Reclaiming Myself
Reclaiming Myself after child sexual abuse

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This book is dedicated to all survivors of child sexual abuse:

You have within you the strength to overcome
To create your future, to be and become...

Antonia van Loon

To our children:

With the birth of a child
A bright new world is born
May it have sun and ocean and winds of seeking!
May it always have the fragrance of loving and caring!

Anonymous
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Catherine House Inc. offers emergency and transitional supported accommodation, and a range of services, to women with complex needs who are homeless. Over 93% of the clients that use the service have experienced the trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA). As a result, some have used drugs, alcohol and gambling as a means of trying to manage their emotional and physical pain.

Dr Debbie Kralik from the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) Research Unit approached us at Catherine House Inc. during 2002 to consider entering into a research partnership with the RDNS Research Unit. It was recognised in these discussions that one underlying issue for many women requiring support from Catherine House was the impact of sexual abuse during childhood, which appeared to be correlated to their alcohol, gambling and/or substance misuse in adult life. There had been little capacity building research done in this area.

Our two organisations partnered, applied for, and were successful in gaining funding for the study from the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd (AER) and as a result, the project commenced during August 2003 and was completed August 2005. The Project Management Team, which was set up to oversee the project, met regularly and consisted of members of both organisations. The project has proven to be an excellent example of two non-government organisations working collaboratively together, at every level, to achieve very positive outcomes.

This inquiry was grounded in the actual experiences of women who, as children, experienced sexual abuse and have continued to live with disruption throughout their lives. Catherine House is indebted to both Dr Antonia van Loon, the Research Unit’s Project Manager who led the project, and Deirdre Flynn, a social worker at Catherine House, for working so sensitively with the women who participated in the study. Together with the women, they have untangled life stories that had previously been silenced. With immense courage, women have shared their stories and told of events and experiences that have shaped and disrupted their lives. They have found their voice, which has risen, sometimes gently, sometimes fiercely, but always from deep within them. Aspects of the stories shared within this book are evocative and full of compassion and wisdom.
There was a wide range of reactions and experiences that came from the women who attended the group. Feelings and emotions ranged from fear and anxiety to elation and relief; that finally there was a safe forum where they could begin to dialogue about matters that they had kept hidden away for so long. Trust in the facilitators and in the other group participants grew slowly; however, by the end of the project the women had developed a real bond and connectedness because of their common experiences.

The group process allowed a safe space for reflection and interpretation, and through the research construction, a consciousness-raising developed among many of the women who participated. The growing trust that developed in the group allowed women to gain more confidence and courage about the issues/questions/topics that they were prepared to raise. This was very important as many of the women had held these questions and associated anxieties for years. Some women found participating in the group difficult, as they confronted the most painful and shameful aspects of their lives. At times women would need to retreat from the group to process their reactions and feelings before they were ready to come back and do more healing work. At all times, the women were free to come and go as they required.

It emerged during the study that the women’s stories of disruption were stories of their feeling different, so that possibilities for order and continuity in their lives appeared to be remote at times. It has been important for the women to hear the experiences of others. The sharing of experiences and knowledge within the group increased the sense of personal validation for each woman. In voicing and sharing experiences a sense of clarity of the past and its impacts developed and a vision for a preferred future was able to be constructed. This movement towards order is not always straightforward, nor does it happen quickly, but rather it is experienced as an unfolding process.

The research process of ‘Look, Think and Act’ provides a process that can facilitate understanding, sense-making, and the necessary action that creates the life-enhancing change which facilitates transition. Extracts of the process used in the study are threaded through this book so other survivors can benefit from this way of reclaiming their sense of self.

The results of the study show that child sexual abuse has a lasting impact that can seriously compromise a woman’s sense of herself, as well as her life chances. It is hoped that this book will offer child sexual abuse survivors a reduced sense of isolation, knowing they are not alone in what happened to them. It is also hoped that the book will be a valuable resource to workers in this field as they use it to assist women with experiences of child sexual abuse to move forward more positively in their lives.

Madge McGuire
Director: Catherine House Inc.

Debbie Kralik
Acting Director: Royal District Nursing Service Research Unit
First and foremost, we are deeply grateful to the women who took part in this research project. The process of discovery we have worked through has taught us all much about ourselves, each other and life. This book was born out of the women’s desire to use their experiences to help others move forward with their own healing journey. They have shared much of themselves and without their willingness to do the difficult work of exploring past and present life experiences; this book would not be available to help other CSA survivors make sense of their lives. Some women requested to have their full name in this book. Others asked for their first name only, while others nominated a pseudonym to protect themselves or their family. Participants who were uncertain were provided with a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Words are not enough to tell you just how grateful and thankful we are to these courageous and amazing women:

Joanne Marie Betts, Roseann Dowden, Louise, Sophia, Catherine, Leilani, Vivian, Anastasia, Maisie, Megan, Emma, Harmony and Grace.

The research team would like to thank the following organisations who participated in the data generation process, and without whom this important work could not proceed. We were heartened by the enthusiasm and commitment shown by service providers to participate in this research to improve the capacity of their services to their clients. In total, 50 services were invited to participate and of these, 24 organisations affirmed their response. They were:

Addiction Counselling Service
Alcoholics Anonymous
Baptist Community Services
Catherine House
Centacare Catholic Family Services
Dale Street Women’s Health Service
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
Drug & Alcohol Services South Australia
Gambling Addiction Treatment Service
Mission Australia
Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services of SA Inc.
Ramsay Health Care SA Mental Health Services
  • The Adelaide Clinic
  • Fullarton Private Hospital
  • Kahlyn Day Centre
Relationships Australia
Salvation Army Social Services
Second Storey Youth Health Service
Service to Youth Council Inc.
Sidestreet Counselling Service
Southern Junction Community Service
StreetLink Youth Health Service
UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide
Women’s Health Statewide
Yarrow Place Sexual Assault Service

Special thanks must also go to the following individuals who contributed a lot of time, knowledge and expertise to this book. It has been a joy to work with so many committed and inspiring professionals. The women of South Australia are fortunate to have you all. These amazing people are:
  Fiona Barber, Melissa Castle, Sarah Bishop, Wendy Bowman, Denise Carey, Leslye Chenery, Grant Daniel, Cecile Dutreix, Kylie Duncan, Deirdre Flynn, Anna Kroehn, Susan Mann, June Mattner, Julia Mc Millan, Robert Mittiga, Kathy Modystack, Karan Mulvey, Gabrielle Preston, Tanya Stojadinovic, Sandra Taylor, Mary Rumbold, Jody Sloane, Jackie Terryschild, Manja Visschedijk and Mim White.

Please note that the professionals listed above contributed to our understanding of the book contents. Being listed in the acknowledgments does not imply their endorsement of the final content and as such the authors take full responsibility for the final manuscript.
We’d like to thank a generous and sensitive team of professional women from Women’s Health Statewide – Leslye Chenery, Cheryl Baxter, and Louise Sibenaler who funded and delivered two excellent half day complementary healing workshops at Catherine House as a result of this project. The workshops provided activities the women could use to care for themselves as they dealt with past trauma.

We would like to acknowledge the fantastic support we have had from the staff of Catherine House and Royal District Nursing Service Research Unit. They have helped with transcription of hours and hours of taped interviews, administration of the grant, provided professional critique and editing of final manuscripts. Our requests have always been served with dollops of encouragement and mountains of goodwill, and we give our sincere thanks to:

Debbie Kralik, Natalie Howard, Lois Dennes and Tina Koch of RDNS Research Unit; and Madge McGuire, Deirdre Flynn and the administrative and catering staff of Catherine House.

This important work could not proceed without being resourced, so we gratefully acknowledge and thank the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd for the grant funding that they contributed to make the project possible. They have been an excellent funding body to work with, making the administration of the project simple and hassle-free.

Finally, I (Antonia) would like to acknowledge my husband Hugo for his active encouragement and constant companionship that sustains and enables me as a person. Having that kind of support has allowed me to focus my presence in the research process.

Antonia van Loon
Project Manager
We have called this book “Reclaiming Myself after Child Sexual Abuse”. The dictionary definition for the word ‘reclaim’ is: “to win back from vice or error…; to seek the return of…; to bring into cultivation or other use from being under water or in a waste state”. The word seemed well suited for this process. The women spoke of staking a claim on their right to become the person they longed to be, and of cultivating a new sense of self after some women had become lost to alcohol, drugs, gambling and other behaviours used to numb away their suffering. Joanne, a group participant, summarises:

“I am staking a claim to life. I am reclaiming my birthright to take back control of my own life. I am searching for the gold nuggets in my life story. I know deep down those nuggets of gold have always been there and now I am able, and have the tools, to dig deep and find them. I am reclaiming myself.”

This book title complements the logo of Catherine House and its description.

Our logo is a woman standing tall. Her legs are elongated to give the impression of inner strength and resilience, and she is holding her arms up in celebration of taking control and giving herself shelter in a difficult time. She is not standing still – her legs are of different lengths to emphasise movement – she is moving forward, she is progressing positively with her life.

The colour gold suits the image best. Gold is precious, and has enduring qualities. It is resilient, and albeit that it looks rough in its raw state, with a bit of effort, it shines!

We were both truly privileged to share time and testimony with these remarkable women. We trust we have conveyed their message to you with clarity and hope.

Antonia van Loon and Deirdre Flynn
Research Group Facilitators
The photographs

The participants were given an opportunity to take photographs that represent aspects of the journey through their eyes. The collages on the cover of this book were completed by one of the women depicting aspects of her life that she either values or that have impacted her sense of identity. These explanations accompany the photos at the commencement of each chapter.

Chapter 1
You need a safe place to live to be able to do the work of healing.

Chapter 2
I have found the love of a pet is unconditional. They are safe and faithful.

Chapter 3
Think about the impact
Adrift on a sea, alone and so sad
Crying about all that I’ve lost
Everyone thinks I am just mad
But love’s anchor to me has been lost.
A family secret, dirty, obscene
Stole my spirit, shredded my hope
Took away my childhood dreams
How was a supposed to cope?

I won’t let this past hold me back
I am determined to make it change
My children, no love will they lack
My nurture will stay within range.

Anonymous 2004
Chapter 4
I used to hide behind the masks – I gave people what they wanted to see. I am getting in touch with the real me and she’s OK!

Chapter 5
If my rabbit does not want to be touched it scratches me to let me know and then I let it go. When I didn’t want to be raped within my marriage, I tried to defend myself. I was beaten. I was not left alone. I was treated in a way that I would not treat an animal.

Chapter 6
I am pruning the dead relationships out of my life, so I can get fresh new growth!

Chapter 7
This painting is about me building new connections to people who love me and cutting loose people and things that will poison my life.

Chapter 8
I am seeking protection and nurture in the arms of my higher power.
This book was written with female survivors of child sexual assault/abuse (CSA) therefore we have used the feminine pronoun throughout this text when speaking about CSA survivors. That is not to say that much of the work covered in this book would not be useful and appropriate to males as well. We believe all survivors will find benefit in working through this book, but males will have to alter the feminine pronoun as they read. There may be additional issues that male survivors need to face and deal with and these would not be covered in this resource. We have spoken about the perpetrator of the CSA as ‘he’ because in most cases the offending perpetrator was a male. That is not to say that women do not perpetrate sexual abuse, or that males are not the victims of child sexual abuse/assault.

We use the first person in our writing because we want you, the reader, to feel as if you are having a conversation with us in the group. The quotes are verbatim extracts from our meetings and we have not altered the language which may be colourful and colloquial, but it represents our life story as we see it.

We use the word ‘survivor’ instead of ‘victim’ because we believe the victims are already dead. They were murdered, or committed suicide, or have become so spiritually and emotionally ‘dead’ that they are chronically ill and even institutionalised. We may have been victimised as children, but we survived. We are working to shed the paralysing qualities that are part of a ‘victim’ identity. The emotions that fuel alienation and make us feel like a victim are shame, anger, guilt, fear and embarrassment and these emotions always bring about a level of suffering no matter how great or trivial their cause.

This is not a professional text and it does not claim to cover every aspect of the healing journey. It simply follows the process we used, and the topics we cover are the ones we found difficult to face and deal with. For some healing has come quickly. For others healing is taking more time and effort. However the over-arching message is this, healing is possible and a new future is available if you want to work toward it.
The work of reading and journaling through the exercises in this book can be undertaken in a group or as an individual. Some aspects will evoke feelings, thoughts, emotions and body sensations that can be difficult to experience. That’s why it’s important to go through Chapter 1 carefully. We recommend that you think through a safety plan even if you think you may not use it. Please make one because you may need it and it is better to be prepared so that you stay safe during the healing process.

What seems to matter most in this healing journey is the attitude or meaning each of us brings to our experiences. We have found it useful to pay more attention to our attitude and reactions to life’s experiences (including CSA) than to the actual events troubling us. We are resisting the temptation to ask questions like ‘Why me?’ which can increase our suffering and instead we are asking ‘OK so this is what happened; what can I make of this now? How can I deal with it? How can I change the situation?’ We are using the simple process of ‘Look, Think, Act’ to organise our thinking. We are learning to choose responses that promote our life, happiness and hopefulness.
Chapter 1

How to Use this Book in the Healing Journey

Why We Wrote this Book

We are women survivors of child sexual abuse/assault (CSA) and in this book we share experiences we discussed for over one year of our healing journey. We explored the impact sexual abuse in childhood has had on our lives and decided that we want to write this book of our experiences to share our story and the group process that is helping us to create a life that is more to our choosing. We want to help you to understand the impact CSA has had on your life and help you to safely break the silence, so you can find strengths in your story and reclaim aspects on which you can build your future. We are experiencing healing in sharing our story and this book is a record of part of that journey so you can share in the work and develop self-caring, rather than self-rejecting responses. We hope by sharing our stories and the healing process we are using, you will get the sense that you are journeying with the group and feel less alone in the work of healing.
This is not a book written by professional experts in the management of CSA such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. It does give you some explanations provided by professional therapists and ideas from our personal reading, but these are only included because we found them helpful ways to understand our life story. The most beneficial response we encountered was to share our story within a safe group that facilitates the exploration that leads to insight. This enables us to recognise from where our behaviours are coming and we begin to see what changes need to occur. We hope you will be able to identify why you are experiencing particular emotions and feelings and see how these have influenced your choices. Then when you face the painful feelings, ghastly memories and weird body sensations that are a legacy of CSA you will know where these thoughts, feelings and sensations come from and you will be less likely to react with self-rejecting or self-destructive behaviours that add layers to the hurt.

We know what it’s like to live with confusion and anxiety because these have been constant companions since we were first sexually abused. We try to cope by being detached, denying what is happening, dissociating ourselves from the awful experiences as if they were happening to someone else. We learn to put on masks so no-one can see the real us, because we are so ashamed of ourselves. We learn ways to ignore and pretend, or we numb away our suffering with alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, food, work and things like that. In that way we forget our pain for a while. We keep blaming ourselves, feeling responsible for our situation, believing something is wrong with us so we do not deserve to be happy, safe or loved. We rarely feel safe in any relationship because the abuse we experience marks our lives with rejection, mistrust, low self-esteem, and a deep, empty hole inside of us that nothing seems to fill.

We are used to feeling hurt and different from other people so we lower our expectations of ourselves and others. We try to shut off our need for love, safety, belonging, joy and peace by toughening up. We either run away in our head or we actually run away from our families. Some of us have become over-achievers and try to please everyone to prove we are OK. Some of us have been rebellious fighters to prove we are untouchable. We use these behaviours to keep safe, to escape and distance ourselves from potential harm and more pain. As we look back we can see some of our reactions have led us deeper along paths of loneliness, sickness and despair. We now recognise that we do not want to keep denying our past and compromising our potential. Our mind and our spirit eventually extract their toll, forcing us to face the truth and the pain that goes with the past.

The good news is that facing the past allows us to reclaim the parts of our lives that we want to, so we can move into the future of our choosing. We’d be lying if we said it was easy, because it’s not. It is hard work. Sometimes it feels like it’s too hard, too painful, unfair, and just not worth it. We stumble and go forward and then drop back again, but looking back over the 18 months we can see we are
healing. At times it’s difficult to stick with the work. It’s not easy to believe we can create change and scary to think of living in ways that are unfamiliar. We slip back into comfy old patterns of coping and reuse drugs and alcohol. We give up on the group, on ourselves and others, thinking no-one can possibly understand our situation... but they can and they do, so keep working. Recovering is slow work so celebrate each success and take courage because like us, you have been recruited into a life story that is not of your choosing and you can reclaim aspects of your self from that past story and create a future that you prefer.

How to Use this Book

This book shares aspects of our stories with you so you might see similarities with your own story, just as we did when we shared in the group. Your story provides the lens through which you interpret your experiences and we invite you to examine that story for its strengths, so you reinterpret your understanding and direct expressions of your experience in ways that are constructive to your wellbeing. We discover many things about ourselves in sharing parts of our life story in a group because we see aspects of our own story in other survivors’ stories. In sharing we learn to make sense of what has happened in the past and what is happening now, because we get new information and insight on the problems in our lives. We cannot ignore what happens to us, even though we are tempted to do that, we now recognise it is impossible to move on by ignoring our experiences. We hope this book ignites in you a sense of hope for the future.

Self-destructive behaviours are an expression of the abuse... these are shaped by the meanings that we give to the abuse. Self-blame and feeling unworthy are very common themes in all of us. As we explore the impacts and effects of CSA we see that many of the self-destructive acts we use are expressions of the CSA we experienced. We hope to action and respond in the future in ways that are more self-caring rather than self-rejecting.

Tip

It may be helpful to ask yourself ‘Does this response fit with old patterns of self-rejection, or is it self-caring?’ This is a good question to keep with you when you are unsure of how to respond to situations.

We recognise that we all feel a lot of confusion and have been wandering around most of our lives trying to work out ‘What the hell is the matter with me?’ We often feel exhausted, frightened and
isolated, using words like ‘floating’, ‘daze’, ‘murky’, ‘foggy’ to describe the feelings that go with trying to make sense of ‘Who am I?’, ‘How did I get into this place in my life?’ ‘Why am I so different from other people?’ ‘Where do I go with all this baggage?’ Giving a voice to our experiences and naming our problems gets the issues out of our head so we don’t feel like they are driving us crazy. It helps to tell and hear our story, so we start making sense of concerns. Talking about what’s happening inside us helps clarify things. It allows us to see we are not alone and isolated in these bad circumstances, so coping and feeling ‘normal’ becomes a reachable goal.

You can work through this book alone, but we would not recommend it. We suggest building a support team that includes a qualified therapist who is skilled at listening and helping people to clarify thoughts and feelings, to help you think through the consequences of your planned actions. All this thinking can get tiring at times and it requires commitment and perseverance, but if we can do it, so can you. We want to inspire you to start working and dare to make the choices that you want for your life and watch yourself grow!

Tip

It’s tempting to think that a quick read of this book will enable you to put your past to rest, but healing takes time. It’s essential for your safety to have support people who can encourage you when the going gets tough. Move when you feel ready. Don’t force yourself to do any exercise unless you feel safe.

Keeping a Journal to Express Your Self

This book poses questions that we discussed in our group and found important to the healing process. It will really benefit you to spend some time looking and thinking about your answers and then jotting them down in a journal (any simple exercise book is fine). Your journal is your friend. It is not written for anyone else but you. It is not a spelling or writing test. It doesn’t matter what the grammar is like. You can choose to draw, create an artwork such as a collage, a poem, or express your thoughts in other ways if words are hard to find. Write whatever you feel. The aim is to get out of your head the feelings, thoughts and emotions you experience. It is your way of expressing your inner thoughts and clarifying your thinking so you can choose the outcomes to your behaviours and responses more predictably.
Tip

It's really important to focus on your positive strengths and achievements and note these each
day or weekly. No matter how small, these are the building blocks that will make you stronger,
so focus your thinking time on your strengths. Get your support team members to reinforce
the strengths you tell them about.

Creating a Safe Space to Work

Healing is a life-long process. It can take a long time to get to the stage where we are able to talk
to people about our CSA experience. We found that we first had to get our immediate life situation
manageable and somewhat stable (eg, in safe housing) before we could face this work. However,
we recognise that if we keep waiting for the perfect time, we will continue to delay facing the truth,
because our inner child keeps telling us to run away, escape, deny, adapt, numb away, but at all
costs avoid facing the fear and pain.

Some of us have been flung through life as if we were the ball in a pin ball machine. We are jolted
without warning from one crisis to another. We move from job to job, relationship to relationship,
have trouble paying our bills and change our houses frequently, even becoming homeless. The
chaos and confusion inside us comes from our early life experiences. The energy to manage our
changing situation consumes all our attention and can leave us feeling drained, exhausted and
helpless. Part of being safe enough to explore our lives involves having a roof over our heads so
we can work toward a more stable, regular and predictable life. It's important to be in a secure and
protected place to commence the healing journey.

Tip

Many of us grew up with abuse in our families and this has become a familiar background
to our lives. We find ourselves in abusive relationships as adults. For us the abuse comes in
many forms: yelling, put-downs, swearing, hitting, forced sex (rape), being kept moneyless, not
allowed to be with friends, always dominated and controlled by the other person. If this is happening
to you, get professional help about how to deal with this relationship and the situation you are in before
you start dealing with the issues in this book. See Appendix A for some services to contact.
It may be helpful to time the work you do with this book before you have a counselling appointment or early in the day so you are not mulling it over instead of sleeping. Set aside a specific amount of time and do only that amount of work. You may find it helpful to work on the book in one particular place and create in that space a nurturing ritual to protect yourself as you look at the issues. Journal your thinking and choose your actions. It may even be necessary to store this book and your journal away from other family members in your house if you want your story to stay private. You, and only you, should decide who knows about your story. Don’t allow shame or fear to stop you from sharing it with people who can help you move forward with your healing.

There are professionals who feel there is nothing to be gained by going back over the experiences of the past. One woman in our group was advised by her doctor that the group work was ‘stirring up old stuff’ and contributing to her addiction problems. Yes, you will feel some distress when you work through this book, but most of us feel distress regularly anyway. In fact we have to work at suppressing our emotions, thoughts and memories so we are not troubled. We spent a lot of time discussing whether we felt speaking about the past was helpful, or not, and how much exploration was enough. We concluded that we did not need to dig too deep because the exploration may become re-traumatising. We need to acknowledge the CSA happened to us and speak about the aspects of our story that relate to the impacts, rather than the details of what happened.

Tip

If you need to share those details we suggest that you share them with a professional who is experienced in listening to CSA stories. The aim of telling is to relieve the burden of carrying around this aspect of your story as if it is the sum of who you are. The CSA is not your whole story. If you don’t want to talk about it you may not be ready yet, so don’t do it. If you are ready, get support and follow the suggestions in this chapter so the process is safe.

Journal Exercise

Look at the questions below, think through the issues and journal your responses.

- Are my close relationships safe enough to work on my story?
- Is my housing situation safe enough to work on my story?
- What time will I allocate to working on my story? Where will I do this?
- What nurturing activities will I do for myself before, during and after I work on my story?
Choosing Support People

It’s a natural outcome of experiencing abuse to think people are untrustworthy. We were surrounded for years by people that we should have been able to trust who were devious and dishonest. So locating a few people to share our story with is important, but it can be difficult.

Tip

Trust your own feelings. Choose people who are interested in you and engage with your situation. It’s a good idea to choose at least one qualified counsellor who has worked in the area of CSA. Make sure you feel safe in their rooms and that they are sensitive and encouraging. They should tell you something about themselves and how they work with survivors. They should answer any questions you want to know.

Websites like http://www.voices-action.org/brochures.html will provide you with questions you can ask if you are unsure. It’s helpful to have some qualified people and some friends in your support team, but choose friends who have shown they care about you and are willing to support you.

