A deep wound under my heart” Constructions of complex trauma
May 2020

Barriers to disclosure of sexual abuse

- * fear of not being believed or supported in the disclosure
- * shame about believing they were complicit in the sexual abuse, blaming themselves
- * not wanting to upset caregivers or family members
- * themselves minimising the abuse and trying to convince themselves it was insignificant
- * having survived by locking the memory away and being disconnected from it.
- * being afraid of destabilising their own mental health
- * not wanting to burden someone else with this information
- * not having ever named their experience as 'sexual abuse'.

Concerns for workers in asking about sexual abuse

- ❑ Fear of re-traumatizing someone
- ❑ Fear of interfering / invading privacy
- ❑ Lack of knowledge / confidence
- ❑ Lack of time
- ❑ Doubts about survivors' story
- ❑ Tendency to minimise clients' experience of abuse
- ❑ Historic disapproval of raising abuse issues
- ❑ Asking increases complexity
- ❑ Too confronting – you may be impacted

Principles for Responding to Disclosures

Believe

One of the greatest barriers to disclosure is the fear of not being believed.

Non-judgement

Let them know that you do not think that they invited the abuse and that they were not responsible

Safety

Assess – is the person still being abused?
Support the person to be psychologically safe

Normalise feelings

Reassure the person their feelings are understandable given what they have been through

Client control

Support the person to control timing, pace and content of disclosures and who else is told about this.

Support / Referral

Assistance with skills to manage distress may be needed or referral for sexual assault counselling. Support the person to identify additional help they may need

- Seriously** Take the disclosure seriously regardless of person's mental state or plausibility
 - Ensure you're in a room that allows for privacy
- Affirmation** Provide affirmation, validation & support – “this is a good & brave thing you're doing by telling me this”
- Facts** Gather the facts without going into graphic details
- Explore needs** What does the person impacted by the assault need and want to see happen
- Team around** You are not alone. Utilised the team and resources you within your organisation and externally
- Your responsibility for** If you are the person who has been told, you feel safe them; don't refer them on straight away...you'll do fine!

(Adapted from NAMHS NPU Gender Sensitivity Leadership Group)

Gently enquiring about the possibility of someone's childhood trauma...

Sometimes when bad things happen in the present, they touch on bad things that have happened in the past, is that the case for you?

Has anyone ever hurt you or touched you in ways that made you feel frightened or uncomfortable?

If you ever decided you wanted to talk about this stuff I can help you find the right person.