White [1] says in his counselling experience the ‘weightiness’ of the burden of the abuse story can be estimated by the number of people who were abusers in our life. He terms these people, ‘recruits to the abuse team’. For example, on the abuse team may be the child sexual assault perpetrator/s, and others who abused us within violent relationships at later stages of our lives, intimate partners who abused us etc. How has this abuse team been working throughout our lives? At what level and what period of operation were they at work?

To counterbalance their destructive impact we need to invite people onto our support team. The number of people we are likely to need and the length of time we will probably need them may be estimated by how long we want their involvement and the amount of participation we want from them. It’s not a deficiency to invite people to support us in our healing and recovery, rather it’s a wise and important step to nurture our new ways of being. White suggests that we formally invite a few people to be a part of our support team and acknowledge their past involvement and request any continuing nurture. We illustrate it in Figure 1.1.
We suggest that you ask one support team member to write you affirming notes several times a week/month. In this way you will counteract the voices of the ‘abuse team’, operating within your head, and undermine their volume, frequency and impact in your life story.

Journal Exercise

Write down the names and phone numbers of at least two people, but preferably more, who you can call on to be part of your support team.

1. ............................................................................................................................ ................
2. ............................................................................................................................ ................
3. ............................................................................................................................ ................
4. ............................................................................................................................ ................
5. ............................................................................................................................ ................

If you are struggling to write down a name you may have been isolated for some time and reaching out for help will be difficult. Take the step of finding just one person, or go to your closest women’s health service and start breaking the silence so you can find one support person.
Issues to Consider when Seeking Support

Finding appropriate support: We all need to know how and where to find the right help, so we recommend looking up the white pages telephone book and contacting your local women’s health centre or women’s help-line as a first point of contact. They will be able to tell you where to get good local support. Some key South Australian contacts are in Appendix A of this resource.

Journal Exercise

Write the names and phone numbers of three agencies in your area that will best be able to help you:

• ................................................................................................................................................
• ................................................................................................................................................
• ................................................................................................................................................

Choose the right helper: We had less success with health professionals who prefer a medication-only solution to our needs. We need workers to whom we can relate. Often we cannot face talking until we feel less depressed, therefore a medication and counselling combination seems to work effectively.

Some of us were not believed, others were told to get over it because it happened so long ago. We found counsellors and social workers were usually better prepared with a sound understanding of the impact of CSA and they have the listening skills needed to help us solve our own problems. Whoever you choose, that person should be caring and attentive.

Before this group my mind sometimes felt like a big wall full of graffiti, but now it’s breaking up into clearer pictures.

The group situation gives me strength and the effects snowball. We talk about real life issues and the positive effect lasts for days for me. It is group problem-solving based on all of our past experiences. We bring our questions and we hear each others’ experiences, ideas and different opinions instead of chasing around with them in our own head.

I have got an encyclopaedia of beautiful memories but they are buried under a black cloud. They very rarely surface but when they do I start to feel good. Then that black cloud comes along and they disappear from view again. What I get from the group is some sunshine that lifts the cloud longer. I can’t get on with it on my own. I know this now. I need a lot of ongoing help and in the fellowship of the group I am not alone, I gain a more balanced view, I receive help and give help.
Join a support group: There is great support in sharing with other survivors, because we share ways of working through our difficult experiences. Talking externalises the issues and disentangles them from who we are, so it becomes possible to separate ourselves from the abuse experiences. It is like extracting something from inside one’s self and putting it into the group for everyone to look at. It gets the issue out of our head and into the safe open space of the group so it can be examined from different perspectives. We get someone else’s view on the issue and they may see things from a different angle. The effectiveness of the group relies on people being willing to put their issues into that group space, and for others in the group to agree to be sensitive, caring and honest with their responses. In that way we all get more information, a chance to speak and a chance to be heard. We find the group process to be helpful and can recommend it to you.

It might help to hear a few comments that we made when we first got started with the group so you can see we that we also felt vulnerable and uncertain when we began this work:

- I feel like I am the only one that has been through this and by sharing it I may be bringing more grief to myself.
- I feel a bit like I don’t want to say a whole lot to start with; I will probably just do a lot of watching and listening.
- I really don’t want to talk about this stuff and I just try and forget about everything, which is what I have always done, so bringing it all out, well that could get really scary and difficult.
- It is like a door that doesn’t want to be opened. I am afraid of what’s going to happen when I open that door. What’s behind it? What will come out? Will I be able to close it again?
- I can’t even work out how blocking it out for 30 years has affected my life.
- Right now I am at the point where I am completely numb about the whole thing. I hardly ever touch the subject because I have turned it into a solid wall. My first step to healing is to unfreeze myself, un-numb myself and to actually break down the wall. Maybe I’ll finally be able to cry about it.
- I can’t keep pretending it didn’t happen to me and move forward. It doesn’t work.
- To hear other people saying they had been through the same sorts of things and feel the same about themselves is really powerful for me.

It is true to say that working together for over a year has made us feel uncomfortable at times, but it has also been ‘cleansing’, ‘freeing’, ‘liberating’, ‘validating’, ‘empowering’ and above all, ‘healing’.
Have one or two key workers:
Most of us have multiple workers within the health system and this fragmentation and specialisation means we tell our story over and over again and that can hurt. We are trying to ask for one or two trusted workers who know our story to be our key support workers and ask them to network and communicate between other service providers on our behalf.

Our worker should involve us in our care:
We should choose therapists who give us a voice in our situation. We may have multiple problems, but they are ours! We need to tell the worker that we want to be informed and invited to have our say in what we need/want to happen in our life. We all need support to reclaim decision-making, but a good therapist will allow us to keep control of our life and encourage us to join in decisions about our care. We may want them to make a decision for us while we are in a state of crisis, but we still want to be offered that choice.

What am I Going to Feel When I Work on my Past Story?
We experienced a variety of feelings in dealing with our past and they weren’t all bad, but some were mighty uncomfortable at the start of this process. Opening our mind isn’t pretty because we cram a lot of bad feelings, dark secrets and negative experiences in there, and facing them can make us feel uncomfortable, restless, distressed, shocked and even disgusted. It can hurt to face the memories and flashbacks, which can feel like they are overwhelming, triggering the automatic childhood responses of running away, avoidance, denial... We do not need to return to the scene of the trauma and its destructive expressions in our life. We just need to acknowledge they occurred and say what we feel we need to get out, to make sense of the impacts of what happened. These externalising conversations allow the story to be de-constructed and re-storied to show our strengths. In so doing, the perpetrators’ values are debunked and we reclaim authorship over our life story.

Some of us experienced distress and sadness when we told our story but facing the truth broke the silence. We also found a deep sense of release and empowerment in telling it as we wanted it told, and having it heard and understood. We had a strange mix of hope and apprehension because it

I knew I was different but could never work out ‘Why?’ Sharing with someone who had been through it validated that I wasn’t a mental case or the one having sick thoughts… it brought a sense of clarity to the situation that allowed me to reframe my life so I could move forward.

I think everyone has the capacity to solve their problems and if we have the support to do it, people will work their own stuff out. You need that support. People say they can’t do it for me, but I don’t want them to do anything for me. I want to be in a place where I can work through it myself. I need reassurance that I am making OK decisions. As I am making more decisions for myself, my confidence is building.

I will never be the same again because telling lifted an awful burden from me. I know now I can work through my pain and I don’t have to carry it locked forever deep inside me.

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was unfamiliar ground, but time and work has shown us that re-authoring our future brings hope and excitement. We are regaining control over the memories and choosing responses that spur us toward self-caring, rather than self-rejecting behaviours.

Being part of a group is empowering and helps us find a voice to name our issues, but it also dredges up past memories that can create internal turmoil and sometimes we feel like we are going backwards instead of forwards. This led some to withdraw from the group for awhile, others slept it off for a day or two so they could process what was happening. Coming face to face with our past and our pain (which is always there anyway, even when we try to suppress it) helps us find new ways to get stronger and with that, the suffering lessens.

Facing the pain can be exhausting and draining and it may affect us physically. Some things we note are that we feel ‘tired’, ‘spaced out’, ‘shocked’, ‘a bit out of it’, ‘kind of trance like’, and ‘our body feels different’. We have ‘a heavy feeling in the chest, a broken heart feeling, tense muscles, back ache and headaches...’. These are body responses to stress and can mean we experience some pain. Knowing what to expect may help make it easier. Don’t be frightened, because the feelings do not last. Once the issues are in the open and self-nurturing begins, the pain leaves. Just make sure that caring support is available. For some women, medication is allowing them to face their pain, so consider this option.

Journal Exercise

When working on CSA, feelings may well up within you that lead you to thinking about killing yourself or harming someone else. You need to identify the signals your mind and body are giving you and check out why these signs are being triggered. What's happening in you and/or your environment that is leading you to react like this? Once you have worked out what is triggering your responses, you should take the steps to reduce the risk to yourself and others and to protect the safety of yourself and others.

If you need help because you feel overwhelmed, please turn to Appendix A or the front pages of your white pages telephone book and ring one of the help-lines or services for assistance.
Look: What are some of the signs your body and mind uses to let you know you are unsafe, eg breathing faster, lump in my throat, sweaty palms?

My body feels: ........................................................................................................................................

My mind is: ...........................................................................................................................................

Think: What might be triggering these responses, eg memories, smells, dreams, certain people, situations, particular activities?

My harming thoughts come when: ...........................................................................................................

Act: What can you do to help you settle down and feel safe, eg leave the situation, deep breathe, go for a walk, phone a friend? See if you can think of several options for future use.

If I feel unsafe I can: ................................................................................................................................

These situations can make you really fearful about working on the CSA so we suggest you write in your journal:

- What is the worst thing that can happen?
- What is the best thing that can happen?
- What is most likely to happen?

When you feel like quitting:

- What is triggering these thoughts, feelings?
- What is contributing to these feelings?
- What will help you take control instead of running away?

Tip

Please try not to quit. When it gets hard, step back awhile and nurture yourself. You should go and get some support before continuing. If working on this becomes overwhelming, find professional help from your doctor or counsellor as a matter of urgency.

I feel pissed off because I really never acknowledged it. In fact I have spent my whole life creating things to avoid dealing with it. I wish I had started this work earlier so I might have avoided losing so much of my life and climbed out of the downward spiral of sadness.
Explaining the ‘Look, Think, Act’ Process

Our mind is like a train engine directing our thinking and behaviour [2]. The will is the engine fuel. It supplies the engine with the hope, motivation and energy to move forward. It can freeze supply so the mind stalls, or it can override the mind so it takes us on a different course of action. Feelings are like the train carriages packed with passengers called emotions. Emotions can speak directly and loudly to our mind. If we let our feelings direct our life instead of letting our mind drive our actions we may find ourselves going on lengthy detours down different tracks, or even derailing for awhile.

What and how we think influences our feelings. Positive thoughts make us feel happy and energise us, while negative thoughts make us feel sad and drain our energy. Thoughts can drift into our head uninvited and we think we cannot control their entry. The fact is that thousands of thoughts enter and exit our mind everyday and we don’t dwell on them. We can control thoughts, so that means we can place them consciously in or out of our mind. We can control how much space and time we give a thought in our mind. If we dwell on the negative thoughts that impose themselves on us, we flood our mind with emotions that trigger the old response patterns of alcohol or drug use. We can become very pre-occupied with our thoughts and they have the potential to change an ordinary experience into one that produces great suffering just because of the way we construct the incident. Focusing on certain thoughts that we link together, can create a sticky web in our mind and this will leave us feeling trapped, or like we are going crazy. An important aspect of our healing is to take charge of what we are thinking. We are the only ones that can do that. No other person can do it for us. Our mind is ours to control and we found this piece of information very hopeful and empowering. We are learning how to action certain thoughts and dismiss other thoughts. We are learning how to manage our thoughts so that we dwell less on unhelpful ones, and focus on thoughts that make us feel strong and able. We hope you will do this too as you work through this book.

We use the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process to help move thinking to actioning what we want in life. It’s a process used to do problem solving research [3, 4]. It’s fairly simple and easy to use. It did not come naturally to us at first, but over time we found we were using it spontaneously as a way of thinking through issues. New patterns of responding take time to build into our lives so we suggest that you just keep trying to do it, so with time it becomes second nature to you.
1. **Look:** What’s going on? What’s happening?

2. **Think:** How do I feel about that?

3. **Act:** By ‘Act’ we mean to take action, or do something.

   What do you want to action to change the situation?

   Now don’t just think about it, do it! Take that action!

---

**Look**

We build a picture based on information available to us about the issues we are dealing with. From here we locate the areas we want/need to work on to move forward. Take some time to write down:

- **Describe:** What is going on? What are the circumstances?
  
  What’s happening inside you? What are your responses?

- **Gather information to build a picture:**
  
  Who: the people involved;
  
  Where: the place; and
  
  When: the time of the situation.

- **Record the information of your experiences:**
  
  Try to get other people’s views.

- **Describe the context of what is happening:**
  
  What thoughts were going on in your head at the time?
  
  How long did you mull over the event afterwards?

**Think**

We aim to clarify meaning and increase our understanding of the why, when, what, where, how… of our experiences. Describe the issues and think about what we need to do with/about them. Answer questions like:

- What’s the main problem?
- Why is this happening?
- What was the trigger or cause do you think (eg. attitudes, beliefs, past experiences)?
- What are the consequences?
- How am I behaving (eg are your responses defensive, grounded in your past)?

---

The hardest part is starting. It’s like riding a bike, you have to get on first and then fall a few times, but you get back on again until you get a feel for the balance, so you know how to correct yourself, keep upright and move forward.
• Which area/s can I move forward with?
• How might my moving forward look?
• When should I begin – what order...?
• How should I do it?

Act

Thinking about change does not effect change. We can spend a lot of time thinking about what we wish things were like and never take one step toward making those wishes happen. To act requires us to take action. We must become involved with our current situation and choose the actions that will take us toward our chosen goals. We often have little choice about the need to change; we can only choose how we will change. It’s difficult, but we found a good place to start was to think about what could/should be done differently to get the outcome we wanted. Then we began to action the smallest and most easily managed act that would have the most benefit to our happiness and wellbeing.

Tip

Set yourself a personal goal and task and work out how you will take action on the changes you wish to make. In this step you make an action plan and start the action steps that will help you achieve your plan. Ask yourself:

• What area/s do I want to act on first?
• What is most important to me right now?
• What is the most achievable thing I can act on right now?
• What’s the likely outcome of the action?
• What places will help me achieve my goal? Eg quiet places, safe places, specific locations, support services etc.
• Which people can help me?
• Where can I get support if I need it?
Explaining the Cycle

We’ve all got thoughts and feelings and attitudes that go on inside our heads about our current experiences. These thoughts and feelings give rise to emotions such as love, fear, anger, hatred, sadness, sorrow and so on, which need to be recognised, acknowledged, and if possible, named. Emotions trigger within us behaviours and responses. We often behave based on our feelings and emotions, and at times this has led to self-rejecting quick, reactive responses, arising from the past abuse experiences. These learned responses may have been helpful once, but they can hinder our transition through life. Every response, whether we’ve thought it through or not, has a consequence, and these consequences impact other people and situations, or they impact within ourselves. Some consequences can be anticipated, some are unintended and we can’t anticipate them at all. Some may come ‘out of left field’ but we’ve still got to deal with their direct or indirect impact. This process goes on within our heads in everything we do every day. We modify our behaviours by the reactions and results our behaviours provide us. The ‘Look, Think, Act’ process simply helps us to work out what’s going on, because we can become confused if the outcomes of interactions are not what we thought they would be. The process focuses on changing our thinking, so we can alter our behaviours and responses to influence our preferred outcomes.

An Example

My son says something rude to me (Behaviour). I think “How dare he speak to me like that...” (Thought). The emotions I feel are annoyance, frustration, even anger (Emotion). My immediate reactive response is to shout a ‘put down’ response back to him (Response). He turns around and gives me a rude gesture and walks off (Consequence). I become more irritated and angry (Emotion). My self-talk says ‘I’ll show you who the boss is! I won’t let you treat me this way’ (Thought) and that drives my reactive response to give him a smack (Behaviour). He turns around and hits me back (Consequence) and the whole episode spirals on out of my control, as the cycle of violence escalates. Alternatively, I can stop myself and think ‘What sort of outcome do I want from this interaction?’ Then choose a response that is more likely to get the desired behaviour. If I step back and provide a more considered response I may diffuse the situation and shift the outcome. It does take practise but each time I do this, it becomes easier.

The ‘Look, Think, Act’ process informs our choices and helps us work out what we want to modify in our thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behaviours to help us choose responses more thoughtfully. Even pretending nothing is happening, not responding, or running away, is a choice and the consequences still occur from those choices. That is not to say that withdrawing to think or regroup is not a valid choice, it certainly can be both a safe and a useful option. However, ignoring or pretending that nothing is going on decreases our ability to influence the outcome, but we will still have the consequences of doing nothing.
Figure 1.2
Thinking, Feeling, Responding and the ‘Look, Think, Act’ Process

**Thoughts, Attitudes, Emotions**
Your thoughts and attitudes cause emotions to well up within you, eg love, fear, anger, hatred, sadness, sorrow…Try to recognise and name them. Use ‘Look, Think, and Act’ to see how these emotions influence the way you feel.

**Feelings**
Your mind listens to your emotions and the feelings that arise within you about your current experience, eg care, concern, betrayal, rejection, shame, guilt, isolation… These feelings are influenced by your past experiences, and the attitudes and values you currently hold. Use ‘Look, Think, Act’ to work out which feelings are impacting your decision-making and behaviour.

’**Look, Think, Act’**

**Look:** What’s going on? What’s happening?

**Think:** How am I feeling about it?
Try to get a better understanding and meaning of the issue so you can work out what you need/want to do about it.

**Act:** What do you want to action to change the situation? (Doing nothing is a choice!) Set your personal action goal and plan how you will make it happen.
THEN DO IT!

**Consequences**
All your behaviours and responses have consequences. Some you can anticipate so you can plan for them. Some are unintentional so you will need to modify your responses to get the outcome you want. These consequences impact you either directly or indirectly. Use ‘Look, Think, Act’ to understand what’s happened/happening.

**Behaviours & Responses**
You often behave based on feelings and emotions, which are managed by your mind and will. Your behaviours can be a rapid reactive response which has not been thought through carefully, or you can choose to think through a considered response that is more likely to meet your needs.
Use ‘Look, Think, Act’ to facilitate this thinking process, so you can choose responses that may give you the outcomes you desire.
Tip

To using ‘Look, Think, Act’ on your own to work through a current issue you have. Answer the following questions:

**Look**, at all the options and ask yourself questions like ‘What’s going on in this situation?’ Ask yourself the what, why, when, where, how questions for each phase. This stops you spending too much time locked in looking, thinking and not actioning anything, which easily happens if you just keep things going on inside your head.

**Think**, ‘What are the feelings and emotions rising within me over this?’ ‘What is the ...(replace with the emotion eg hate)…having me think about myself?’ ‘What is it I really want to do that would be self-nurturing?’ ‘How do I achieve what I think is most achievable/important now?’ If I do this, then what is the most probable outcome? The ‘Look, Think, Act’ process is facilitated by externalising these facts. For it to be an empowering process you have to take a chosen action. Think about the issue as objectively as you can, as if you were describing a chair in the middle of the room. Examine the issue from all angles, think about the problems and work out what you want to do with it. Do you want to take the issue back inside of you? Do you want to share it with someone else, like your worker, to help you work through it? Do you want to leave the problem with whoever you think it belongs to?

**Act**, is expressing action by doing something about the situation. Take steps toward your chosen goals. Remember it’s not enough to just think about the possible action, you have to do it if you want it to happen! It’s the same as winning a race. No amount of thinking about how you will win, or planning what you will do once you have won, will win the race. You have to get out there and run the race to win it. wishing or thinking alone will not make it happen, but planned action does work! Just try it on a few simple things and keep practising it until this way of working through concerns becomes a habit. It does take a bit of practise, but when you work through issues systematically using ‘Look, Think, and Act’, it becomes easier each time.

Summary

In this chapter we started by telling you why we wrote this book to share aspects of our story and the processes we used to safely explore the impacts of CSA so we could encourage you to join us on the journey to healing. We focused on how you should use this book and emphasised the importance of your personal safety in this process. It is essential that you have a safe space and reliable people to
work with. We recommended obtaining support and listed several important considerations to think about when seeking appropriate support. We sought to clarify some possible feelings that you might experience when you work back over the past and see how it has influenced your responses to life. Finally, we explained the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process that we are using in our group work. It’s a simple and logical way to make sense of life experiences and solve problems so that you can focus on making choices that are more in line with the person you want to become.

In the next chapter we will look at how you have been coping with your past experiences. Please make sure you have at least one or two support team members organised to help you if you need to talk to someone. It will be helpful if you have a beginning understanding of the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process before you move on to Chapter 2. You may want to revisit Figure 1.2 and the related ‘Look, Think, Act’ questions and take some time to think about them first.
We are all unique and we have different ways of managing. There is no single way to ensure healing, but we can work out what suits us best. We need reliable methods that sustain us and build us up by helping us sort out our thoughts, emotions and feelings so we choose behaviours that give us the outcomes we hope for. To commence this work you need to identify the ways you have been coping.

One useful explanation we read says that within every child sexual assault/abuse (CSA) survivor’s mind lives an adult child, a functioning adult survivor, and an adult survivor [5]. For some of us the child voice in our mind speaks loudest. She makes sure we remember our past experiences. The trauma of CSA is said to stall thought development and behavioural responses which can lock CSA survivors into reactions that help them survive their childhood, such as detaching, denying, forgetting, dissociating, fantasising and withdrawing to manage rejection, betrayal and abuse. Our inner child longs to belong, to get warm responses, to feel connected and loved, but she has learnt not to expect any of those things without strings attached and this adds to her confusion, shame, fear and anger. We have become mistrustful and developed strategies to become invisible (withdrawing,
becoming very shy and passive, trying to please everyone and keep them happy at our own expense), or we have become untouchable (rebellious, run away, slept around, got drunk, done drugs, played pokies etc.) so that we could make sense of an inner life that yelled at us ‘you are not loveable and you never will be!’ We believed there was something wrong with us and that we had no right to be happy.

The functioning adult survivor becomes the fighter, the accommodator, the escape artist, the victim, the denier, the over-achiever, and the pleaser’ [5]. The battle inside our head rages between the inner child and the adult. The inner child demands we keep on with the familiar patterns of coping that kept her safe, but our adult knows these ways of living don’t work in an adult world. As adults we have to relate to partners and our children with presence and open, honest communication, yet we spent our childhood dissociating ourselves from our body and distancing ourselves from close relationships. Adults are expected to make choices that promote their happiness and security; however as sexually abused children we incorporated rejection, betrayal, distrust and confusion into our psyche as inevitable facts of life. Therefore as adults, when we experience fear, stress and painful life situations, our mind chooses the familiar childhood strategies of denial, detachment, withdrawal and escape as the preferred ways to cope. The confusion can become overwhelming, so our inner child chooses familiar coping strategies to escape. Many of us used alcohol and drugs to escape and these patterns need to be recognised if they are to be changed. We want to learn other ways to respond that sustain our right to safety, enjoyment, love and inner peace.

As we become adult survivors we steadily take back control from our inner child and allow her less of a voice in the decision making that goes on inside our head. We learn to make adult choices based on our adult thoughts and feelings, using the ‘Look, Think, and Act’ approach. Our behaviours, attitudes and actions are based on our rights and responsibilities to ourselves as adults. To do this we need to look back over the past, acknowledge the CSA happened and the impact it has had on our life to date, which is what we explore in Chapter 4. In that chapter we aim to move the dominant plot line in our life story from one of failure, blame and worthlessness, to one of being able and worthy.

In Chapter 5 and 6 we will face some of the key emotions, feelings and issues that recruited us into a story of worthlessness and shame.
In Chapter 7 we deal with some key issues like relationships, boundaries, sexuality and confronting the perpetrator.

Finally in Chapter 8, we focus on the ongoing reclamation of aspects of our changing sense of self, rather than the notion of recovering our old self. We look at re-storying our lives to shape our preferred future, focusing on redefining responsibilities; re-establishing boundaries; reconnecting with family; reshaping realistic and healthy relationships; reworking sexual intimacy; and revitalising health.

We encourage you to keep working through this book one section at a time making it something you can use to facilitate your personal healing journey.

Recognising Your Current Coping Strategies

This resource is aiming to help us to transition the past, and live in the present and create our chosen future. We need to reflect and see ourselves as able, so we can act on what we want to act on, doing one thing at a time. If we stay put and just sit with all this ‘stuff’, it keeps hurting and we will probably live as ‘victims’. A victim sees her situation as inevitable and her choices as non-existent. We have all been victims and can slip back into that space when things get tough.

Recognising the ‘Victim’ Identity

We have all claimed the identity of victim at some time, thinking everything happens to us and believing we have no options in our situation. This was true when we were children and it may be true for some aspects of adult life. However, we now recognise that staying in the victim place restricts our identity, stops our growth and readily sets us back on the path to drug and alcohol use. In the victim mode of living we:

- put ourselves down and reject ourselves in our self-talk
- and this quickly becomes self-loathing, self-hatred and we express this with self-destructive behaviours.

It is all just on the surface and everything is still just under that. I have to remove that baggage first...

Then after I do all these things to offload that crap there is still a void that nothing seems to fill. I have to find what it is that will fill that void.

Some ways to love myself more and nurture me so the hole heals...

I would lock myself away and just go over the whole thing again and again in my head like a stuck record, regurgitating every detail until I was so full of self-pity all the time... I think I could actually identify with being a victim...at least it was an identity...I enjoyed it, I believed it, took it all on...
• dismiss compliments and mistrust the person giving the compliment;
• withdraw into ourselves and isolate from others;
• feel sorry for ourselves to the point of self-pity;
• believe no-one could possibly understand how bad it is/was for us;
• dwell on the issues about which we feel victimised;
• spend a lot of time thinking on our own issues and replaying them in our head so the focus stays on us;
• think less of others and more about our own pain;
• don’t believe we have any choice or control over our situation; and
• become less able to action our desired changes.

If we don’t look at how we can shift our thinking we will keep digging deeper into the hole we want to get out of. No-one else can act for us. We must each act for ourselves. Movement may be slow, with an occasional setback, but transition is possible.

Tip

If it becomes too hard for you, put the book away for awhile, but we encourage you to pick it up again when you are comfortable. We have found it helps if you don’t labour a point too long. Keep moving by actioning small changes if you want to move faster. Start by asking yourself what is possible for me to move on now.

Confronting the truth of our past allows us to commence the work of healing. To do that, we must acknowledge what occurred to us and think about how we have survived. Find ways to build self-nurturing skills into life because self-caring and loving ourselves helps us become stronger. The starting point of this work is to reflect on how our inner child affects our thinking and behaviours and influences our coping strategies.
Journal Exercise

In your journal write a set of 5-10 dot points for each of these questions.

- When I have feelings of self-hatred, or when I face crisis situations in my life,
  I usually cope by: ............................................................................................................
- What does the self-hate have you thinking about yourself as a person?
- How does it have you treating yourself, your life, your body, and your thoughts?
- How does it interfere with your relationship with others?
- When I was a child I nurtured myself by: .................................................................
  [Some of us couldn’t remember nurturing ourselves so we looked at how other people nurtured
  themselves and chose some things we could try]
- Ten things I can do NOW when I become confused, panicked, or overwhelmed by my situation
  that will nurture me and give me hope so I can cope with life: ........................................
  .......................................................................................................................................
  [Remember loving yourself is not self indulgent, it’s essential to healing.]

Ways We Can Nurture Ourselves

The following sections list different strategies we have used to manage our situation. The list is not
exhaustive, nor is every aspect on the list the right choice for every person. We share them as ideas
we have used and found helpful. No single thing provides a complete solution, but doing many things
together will make us stronger. It may help us reposition ourselves within our story as able. Seeing
ourselves in a different way may enable us to move forward.

Tip

When you feel sad, it helps to change what you are doing at the time and do something that
distracts your thoughts. It is also useful to action deliberate responses that make you feel
calmer, and then you will be more able to untangle the web of feelings and give expression to
your emotions so you can work out what you wish to action.
Strategies Involving Professional People and Programmes

You may find some of the following strategies that involve professional therapists, counsellors, structured programmes and self-help literature useful.

- **Support person/s:** Establish a small support team that will listen to you. Discuss your struggles and your joys with people that you can trust who will listen attentively and reflect back to you aspects of yourself that you wish to reclaim.

**Tip**

These people are there to help by listening to you, not to provide material resources, food, shelter or money, unless you have negotiated that involvement. If you ask for that kind of assistance from your sponsor or support group, you may find they are unavailable for you.

- **Locate accepting places:** You should locate places (gym, sports, church, craft groups etc) where you are unconditionally accepted. Don’t invest in relationships where you are not accepted.

- **Join a support group:** You need to get reinforcement and support so attend a specific support group. If you have an addiction attend a group such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Gamblers Anonymous (GA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), domestic violence, eating disorder, mental illness support groups etc. Ring a friend/sponsor if you feel overwhelmed because there may be times when you are tempted to slip back to your old response patterns.

- **Find supportive places:** You need to be in places where you can relate to people who give of themselves to you and are willing to receive from you.

- **Consider making a contract:** Negotiate with your counsellor, or a close friend, the steps you are going to take toward healing and prevention of self-harm. Let them help you stay accountable to your plan by reporting to them your action steps toward your goals at regular intervals.

- **Attend a self-help course:** Do courses that improve your understanding of yourself, contest old behaviour patterns and develop new life skills that will help you live the way you want. Eg. Inter-personal skills, communication skills, decision making, parenting courses may be helpful in moving toward new goals.

- **Read a self-help book:** You may find great assistance in reading self-help books and their accompanying workbooks on specific subjects with which you require assistance. Most of us found worth in working through the exercises and suggestions in *The Courage to Heal* which some group participants used to continue their personal work in between group discussion [6].
Some found sections of that book difficult to complete because it surfaced old wounds and we recommend that you follow the strategies they offer to keep yourself safe when you work through books on CSA. You may find some of the strategies listed in this resource will help. There are many self-help books available on CSA and related topics and some used by our group members are listed in the reference section at the back of this book [5-44].

Strategies Involving Family

We used various strategies to manage family life to improve our ability to nurture ourselves and cope with family relationships.

- **Be open and honest with your children:** It is better to be up-front about your personal hopes and plans because it demonstrates your willingness to work thorough your difficulties and your children, are likely to respect that.

  *My son is proud of me for doing this. He knows what it is all about and he is proud that I am doing it. I feel that he is on my side. He is learning about it. He is helping me because I used to go flat chat for weeks and months and then have a relapse, but now I have very few of them...*

- **Write ‘love’ letters to your children:** You may write them in your journal and choose to give them to your children, or not. Writing letters helps to give expression to your emotions. You may hang on to the letters and give them later, perhaps in a year or two, when you are stronger. This strategy is aimed at getting your feelings about yourself and your family into the open, putting a voice to the love and hopes you hold for your children, which may be difficult to say directly to them.

- **Speak to your family:** If your relationships are healthy, maintain contact even over long distances via phone or email. Your local library will have free email service.

- **Reframe your mind picture of your family and the perpetrator/s:** You may have to reframe your mind pictures of your family. They may have held great power over you and in their presence you become weak and vulnerable, even as an adult. You can reclaim your personal power through consciously reframing the perpetrator as ‘pathetic’, ‘isolated’, ‘feeble’, ‘weak’, ‘gutless wimps’. This helps you channel your outrage from other family members to the CSA perpetrator/s. You are actively disarming their authority over your life and reclaiming the territory of your life.

- **Find a ritual that helps you remove/reposition the perpetrator in your mind:** In order to remove some of the power the perpetrator/s may hold over your current life, some find it helpful to have a conscious separating ritual.
You may like to do what one woman in our group did; she drew a picture of the perpetrator and placed it on the bottom of her running shoes and jumped, stomped, and ground it into the pavement. She said, ‘It felt so good to think of him being pulverised by my power.’

Another woman read a self-help book that suggested a ritual that required writing a letter to the perpetrator and having a ceremonial cremation. She tried it and found it cathartic and liberating:

I read this and did it and it was releasing. I wrote a letter and put down all I ever wanted to say to that b*****d. Then I destroyed the letter in a little ceremonial cremation. I burnt it and discarded the ashes. As I discarded the ashes I said to myself ‘That’s the last time I will willingly give you space in my mind. Be gone. You are dead in my eyes and you will no longer hold any space in my life.

Strategies Involving Other People

We found these strategies involving other people helped us cope more effectively.

- **Build relationships:** Get to know other people. Some survivors need help in handling relationships and building interpersonal skills. Many of us have lived on the street where you become very isolated and struggle to communicate over time. On the streets it’s intense just to say good morning to someone, so it may be easier to start by speaking to the checkout operator at the supermarket as a manageable first step. Even that step can take awhile for some women. When you have been in isolation for so long, it is hard to give of yourself. The first little step is to stay calm in the presence of other people; eventually you can move to speaking to them; and further along you may share a bit of yourself. This does involve risk-taking and many people don’t understand just how difficult this is. Consequently, when you are in a group you need a long time to let yourself get comfortable. When you feel safe enough, you will find your voice and then speak out. To be heard and have your opinion validated within groups and in personal conversations is a huge step toward growing your self-confidence and discovering yourself, so it’s important to allow yourself enough time in the group to build trusting relationships. Attending once or twice, or attending groups erratically will not allow you the opportunity to develop the trust you will require to speak freely.

- **Keeping your connections going:** You may feel like isolating yourself but make sure you don’t withdraw for too long, because it is known to increase your risk of returning to old patterns of using alcohol and drugs.

  I don’t allow myself to get too isolated because the needle’s in that place. You get your moments and your nights when you are just sitting there on your own and you think, ‘Am I doing enough, or am I doing too much?’. You don’t know where to turn, who to connect with.
• **Join a recreation or craft group:** It is very helpful to do something creative with your time as it gives meaning and purpose to the day. Additionally, friendships are formed within group activities. A nun who visits prisoners on death row in the USA has noted that men awaiting a death sentence gain a sense of peace and purpose by filling their hours with meaningful creative activities. They have made her picture frames from alfoil chewing gum wrappers, written books, and found the joy of doing something creative with their time.

  I joined a walking group and a craft group where I can go and have conversations and do something creative and find new friendships.

• **Write a letter:** You can write a short note or card to someone every couple of days to keep from becoming too isolated.

  I make an effort to write a letter to someone every day or every second day. I have got it in my head what I want to say in that letter. I try to communicate on one level or another, but I still maintain my space.

• **Make a phone call:** Sometimes you just cannot get out for a variety of reasons so maintain connections to people in other ways, such as making a phone call.

  ...you have to make the effort to get connections started in your life. You have to say to yourself, 'I have to create a life and create a network because they won’t just come to me.'

  It takes some work and you have to be willing to do it.

• **Invite a friend for coffee:** You may begin by going for coffee with a friend outside the home. When you are sure the relationship is safe and you feel ready, then invite them into your home. Some of us are not yet able to do this but recognise we are moving toward establishing that trust.

  I go for a coffee. As I mix with people I find there are some that I want to get to know more. I have to take a risk and ask them to meet me for a coffee or go for a walk, but I won’t invite them into my home until I feel really safe with them and I’m not ready for that yet.

• **Get a hug:** You may find affirming touch from people you can trust is helpful.

  I am moving and I am worried about where I am going to get emotional support. In here I got used to being hugged by women and that is a really big part of why I have grown. I have never really had anyone touch me nicely, and the hugs are nice.

• **Give yourself in some charitable way:** Giving something to someone else by way of compassionate charity or volunteering. It will build your self-worth.

• **Speak out publicly:** Some of us have been invited to share aspects of our story publicly (with support). It allows you to feel as if you are helping to change the future for others. It is an affirming and empowering experience if you are supported in this process and able to find your voice.
Strategies Involving Yourself

There are many strategies we use that only involve ourselves and managing our personal thoughts, feelings, attitudes, emotions, responses and the actions that we undertake as part of daily life.

- **Face your pain:** We used addictive substances and self-rejecting behaviours to block out and numb the pain of dealing with life’s suffering. To heal you have to begin to experience pain and journey through suffering. In that way, you realise pain does end. You recognise that suffering is increased by the attitude you hold toward your pain. Having the right thinking and getting the right support to work out what is going on, is extremely important when you have not faced your pain very often.

- **Have a good cry to express your emotions:** Anger and sadness can be expressed and relieved by crying.

- **Take medication:** Medication may help you to face the pain and work through issues. See a trusted doctor for help.

- **Create a positive and good mind picture of yourself:** See yourself as you want to be and imprint it in your mind so you work toward making that picture a reality.

- **Affirm yourself in your self-talk:** You live with your past CSA and the shame and guilt that instilled into your thinking. You now know that is a lie and not the real you. Yet affirming yourself can feel like a lie too, because you are so used to hearing the negative old story that you wonder what is true. Learning to speak to yourself in a loving, nurturing and affirming way is not as easy as it sounds. It’s hard to believe that what you say to yourself damages your wellbeing. The truth is that ‘beating yourself up’ with destructive self-talk destroys motivation and hope. It makes you want to stop working at change and give up. Walking that thin middle line between self-doubt and self-belief depletes your energy and gets exhausting. The best energiser is affirming self-talk.

- **Write ‘love’ letters to yourself:** Write yourself a kind and nurturing love letter. When your self-talk becomes defeatist, diminishing or abusive stop at once and read one of your love letters that focuses on your strengths.

  You can write love letters to yourself as well. Stop talking negatively to yourself all the time. It stops you looking in the mirror and always seeing your faults, or looking at your life and seeing the things that are not working. It’s the old saying ‘Is the glass half full or half empty’. The change is really in the way you see it, so I am trying to focus on a more optimistic view of myself.
• **Recognise grief:** You will have days when you look back at your life and think of the self that might have been. It has been lost because of the CSA and as a result you experience anger, grief and sadness. As you acknowledge your losses you will find it easier to shift your focus to what strengths you can reclaim from the past and incorporate into the self you want to become in the future.

• **Keep your promises:** You develop a stronger sense of self-worth when you practise keeping your promises and commitments, especially to people who are important to you.

  > I am learning to keep my word and develop more integrity so people know they can trust me, especially with my children.

• **Allow yourself seclusion:** Withdrawing from time to time is good because it allows you space to reflect and regroup. Be realistic about the time frame you need to be alone and don’t overdo it.

• **Make decisions and take risks:** Learn to identify what you need/want and work this out by prioritising what is most important for your wellbeing now. Only take risks that you have thought-through carefully after weighing up the likely consequences, both positive and negative. Then make your decision based on the outcome you want or need, rather than responding from self-protective reactive impulses.

• **Check boundaries:** It is important to establish and maintain boundaries around yourself that help you to stay safe. Become aware of your feelings about where the boundary is and how it can be maintained.

  > I used to get over-enthusiastic about being involved with something and then hit the highway running, giving it everything I have and get burnt out.

• **Select where to focus your energy:** Healing can be very energy consuming emotional work. It can leave you feeling drained because your new ways of living and being are still tentative and have to be thought through, which can be tiring. So make a careful selection about where your energy will be focused.

  > You need some boundaries before you can survive out there (out of supported accommodation). You need information about yourself so you can create boundaries instead of throwing yourself out there and then learning the hard way. The fact we were violated means our basic boundaries are weak and people are watching us out there. You have to give yourself enough time to try in little kindy steps without assaulting yourself, because assault is all you have ever known. It started out as sexual assault, but it ended up as assault by everything and everyone.

• **Maintain your appointments:** Maintaining a routine where you keep appointments and take responsibility to be where you have agreed to be, reinforces your strengthening sense of self.

  > I try to maintain everyday appointments and just continue to keep being where I said I’d be. I do it even when I feel like staying home and shutting myself away. I then congratulate myself for getting to the appointment and over time I am moving forward.
• **Focus on simple joys:** Find joy in the simple pleasures in life such as smelling flowers, watching children, patting an animal, making food, gardening etc.

  I had to start saying out loud to myself things like, ‘What a beautiful flower!’ just so I could hear the things I had forgotten. I began to look around me for lovely things. I had become so wrapped up in myself that all I could see was my problems.

• **Inner Reflect on your actions:** You may find it helpful to spend time doing yoga and other reflective activities that discipline your mind. These help you relax and help you focus on a life that is more thankful for even the smallest things.

  …at the end of each day I spend 15 minutes on my own and go back over the day and think of all the times when I have been loving towards other people, and they have been loving towards me. Even if it is just smiling at someone while I shop. This is changing my focus so I concentrate on building a life of thanks and I have found it leads to contentment and more inner peace. You focus on what is working rather than what is not. This changes your attitude and your behaviours toward other people.

• **Have a safe massage:** You may find it helpful to have a safe relaxation massage, especially of your hands or feet. The touch is relaxing, beneficial for sleeping and keeps you connected to other people.

  …before I go to sleep I try to massage my feet and make them feel good, so I can relax and sleep.

  …when I left my marriage I had a relaxation massage and I broke down on the table because it was the first time I had been touched in a caring way that was non-sexual. I was surprised how it affected me that much; enough to break down.

• **Eat healthy food:** Keeping a healthy balanced diet and drinking plenty of water (> 2Litres / day) gives you the energy you need to do the work of healing. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and limit the intake of high fat, sweet, processed foods.

  I know that I cannot think clearly if I don’t eat properly, and when I get down I don’t feel like eating, so maintaining healthy food intake is important.

• **Take care of yourself:** It will help you feel better about yourself if you take care of your body and your appearance. It doesn’t need make up, just caring for your hair or skin so you experience personal pleasure in who you are.

  I had stopped taking care of myself. Now I am enjoying making myself look pretty. It helps me feel good about myself. I like wearing nice clothes, some lipstick, doing my hair, doing my nails, just looking after my appearance a bit and it has helped me feel better.
• **Practise spiritual and/or religious activities:** You may find it helpful to consider religion as a way to organise your spiritual dimension. It provides a framework from which to make sense out of life. Some of us find it provides life with meaning and purpose and gives us a sense of identity that helps provide a reason for living. It gives us a context for life and connections that provide an understanding of who we are and where we are going.

  *I would not be here today if it had not been for my faith. It’s given me everything I need to live in peace and freedom. Best of all it has removed the burden of guilt and I now have an identity as a child of God.*

**Strategies Involving Living Things**

We use several strategies that involve pets and gardens. They include:

• **Care for and nurture a pet:** A pet (guinea pig, bird, rabbit, cat or dog) is a living creature that responds to your love and returns it without question. It is dependent on you, so it can help to fulfil your need to nurture when your children are less available to you.

  *My guinea pig gets all the soothing. He is in a cage and he comes out when I want him to come out. He is small enough to handle... he will sit for an hour and I can just pat him and stroke him. He knows when I cry... he comes out of his little night time box and sits there and stares at me while I am crying. He knows I am going to get him for a cuddle and he waits for it.*

• **Potter around in the garden:** It’s really good for you to care for and nurture a living plant. It helps you to feel connected to the natural environment and just brings contentment and peace.

  *I like relaxing by gardening. Seeing a plant grow and thrive in my care is good. I figure no serious people relationships until I can keep my plants thriving well!*

• **Grow vegetables and flowers:** The joy of nurturing a plant that produces food is helpful to your wellbeing. It brings a sense of reward, empowerment and connection to the earth, that is difficult to explain, but it is real.

  *I stand out in the yard and talk out loud to the bushes and tomatoes I have grown and tell them how much I appreciate them. I feel connected to the life force that is within the universe and know that I will be OK.*
Strategies Involving Creative Activities

Creativity enables you to lose yourself for a while and give expression to your emotions. It doesn’t matter if you just put the piece away, or don’t even finish it, because you don’t need to display it for it to be helpful. Many of us are discovering talents of which we were unaware, which is affirming.

- **Immerse yourself in a hobby or creative project:** You can just lose your problems and your issues for awhile in craft. It also gives you another medium to express your emotions. Eg. sewing, knitting, crochet, mosaics, drawing, colouring in, quilting...

- **Journal reflections:** It is helpful for you to clarify thoughts and give your inner voice expression by journaling. It helps to create clarity and gives you a way of making sense of what is going on.

- **Write letters:** It helps others to understand you and you can express yourself, especially to your children. You can enjoy telling people you love them, which is not always easy to say face-to-face.

- **Make a comfort box:** You can put into a box bits and pieces you really like, such as pictures, stuffed animals, letters, photos, beads, stones, cards etc. Then get the box out when you feel a bit ‘flat’ and enjoy the contents, as you surround yourself with pleasant things that comfort you.

- **Make a ‘happy’ book:** Stick in an exercise book, things that you like to read and look at. Visit it often, but especially when you are feeling sad. You can stick a collage of positive words from magazines that affirm and encourage you, positive notes and letters, scriptures, sacred writings, affirmations, quotes that make you feel good, pictures that inspire you, recipes of food that you like to make (you can also hang pages around your house so you see them often).

- **Write creatively:** Write a poem, a story, a song... that helps you to gain control over your emotions and allows you to get feelings out of your head and into the open.

- **Cook creatively:** Just use simple and cheap ingredients to make something yummy. Then sit down and eat it and really taste it. Use different recipes.

  *I bought a cheap box of tomatoes from the market and made some sauce. I then gave some to friends who really loved it and it made me feel really good.*

Strategies Involving Soothing Activities

Activities that we have used to soothe ourselves, forget our problems and ‘lose ourselves for a while’.

- **Enjoy nature:** Sit or walk in the park, feel the sun on your back, the wind in your hair. Look at the flowers and plants in the Botanic Gardens. Go for a drive by bus, train, car, or bike out to a park for the day.

- **Warm yourself:** Cuddle up with a hot water bottle, a wheat pack, a blanket, or a soft toy. Have a hot shower or bath.
• **Experience pleasant touch:** Feel soft material like fur, soft suede. Dig your feet in warm sand at the beach. Squish your toes in mushy mud.

• **Cuddle yourself:** Feel the joy of sitting on a couch hugging your kids, nurturing them and rocking with them.

• **Watch something enjoyable:** Relax with a movie, television or DVD. Watch children as they play.

• **Do thinking activities:** Do a crossword puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle; play solitaire, cards, computer games, chess, word games, Nintendo, etc.

• **Pray and meditate:** There is a lot of research that demonstrates that praying and doing mindful relaxation is very helpful to calm you down and help you gain personal control and inner peace.

• **Enjoy music:** Play an instrument. Listen to your favourite music and sing along if you can. Get a Karaoke tape and sing along to it.

• **Read a book:** Join a library and read books and sacred texts. Surf the internet there. Borrow talking books, magazines and travel books to escape in your mind.

• **Enjoy food and drink:** Eat something yummy really slowly. Have a hot relaxing herbal tea. Drink something really cold on a hot day, or hot on a cold day and feel your body respond.

• **Experience movement:** Rock in a rocking chair. Cuddle a stuffed toy. Have a swing at the playground. Punch a pillow.

• **Do some exercise:** Get on a bike. Go to the gym. Go for a brisk walk, or a swim. Go dancing. Play tennis and hit the ball really hard if you have a lot of anger!

• **Go shopping:** Look at really beautiful things and admire how they are made. Sort out something nice as a gift for your children. Spoil yourself once in awhile, just a couple of dollars, but it’s just for you.

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**Journal Exercise**

In your journal write a list of things you would like to try from the strategies above. Create your own ‘Top 10’ list. Then when you are confused and don’t know how to approach life, or if the going gets tough, you can turn to the journal page and start doing things on the list one by one, until you find something that is helpful and viable for your current situation.