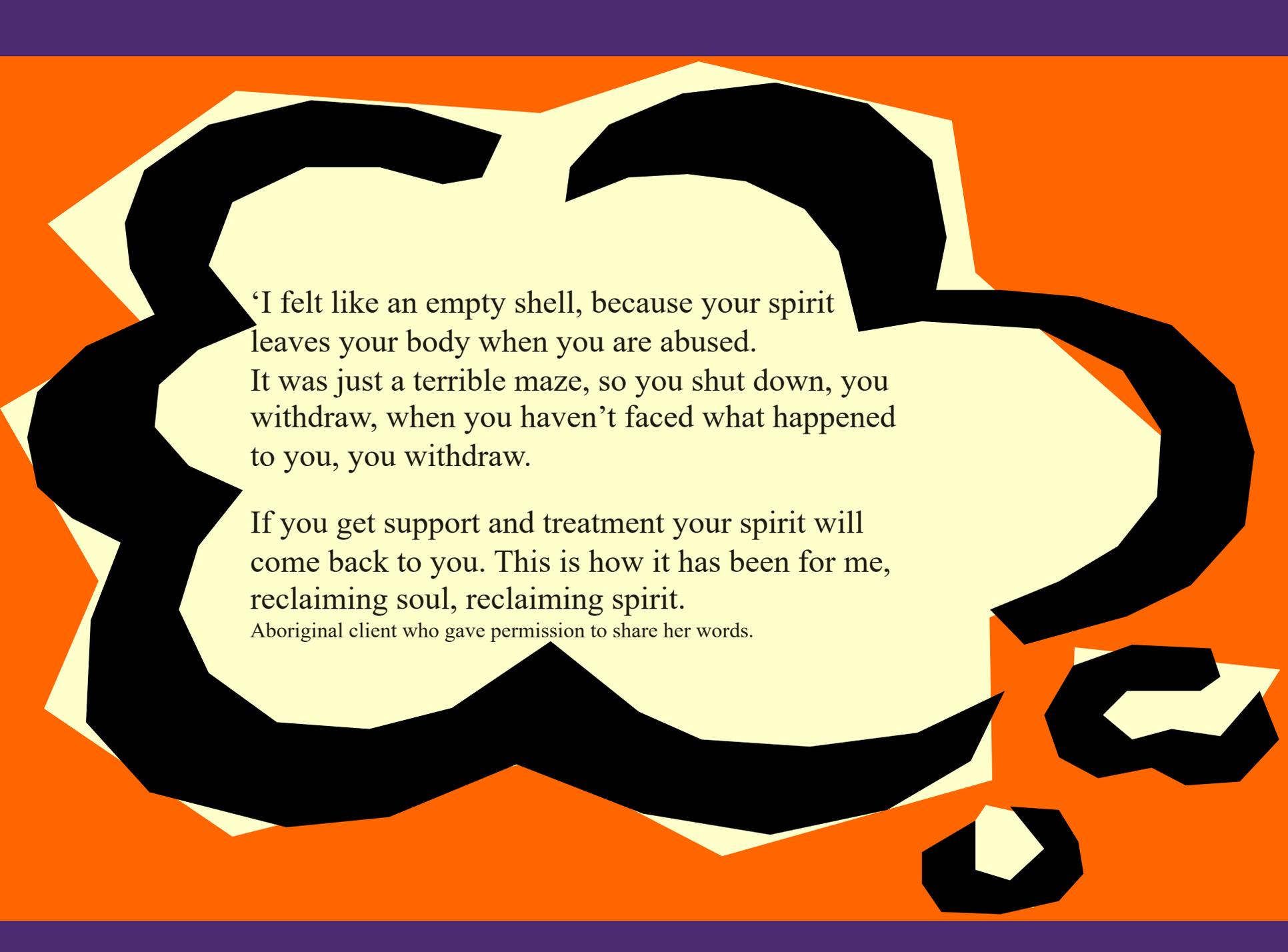
How you might support disclosure

- ▶ *“What happened to you must have been really frightening, no-one should have to go through that.”*
- ▶ *“You look really upset. Would it help you to talk some more about this with me?”*
- ▶ *“You don’t need to tell me details of what happened but we could talk about how it’s affecting you and what might help you”*

Unhelpful responses

- Disbelieving, Ignoring or minimising the disclosure
- Blame the client for the sexual assault
- Ask questions like, 'why didn't you tell someone earlier?.'
- Express shock, horror or give away your own distress at hearing the disclosure
- Share your own experience of abuse
- Saying something like, 'the past is the past, don't go opening that can of worms'.
- Assuming person is attention-seeking, making up the abuse, seeking revenge or delusional
- Assume the client is safe, without checking this.
- Force services onto the client.

‘We are people who have had some awful experiences and we might be really messy right now but don’t give up on us. Don’t look at the behaviours but focus instead on what’s driving them. We need you to acknowledge the journey, and the fact that we are still alive and holding on is a testament to our strength. It is hard to convey just how difficult our experiences have been. Your patience and compassion validates us and empowers us to see that change is possible’
Client comment from: “A deep wound under my heart” Constructions of complex trauma – May 2020



‘I felt like an empty shell, because your spirit leaves your body when you are abused.

It was just a terrible maze, so you shut down, you withdraw, when you haven’t faced what happened to you, you withdraw.

If you get support and treatment your spirit will come back to you. This is how it has been for me, reclaiming soul, reclaiming spirit.

Aboriginal client who gave permission to share her words.

Referring to Northern CASA

NCASA Counselling line **9496 2240**
(Monday - Friday 12.30-5pm)

After Hours Crisis Line (SACL) **1800 806 292**

NCASA Admin Line **9496 2369**

Address: Building 26, Repatriation Campus, 300
Waterdale Rd, Heidelberg West 3081



Eligibility criteria for Northern CASA service

- * Live in the catchments of Whittlesea, Darebin, Banyule and Nillumbik
- * Be over the age of 12 years old
- * Have experienced sexual abuse/assault and wish to seek counselling to address the impact of this
- * Be the non offending family member of someone who has experienced sexual assault

Offer: 16 sessions of counselling for victim/survivors
6 sessions for family members

When is the right time for sexual assault counselling?

Any Questions?