1. ........................................................................................................................................................................

2. ........................................................................................................................................................................

3. ........................................................................................................................................................................
Look: List in your journal some of the positive strategies you already use that work to calm you when things are not going well.

Think: What particular focused care do you give yourself in each of the following dimensions?

Body Strategies: .............................................................................................................. ..................

Mind Strategies: .............................................................................................................. ..................

Spiritual Strategies: ......................................................................................................... ...................

Social Strategies:  ........................................................................................................... ...................

Relational Strategies: ........................................................................................................ .................

Act: Highlight or tick any actions on the list that appeal to you as strategies you can action to help you settle down and cope when you are working through this journal.

We are really glad you have read this far and want to encourage you that doing some of these activities will help you to be safe in the process of facing the past, so you can not only heal, but thrive.
Summary

This chapter sought to draw your focus on to the current situation and the ways you are coping with life at present. It’s important to remember people are always in the process of becoming. We depend on many people, conditions, contexts and creatures to exist. We all need to engage authentically and spontaneously to develop the functioning self that we prefer, rather than the self the CSA has kept in the fore-ground of our minds. This chapter highlights some strategies that we have heard about and/or used to nurture ourselves in the healing process. We urge you to try some that appeal to you because in using them you may find the soothing you need to continue the healing journey.

In Chapter 3 you will commence the task of revisiting your story. Please ensure you have your support people and your safety plan discussed in Chapter 1 ready to action should you need it. While the task is difficult, it releases a great burden to have the story out of your head and into the open, so move on with care and hope.
What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child Sexual Abuse/Assault (CSA) is anything that injures, damages or interferes with a child’s normal healthy development. Abuse is about manipulating, controlling and intimidating another person to do what you want. Most of us downplayed our abuse, thinking that our experiences were not as bad as the abuse other people went through. Some of us thought our experiences were normal and only discovered recently that this was not true.

We tend to talk about our assault and abuse as ‘it’. It's difficult to find the words to describe ‘it’. We all had different experiences. They include: being shown pornographic and sexually explicit materials; being spoken to in sexually suggestive ways; having our body touched, especially the genitals and breasts; having our genitals ‘played with’ in games that involved handling, or penetration by fingers and/or objects. We experienced invasion of the vagina, mouth and anus by the perpetrator/s’ penis, fingers,
or other objects. Some were forced to provide masturbation; others were covered with the products of masturbation.

Sometimes our body responded to the physical stimulation, which added to our confusion because it felt pleasurable, so we thought we must be responsible for what was happening. We naively thought if we hadn’t enjoyed ‘it’, the perpetrator would have stopped doing ‘it’, which is clearly untrue. Some of the perpetrators used violent methods involving force, torture and rape at knife-point. Whatever ‘it’ was, ‘it’ left all of us confused, traumatised, sexualised too early in life, betrayed in multiple ways, set apart as dirty and different, shameful, guilty and put us into the position of powerless victim.

Who are the Perpetrators?

The perpetrators of the sexual abuse varied. They were our biological parents, step-parents, foster parents, grandparents, uncles, brothers, stepsisters/stepbrothers, neighbours, family doctors, teachers, and so on. Most of us were assaulted by adult males we knew, and thought we could trust. Often there was more than one perpetrator in our past. One woman in our group was violated by a group of adult paedophiles. Having had our sexual boundaries dishonoured so early some of us became vulnerable to being re-victimised by other adults.

Remembering Your Story

When we started our healing journey we were unaware of the lasting impact the sexual abuse in childhood had on our lives. We had experienced so many emotions, feelings and attitudes, which we now know are common to many CSA survivors, but we all felt alone in our experience. We knew we often felt ashamed, isolated, depressed, and very confused emotionally. We were unaware of how many of our values, beliefs and attitudes were affected by CSA, effectively making us more vulnerable to further victimisation later in life. These impacts are discussed in Chapter 4.

Tip

It’s much easier to deal with problems if you know what you are dealing with. We think it is important that you revisit your past to identify how these experiences have impacted, and still do impact, on your life. You do not need to revisit your sexual abuse experience unless you want to.
We were surprised about how similar our experiences have been and how much we have in common. It broke the sense of isolation and loneliness associated with CSA to be able to share our story and see we were not as different from everyone else as we had thought.

What Memories Do You Have?

Many of us learnt to suppress our memories, yet from time to time memories come flooding back without warning. We know that memories well up emotions and the most common ones we have experienced are fear, anger and sadness, which leave us with feelings of guilt, loss, hurt, pain, shame, anxiety and a sense of deep emptiness inside us. At times we still react to these emotions in ways we learnt as children. The fear made us want to run away, or we froze, powerless to take any action. Sometimes we coped by escaping in our head, pretending we were somewhere else, or doing something else, or our perpetrator was someone else.

When memories of our perpetrator invade our mind we can feel anger, deep hatred, or even in some cases a confusing mix of love and hate.

Some of us tried to tell our mothers and other people about what was happening and when we remember this we often cry because of the strange mix of hurt, sadness, anger and betrayal we can feel when we think of their inaction. Remembering can relive that hurt. We don’t think the memories ever go away completely, but we know that after the year of group work many memories are less painful and we are learning to use them to move us toward self-care and positive personal action. We have shifted memories into a place where they are less ‘alive’ than they were, therefore less able to paralyse us with fear. We are learning to evaluate them and control them to facilitate our healing and growth.

We are working to name the memories and have found they become less intense as we shape the meanings that we give to the abuse memories. As we explore and shift the meanings our expressions of the abuse are less self-destructive and our self-talk is becoming more affirming.

We were haunted with questions like ‘Do I want to know more? Do I need to know more to move forward? What I can remember is traumatic enough, let alone what I can’t.’ ‘Do I need some sort
of rearrangement in my brain, or do I just need to accept that it happened and move on?’ We think
that this is individual for each person. Some of us found that remembering could only be done a bit
at a time, when we felt very safe. Others claim dealing with their past was only possible once they
acknowledged the truth of what happened and cleared out the memories by making conscious
choices to diminish their power over the present. It does not mean we need to dredge up every
memory but it means we will have to work out how to deal with memories if and when they arise; and
in most CSA survivors they do surface.

All the yucky stuff inside me that I haven’t dealt with has stopped me from being active, clean and whole.
Over the last six months, I have been going through a slow process of dealing with each of those things
and I feel stronger in myself. I now know I have a purpose and a plan for my life.

We have handled our memories by using a combination of the following activities to help this process: counselling, talking
to a trusted friend, confession, prayer, meditation, reflection, and liberating rituals. We are now working on filling our mind
with affirming and positive experiences that make us feel good about ourselves. Some activities we use to achieve this include
affirming self-talk; respecting others; cautiously trusting in measured amounts and evaluating how the trust is used and
returned; helping others; reading self-help books and religious scriptures such as the Bible; group
work; listening to ourselves and others; and nurturing ourselves (see Chapter 2 for details). This is a
beginning place from which we can continue to grow and action our future.

Journal Exercise

‘Memories are like puzzle pieces. You don’t know how they fit together unless you look at each
piece and see how it fits with other pieces to make the big picture’. If you cannot remember it does
not matter, because you can still heal. What’s important is that you acknowledge to yourself that
‘it’ happened. Often we don’t want to remember because we are afraid of what will happen if the
memories are surfaced. Fears that stop us from remembering include the fear of what will happen
to us. Will we get swamped by overwhelming sadness and even want to kill ourselves (we have
all felt that way in the past so it is a possibility)? We fear that it will destroy our intimate partner
relationships. If they know the truth will they run away, or will they understand? We fear the anger
may get out of control and the desire to seek revenge could lead to murder.

• What are your feelings about telling?
• What do the fears have you saying to yourself?
• What does the fear have you thinking about yourself as a person?
• How does the fear have you treating yourself? Your life? Your thoughts?
• How does this fear interfere with your relationship with others?
Tip
If you are ready, try to note some of the memories. More will probably surface as you work through this book. As you remember, jot them down in your journal. From time to time revisit them and see if there are patterns emerging in your memories. You can share them if you want to, but don’t feel this is necessary for this exercise to be helpful. There are a few examples from our stories placed in brackets below to start you thinking.

Look
• The facts of what was going on: (I was always getting sores and ulcers in my mouth; I had wee infections all the time…)
• I can remember: (hiding under my bed; playing games of hide and seek around the house; hearing the bedroom door open in the dark, smelling alcohol on his breath, the pink pyjamas I had on…)

Think
• What gaps are there in your memory? (I can’t remember anything between 4 and 10 years of age; I can’t remember much at all about my childhood…)
• Are there patterns in the memories? (They always come back when we move into summer and it’s swimming weather)
• When you see how they fit, is the picture of what went on becoming clear?
  (I now remember it was a school swimming carnival when it first happened to me)

Act
• You may wish to share these with someone you trust.

What Triggers Your Memories?

Some memories are easily accessed and can be spoken about to your counsellor or group. Others are deep inside us and these are not easy to talk about. They are like bits and pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle and you may not be sure what the complete picture looks like, because you have lost some pieces. Memories can be triggered by different situations, which usually include our senses. For example certain smells (aftershave, alcohol, body odour, semen), seeing a colour or article of clothing or furniture, darkness, particular words, phrases, music,
a movie, certain times of the year, dates, particular people and places, being touched on certain body parts, and relationships that have suddenly turned abusive, are common triggers that surface memories.

The reactions we have to our memories are well-practised patterns learnt in childhood. We usually feel frightened and confused, detaching, withdrawing, becoming frigid or backing away from sexual advances in adulthood. Not often spoken about is the fact that some of us did feel sexual arousal, which really added to our confusion, because we didn’t expect to enjoy something that made us feel such shame and revulsion. This has made talking about our experiences even more difficult because we feel such shame, wondering if we may have been to blame in some way, which adds to the disappointment we feel within ourselves.

**Tip**

We found that when memories overwhelmed us it was best to keep the focus on safety. So you may need some time out, or you may even need some medication to help you deal with this time of acknowledging. When you feel ready, then you may want to give a voice to your memories and feelings by speaking about them in a group, or to a trusted friend or counsellor.

We spoke about the social silence and taboos around sexual abuse that prevent families from speaking out about their experiences. We talked about the social understanding that families are loving, caring, supportive groups, yet our experiences were ones of betrayal, violence, disruption and chaos. The incongruence between what we experienced and what we knew was socially acceptable, recruited us into feeling different from other children. The saying ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ is one myth that we explored in the group to understand how social expectations can enlist parents into believing this behaviour shows they that love their child. Such social beliefs may be manipulated to misuse parental power and then become abuse. Consequently, as children with no voice and power, we were recruited into beliefs that triggered a set of confusing emotions regarding loving families, violence, sex, parenting, gendered power and so on. Unpacking some of these memories of our childhood experiences helped us make sense of situations in such a way that we could see that we were not to blame, but drafted into the warped behaviours of the sexual abuse story by others who abused their power.

**Journal Exercise**

Before exploring these memories you may wish to go back to the list you prepared in Chapter 1 and the strategies to cope that you highlighted in Chapter 2 so you stay safe throughout this exploration process.
Have you been burdened because you felt that you were in some way responsible for the sexual abuse? Have you ever spoken about this?

What social and family behaviours recruited you into this story of blame and shame?

Dreams, Flashbacks and Sleeping

We have all experienced dreams, nightmares and flashbacks. The nightmares can be disturbing because they have a powerful ability to disrupt life. They are invasive, and make us feel like we are reliving the abuse. One woman was so severely affected by dreams that she had great fear of the dark and immense difficulty sleeping at night.

Put simplistically our knowledge is stored in our short-term memory and recalled when the occasion demands it. If the material is not revisited at regular intervals the knowledge will recede into the background and eventually be forgotten. If memories are revisited regularly or re-experienced in various ways we develop a consolidated mind picture that can stay in the foreground of our memory for a long time. It will then be stored in long-term memory for retrieval at a later stage. When we start telling our story we will retrieve many memories into the foreground of our mind. Consequently, our dreams may become worse for a while, because as we foreground early life experiences into our conscious memory it affects dreams. It does help to share the dreams with a trusted friend or counsellor, and to journal dreams to see how they are resolving. As we focus on our personal strengths in the past story, the power of the former negative life script is broken down and diminishes its hold over us, reducing the fear we feel when exploring the past.

Tip

Some things you can use to help you sleep include:

- Just before I go to sleep I think of things I enjoy and I have fewer bad dreams.
- I try to do pleasant things before bedtime because what I have been doing or thinking in the day can play on my mind, and I go to bed and dream about that.
- I have developed a calming ritual that I stick with each night before I go to sleep.
- I read a nice escapist book, like a love story.
- I pray and meditate until I am relaxed and can sleep.
- Warm milk drinks and herbal teas such as camomile and valerian tea help me.
• If I am angry, before I go to sleep I beat up my pillows or ride the exercise bike for an hour, so I am tired and then I’ll get to sleep.

• I focus my mind on people I love: my daughter, my children.

The Silencing in Childhood

Most of us tried to tell another adult. We were rarely believed. Sometimes we were blamed and set apart as the family ‘scapegoat’, confirming in our minds that we were bad and deserved what we got. It is important to stop blaming ourselves. The perpetrator/s used many clever messages to twist the blame back to us to keep us silent. These words can come back to us and may even keep us silent as adults. To keep the love of people we care about we stay silent, because we do not want to be emotionally frozen out by the people we love.

I was worried about losing my life over it. Eventually I thought I would rather die than live like this, because I don’t want it to happen any more. He held a knife to my throat and I realised that if he was really going to kill me, he would have done it already.

I had had enough. I couldn’t stand it any more. I knew it wasn’t my fault that it was happening and I didn’t want it to go on anymore. I couldn’t handle it anymore. It got to the point where I wasn’t worried about him killing me because I was thinking of doing it to myself.

The most common way we were silenced as children was by verbal and physical threats to our safety, or the safety of our family (mother, siblings). We were threatened and told ‘No one will believe you over me’. Some were told we wouldn’t live to see the consequences. The innocent love of a child must not be manipulated in this way by any adult. At all times the adult is responsible for their behaviour, not the child. This is true in all relationships including our relationships with our children.

For some, speaking out or leaving home was not a viable option, because they were under the care of the State guardianship board. They were not believed by workers when they tried to tell, so they had to wait until they were 18 years of age to leave their abuse situation.

For all of us, finding our voice and breaking the silence has been difficult and painful.

Journal Exercise

• What are the best things that could happen by breaking the silence and telling someone?

• What do you think is the worst thing that could happen?
What is most likely to happen?

How did the perpetrator control me and keep me silent? What did he say or do?

Fear, guilt, shame and the need to protect others kept us silent. What kept you silent?

If you told someone now, would that emotion or feeling still hold as much power?

One person found relief by getting together with her counsellor and at their meeting they added an empty chair to the room. She imagined she was telling the perpetrator what she felt. It would be important to have some good support there to work through the feelings that such an exercise could create.

For some the pain of CSA is one of many painful experiences that have happened in our lives, therefore we are not in any position to disclose it, because there are always other problems that claim priority. Consequently our abuse is actively suppressed so we can manage the struggles of the day. Others never tell anyone and are only now starting to break their silence.

The shame we feel stops us from telling. Acknowledging the truth that the CSA happened is a very difficult thing to voice. Some find it almost impossible to put their feelings into words. Organising the mixture of images and feelings into speech is not possible. Speaking out about the abuse allows us to separate our self from the abuse experiences. Our self has been hidden from view by the ‘masks’ we learnt to wear, to either hide ourselves from others, or to make ourselves look like others so they can not see how ‘different’ we feel. We think they will see us as shameful so we hide our identity to feel acceptable in society.

No longer denying the reality of the past means you have to resist the urge to stay silent, and keep your focus on your desire to change and create the future of your choosing. You can’t create that future without taking chosen actions towards it. Most of us find this very difficult because when we were victimised we had no choice and we continued to live that way for years. We felt powerless to choose and were unaware that we could make positive choices for ourselves. Moving from victim to survivor has meant taking actions, a few small steps at a time, toward our chosen future. The joy of making our own decisions has been a good motivation to keep growing our strengths. The first real

I wasn’t allowed to leave home until I was 18 because I was under the guardianship of the Minister, so basically I had to stay in that house until I was 18. I moved out 3 weeks after my 18th birthday.

I wear a mask so people see what’s on the outside, they don’t see what’s going on inside my head. I appear as a normal person that’s had no problems in their childhood. So looking at me and the way I act, you won’t know. I look like anyone else that has had a perfect childhood.

It seemed to me that a lot of families in the area of C... knew what was going on because every kid that came to my house and stayed over, never came back again. He tried it with them as well. I could never have any friends over because he would prey on them as well. No one said anything to the authorities and it was pretty horrendous what he was doing. I don’t understand that. If it was known in the community why didn’t anyone do anything about it?
action for us was joining the group and reaching out to trust others in the group with our story. This took time and it wasn’t always easy. We recommend a combination of self-help work, such as this work book or the more comprehensive book ‘The Courage to Heal’ as good starting points. However, we think a well facilitated survivor group is essential to getting the support and encouragement we need to make sense of the past.

Tip

If you have had a bad experience telling someone, or if you have never disclosed the sexual abuse before, then it’s important that you plan the who, what, when, where and how of disclosure before you do it, so you are likely to get a good response.

The following guidelines for telling were adapted from our group work and the workbook ‘The Courage to Heal’ [6]. You should consider:

- who you are thinking of telling;
- what you want to talk about;
- what you will not talk about;
- when you are going to talk;
- where you are going to talk;
- the responses you expect; and
- what you are going to ask for.
- Do you want them to do anything with the information they hear from you?
- Can they tell anyone else? If yes? Who can they tell? If no – who is not allowed to know?

We recommend that you evaluate how the ‘telling’ went by finding out what worked well; things that didn’t work; surprises you encountered; what you would do differently if you could do it all over again; what you learned; and what you are proud of [6].

Journal Exercise

- Who can you safely share your story with?
- What will be the best part of telling? Write five points down.
- If you have not told anyone before, read these points often over the next weeks and months and add to the list the benefits of telling.
Breaking the Silence and Disclosing the CSA

Many self-help books encourage you to name the perpetrator. This has been a really tough thing to do for some women. We struggle to let the perpetrator’s name cross our lips. Many of us just cannot deal with naming the abusers. It’s not easy to hear yourself say it, and most of us still have difficulty saying the abuse happened. We are not convinced that it is necessary to name the perpetrator/s to heal. If naming is too painful and makes you feel too vulnerable, then don’t do it. What is most important is that you can acknowledge that the sexual abuse occurred and recognise the impact it has had, which we discuss in Chapter 4. The key healing factor is that you accept that it did happen to you and that you were not to blame. The perpetrating adult always holds the responsibility.

Some of us disclosed our CSA to ‘friends’ in confidence and our disclosure was used against us. Therefore we suggest you choose carefully the person to whom you disclose, as the insinuations and innuendo can damage your self-confidence. It is difficult to share these experiences with other people, because of the shame we feel about the experiences. Additionally, we do not want to hurt or repulse other people with our story.

Tip
You should acknowledge to a person/s you trust because you cannot predict how people will react to the disclosure. Some of us were judged by our listeners and others were disappointed by the reactions we got from some professionals. You may find that workers who are used to hearing about child sexual abuse have a more useful response to your story (See Appendix A for services).

The uncertainty of the response you will receive and what people will say to you can be anxiety-provoking. If you have had bad reactions in the past you may be reluctant to share your story and that can compound your fear and isolation. It can lead you to withhold your story from really important people in your life, because you are fearful of frightening them away.

I can’t name them. I’ve tucked it somewhere in the back of my consciousness and it’s hard to bring it out. I cry when I try to name them. It’s too close to reality. I am afraid of what’s going to happen once I do name them. It’s like bringing them back to life. Naming them makes them people again.

People struggle to know what to say to you. They are afraid they’ll say the wrong thing and offend you. Y felt uncomfortable about my torture experience and she didn’t know how to be… I said, “Just treat me normally”, but people freaked out and stopped talking to me. They treat me as if I’m not the same person, like I’ve died or something.
It is not easy but be encouraged. We have found that once we mouthed or wrote our story, the relief we received was amazing. It’s just about finding the right person to tell.

Tip

Acknowledging the abuse took place is an important first step in healing. This has to happen within you first and then, if you can, share it in a safe group or with a trustworthy person who can listen and support you in this acknowledging process. It will help to remove the feelings of alienation, difference and isolation associated with CSA.

I noticed yesterday I thought about the needle twice. I thought about it and I know something is breaking down inside me and I am in trouble. I am aware that something is breaking down in me at the moment........if I stay connected that’s how I will save my life. I have made the mistake before of isolating myself and then going too far down that isolation track into a pit of despair, and the needle’s in that place. So I made myself get up and go and find someone to talk to.

Focusing on a New Way of Thinking

Once we give voice to our story we need to locate the system of meanings at work within that story which recruit us into the diminishing notion that we are unworthy. We look for the limits and possibilities within our story by checking what knowledge, strategies and techniques we each use to help us survive and how they work in our lives. In these stories we celebrate the ways we are able to survive, and in speaking about our strengths we dispossess the perpetrator/s power over our life and reclaim authority for our own life and our preferred future.

Reframe the Situation and Look for Strengths

I am being a bit more objective and analytical about things, instead of automatically reacting. It’s happening, it’s working and it’s getting easier (using look/think/act) the more I use it. I’m more organised and when a situation comes up out of the blue, I am trying to use alternative ways of handling it, rather than reacting the way I did before.

To move forward we find motivation and encouragement from focusing on the parts of our life story that show we are able and strong. We are survivors! We resisted in the face of abuse. To create a stronger self, we are listening for a stronger storyline and are committing to stop replaying the destructive messages of the past which render us powerless. Much of the work that goes on in our minds is sense-making of situations and people to ensure our survival.
Tip

Have you ever stopped and congratulated yourself on the achievement of surviving? Stop and say it aloud to yourself now! “Congratulations… (your name)... you are the survivor in this story, not the victim!”

If you are like us, you are probably hard on yourself, feeling shame and defeat and resigning yourself to the thought that you will never be free of the past and feel ‘normal’.  Well that is a lie. One way forward is to think about how the past story recruited you into shame and guilt and then see in that story how you were right and strong. That is the plot line you have to strengthen. The difficulty is that you have rehearsed your old life-script for a long time, and now you have to learn a new script and speak to yourself in a nurturing and affirming way.

We find it tough to see ourselves in a positive way because negative reflections are so dominant in our thinking. We see ourselves dimly as we hope to be and need to keep working at looking at ourselves with kindness, believing we can do this, so our mental picture becomes more focused and believable. This requires committed energy and action because if we only look and think and don’t take action, we are effectively doing nothing and exactly nothing will change! We have to practise new ways of thinking. We all have strengths and weaknesses. To build a new beginning, it makes sense to work with our strengths and keep building a new sense of self on the strong points rather than the weaknesses. When the new self becomes more substantial, then we can focus on reinforcing our weaker aspects. If we start by focusing on weaknesses and deficits we will get discouraged. Every person has weaknesses and every person has strengths. Healing requires us to foreground our strengths in our mind and as these pictures become more clear and accessible to our mind, we will notice many weaknesses disappear without specific attention. We can create a new beginning each day. Life is always changing and we are always in the process of becoming. We do not need to be stuck in the past story but we need to work at creating the changes we want.

Living is about transitioning change, incorporating into our mind the aspects of our changing self that we prefer and setting aside those that hold us back. The situations around all of us continually change and sometimes we have no control over those changes, yet the old way of living is gone and a new way of living has to be created. We can spend some time in a ‘limbo space’, denying the changes are here, but eventually we have to adapt if we are to move forward. In doing this we may experience some grief over the losses that the changes have brought. It’s important to experience and acknowledge this sadness.

When I was rock bottom I didn’t think that anyone could get me out of it. I knew I could not get myself out. I was really hoping for death to the point that I couldn’t cope anymore and I wanted to kill myself. Then I found out God loves me. God wants the best for me and I am grasping onto that. I have felt it... I am not in this alone and it was not another person, it was God, my higher power.
We do need to get in touch with our feelings and emotions, experiencing them, naming them and thinking about where the emotions come from and what responses they can trigger if we do not choose our reactions carefully. This is a time when those who have coped by using alcohol, drugs, substances or gambling find themselves tempted to numb away the pain brought on by grief and loss and return to alcohol and addictive behaviours for release. Instead we are choosing to recognise when we are becoming overwhelmed and as an alternative to isolating or turning to past responses, we reach out to trusted support people for help; our sponsors, friends, group, worker, counsellor etc. At these times it’s easy to choose to dissociate and isolate, withdrawing into ourselves because life is confusing and we feel overwhelmed. We can slide into despair, so it’s important to maintain valuable affirming relational connections in the midst of chaos and change. Remember, change also brings possibilities to find new ways of living and being in the world that can provide opportunities. We all need to spend time looking and thinking about how we can still achieve our desires and then set about actioning the things that will make these desires happen. Some of the questions that will help us work out our life issues are listed in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1 Transition and Issues to Work on in Each Phase**

| Ending – Current way of living ends (may be chosen eg entering a rehab programme, or forced eg death or fleeing a relationship) |
| Limbo – The changes chosen or forced may be confusing and disorientating. It requires sense-making facilitated by the Look, Think, and Act processor forced eg death or fleeing a relationship) |
| New Beginning – Incorporates changing patterns of doing and being into fresh ways of living |

**The Issues to Explore in Each Phase**

- Recognise life is different
- Attempt to name endings
- What has changed?
- Note the impact endings have on your sense of self
- Acknowledge losses and grief that endings can cause
- Recognise life’s journey changes direction and all endings are junctions that bring choices which may be new opportunities
- Notice what thoughts are preoccupying your mind
- What’s happening inside me and around me?
- How do I feel?
- How long have I been mulling on these thoughts?
- What emotion is present?
- What do I need/want now?
- Is it possible, given the changes that have occurred?
- Focus on what is possible in the situation
- Focus on opportunities changes bring
- Draw on past strengths
- Develop support team who can reinforce your new patterns of living
- Make some specific goals toward your desired outcome
- What is important now?
- What is achievable?
- Who can help me?
- How & when to action?
Journal Exercise

Stop for a few moments and shut your eyes and create a picture of yourself as the victor in your life story. You are the conqueror in this story.

- What does your face look like?
- How are you standing?
- What are you doing?
- What colours are you wearing?
- What sort of clothing?
- Is your head held high?

Imagine yourself as strong, capable and in control. Now either draw that picture, or write a journal entry of what you look like and feel like in that picture. Go back to this picture daily. Let it keep you focused on living strong.

When this part of your picture is clearly ‘painted in your mind’, you can bring other people into the background. People live in relationships, so in this new mind picture, choose who you want to have in your picture. Only choose people who can help give you strength and vitality. There should be no person in this picture that wants to bring you down. You may choose a supernatural or spiritual force to uphold you in the picture. You may choose relationships with the natural environment and animals. Imagine how they are supporting you and nurturing you. Focus only on what is good, just and fair when you think of how these people and living things are surrounding you with loving care. Your mind will help you to create this new reality if you keep ‘foregrounding’ the picture by consciously thinking about it. What positive qualities does each character bring to you? What are they doing?

Tip

Figure 3.2 is a tool to help you graph your transition so that you can see yourself shifting your responses and patterns of living over time. It is adapted from the work of Michael White [1] and allows you to graph your sense of wellbeing on the vertical scale with 10 above the neutral point of 0 being excellent and 10 below the neutral point of 0 being deep despair. In doing this, you will note that transition is not always straightforward but has highs and lows. Over time, you do incorporate changes and develop new understandings of your experiences and transition is evident. Seeing this movement can bring hope and motivation to keep you working at your healing. It

In my mind before I go out there, I tell myself it’s going to be a good day. No matter what happens, I am not going to let it get to me. I am getting more self-esteem and confidence as I try to say what I want and need. I am doing things differently... addressing things in different ways... I think about things more, and I can ignore things I know hurt me. I let his annoying little side remarks wash over me. He no longer controls me or my life.

I am stronger, and I want my independence, I will be free. I deserve better... yeah, I really do deserve better.
will also highlight when you may need to seek extra support if your healing and recovery appears to be stalling below the neutral point for too long.

You can also use this when you are planning change by charting your sense of wellbeing for the weeks or months before you plan to make the change, which is located at point 0 on the horizontal scale. The time before the ‘Change’ is called ‘Pre-Ending’ and indicates your sense of wellbeing in the months before the change event/experience occurs. The ‘Limbo’ period is the time after the change when people often feel empty, confused, disoriented, insecure and/or numb. This can be shorter or longer than 12 months as there is no definite time frame for this process, but we have given a 12-24 month time frame as major life changes take at least this long to incorporate. The area titled ‘New Beginning’ is the time after you have shifted into new patterns of living and responding and these patterns are becoming familiar responses which promote your sense of wellbeing, indicating that you are incorporating the changes into your life. Again, the time scales can be as short as weeks or as long as months or years. So we suggest you keep the graph going for as long as you find it helpful.
Time (It can be used in days or weeks or months when things settle).

Rate Your Wellbeing
- Despair
- Very Sad
- Sad
- Bit Sad
- Neutral
- OK
- Well
- Very Well
- Excellent

Note: The numbers above and below the neutral point 0 can help track changes in wellbeing.

Note on Graphing Transition and Wellbeing:
The aim is to note that life's journey may have setbacks, but on the whole moves forward in the transition process. This brings hope and motivation to keep working at your healing. The graph will highlight when you need to seek extra support for your healing and recovery.

Pre-Ending is the time before you have begun to incorporate the changes and find a new pattern for living. Your feelings may feel empty, confused, disoriented, isolated, and there is no definite time frame for this.

Limbo Period is the time immediately after the change when you may feel empty, confused, disoriented, isolated, numb (there is no definite time frame for this).

New Beginning is the time after you have begun to incorporate the changes and find a new pattern for living. These feelings become more regular responses.

This tool is adapted from the work of Michael White titled ‘Migration of Identity’ and is used with permission.

Figure 3.2 Monitoring Your Feelings in the Transition Process

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Notes on Graphing Transition and Wellbeing:
Summary

In this chapter you were invited to revisit your life story without focusing specifically on the abuse experiences and risking the possibility of re-traumatising yourself. We explored the question ‘What is child sexual abuse?’ and the social pressures that prevent children from talking about their abuse experiences, which conspire to keep women silent for years. We looked at memories and what part they play in reinforcing the mind pictures we have of ourselves and others. We focused on new ways of thinking that could direct our attention to the here and now, as one key way of decreasing the power past fears and feelings have to increase our sense of isolation and suffering.

In Chapter 4 we discuss the specific impacts we have experienced that can be connected to our sexual abuse in childhood. It can be a very difficult chapter to explore, so we recommend that you have your safety plan in place before tackling this work.
Chapter 4
The Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse

We discussed the impacts child sexual abuse/assault (CSA) has had on our lives. Service providers also shared their understandings of the impacts of CSA that they have noted amongst survivors. This chapter discusses some of the common impacts. Psychologists suggest that some of our responses may be grounded in the rejection and betrayal experienced by our inner child. Our inner child was betrayed, manipulated and silenced by adult/s she should have been able to trust and this contributes to delayed development of self-esteem and a healthy identity. The inner child feels responsible and grows up trying to please, or to prove to others she is acceptable.

As we look back to when we were children, we recognise that we did show signs that could have alerted observant adults to ask more questions about our plight. All the things we noticed could have come from other conditions as well, but in our case they were related to the sexual assaults. Over the two year period of the research we added to the list the behaviours and warning signs that we were showing as adults that were related to the sexual abuse experiences as children. Why list it you may ask? We felt it was important to bring these issues to the surface so other women are less isolated.
in their experiences. Additionally, service providers tend to avoid asking about past CSA and we want to know why that was so. If we had started working on these issues earlier in our lives we may have been spared many years of compounding sadness. We believe we may have been ready to discuss CSA had we been asked in an appropriate manner, in a safe space and by a sensitive worker. Service providers are concerned that less experienced workers relating to women like us, might not have the experience to recognise the possible signs and impacts of CSA. We agree. Please realise no single woman shows all the behaviours printed in this chapter and remember, each impact or indicator can be caused by issues other than CSA. The list is long, yet it is not exhaustive. We have used the words that we use to explain some of the more technical terms so everyone can understand.

Tip

After reading this chapter you may think, ‘we are doomed’, but that is not so, because for each issue discussed in this chapter, survivors demonstrate behaviours that enable survival and many have strengths on which they reclaim and build their lives. We discuss these as we go through the book, so please don’t despair when you read this. Just look down the list and think about the issues that apply to you. Use the list as a starting point to talk to someone you trust, preferably a qualified counsellor or therapist. The choice is yours. If you find it too traumatic please do not proceed and enact the safety plan you developed in Chapter 1. The list is provided to help you identify impacts you might have taken-for-granted or attributed to something else. When you recognise how situations have come about, you are more able to consider ways to manage them if they are a problem.

Journal Exercise

Supposing you believe each person is an integrated body, mind and spirit, what happens in one dimension will impact all the others as we cannot be separated into just a body, or just a mind. The impacts of CSA can result in illness and consequences, which present in varied and sometimes unusual ways. It will help to journal these questions as you go through the impacts discussed in this chapter.

- Have you experienced some of these signs/indicators in the past?
- Are you still experiencing some of them?

Sexual abuse impacts every dimension of our lives in many ways, some obvious and some subtle. Many of our thoughts and actions are mediated by the need to stay safe, or to forget what has happened to us. Nevertheless, we found that there is a common story to our experiences and this
is written below. There will be aspects of your personal story reflected in this group story, but not all aspects will be true for each person affected by CSA.

Tip

You may be able to identify with some of these experiences and you may feel shocked by the similarity to aspects of your own story. It may be hard to read this, so please put in place the safety plan you thought through in Chapter 1 before you go any further.

Our Story of the Impact of CSA

The main points of each woman’s story have been grouped into one common story.

We were all sexually abused when we were children. The perpetrators were mostly males who were related to us, although some were abused by family, ‘friends’ and some by unknown perpetrators. The details of our experiences differ, but we have all experienced trauma and threat to our growth, development and wellbeing. The problems we faced and continue to face are similar.

A number of us experienced the CSA within our family. We tended to have unhappy and dissatisfying family relationships, which became distorted. We often felt unsafe within our home and were surrounded by violence – physical, verbal, emotional and sexual. We began to believe we were deserving of everything we got. This was reinforced by the sense of betrayal from our family and manipulation from the perpetrator/s who dominated us from their position of power and trust, making us feel powerless, worthless, ashamed, guilty and to blame. We were used and treated as objects, or meat. Our silence was bought by being spoilt and bribed, or threatened and deprived of what we needed. We tried to keep everyone in our family happy because our family life was usually tense and uneasy. Some of us know our parents were also sexually abused as children. The sexual abuse we experienced was not talked about in our homes. The experiences were normalised and some of us did not know that this was not every child’s experience. Many of us had parents who misused alcohol, which was often the time we were most unsafe. Many of us felt we did not fit in our family. We were very uncomfortable in our home situation, feeling alone and isolated. We felt as if we were punished all the time, set up and trapped in a situation we did not know how to get out of. Some were dominated and tormented by the perpetrator/s and were extremely frightened.

On Reading ‘Our story’

It’s in your face when you read it. I’m thinking ‘Yep! There it is! This is your life!’ I cried. I felt sad just seeing it and thinking everything that’s happened to me. Then I felt angry and I thought ‘You bastard’. I hope he reads this and realises just what he has done.
Some of us have mixed feelings about our perpetrators which makes this experience all the more confusing. Some of us felt a confusing blend of hatred and love for the perpetrator, especially if he was our father. We felt bewildered by this person’s action, because we did not understand why it was happening to us. It has made love a very difficult emotion to understand and created a web of puzzling contradictions that, as children, we could not untangle. We felt over-powered, and betrayed because we should have been able to feel safe and loved and instead we experienced rejection and shame.

When we tried to speak to our parents and others about the embarrassing and shameful experiences, most of us were not believed so we learnt to keep it inside us. We learnt to minimise what happened to us because we were ignored or dismissed by our parents, our family and others in the community when we did try to tell. Diminishing the abuse helped us to forget it more easily. We spent our childhood maintaining a shroud of silence and secrecy around our perverse experiences of CSA.

We coped by suppressing memories, learning to forget, disengaging, dissociating, isolating ourselves emotionally in relationships, trying to please everyone, trying to adapt and accommodate our weird situation, because there was no escape anyway. This allowed us to survive our childhood. We knew we were different from other kids, but we did not know exactly why, or how. We sensed there was something wrong with us, but what? We tried to fit into what other children were doing and feeling, but we usually couldn’t. Many of us withdrew socially and isolated ourselves from friendships, preferring to remain quiet, because we were full of insecurity and fear. We made sure we did not get really close to people, or trust anyone. We escaped this lonely situation by going inside our head; into our memory, creating fantasies that allowed us to escape the reality.

Our confusion translated into behaviours that we now recognise as related to our past CSA experiences. These include displaying sexual behaviour and knowledge that was greater than the other kids our age. Some fear they may have acted out sexually with other children without knowing what they were doing was unacceptable behaviour. Some of us had learning difficulties because we had little confidence in ourselves and couldn’t concentrate at school. Others became relentless overachievers, working to prove to others and ourselves our worth. Some of us became trapped in the notion of helplessness, resigning ourselves to a life of suffering, believing we were unable to change our situation. Our current group work is teaching us otherwise.

As we became teenagers the longing for escape, romance, and a loving relationship led us to try different behaviours to manage our situation. We all felt as if we didn’t fit in, thinking no one could ever love us. Some of us tried to find love by moving in and out of sexual relationships. Some
numbed the painful feelings away using alcohol, drugs and/or gambling. For some the self-harm, promiscuity and re-victimisation continued. Vulnerable boundaries made us easy targets for predatory people, increasing our hopelessness and sadness. We no longer trusted easily because everyone seemed to want something from us, so we chose to become disconnected to protect ourselves from further hurt. We had few dreams or hopes for the future, using addictions to escape, cope and even survive. We now recognise these life patterns added to our problems, but they did assist us to cope at the time.

Looking back on our childhood we realise that when other children were developing the building blocks for a strong identity, understanding that they were unique and worthwhile, able and OK, we were stuck in a world that taught us we would never amount to anything. This has led us to continue carrying the burden of shame and guilt, confusion and sadness that weakens our self-worth and diminishes our identity. Focusing too long on what we have lost increases the gnawing emptiness. It sends us into that ‘dark hole’ within, from which wells sadness, shame, disgust, guilt, anger, and fear. So we are consciously choosing to work through the past so we can release its control over our lives and reclaim our personal power so we can start choosing our preferred future.

The Impact on How We Live Within the Broader Society

These are some issues we are still working at changing in our lives:

- Most of us find relationships and friendships a challenge because trusting is difficult, so we have few close friends. We either give people too much trust, and are hurt by them, or we feel unable to trust anyone, even ourselves.

- We use a variety of ‘masks’ to help us function. We look around us and see what others are like and how they act in certain situations so we put on the mask that suits that particular occasion. We hide ‘the real me’ from view, because we fear no-one would want to know her. We can develop masks for all occasions.

- We try to fit into the society even though we tend to feel different, as if we don’t belong. Sometimes not fitting in makes us act out by lying, stealing, running away, fighting and using other ways that demonstrate we do not fit.

- Some of us are rebellious and ‘in your face’ which we think is an attempt to become ‘untouchable’ to others and show we don’t care what they do to us.
Most of us feel like we have a bottomless pit of anger inside us, which can well up at unexpected times. We recognise our right to be outraged about what happened to us and we want to channel this passion and energy for our healing.

We often withdraw inside ourselves and become very shy and quiet, thinking no one would want to hear our opinion, or hoping no-one will notice us so we can stay safe.

We are always looking out, staying alert for our safety, finding it difficult to relax among people.

I’m always looking about the environment, always watching. I’d make a great witness for anything, because I can tell you minute details... I still fear that my step-dad’s watching me.... I look around for exits to make sure they’re accessible... in case I have to get out in a hurry.... in case he sees me, or I spot him and I’ve got to get out really quickly or something...

We try to make our lives fit what society expects by building an external life that counterbalances our internal confusion. For example some of us have become compulsive cleaners, keeping our living environments very clean and ordered to counterbalance our chaotic internal life.

Some of us are hard workers, working to forget our pain. We can’t sit still and rest. We are always busy and on the move, so we forget.

We have problems establishing boundaries in relationships, especially around sexual activity. Some of us were promiscuous as adolescents using sex as a method of finding relationship, confused by the difference between love and sex, yet looking for love and acceptance.

As we are getting older we are finding it harder to live and be in the world and still forget our past.

The Impact on Our Patterns of Coping

Changing our old patterns of coping is difficult, but we are progressing and life is becoming better as we practise how to live in ways that keep us safe, while allowing us to grow a sense of identity that we can feel comfortable with.

Some of us find it hard to complete a task. We start many things and we are often very good at them, but we cannot see them through to completion.

We may try to help other people solve their problems because that stops us having to look into our own. We also obtain a sense of worth from doing this.

We have used alcohol, drugs and gambling to dull or numb our pain and it can get tempting to return to those substances when we are suffering.

Some of us tend to turn the anger and contempt back in on ourselves. We do this through self-harming and/or risk-taking behaviours to relieve the pain or continue to punish ourselves.
believing that is what we deserve. For some of us, using alcohol, drugs and gambling led to addiction and the addiction has led directly to many additional legal, financial, housing, family, health and social problems.

- We recognise that at times we sabotage our own recovery because we are frightened of what demands an unknown future could place upon us, fearing we may not be able to live up to the expectations.

The Impact on Relationships with Our Partners

Intimate partner relationships remain a key area of concern due to the impacts of CSA and the lack of confidence we have regarding our body, our relational capacity and our sexuality.

- We sometimes choose partners that control, overpower, use and abuse us. We have found ourselves in unhappy marriages and violent partnerships where the focus is always on our partner. Being controlled and manipulated is well-known territory, so we readily move toward controlling, calculating and abusive people because this is familiar. It is what we know from our childhood.
- Many of us feel panicky and anxious about our relationships. We have had very few role models and guidelines for positive relationships, so we lack confidence about our capacity to sustain a loving intimate partner relationship.
- We can feel insecure in relationships and afraid that we are unlovable, so we require a lot of reassurance.
- We often have problems communicating what we really feel to our partners, fearful of honest communication and the possible consequences that may bring.
- We tend to blame ourselves when things go wrong and frequently underestimate our own abilities.
- Some of us are fearful and mistrust men. At the same time we want to enjoy a loving relationship with someone special, where we won’t get hurt.
- Some feel insignificant and powerless in a man’s presence, to the point they are unable to speak and act in a calm and usual manner.
- Most of us try to keep everyone happy by taking the road of least resistance, but some rage and fight in conflict situations.
- The boundaries have been blurred between intimacy and sexual activity and establishing healthy boundaries around sexual conduct remains a challenge. A few chose to work in the sex industry. Some found sex disgusting, humiliating and painful. Many of us can’t stay emotionally present during consenting sex. Others have difficulty achieving orgasm during sex.

I’m saving myself for someone special. My step father may have taken my virginity and used my body, but the whole of me was not in that place. I am going to give my whole self to someone I really love. That’s the time my mind and my soul will go to bed with me. It will be at the time I choose. No-one can take that away from me.
• A few have chosen to avoid intimacy and cannot entertain the idea of having sex. Some are uncomfortable with their body and that also impacts on sexual activity. Several have flashbacks that make responsive participation during sex difficult.

• We recognise that many of us agreed to sex even when we didn’t want it because we were either conditioned that we could not say ‘No!’, or we had no secure boundaries established around our body.

• We have all had negative sexual experiences early in life. We lost our childish innocence and our birthright to choose to whom we would offer our selves sexually. Yet some of us are reframing this loss by seeing ourselves as body, mind and spirit, and though our bodily involvement in sex may have been taken from us, we are able to pursue loving sexual activity with the person we choose to love that engages our whole person, body, mind and spirit because this is something only we can choose to give.

The Impact on Our Parenting

As a child I was invisible, quiet, kept secrets and hid the truth. Suddenly when I became a parent I had to be open, loving, up-front, honest, available, responsive, warm... I have had to entirely reinvent myself.

Parenting is another aspect of life that has been impacted by CSA. Our lack of confidence and lack of access to our children are key concerns. Additionally we struggle with boundary setting and this is an area of great concern to most of us.

• We love our children and for most of us, they are our key reason for living, the main source of hope and joy. Some of us enjoy nurturing our children in ways we were never nurtured, while others have struggled to touch our children because of the memories and fears this intimate touch raises within.

• Sometimes we have had problems bonding and engaging with our children. We spent our early lives not being present in close relationships to protect ourselves. Now, as adults, we are expected to be engaged and present with our children; yet this is not a familiar pattern of responding for us.

• Sometimes we ignored the patterns of abuse that were being repeated in our own families because we thought them normal. This has increased our guilt and shame because we now recognise the impact abuse has had on our wellbeing and worry that we may not have sufficiently protected our children.

• We are concerned about our children and whether they are safe with their carers. For many it is our ‘number one fear’. Some of us have become very protective and vigilant over our children and we get anxious for their safety. Some have found they obsess over thoughts of safety for their children, even having difficulty letting them go to school.
We find boundary setting with children a complex task. Conflict makes us scared, so we may respond reactively rather than in a thought-through manner. It's often easier to ignore the conflict and give in to our children. This may send them the message that they can 'walk all over us' and that behaviour diminishes our sense of personal authority.

Parenting and boundary setting is complicated by our limited access to our children so they often have confused boundaries when they move between parents. We desperately want the time with our children to be enjoyable, so we sometimes give in when we should not. It is difficult to assert boundaries when we do not have regular and sustained access to our children.

When our children have problems, especially as adolescents, we struggle to know what to do and this wells up self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy within us, which is a major trigger to old response patterns.

Some of us lost our capacity to live with our children due to addiction and homelessness. This is a difficult challenge, and for some it has become the turning point where we said 'Enough! We have to get out of this situation!' so we made the decision to go and get professional help. Several of our group are reuniting with our children and we are successfully connecting together as a family. Challenges remain, but we are growing in our confidence as parents.

The Impact on Our Health

We live with many physical and mental health problems related to our misuse of alcohol, drugs, sex, living with stress, violence and abuse, and the long-term damage caused to us by the past CSA and addictions.

Most of have suffered with depression, because we were stuck in situations we did not know how to manage. Some held so much anger, grief and sadness about the past and had nowhere to channel their rage except inside themselves.

I was without my kids for two years. I was on the streets and no one knew it. I didn’t look like a street person. I just wandered this city for two years trying to get a glimpse of my kids. I knew what they were doing. I saw them going a bit off the rails, I would hear rumours about what my daughter was up to, losing her virginity, and I wasn’t there... I can’t change that, but I can improve the future for them and myself. That is what I needed to do, to front up to everything. You see I always got to a certain level and then I’d fail. This is the one thing that kept me trying to move forward – my relationships with my kids. I knew how I wanted them to be and relate to other people. So I began the journey to start to heal myself and get back my life.

When I sleep I have nightmares. I also have a recurring nightmare when someone is throwing me out of a plane and I feel like I am free-falling.

I can be absolutely tired and just about to drop and I might sleep for an hour or so, but then that is it. I can go for two or three days without sleep.

At night-time a lot of bad things happened when I was young, so the night is an absolutely awful place for me. I always feel anxious just before night-time. The time he would have come home I guess. During that period between 4 and 6pm I get very antsy and I can’t relax. Once the night-time is there I can fight it, but when it is coming, I associate whatever happened to me as a child to the coming night-time.
We all wanted relief... so some have seriously considered suicide as an option to end their suffering.

Some of us had eating problems; over-eating, under-eating, or bingeing and vomiting food and drink.

Most of us had, and some still have, problems sleeping. We have disturbed and disrupted sleep patterns because the tension present in our body won’t let us relax.

Some are afraid of night-time, feeling unsafe in the dark. Others dream a lot and some experience recurring nightmares.

The Impact on Our Mind

We have lived with confusion created by our memories of sexual abuse and we have dealt with this since childhood by actively:

- suppressing memories of the abuse and working at forgetting by blocking out, pushing aside, shutting down;
- trying to make sense of life and the past within our heads. This leads to confusion, where we feel like we are going crazy. At these times, we struggle to make complex and quick decisions, feeling overwhelmed by circumstances that make us feel really tired and depleted, so we choose to ignore these emotions;
- trying to disassociate ourselves from the bad and sad feelings and ‘space out’ so we are not present in the situation;
- using our imagination to escape within our mind by fantasising ourselves out of our bad experiences;
- creating a safe place within our mind into which we can safely retreat to protect and nurture our inner selves;
- finding ways to give our mind rest, because we have problems sleeping due to nightmares, flashbacks and fears that can overcome us, especially at night; (we often use rituals to relieve the anxiety and these can become compulsive habits that we must undertake before we can sleep); and
- experiencing the anger that we struggle to place. We have been looking for more productive outlets to channel our outrage productively. We are often unable to express the anger so we direct it at ourselves, becoming depressed and isolated. Alternatively, we express the anger without restraint and become aggressive ‘out there’ and ‘in your face’, especially in public places. We have come to see this response can be our unique voice of protest and resistance to what is happening within us.
### Physical conditions
- Abdominal pain ‘tummy ache’
- Generalised body aches and pains
- Headaches and migraines
- Stress symptoms ‘tight jaw, hard to swallow, sweaty palms, shaking, tight in the chest, etc’
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Can’t control urine or faeces
- Injuries or irritations of vagina and / or bottom
- Pain while urinating (infections)
- Bed wetting
- Vaginal infections
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Mouth ulcers
- Heartburn and indigestion
- Stomach and bowel ulcers
- Rashes
- Asthma
- Pregnancy
- Abnormally high pain tolerance
- High blood pressure
- Muscle tension, tight & tingling in shoulders, neck and back
- General pain and stiffness

### Physical effects
- Difficulty sleeping
- Dreams and nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Weight issues (under or over)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Deep grief and sadness
- Chronic tiredness and fatigue
- Deep reaction to an unexplained situation eg a smell, place, person
- Addictions – alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, work
- Outbursts of rage and anger
- Violent behaviour

### Emotions and feelings
- Fear (eg, dark, certain places, people, dentists, doctors, situations)
- Anger
- Guilt
- Shame
- Self-Blame
- Hurt – emotional pain
- Sadness – crying and sorrowful
- Anxiety, ‘nervous’, panic, agitated
- Overwhelmed
- Confusion for no apparent reason
- Frustration – bitterness
- Hate (particularly self-hate of our body)
- Spite – desire for revenge
- Withdrawn, quiet and secretive
- Emotionally numb
- Wild mood swings

### Psychological problems and Psychiatric ‘diagnoses’
- Uncertain of identity ‘Who am I?’
- Obsession: thoughts are difficult to control
- Compulsive: the rituals we need to feel safe become difficult to control
- Perfectionist ‘nothing quite good enough’
- Fears and phobias eg fear of dark
- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Post Traumatic Stress
- Panic attacks
- Self-injury and suicidal thoughts/attempts
- Psychosis
- Dissociation
- Multiple Personality
- Anorexia and Bulimia
- Extreme behaviours eg drop out of jobs easily, or always push self to achieve more

### Spiritual issues
- Feeling empty, inside ‘a dark hole’
- Loss of meaning and purpose in life
- Loss of will to live
- Hopeless ‘no way forward’
- Loss of faith in God, ‘abandoned by God’
- Loss of trust in spiritual leaders

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**Table 4.1 Summary of impacts CSA has had on our lives**
Tip

You are probably thinking ‘This is too much! What is the use!’ You have no doubt seen some aspects of yourself in this list. We all did, but that is not us now! We are moving on and so can you. That’s not to say some days aren’t bad, because we still have days, even weeks, when we are set back. You will learn to recognise from where your feelings come, and how you can manage them in ways that help you live the way you want to live. Using ‘Look, Think, Act’ will help you to do the sense making activity that helps you make your preferred choices. Some things work well and some don’t, and that’s the same for all of us. Learning to live life in a different way takes time but it can be done.

Journal Exercise

In your journal express your feelings by writing or drawing your response to the lists above:

- What are you feeling after reading this chapter of impacts and indicators of CSA?
  Which impacts have you struggled with? Which if any are affecting you now?
- What can you do to handle your feelings at present?
- What strengths can you see in your past that you can build on?

Remember, you have survived and you have many strengths.

Summary

This chapter discussed some of the impacts of child sexual abuse on a variety of key areas in your life. These include your coping patterns for living in the broader society, your interpersonal relationships, your parenting, and your physical and mental health. It is a difficult chapter to read and think about, but from the adversity and subsequent suffering you experienced there is within each survivor, resilient qualities and fresh insights that will facilitate the process of transformative change. You will develop increasing ability to make sense of issues and impacts you could not understand before you began this exploratory process, because you will now know where some of your thoughts, feelings and issues come from.
It’s difficult to explore your CSA story and not experience some distress and discontent. Suffering can create disturbing background noise in your mind that may become so loud you no longer hear the quiet still voice of reason within your head. This often leads to distracting commentary about experiences, which can create confusion in your mind, making your experiences seem larger than life, welling up in your mind fears that make you feel miserable and alienated. This can become a state where you feel powerless and victimised triggering stress, frustration and suffering. The ‘Look, Think, Act’ process will help you tease out what is happening, so you can sort out the real threats from the perceived threats and then look for opportunities to shift your thinking. Doing this in a group or with a trusted worker is the best way to work this out.

In the Chapter 5 you will face the issues that CSA presents which are relevant to reclaiming the past and transitioning into your preferred future.
To move forward and transition the past we have to face some big issues that have kept the impact of our childhood experiences adversely affecting us. The best way to do this is to look into, and think about the issues in a group or with a therapist. This will provide opportunity to name and voice concerns in a safe space where you can carefully plan options in a supported environment. Then use your thought-through plans to respond and take actions that you can manage, to influence your plans. This chapter discusses some of the main issues child sexual abuse/assault (CSA) survivors face. You may have similar challenges and this chapter may help you to see from where the issues come, so you can face them with courage in a planned manner.
Facing the Issue of Alcohol, Drug and Gambling Misuse

Not every sexually abused woman has had the same experience, but many in our group coped with the pain of CSA by using alcohol, drugs and/or gambling to numb away their suffering. These activities provide a way to escape the situation for a short time and allow us to feel normal and in control for a time. They make it easier to quieten our heartbroken inner child and provide short-term relief. However, ongoing misuse of alcohol, drugs and gambling, exact a further toll that threatens our economic, physical, social and spiritual health and wellbeing.

Our group began in a supported accommodation service because addiction and/or ongoing victimisation contributed to our homelessness. We know over 90% of women in this accommodation have a history of being sexually abused during childhood. We received help for the addictions, but we now realise that the CSA is directly linked to the reasons that we looked for escape and relief in substance use. To create permanent change in our lives we are dealing with our past story as part of our recovery and healing. The alcohol and drugs do provide temporary reprieve but do not remove the painful reality of our life story. Once the effects of the alcohol wear off, we are left with intense feelings of disappointment, shame and guilt and that leads to hopelessness. Reality gets harder to live with, so we drink more often to forget. It takes more and more to remove our growing hurt and before long we may have serious substance misuse problems and became dependent on, and addicted to, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex or other activities. Almost all of us began using addictive substances in our early teenage years. We have swapped addictions at different times in our lives, looking for new ways to escape our memories and our situations. We use these things because we want to be free of our suffering.

What we got from our addiction was:

- the ability to forget the past and present problems for awhile;
- an identity in an accepting peer group;
- happiness and a sense of relief and relaxation;
- something that helped hold us together;
- an escape and the ability to shut off for awhile; and
- dulling or numbing of the pain.

We find it difficult to change our past coping behaviours when the package of feelings tied to our past sexual abuse wells up within us. In our group we spent a lot of time looking at what triggers this package of feelings and found a common thread is relational problems that make us feel diminished, overlooked, confused, overwhelmed, trapped, constrained, guilty, ashamed, blamed, alone, anxious,
fearful, sad, defeated and empty, are the most common precursor for the emotions that trigger the desire to drink/use/gamble.

We are working at our healing and moving on with hope to achieve a purposeful and meaningful life. We want a life in which we can love, and be loved. We want a life where we can feel safe, happy and content. To do this we need to find the courage to face our issues, acknowledge what is happening within us and stop blaming and punishing ourselves for the past. We need and have accepted professional help to prevent ourselves from sabotaging our recovery, either consciously or subconsciously. We recognise that the emptiness at the centre of our lives must now be filled with things that heal our broken heart, nurture our spirit, renew our mind and protect our body. These are the goals we are working toward.

Journal Exercise

- How has the use of alcohol, drugs, gambling or similar activities affected your life? (Your own use, or the use of someone in your family).
- How is the use of these things connected to the CSA?

Facing Ourselves

Most of us have a diminished sense of self. We dislike our bodies, depreciate our minds, and downgrade our self-worth. For some of us, facing our body is an ongoing problem. We mistrust being touched and can find body care a repulsive experience. This dislike can lead us to cover our bodies, ignore them and isolate from other people. We recognise that this dislike is born from the early betrayal and manipulation of our bodies by people who assumed power and control over every aspect of our being, body, mind and spirit. They denied us the opportunity to develop the values, beliefs and attitudes about ourselves that are the building blocks of a strong sense of self.

I can’t stand the thought of anyone touching me or seeing me naked. I have a thing about people seeing my skin. When I wear bathers, I wear long shorts that come up to here... I wear an old T shirt that covers up my bottom half, and then I feel safe.
Facing the Issue of Violent Intimate Partner Relationships

Many of us have difficulty in maintaining intimacy within relationships. Some of us have people coming in and out of our lives, while others have very few relationships, preferring to withdraw socially. Intimate partner relationships expect from us an emotional presence that our childhood experiences have taught us to suppress. These relationships require trust and commitment. Some of us avoid communication and have difficulty expressing love, affection and intimacy. During conflict we protect ourselves by withdrawing, escaping within, dissociating and building an emotional fortress inside ourselves that enables our survival. This strategy worked efficiently when we were children but we are finding it does not work in an adult world where we are required to be responsive and intimate in relationships. While growing up we received rejection and criticism, even violence, so we became hyper-vigilant and ready to retreat or attack at the first sign of relational difficulty, using survival patterns of withdrawal or aggression to enable our safety. These patterns now get in the way of our intimate relationships and we recognise that they have to be managed to develop adult responses within relationships. However they cannot be entirely abandoned as they remain strategies that can keep us protected in unsafe relationships. The key is to learn how to manage them in different ways, so they effect healthy relationships.

Some of us have had intimate relationships with violent, dominant and controlling partners. It’s hard to change this pattern when you grew up with those behaviours as the backdrop to normal family life. Most of us were sworn to secrecy, threatened, bribed or cajoled into silence by the perpetrator/s, learning early in life to accept our lot, otherwise we were in more trouble. Our perpetrator/s told us there was no point hoping for escape, so we believed we would never get out of the experience and learnt to give in as one way to survive. We became withdrawn and detached and we return to that response when we are in threatening or compromising situations. We are learning to stay present and assert ourselves in difficult circumstances. We see from where our responses have come and are trying to choose behaviours that are more likely to get the outcomes we want.

A few of us reacted to our abusive family relationships by becoming fighters, rebellious and non-compliant. We think this behaviour is a reaction to our childhood situation, an effort to become untouchable, or perhaps match our exterior life with our troubled internal emotions. We now interpret this behaviour as an alternative story of resistance to our CSA situation that shows our strength in the midst of adversity. As
adults we have found that we can return to aggressive responses when we are put in pressured situations. We may behave abusively to others if we feel trapped, or angry. We know that being abused as a child does not justify us becoming abusive with any other person now that we are adults. So taking the strengths from this story we now see that we can be assertive without being aggressive, so we are trying to channel that assertiveness toward the establishment of personal boundaries and actioning future goals.

Aggressive responses to anger well up within some of us when discussing perpetrators. Thoughts of revenge, murder, maiming and mayhem are seriously entertained when the anger overwhelms us. In the group we work through these emotions, feelings and thoughts and recognise that we have the right to feel anger, but the anger should not be turned inward on ourselves, or toward others. We were children and entitled to be safe, loved and protected. We were not responsible for the actions of the perpetrator. Apportioning the blame and guilt, the shame and responsibility where it belongs, with the perpetrator, is an important part of learning to live stronger and channelling the anger toward more positive outcomes, which we discuss in Chapter 7.

Journal Exercise

- How have you communicated in intimate relationships in the past?
- How has this worked in close intimate and trusting relationships?
- If you withdraw from conflict what happens within you?
- What happens to the relationship if you retreat within yourself?
- If you get aggressive during conflict what happens within you? What do you feel in your body? What are you thinking?
- Does the aggression turn into violent reactions in your life story? How and when?
- What types of violence are occurring in your current relationships with your partner, children, family, workplace, friends…?
- What happens to the relationship?
- What gives you the best results that strengthen your relationship?

Facing the Fear of Repeating Violence and Sexual Abuse

Some of us are anxious that we, or our children, might become perpetrators of sexual abuse because we/they have experienced sexual abuse as children. There are many facts and myths
around CSA repetition and it is helpful to know that around two thirds of CSA survivors will not abuse their children. We are choosing to re-story our lives to that preferred end. It is disempowering to believe that behaviour cannot be changed. We now know that our freewill can over-ride our learned behaviours and this means we can all become who we want to with support and carefully thought-through actions. We can learn different ways to manage our lives and we know adult CSA survivors can be loving parents, nurturing and protecting their children.

We have to be careful not to get recruited into thinking we are trapped in some ‘cycle of abuse’ that is fixed and unchangeable. That is a really powerless position to be in and the future doesn’t have to be like that. Everyone can shift their story around to make a new ending. We can’t change what has happened in the past, but we can change the ending and choose a new way of living now. We won’t get locked into the idea that we are never going to be able to break that ‘cycle’, because we believe we can.

Facing the Issue of Disappointment with Our Mothers

Many of us have issues with our parents. We carry mixed emotions that swing between love and hate. We were either abused by them or feel that they failed to protect us in some way from other perpetrators, which raises confusing thoughts, feelings and emotions that are difficult to make sense of. When we discussed this we were surprised at how strong our feelings toward our parents were. We discussed how social expectations about mothering place the burden of responsibility for the safety and nurture of children upon their shoulders. Mothers are made to be more accountable than fathers for the nurturing and safety of their children. This belief can set mothers up as failing children who have been assaulted, because we believe mothers should be more aware of what is going on in their family.

Some women state their mother’s knew what was happening and chose not to intervene. These mothers were variously described as ‘jealous’, ‘nasty’, ‘vindictive’, ‘full of hate and anger’. Other mothers were intimidaded.
into silence by the perpetrator for fear of what would happen to them or their other children. We know that the anger turned toward our mothers can sometimes overshadow the anger we feel toward the perpetrator. We now recognise that there are other factors that come into play as possible reasons why our mothers could not protect us. These factors include fear of reprisal; inability to know what action to take; their own emotions of shame, blame, guilt and denial led them to pretend it wasn’t happening because they had no idea what to do to change the situation; they were dissociated so they did not recognise what was happening; they were so shocked they became emotionally unavailable to us, their children. It’s important to explore the anger and disappointment we feel about our parents. For most of us, our mothers were not the offending perpetrator. Our outrage should be directed to the offending person because they hold the responsibility for the CSA.

Tip

Some confront their mother and it becomes a time of healing. Others confront their mother and find she is still unwilling to discuss the past, or face her responses to our sexual abuse. Some confront their mother in person, while others do it by letter. If you are going to confront any relative on this subject please put in place the safety precautions you organised in Chapter 1.

We spent some time considering how we might feel at the death of our parents and/or perpetrator/s. Some hope for relief, others want to feel a sense of forgiveness, some are still very angry, some expect grief and most think they will feel a sense of satisfaction. However, women who have experienced the death of the perpetrator claim they have not experienced the relief or satisfaction they were hoping for, which is a comment frequently stated in the literature [45, 46]. It seems important to examine your perspective and reframe the perpetrator and your parents in your mind.

Journal Exercise

We suggest that you reflect on your past as if it was a group photograph of all the people who have been a part of your life. Then locate the perpetrator and the key offending abuse team members. Then consciously move them out of the picture and reclaim centre stage in your mind picture for yourself and other people on your support team. Include significant family, friends and children. This is where your energy and focus should lie for the future. Consciously think through who should be in your reclamation picture and draw it in your journal.
We have all said we feel like we are going crazy from time to time. It happens when our mind is flooded with conflicting messages that replay unclear and confusing themes over and over in our head. The work of making sense of all the mixed messages within our head can go on night and day. It can feel as if there is no sense to be made from what we are experiencing. We get stuck with incomplete thoughts and it can become overwhelming. You are neither in the past story, or in the future story. You are in a place that is in between, a place we call ‘limbo’.

It may help to explain it as if life was a drama or a play. We rehearsed one script for years and we knew all our lines off by heart. We knew exactly what to do in this life drama. However, in the process of living, every person’s life script changes. We still have to be a part of the life drama, but for a time we don’t know what’s going on. Everything and everyone around us speaks and acts different. We are no longer sure how to perform effectively in this new life drama. The old script doesn’t fit the new situation. At first we are not really sure what has changed but we know things are different. We don’t understand just how to adapt our past script to our new situation. This is the confusion of the limbo period. Over time, and with the help of other players who can give us helpful direction, we will work out what is going on. We then start to learn how to act and what to say. We do it one scene at a time, or even one section of a scene. We work on it until we have mastered that bit and then move on to the next. The ‘Look, Think and Act’ process will help in this sense-making activity. As we learn new aspects of the life drama we feel more like we belong. We start to take charge of our own life script and choose who we want to have in our life story. In so doing, the old script plays a lesser part in our current life. The voices of the past CSA story make less background noise in the new life story. As we learn and repeat the new affirming life script the feelings of craziness disappear.

**Journal Exercise**

- Have you felt crazy? What did you say to yourself or act like?
- Were you told you were incapable? What did they say to you? Write down the opposite and repeat it to yourself. Hang it on your walls and say it regularly. For example, perhaps you were told ‘You are such an idiot you’ll never get anywhere in life.’ Then write this response down ‘I am a competent and able woman and I am going to the places others only dream about!’
• Write down more positive and affirming statements to say to yourself regarding your future. It helps to start them with words like ‘I am…’ ‘I will…’ ‘I have…’ ‘I can…’’. For example: ‘I have the courage to make this decision.’ ‘This decision is another step toward the future I deserve.’ ‘I am a strong and disciplined woman’ and so on. Remember your thoughts drive your emotions and feelings and these will influence your behaviours so you must continue to make affirming self-talk a part of your daily healing. It may seem unnatural, but it is really helpful to counterbalance the negative inner voice, when it becomes noisy and self-destructive.

Facing the Issue of Self-Sabotage

Fear of failure and fear of success and the extra demands they place on us can lead us to sabotage our recovery. Most of us have low self-esteem and are very critical of ourselves, putting ourselves down and feeling unable to accept a compliment. We put other people’s needs before our own because we don’t feel we are worthy to have our needs met. When you don’t think much of yourself, you easily sabotage your healing in conscious and unconscious ways, believing you are not allowed to feel good. Self-sabotage has been part of the recovery experience for some of us. For example: we started jobs we knew we didn’t like or could not do; we knowingly borrowed money that we knew we could not repay; we deliberately had unsafe sex; we got into fights; we got drunk knowing we were at risk; we have found nice places to rent and then allowed ourselves to fall behind in rental payments; we got parking fines and then didn’t pay them, knowing we’d end up in court; we’ve been in a safe rehab programme and then ‘hit the streets for a bender’; and some of us fear we may have turned a blind eye to the abuse of our children. These are some of the things we do when we step into the ‘couldn’t care less… do what you like…’ way of thinking that characterises the ‘victim’ way of living. The outcome is usually a setback in our healing, and this delays our progress and diminishes family happiness.

Instead of ‘beating ourselves up over it’ in the shame/blame/guilt game, we recognise from where the behaviours come and remember that each day is a new opportunity to begin afresh. In this way we are empowered to keep trying to make good decisions each day. Some choices are good and others are not. Some behaviours get what we want and others do not, however, we always get the consequences. That’s every human’s experience. As we grow stronger we are more willing to accept our setbacks as learning experiences and not view them as ‘the end of the world’ so we start feeling sorry for ourselves, or get down on ourselves. We are learning to be less critical and negative toward ourselves and get back up when we feel let down. We take the lesson from the experience and have another go. The exciting part is that as we do this we get stronger with each experience and build our capacity to resist a bit more the next time.
Journal Exercise

- Have you knowingly put yourself at risk?
- Have you on occasion purposefully harmed yourself or your circumstances?
- Have you ever thought ‘I’ll get around to paying that later?’
- Were these thought-through decisions?

Now go back and look at this situation and think about your responses.

What could you have actioned that would have been helpful to your happiness?

You are allowed to be happy! You deserve it!

Action something now that will work toward your happiness.

Facing the Issue of Isolation

It's hard to trust people after CSA and it can feel safer to isolate yourself from the possibility of hurt. We are scared of rejection, fear and being hurt by other people. We are overwhelmed by a sense of difference and we long to feel ‘normal’. The group has shown us that ‘normal’ is a socially constructed perception that is formed from the way we think other people live and the way we think they view us. It can make us more sensitive to what people say, which we can interpret as hurtful, reinforcing our sense of difference. For example, what is meant as a joke or a passing comment may be understood as a personal attack and reshaping this sensitively can be challenging. Our heightened awareness of body language and non-verbal cues mean we often interpret these responses as threats because it keeps us safe. This is a good thing when it is appropriate, but it can get in the way of friendships and lead us to isolate ourselves unnecessarily. In the group we are becoming open and honest with our communication and more assertive about our right to speak and be heard. These are life skills that most adults take for granted, but we are just learning them now.

Facing the Issue of Past Survival Responses

Many of our reactions and responses are grounded in the ones we used as children. Some are helpful and others are not. To respond in an age-appropriate manner in the here and now, we have to heal and nurture our inner child [13]. The abused inner child plays her life script of anger, rage, shame and fear, which effects unconscious reactions based on former emotional wounds and attitudes that keep
the wounds raw. A lot of energy goes into keeping our raging inner child quiet, but once we begin to nurture her and channel her outrage, she becomes quieter.

Our self-identity forms in early childhood and people build relationships with the environment and other humans on that foundation. Our childhood was spent reacting to trauma, fear and shame and we now have to go back and nurture our inner child and love her back to a state of inner peace. Love is a verb, a doing word, so to love ourselves we have to action changes within ourselves that lead to healthier relationships. We need to acknowledge our inner child’s experiences, respect her feelings and acknowledge the sadness and grief she has had to endure. In that way we do not keep carrying this suffering into the foreground of adult life. Our lack of socially acceptable ways to grieve our situation as children has meant many of us suppress these difficult emotions. As children we had no idea of how to get our emotional needs met and in adult life some of us have kept reacting in the ways that we used when we were children. Consequently, our adult emotional, mental, spiritual and physical needs may not have been met. These survival strategies of childhood can leave us empty, wounded and confused as adults. They keep alive the shame that is so toxic to our wellbeing and growth, leading us to believe there is something wrong with us and foster thoughts that say we should never have been born, or that we are a mistake.

There is nothing wrong with us as people. Our early life experiences were wrong and they have led us to build our life on a dysfunctional foundation of lies. Now that we are aware of these lies, we are reclaiming power over ourselves. We are observing ourselves and deliberately raising into our consciousness what happened to us so we can draw the strong and positive points from within ourselves and reclaim them as the foundations for our future. This involves honestly getting in touch with our inner selves – our thoughts, emotions, feelings, responses and reactions, which is no easy task, but it is happening over time and with support we are becoming stronger.

Most of us have a highly developed critical self living inside us and her voice can be loud, disapproving and shaming. She seeks to keep our emotions and behaviours under control. Her self-talk would have us believe there is something wrong with us and that our existence will be endangered if we let people see our emotions and our true self.

When I was younger I had a whole fantasy place in my head which had other people and places where I could hide and not get hurt. Creating that safe world inside my head worked when I was a child, but as an adult it’s hard to go there and still relate with my heart to relationships with my partner or children. I am having to relearn how to get in touch with feelings that I taught myself very carefully to avoid because they were not safe. So when things get out of hand it’s easier to withdraw to my safe place and when I’m there I don’t know what’s going on with the kids or anything. Then I snap out of it and I feel bad about what’s happening to the relationships with my children and that hurts. I get so mixed up, and I can’t work out what to do. I am struggling to relate with my heart because it’s really new and very scary, but I know I have to do it.
Using the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process you can observe your critical self by observing your thoughts, feelings, emotions, responses. You can ask questions like:

- What am I feeling and why?
- How is this connected to the past? How old was I then?

You may notice as we did, that as you become aware of your own responses and reactions, you also become aware of the responses of those around you, recognising when they are acting childish, or like a teenager, or a critical adult. The more you do this, the better you become at controlling your own reactions to another person’s response. You stop taking everything so personally and your capacity to tolerate people increases. That stops the hurt you feel when other people’s comments arouse the shame, guilt, anger and fear.

Emotions are energy in motion [16]. Therefore, emotions are meant to move out of us. Our attitudes can influence our emotions and affect our feelings. These emotions can get stuck inside us and manifest in our body. We may experience muscle tension, chest tightness, headaches, tummy aches, indigestion, ‘butterflies’ in the stomach, trouble swallowing, tight jaw and lower back pain as just a few common problems that indicate our emotions are not being released.

We now know the emotional energy generated by the CSA doesn’t go away, even when we try to deny it or suppress it. Releasing it in a safe way has been part of our healing, because unreleased we either explode in an uncontrolled outburst, or we implode inside and become ill.

Look back at Chapter 2 for a list of strategies we used to relieve emotional stress. Now check the list of ones you said you would like to try and action a plan to do them regularly.

Facing the Issue of Trust

"It makes it very hard to trust men. I am always thinking, ‘What do they want?’ or ‘Are they going to try and use me?’"

When you have been sexually abused by people who were supposed to be trustworthy adults, most of whom were men, it’s hard to trust any man, even one you might think should be trustworthy. You are never quite sure, because you have been hurt in the past.
When we give small amounts of trust and the person is found to be trustworthy, it becomes easier to trust again. However, when people you trust do not honour that, or worse, violate you in some way, trust becomes a dangerous activity and you tend to avoid trusting anyone, preferring to remain vigilant to protect yourself.

The early betrayal of essential trust by key adults in our lives leaves the inner child vulnerable and confused. The confusion is made worse when abuse is tied to love. The boundaries between love and sex, parental love, trust and safety are blurry and it leaves a confusing set of emotions that are difficult to separate.

Facing the Issue of Motivation

As we said in Chapter 1 it’s hard to think and talk about such deeply personal and painful things. We have all felt like quitting the healing journey more than once and here are some of the reasons we gave:

- The past patterns of living are predictable, so I know what to expect. To a degree I have learnt how to manage that and survive. The feeling of lack of control that working on the past produces is unsettling and unpredictable. Before starting this journey I could put these experiences into compartments in my mind but now they seem to be becoming harder to manage.

- I am growing but those around me are not. I resent the fact that I have to do all the recovery work when it was someone else’s fault this all happened in the first place.
As someone who has had an addiction, contemplating a future without drugs and alcohol is scary. On top of that, I have lost my circle of friends. As a drug user most of my friends were suppliers or users and I can’t be around them in recovery.

It’s been a long time since I faced my painful issues and to go through them and see that pain again; I just don’t believe it’s possible that the pain will ever go away in my case. So I say to myself, ‘If I stop this work now, then this pain will go away’ and that’s tempting to do.

I worry if people will like me when they know the truth about me. Will I like myself, because I don’t like who I am now, and is that going to change?

It’s painful listening to the hurts of others in the group as well as facing my own.

I feel like there is no end to the painful memories in my life. It’s like a bottomless pit of shit! Enough is enough! I don’t want to dredge up any more muck. I’m done with living in this mess and I am going to look forward from now.

Tip

We can only say, don’t quit! It does hurt but the hurt is lessened as your awareness and your compassion for yourself improve. This happens each time you choose your actions based on careful looking and thinking. If it’s too hard, stop for awhile. Have a rest. Get more support and when you are ready, pick it up again. But please try not to give up altogether.

Journal Exercise

In your journal express your feelings by writing or drawing your response:

- What do you have to gain by working on these CSA issues? (example: accepting myself, improving my current relationships, my children deserve a parent who is present, getting the respect I deserve, inner peace, personal control of my life…)

- What strategies can you use when you feel like quitting?
### Table 5.1 Some affirmations you may use in the transition process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-talk</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We can nurture ourselves via positive self-talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can calm down when we are anxious</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can affirm ourselves and each other in a group setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can protect ourselves and choose to retreat to the safe place within ourself</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can identify and keep in touch with our strengths</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Hopefulness</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We know we have to acknowledge the truth of our past to move on</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can create a new ending to our journey by starting to change now</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We can visualise a new way of living</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We are becoming increasingly aware of what triggers our doubts and fears</td>
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<tr>
<td>We will break old patterns of responding by doing it one day at a time</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Inner strength</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have stayed alive in the midst of huge adversity so we are survivors</td>
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<tr>
<td>We might have setbacks but we won’t give up because we want to change</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We are willing to work hard</td>
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<tr>
<td>We are retraining our minds and regaining control over decision-making</td>
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<tr>
<td>We are open to trying new ways to move forward</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Therapy</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have committed to therapy to help us gain the support we need to grow</td>
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<tr>
<td>We hold a common experience so we can grow through sharing this</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some of us are good at reflective journaling and expressing ourselves creatively</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are working at building a repertoire of coping skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can stay safe and deal with issues so we are encouraged to keep working</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>We try to seek therapeutic and safe people as our therapists whenever possible</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Support</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are honest and open with our children</td>
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<tr>
<td>We ask for support when we need it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We provide each other with recognition and reinforcement</td>
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<tr>
<td>We are assertive about our support needs and communicate these clearly</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Spiritual strengths</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have spiritual guidance – an ever present help</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We are living with values and boundaries that sustain us</td>
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<tr>
<td>We are uniquely valued and loved by God</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We have a strong and solid foundation on which to build our life</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We have a source of hope, meaning and purpose in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have a source of unconditional love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our spiritual relationships are trustworthy and dependable</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We understand forgiveness – both giving it and receiving it</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We have a new identity</td>
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Summary

In this chapter we shared some of the key issues that we have faced and identified as important aspects of our healing. These issues include alcohol, drug and gambling related responses to our past CSA and our ongoing experiences with interpersonal violence. Other significant issues we need to face include: our disappointment with our family relationships especially with our mothers, our ongoing confusion and problems creating order from our chaotic lives that can lead to self-harm and mental health problems. We looked at the struggle we have to face ourselves and work out what aspects of ourselves we want to reclaim and what aspects we should let go. We considered how our survival responses helped us to live through great distress, and we began to separate aspects of this self-discovery that could be useful to reframe and create a stronger sense of self, incorporating the useful lessons learnt from the past into a future that has meaning and purpose. To do this we need to examine our attitudes, emotions and feelings which is the focus of Chapter 6.
Chapter 6

Facing Emotions and Feelings

The journey to healing means recognizing that there are areas in ourselves that we need to grow and develop. We have within us and around us what we need to become stronger. Just as our bodies develop strength through exercise, we need our mind to get stronger through exercising our will and practicing new ways of living and being in the world. To do this you first have to face the emotions and feelings you have inside you. There are many emotions and feelings that dwell within us; the ones we call “The Big Five” are: shame, guilt, fear, anger and love. Facing these emotions and the pain and grief that can accompany them is difficult but necessary work. In this chapter, we go through the work we have undergone over the past year and share our experiences with you. You may identify with most of these feelings, but some may be foreign to your experience. As always take what helps you and leave what is not helpful, but don’t discount any possibilities until you make an informed choice with the knowledge before you.
Facing Pain

We are getting stronger and we know that facing our pain and experiencing it is part of the healing journey. To face the pain of our past some of us have had to increase our medication so we could work through painful situations. Most of us have stopped using alcohol and drugs so that we feel our pain and experience it. We now have to work out what is happening and reframe our past experiences so they have less power over current thoughts and actions. We then put in place strategies to cope when painful memories recur, so they become manageable and eventually diminish.

It is emotionally draining and exhausting facing the pain and we can need extra sleep to regenerate and face a new day. That gut churning feeling is tiresome and it is always just below the surface. Facing it will help it lose its powerful hold on us.

Tip

Examining your pain requires a safe person and a safe place. You may need to go back to Chapter 1 and find someone on the list or somewhere safe to retreat to, so that you can face the past in safety. It’s hard to talk about feelings and emotions because they can increase distress so try to ride with the uncomfortable feelings until they settle and then speak about them. You may need additional medication to face the discomfort of doing this work and we suggest you speak to a trusted therapist or doctor about this.

Healing is multi-faceted and needs varying mixes of counselling, support, medication and activities that nourish and heal the spirit, as well as the mind and body. We are suspicious of approaches that only use one method to promote healing, such as medication only techniques which ignore the fact we need to face the pain, move through it or learn to live with it, to heal. Some of us want to reframe our situation by altering our thinking and our behaviours, so that our body triggers its own chemicals to create a happier internal environment. Consequently, some of us are looking into various options for healing that include complementary therapies, support groups, counselling strategies, religious activities, healing rituals and interventions.

In the beginning, when you first start feeling your pain, you can’t think… your whole body feels different. You feel it in every part of your body, your heart is cracking in half, your muscles are tense and it pulls your back out, you get pain in your legs and headaches… You really experience pain. The thoughts get translated to a whole body feeling, it’s not just in your mind.
Facing Blame

Laying blame is an action that always has an effect. When we seek to establish blame we focus on establishing guilt rather than on changing the behaviour. When we think of somebody as being to blame for an event we not only judge the behaviour but also the person, so we can assign guilt to the behaviour. In our culture, establishing guilt is usually followed by a consequence which is often a punishment. We grew up learning this system of blame, guilt and punishment, so we have continued to apply it to ourselves and to others. We frequently do this through our self-talk, ‘It’s his fault… It’s always my fault…’. So how can we change this blame establishing behaviour? Not by punishing ourselves for doing it, but by seeking to replace the behaviour pattern with one that may get us closer to our overall objective to be less burdened by guilt and shame. When we notice ourselves saying (either aloud or in our head) things like: ‘Who’s fault is it? Who did this or that?’ or we notice the anger is welling up within us, we need to stop and ask the following questions:

- What difference does establishing blame make?
- Will establishing blame change anything that is happening or has happened?
- Will establishing blame change the behaviour of the responsible person?

Tip

As you review your responses to these questions you will probably note that some of your emotions are less intense. You may also see that your self-talk moves to become more problem-solving. From this place you can start to determine your immediate and long-range goals and the action steps you need to take to achieve these.

Facing Shame and Guilt

What is Shame?

Shame is often a reaction to other people’s criticism, and our disappointment at our failure to live up to our obligations or the expectations others have of us. Living in society we want to meet the social expectations of mothers, women, lovers etc. Therefore our personal desires are usually based on social expectations of these roles. When we feel we are deficient in some way we punish ourselves because we blame ourselves for the perceived shortcomings. An experience of shame results from an exposure of self. A core element of this shame is failure to achieve a standard or goal. In a state
of shame you cover who and what you are. Shame is one part of our self (such as our adult) passing judgement on other parts of our self (such as our inner child) and concluding that we have faults that are so bad that we should feel ashamed. We judge ourselves to be inadequate, unworthy, or defective. We feel defective in a way that we wouldn’t want anyone to know about, so we hide our defects by pretending to be different. In that way we create a false self to show the world, in place of our embarrassing true self. We hide behind a mask, fearful our faults will be found out.

When people are ashamed they lose their sense of self and their ability to identify with others in their community. The cumulative effect of repeating messages that we are different somehow makes us see ourselves as a person who makes mistakes, and this can lead to feelings of guilt and thinking that we are the mistake, which adds to our shame. We have repeated these messages over many years so we feel unlovable and unacceptable. If we cannot accept ourselves, we are driven into a life of self-rejection, suffering, and possibly serious psychological and mental health problems. Remember, the situation that produced our shame was not of our own doing, so we do not have to keep enduring this shame and its consequences.

Bradshaw points out the false self we create is different from our true self in either a direction that is socially accepted (develop a self that is organised, perfectionist, driven, domineering, the hero/caretaker role, prude etc) or socially frowned upon (careless, passive ‘doormat’, untidy, ‘scapegoat’, ‘black sheep’, crude, aggressive etc) [12]. For example you may develop a false self as a ‘high achiever’ or as an ‘addict’. So the obsessive workaholic and the alcoholic can both have behaviours that are grounded in a false self put in place to hide the emptiness within us that is created by the shame-based identity we hold.

Destructive shame is the root of many addictions and compulsions. We feel defective and look for something to make us feel better, gain courage, forge our difference. These things divert attention from the shame and pain we feel. They reduce our anxiety and produce quick and temporary results, but as Figure 6.1 shows this behaviour just deepens our shame.

\[ I'm\ \textit{choosing not to wear the shame, not to wear the guilt, not to wear all that bullshit anymore. You know, I did for years and all it did was cut my legs off...}\]
We believe the ‘addiction’ is the solution to hide our shame. Eating, spending, working, gambling, drugs, drinking, sex, always pleasing people, are behaviours that provide relief from an inner emptiness and help us escape the need to face the inner self that we view as defective. Bradshaw notes there is no way to change your being by doing alone [12]. Discuss your feelings about issues so you no longer need to hide yourself, then your attitude toward yourself will start to change.

Some of us find that prayer and confession allow us to share our issues and we are becoming more comfortable within ourselves. In religion we find hope and healing from shame. We find identity as a child of God. It is providing us with something meaningful to fill the emptiness we feel inside. It is giving life purpose and our past experiences meaning.

When we understand how shame has worked to shape our identity it is easier to refuse to wear the guilt and/or shame and place it where it belongs with the perpetrator/s. This is empowering and has become easier with practise. The more we free ourselves from carrying a burden of blame, guilt and shame, the stronger we become.

For some, being in the presence of the perpetrator surfaces anger, guilt and shame. When this happens it leaches our new found strength and the perpetrator regains power and control over our
thoughts and feelings. Consequently, many have chosen to cease contact with the perpetrator/s or their childhood family to stop being in situations that give rise to anger and shame.

Facing Fear

It takes energy to process responses and recognise you are reacting out of fear, but it is an important aspect of facilitating transition. It’s good to use the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process to check your responses to fearful situations.

What is Fear?

There are three responses generated by fear that rise within us in different circumstances. They are:

**Fight:** This can lead to reactions that are verbally or physically abusive. At other times people flee the situation and fight from a distance, once they have retreated from immediate physical danger. They employ various non-contact fighting strategies such as writing hurtful letters, sending SMS messages, phone calls, legal action etc.

*He sent me threatening SMS messages for weeks and I could not erase them without having to open them first. It made me really frightened and angry.*

**Fight:** Using this reaction, we run away from the situation. We can feel overwhelmed or powerless to change our circumstances, so we run away to protect ourselves, or our identity. Examples of running away can include changing jobs, leaving relationships, moving house, changing the subject, avoiding the person, shifting schools, etc.

*Fear kept me on the street for nearly two years you know, just running ahead of it. Hoping they wouldn’t catch up with me... running from my past, running, always running away...*

**Freeze:** With this reaction we retreat into ourselves emotionally and withdraw our presence in the relationship. This is generally because we are angry or frightened, so we react as if we were not present in the situation.

*If I’m frightened I go real quiet. I try to become invisible... pretend I’m not there... that way I might not get hit...*
Fear kept us running for years. Some of us have been so scared of the past that we have continued to run, trying to stay ahead of the fear. If fear gets out of control it leads to panic, anxiety, depression, or aggressive and violent behaviour. Sometimes the fear is rational and based on prior experiences, but at other times it’s based on what we think might happen. Sometimes it’s our mind making manageable issues into problems and then making them bigger than they really are. Fear requires us to plan so we can think through possible consequences and then cover all the bases to keep ourselves safe. If you are used to having all the contingencies planned then instead of feeling excitement over the unknown you can feel fear. It can put a negative twist on situations when you don’t want it to. Such fear increases suffering.

Fear is mostly based on what we have experienced so we know the consequences of certain actions. Therefore what I fear may not terrify you and vice versa. For example if you were always punished physically or emotionally the minute you opened your mouth, then speaking to a counsellor about deep painful issues may surface the fear. You may want to go to counselling but you just can’t get there because of the fear. Try to let someone know it’s a problem so they can help make it easier. Many of us live with continual disruption so we experience fear when we have to stay in one place. We worry that people might expect more from us in recovery and that we may not be able to meet expectations. The shame-based thinking can resurface and add to the fear. The lack of predictable outcomes in childhood taught us that life was confusing, so when it starts getting too predictable and organised we freak out! Facing the fear can change its power over us because when we experience the situation in a supported and planned manner and demonstrate that the anticipated fear did not
happen we have less fear the next time we face that situation. Facing your fears does give you a ‘thicker skin’ which professionals term ‘resilience’. This resilience improves your ability to bounce back the next time you face that situation.

Recognising what we are thinking and feeling using ‘Look, Think, Act’ when we are afraid, helps us to plan how to face our fears, which is a significant part of the healing journey.

Journal Exercise

Think of a situation that raises fear.

Using ‘Look, Think, Act’ journal your responses to these questions:

- What’s happening within me when the fear arises?
- What does the fear have me thinking about myself?
- How do I usually react when fear rises within me?
- What responses do these reactions usually bring?
- Are there other ways I can respond to provide the outcomes I would prefer?
- What can I do to change my thoughts and attitudes to quell the fear within?
- What is most important to me right now?
- What is the most achievable thing I can act on right now?
- What people/places will support me to achieve my goal?

Tip

When the fear rises within you, ask yourself these four quick questions based on the journal thoughts you have documented. This will help you call into your memory the responsive action you planned to manage the fear.

1. What is going on?
2. What do I need to do right now?
3. How should I take action?
4. What people / places can support my chosen action?
Facing Anger

Most of us are trying to manage anger that continues to well up within us. This anger may be more appropriately named outrage about what happened to us as children. We want to channel the energy and passion of our righteous anger more appropriately so we don’t turn the anger inward and become self-destructive. We need to see how the anger works in our lives. It can either work towards creating the future that we want, or it works against us. It seldom does nothing. The anger within us can lead us to behave in certain ways. Suppressing the anger rarely removes or even shifts the anger. We can try to suppress the anger and hide it, but then it becomes frozen within us and that can lead to depression as the anger is not expressed, so it turns inward. We now see how that allows the perpetrator’s actions to continue to hurt us. Alternatively, if the anger is given an outward expression it can lead to violent and abusive relationships with people we care about, which again hurts us. If we turn the anger toward another we can end up being in trouble with the law, which again hurts us. The anger turned inward feeds the shame/guilt cycle and increases our sense of powerlessness, which in some cases has led to violence toward ourselves via suicide attempts. In all cases the anger continues to hurt us, so diffusing the anger by recognising why it is there and what we want to do about it, is an important step in healing.

What is Anger?

Understandings about anger vary across cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The way we respond to anger is socially constructed. It is not genetically or biologically determined, or exclusively part of being male. Such myths can make people feel hopeless about facing and dealing with the anger. Some of us were raised in homes where anger led to violence, so we learnt less helpful ways to respond to anger.

Expressing anger can be helpful but it often fails to take into account the effect this expression has on the person expressing, and those being expressed to. We now see that being aggressive is not the same as being angry. Many times the anger we felt was subtly eroding our inner peace. At other times displaying anger allowed people in our lives to get what they wanted.

We all have different personalities through which we process the anger. Some people are quiet thinkers and like to process anger within their head. Others must give the anger words and need to
process the emotion by speaking it out. Others cannot find words and act out the anger. Whatever the action, the first step is getting in touch with the emotion of anger and recognising its presence within us. Then we need to give it a name and a voice. We find this decreases the power of the anger and enables it to leave our bodies, before we hurt ourselves or others. It stops the painful by-products of anger – shame, guilt, sadness and rejection, as well as the real possibility of physical injuries.

**Figure 6.3 Facing Anger**

- **Anger processed in your mind and kept there**: Anger processed in your head (and kept there) may get directed inward and lead to depression, or deep bitterness.
- **Processed verbally**: Anger that is processed verbally, quickly turns into yelling and verbal abuse.
- **Processed in reactive behavioural reactions**: Anger processed in reactive actions may turn into expressions of physical abuse and violent reactions directed at others or ourselves.

Anger doesn’t lie dormant inside us just waiting to explode, nor can its presence be simply reasoned away. Anger is not like a decaying tooth that can be extracted. It is not helpful to say the anger is someone’s fault, because that view leads to blaming other people for ‘making us angry’. We see that these ways of understanding anger provide us with an excuse for being angry, but are not helpful in processing our outrage and using the energy and passion to move us toward understanding our choices and actioning our preferred responses.

Anger is an emotion that rises within every person. When we understand what is triggering this emotion we can take responsibility for what we do about it. Anger occurs in a social context. It is often over a change that has been imposed upon us, or a situation over which we have little or no control, or an assault on our sense of self. We have choices about how, where and when we express the anger. There are real effects on the hearers of angry language, so we do have a responsibility to ourselves and others about how we process and respond to this emotion.

When the anger rises within us we need to spend time using ‘Look, Think, Act’ to examine our emotions. It’s a huge thing to be able to give an emotion like anger a name. Then, try and work out
why the anger is there. What is the reason? Sometimes there are many reasons and the presenting issue is not the real cause of the anger. It's hard to resolve issues when you haven’t got a clear idea of what you’re resolving. So to be able to talk about the anger, start by asking yourself ‘What is going on?’ Then if possible name it and voice it aloud, or write it down, or express it by drawing on paper. Find some way to safely express it so you can examine the emotion more closely. Then look at the effects the emotion of anger is having within you and note how other people are responding to you.

Tip

Don’t say ‘my’ anger, but try to say ‘the’ anger. Anger is not threaded into your being, it is an emotion, so like all emotions you can engage your will and control it. Sometimes anger and confusion go hand in hand and you’re really not sure why the anger is moving up within you. It’s easier to work things out once you identify ‘What’s going on?’ by talking, writing, or drawing. You can then examine it as if it was a physical object.

Journal Exercise

We spent several sessions exploring anger and its many forms of expression and the understandings we had developed about anger throughout our lives. Here are some of the questions we answered in the group. It will help you to work through these issues in your journal, or with a counsellor, or support group.

Social understandings of anger

• In which contexts does anger appear in our society?
• When is anger allowed in our society? When is anger not allowed?
• How is anger used to control people?
• What are some differences you have noticed between anger and aggression?
• How often is anger and violence related in society?

The effects of unhelpful anger

• How did you feel when someone was angry toward you when you didn’t do anything to deserve it?
• Are you more or less able to listen and/or speak to someone when you are angry?
• Does being angry help solve problems? Why or why not?
• What effects does anger have on your important relationships (parent-child, intimate partners, close friends)?
What happens inside you when the anger arises?

- What happens in your body when the anger arises? Here’s some things we noted:
  - tension in muscles of back, neck, chest;
  - ‘stomach knots’, ‘butterflies’, feeling sick – nausea;
  - shallow and fast breathing, heart races;
  - feeling hot; clenched jaw, gritted teeth, clenched fist;
  - face and neck puff up and redden;
  - spit when you speak and pitch of voice is higher and volume increases and we might cry. We also noted there were subtle expressions of anger that we had noticed such as whispering, silence, cold stares, facial expressions.
- How do you usually react when responses provoke the anger within you?
  - pace up and down the room, rub face, twist hair, stay still, talk loud, yell, inhale deeply and hold breath, puff up chest, chain smoke…
- What responses do these reactions usually bring?
  - We can yell, argue, rant and rave, withdraw, escape, hit, punch…
- What feelings well up with the anger?
  - feel trapped, powerless, out of control, frustrated, scared, insecure, hurt
- Are there warning signs that the anger is coming?
- What does the anger have you thinking about yourself?
- What are the effects that the anger is having on me and others around me?
- What can I do about it? What do I want to act on?
- What little things might change now?
- Do I want to sit with it a while until I’m clear about what the problem is?
- What does the anger have you saying inside your head?
- Are there situations when you get angry? How can you avoid them?
- Did anger ever move into violence in your childhood?
  - Often anger and violence were welded together so we learnt to fear expressions of anger, because it came wrapped in abuse.
What alternative behaviours can you employ when the anger is present?

Make a list of responses that suit you.

We said:

- Walk away until you’ve cooled off
- Speak using non-aggressive words
- Breathe in and out slowly 3 times and count to 10 before responding
- Work it off – exercising, riding a bike, going for a walk/run
- Do the exact opposite of what you used to (this saves the arduous task of thinking when the emotion is driving you to drink or use, you only have to tell yourself ‘Do the opposite to what you are thinking now!’)
- When things calm down let the people you live/work/play with understand your situation, so they may be more patient with you. If possible let them help you think of new ways to respond to issues.
- Use ‘Look, Think, Act’ to identify the feelings you are experiencing, name them and try to name the source of the anger. Take action to express the anger safely.

Think of a time in your life when the anger was there and things could have turned ugly and violent but you did not let it happen.

- What did you do instead of bursting out?
- What were you saying to yourself?
- What were you hoping would happen as a result of your actions?
- What was most difficult about this time?
- What helps make it possible to respond in helpful ways?
- What sustains compassion, peace, supportiveness in yourself?

Remember: Anger is an emotion so it can be controlled by your will. There is never any excuse for violent and abusive reactions to anger.
Suggestions to Deal with Emotions and Feelings

We have to make sense of what we’re experiencing in a way that allows us to maintain our sense of identity and wellbeing. If we can’t make sense of it, the issues hang around in our head, bothering us and affecting our physical, mental and spiritual health. We all live by our experiences and try to make sense of them via stories/pictures we hold in our mind (schema). These pictures or stories help us make sense of who we are, where we are, and where we are going. The ‘Look, Think, Act’ process is going on in our heads. Being able to put the emotion into words or express it in other appropriate behaviours gets it out of our head and allows us to leave it or pick it up in a new way that is more empowering to our desired goals and values.

Tip

These are steps in the process we used to deal with emotions that you may find useful:

1. Look at what’s happening within you

   The emotion wells up for a reason. Try not to go with that instant desire to react, instead work out what’s going on in the situation, and inside you? Then choose your response. You need to recognise when your buttons are being pushed and choose responses to shift the situation, rather than reacting impulsively from old patterns of behaviour.

2. Try to feel the experience

   Try to name your thoughts, feelings and attitudes – getting in touch with your body sensations and feelings is the beginning of understanding where they come from.

3. Express those emotions and feelings

   Some of the ways we express emotions include: crying, talking, drama, art, journalling, speaking, counselling, allowing thoughts and feelings to be taken outside of your head and given some form of expression. This can be difficult when for years you have been comfortable in silence. When you are able, talk about the emotion and why you think it might be there. It becomes easier to work out what the issue or problem is, and what you need to do to deal with it. Speak about issues early in a calm and assertive way as this may diffuse aggressive responses and help you get a more desirable outcome.
4. Focus on times when you have shown you are strong

Make a list of times you were strong and able. For example, note good relationships or experiences with your children, friends, your talents, people who have shown they respect and care about you. The alternate story of a stronger you will become more real if you allow it to stay fore-grounded in your mind. Think about it and speak to it yourself. Tell yourself ‘I am an able, lovable and capable woman’. Be courageous enough to claim the new story for yourself. Remind yourself often in your self-talk of this alternative story until it gets stronger in your mind. Say it as often as you did when you were learning your multiplication tables at school. You may also find strength in quotes, poems, scripture verses, songs from which you can draw wisdom, instruction and courage. You can place them around your home to remind you to read them and incorporate the wisdom.

5. Find people in your life who can confirm the stronger you

It’s really important to have a few connections with people who can reflect to you, in conversation and in actions, the story of your preferred identity. They should be people of integrity and sincerity. Focus on building a few relationships with people who do see those qualities in you and minimise contact with negative people who reinforce the ‘victim’ story that makes you feel less able.

6. Live in the day and don’t look too far ahead in the early stages

Focus on today and the immediate future. Practise keeping strong each day. These ways eventually become new ways of living as they are practised. Instead of feeling excitement for a new better future, fear twists that into being afraid of the unknown. Living in the day helps slow down that anxiety of not knowing where to move next.

7. Recognise that you can set yourself short-term goals that deal specifically with some of your emotions, feelings and/or issues.

Put in place the steps you need to take and the support you may require to achieve the goals. Write the goals up and put them in a place where you will read them each day. Review the progress you are making toward your goals each week.
8. Be prepared for the fact that ‘love’ can hurt

I didn’t even recognise what it felt like to be loved. I really didn’t know. That was the big whammy... on the weekend my son was really loving to me and it hurt so badly. I felt so guilty over all the years that I’ve not been able to be there for him.

My son used to reject me and said he was embarrassed of me. He was always nasty. He’d come in and smash my door or things. I’m scared because if I don’t know how to love, how can I pass that onto my son. He’s got to work it out to pass it onto his kids. So I need to work out how I can get in touch with love and understand it.

Love is an emotion that can well up within us confusing responses that may be painful. Healing wounds are tender and need to be treated with care and so do healing hearts. Be gentle with yourself, because as you repair important relationships, such as those with your children, emotions such as guilt, shame, anger and fear may well up again. Keep your focus on making the current relationship work and the past will have less control over your present situation. This sometimes requires that you speak the truth in love and confront adult children with your understandings of what happened in the past, so they too can make sense of their life experiences.

Facing Love

Love is a misused word in our culture. We know love is an action word, not just a feeling or emotion. Establishing and maintaining boundaries is loving. Caring and continuing to be emotionally available is an act of love. We even found that love meant asking forgiveness from our children when fear-driven responses may have led us to be less available to them than we would have liked to be. Loving ourselves also requires forgiving ourselves for the things we did not do, could not do, or didn’t recognise as options. This was particularly so in our role as parents.

Learning to Love Ourselves

The process of consciously starting to see we have good qualities is a part of the healing process. The need to find ourselves, know ourselves, value ourselves and like ourselves is a necessary step in making internal peace with our self. We start by speaking in affirming ways, congratulating ourselves regularly within our head on aspects of the day. Some days, just getting out of bed is hard, and keeping an appointment is a challenge, so affirming ourselves remains important.

It gets exhausting to walk the thin middle line between self-doubt and self-belief. It requires conscious effort to re-pattern our thinking by counteracting negative thoughts within ourselves. As we become better at understanding our emotions, feelings, thoughts and beliefs we are thoughtfully choosing behaviours and actions. We feel more able to situate ourselves in our relationships and feel less necessity to be guarded.
Loving the Inner Child

Nurturing the inner child stops her being a demanding brat. Our inner child can be challenging. Imagine taking a toddler shopping when she always wants something and she does not stop nagging until she gets it. When she’s dragging her feet, she needs to be disciplined so she does not exasperate. That’s what the inner child can be like inside our head. She likes to be loved, cared for and safe, so she feels alive and can discover her creativity and playfulness. We found talking calmly but firmly to her quietens her, but from time to time she gets the upper hand and becomes difficult to calm. Our inner child needs to feel loved and nurtured, but not spoilt. She needs to be disciplined, but not restricted. She needs limits so she is not over-indulged or abused. Give her small treats but do not give in to her every want. Her demanding nature is what makes her powerful. She will not let up if you do not meet her needs and her greatest need is love. If we ignore her she will become noisy and demand attention. However, if we go back to her (inside our mind) and comfort her, hug and nurture her and tell her we recognise she hurts, she comes back to join our adult survivor and we move forward with life as an integrated whole. She will calm down and integrate with the inner adult to the degree she is loved. When she is content she is a lot of fun!

Tip

When your inner child becomes demanding she may need extra nurturing. Your self-talk should be calm and assertive. Do things that do not require you to buy her things to keep her calm and happy. Some simple things we have tried include: allow her time to draw, colour-in, swing at the playground, climb a tree, go for a bike ride, build a sand castle, dance to your favourite music, cuddle a soft toy or blanket, watch children’s television and join in the activities, read a children’s story book, go to a pet shop and watch the puppies, pat an animal, grow a flower, pick some flowers.

I think my inner child wants the things she did not have back then. I can’t remember ever being a happy fun-filled child. I grew up too quickly, now my inner child won’t leave me alone.

I went shopping and I couldn’t afford to buy extra things. I wanted something, and my adult said “No, you don’t need that” and next thing I’m hearing “Yes you do”. I’m like “No, no, no!” saying it over and again, but I ended up buying it anyway, because she’s so demanding.

I’ve still got that child in me, but I don’t really have to go back to her as much any more. She used to be in a corner, shaking and crying, completely lost and alone. A lady taught me to go to her by closing my eyes and just go over to her and gently put my arms around her. I remember the first time I did it. The lady said ‘What does she want?’ I said ‘She wants me to put my arms around her and hold her.’ She said ‘Go to that child’ and I actually did it. It really broke something. I couldn’t bear anyone touching me, so I had to learn to go to her… to go into my emotions like that was terrifying. I did it, and that started the change in me. Instead of rejecting her pain, I embraced her… and she became more confident. I can feel fear and sometimes I actually go back with her into that corner before I realise it… but then I part myself from her and start to parent her in a really loving way. How can I do all this loving and guiding when I have never learned how? My higher power is my guiding force, my way of knowing love, giving it and receiving it…
Forgiving Mistakes of the Past

Forgiving mistakes of the past can be difficult, especially when those mistakes are rooted in our childhood experiences. Shame and guilt can drive negative self-talk, making it hard to love ourselves when we feel ashamed of our actions and behaviors. In the group, we learned that we can stop ‘beating ourselves up’ over past responses, such as alcohol misuse, drug taking, gambling, prostitution, etc. We now recognize that these responses are grounded in our childhood experiences. Those who have begun to acknowledge that they happened and refuse to keep feeling shame over the past are finding it easier to reclaim their lives and build on their strengths.

Recognising Power and Control in Relationships

How power is used impacts on how much we are able to trust and how safe we feel within a relationship. Imbalance of power undermines self-confidence and self-worth, making it difficult to feel secure in our relationships. Recognizing that all relationships have dimensions of power located within them and how these can be shifted within the relationship so we are not being manipulated or manipulating others, is an important part of healing and growing. We know that the impact of unequal power in relationships almost always negatively impacts the person who has the least power. We now recognize some of the signs of unequal power in relationships, so we can look at new ways to situate ourselves. We are trying to implement small changes that slowly shift the power dynamic in our relationships. We are trying to take back control on issues where we can. When possible, we look at what’s happening and think about why it’s happening and then use small actions to change our situation in subtle ways. This makes the situation more bearable and provides options to action change when we are ready and able. This is an area we are still working on but with practice, we are recognizing misplaced power and addressing the imbalance.

Understanding the Power Dynamics in an Abusive Family

For those who were sexually abused within the family (usually by fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, foster parents, uncles or brothers) we now recognize the skill with which the perpetrator abused his power to manipulate our silence and broker fear within the family, which kept us all in his control. As we were groomed for his needs, he ensured that each family member was manipulated, coerced or intimidated to respond in ways that sustained his agenda. The only predictable part of our childhood experiences was the anxiety and fear we felt in our homes, which were often unsafe and uncertain, because we never knew how our interactions toward each other would unfold.
Our mothers were successfully disempowered and alienated in the abuse situation. Every family member played a role in this bizarre act that was controlled by the perpetrator. We were almost all alienated from our sisters, brothers and our mothers in this abuse process and given roles no child should be required to play. For many of us our mothers became emotionally unavailable because they were intimidated and vulnerable, living under the fear of the perpetrator’s consequences. We were cut off from family and friends because the perpetrator was usually jealous and obsessively possessive. In all of this we usually denied it was happening and tried to pretend everything was normal in our home. Everyone in the family seemed to blame one another to rationalise the dysfunctional and chaotic life we led.

Journal Exercise

In your journal take some time to look and think about each member of your family and get a picture of the power dynamics within your family story. Create a table and answer similar questions for each family member. Then take the time to reflect on your family picture and see where you fit. Did the power dynamics divide and separate your family?

It’s important to see this picture so you can separate yourself from this family dynamic. You no longer need to live in that abusive power dynamic today and recognising this will help you separate yourself from those unhealthy relationships.

Table 6.1 Questions about childhood family dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member</th>
<th>Question to reflect on</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1. What was your mother like? What can you remember about her personality? What were her best qualities? What were her worst qualities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. When someone was abusive in the home how did she respond? (Eg cry, yell, fight, get drunk, become silent, blamed... etc)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. How did your mother treat you and your sisters and brothers? (Eg I was ignored, my sister was her favourite, she was protective etc)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. What did your mother do each day – what was her day filled with?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. How was she when your father was not at home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. How close were you to your mother? Did your mother talk to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Was she available to you if you needed to speak to her? Did she listen to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Did she treat all the children the same, or did she play favourites?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9. Did she have friends or go out socially? Did this pattern shift over time?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Did your mother drink alcohol? How did she act once she’d been drinking? What did she do then?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tip

After you have finished reflecting on your childhood family you may see how the perpetrator set up the rest of the family in the ‘blame game’, perhaps using intimidation to manipulate you into silence and setting you up against each other so that he could maintain his power and control. Now think about how your family would have been if the abuse had not occurred. How would it have been if the best aspects of each person had been encouraged to develop? Abuse within families creates angst and dysfunction. It may be helpful to separate yourself from those family dynamics to facilitate healing.

Constructions on Romance

He started out giving me lots of little gifts, but somehow that shifted to me being manipulated so I could get what I needed to live. I didn’t get it – the basics – unless I performed. He turned the power off in the house if I refused to have sex with him. He even used food and money to get what he wanted. I felt like a circus animal, performing

We interpreted some behaviour in the early stages of relationships as romantic but now recognise how these notions can shift to become power imbalances and controlling responses over time. Some examples from our group explains, ‘My boyfriend rang up regularly and I thought he cared, but it soon became ringing me up several times a day to check what I was doing so he could control my movements.’ ‘It started out as helping me to manage my finances and before I knew it he took over my bank

| Father (stepfather, foster father) | 1. What was your father like? What can you remember about his personality? What were his best qualities? What were his worst qualities?  
2. How did your father treat you and your sisters and brothers? (Eg I was ignored, my sister was his favourite, he was protective etc)  
3. What did your father do each day?  
4. What did your father do when he came home from work?  
5. How close were you to your father? Did your father talk to you?  
6. Was he available to you if you needed to speak to him? Did he listen to you?  
7. Did he treat all the children the same or did he play favourites?  
8. Did your father drink alcohol? How did he act once he’d been drinking? What did he do then?  
9. When he saw you how were you greeted? How was your mother greeted? How was your sister/brother greeted? Did he play favourites? To whom?  
10. When he got angry how did he react? Did he punish you? Did he punish any other member of the family? How? |
| Sisters and Brothers | 1. How did you treat your sisters and brothers?  
2. How did they treat you? Did you have favourites?  
3. Did you fight? Who did you fight with most?  
4. What were the relationships between each of you like?  
5. Where did you fit? |
accounts and eventually it was a complete take-over of my inheritance. It happened a bit at a time and I didn’t see it coming. While he was gaining control of my money he was also making me feel like I was way too dumb to do it and that he was doing me a real favour.’ This man took all her money and left her with nothing financially, but she had also come to feel powerless and empty.

Tip

These behaviours may start as romantic interests, but over time they can shift to become controlling. The person abusing power is usually mistrusting and asserts their own controlling agenda. They use behaviours such as not believing you, making you feel stupid by using put downs, telling you what to do and think, dismissing your ideas and ways of doing things, ignoring you, becoming angry, threatening, sulky if you try to re-assert yourself. If you reflect back on some of your relationships you may see how these behaviours may have appeared romantic at first and how the power balance shifted over time through your partner’s manipulation and control, to become abusive behaviours.

You should think about what drives the need to know where you are all the time. It can be concern, but when it moves to checking up without cause, or controlling your movements, it should raise a ‘stop’ sign, a ‘red alert flag’, or a ‘warning bell’ in your mind. If your partner is concerned about you they should demonstrate trust and respect. They will believe you when you answer them and provide you with the personal space you need to grow independently within the relationship.

You may not recognise all the qualities that raise the warning bells in your mind at first, but if you take the time to look and think about what is going on, you will piece together the best information you have and base your decisions on the facts. The warning signs can come in different packages so you may not see the whole picture to start with, but over time you may see rudeness, obsessive controlling behaviours, put-downs and demands. You now know these are not part of a healthy relationship. When you take time to look and think about what’s happening, you will see the signs. Then put the picture together and think about what you can action to create the changes you want. You can choose to deny or ignore the signs, and most of us have done this in the past because it hurts to see what is happening. You may choose to stay in the relationship or action something that may help your partner to see their behaviour is inappropriate. However, most of us now realise it is a trap to keep putting the best construction on what you are experiencing. Another common trap is to feel sorry for your partner and hope the promises they make to change their behaviours will be kept. You will find it helpful to talk to someone about your options and plans. Please do it earlier, rather
than later, because the longer this toxic relationship goes on, the more powerless you will become and the harder it will be to action the protective changes you need to make to keep safe.

We now recognise the warning signs of controlling behaviour and we know where those behaviours can lead. We recognise our personal freedom is at stake when our boundaries are tested. We pay more attention to the red flags, warning bells and danger signs because they are important to our safety and growth. We learn more signs as we look for them and build our knowledge, so that we recognise we’ve been down this road before and we know where it leads. We will then either get out, or assert our rights as soon as our partner’s words, actions or behaviours raise unwelcome feelings within us, because we know it’s a sign that there’s probably more to come. We are all learning to choose the responses that are more likely to get the outcome we need/want.

Table 6.2 has some romantic behaviours that can shift to become possessive and controlling as the relationship moves on over time. If you are becoming increasingly disempowered in a relationship and unable to make your own choices, this is a warning sign to start thinking about where your relationship is heading. Get professional help if you are unsure or concerned about your relationship (see Appendix A for places you can call for help).
Table 6.2
Behaviours that we think are romantic at the start of a relationship and end up controlling and manipulative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic at First…</th>
<th>Later it may become…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He rings you or messages you often to say he loves you</td>
<td>He rings you or messages you several times a day to find out where you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He rings you at work to say ‘Gidday’</td>
<td>He rings and checks whenever you are at work. Perhaps he doesn’t even want you to work and wants you to stay at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He brings you little gifts all the time and these may get bigger as time goes on</td>
<td>Gives you presents all the time as if to buy your love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He does romantic things that are very public – like roses at the office</td>
<td>He starts to use these gifts to demand certain things that he wants from you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He loves to come shopping and buys you clothes that you choose together</td>
<td>He takes you shopping and he selects what you are allowed to wear and buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He asks you to wear certain clothes when you go out</td>
<td>He chooses what you will wear out and won’t go out unless you wear them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He always drops by even when you were not expecting him</td>
<td>He doesn’t respect your personal space and need for privacy and won’t leave you alone, even when you ask him to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He checks your diary and calender so you are both aware of what’s happening</td>
<td>He organises your calendar and social life and prioritises his needs first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is interested in where you have been and what you did today</td>
<td>Constantly checks your whereabouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is polite but distant around your family</td>
<td>Doesn’t want you to be with your family, and he doesn’t want you to be there either</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He says he enjoys your friends and meets them all at first</td>
<td>He sends you on a guilt trip, or sulks, if you want to go out with your friends without him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He wants to meet ALL your male friends</td>
<td>He sulks if you have other male friends who talk to you. He constantly makes insults or innuendo about any friendship you have with a male friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He wants to know who you saw today</td>
<td>He needs to know all the people you speak to. If you can’t remember, he may start to become accusing,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He doesn’t like it if you want time alone to pursue your interests even if it’s to study, play, hobby etc</td>
<td>If you want to leave the relationship he threatens things like “I need you, I’ll commit suicide if you leave”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tip**

If any of the above signs are present in your current relationship, we suggest you talk to someone about strategies you can use to manage the relationship.
Well, we went for coffee and he was nice and I didn’t realise anything about his drinking habit until I got to his house and saw all the cans of beer. Things would be a mess and that worried me. I thought maybe it’s just a one-off thing, he’s upset and he’s just having a binge or something. Then next weekend, it’d be the same. Then I noticed he was pawning his things and not buying food. Just everything that’s important. I thought “That’s bad”. Then he wasn’t treating me very well… being rude… he was rude to his friends and I could see that possessive side. He’d want to see me all the time. He didn’t care that I had appointments and places to go. I was running off to an appointment and racing back to him. Eventually I said “That’s it!”. ‘Cause in the past I’ve actually denied what I’ve seen and it’s been really bad for me to deny those signs, so I now think and act earlier.

**Power Relationships with Former Partners**

I felt like I was really achieving things and now I’ve been spending time with X and the kids, and I can feel myself going backwards. I lose confidence. He picks on me, knocks me all the time, what I wear, what I do, what I give the kids. He’ll always find something to pick on, to knock me for. It’s never right. I start feeling bad about myself again. Unless he has his power and can harass me, he will just keep making my life miserable. I know it won’t change.

Sometimes you have to keep going with relationships that are not affirming or helpful to you, because these people are related to your children. Many of us left relationships due to violence and continuing to be around these people to gain access to our children, is stressful. When our partner holds the power and exerts it in ways that diminish our sense of self, the capacity to mother decreases. Knowing how to react differently stops the old response patterns from restarting. It begins with recognising the warning signs in the relationship and knowing what feelings these behaviours arouse. Based on our life experiences, we know where these feelings can go, so we are trying to use ‘Look, Think, Act’ as a quick way to choose our responses.
Figure 6.4 The cycles of domestic violence

Build-up phase
- Increasing tension

Honeymoon Phase
- He brings gifts
- Affection
- Promises

Healthy Relationships
- Self-esteem
- Trust
- Communication
- Respect
- Love

Stand Over Phase
- Control
- Fear

Pursuit Phase
- Dating & Promises
- Helplessness
- Threats

Remorse Phase
- Sorry
- Self-pity
- Guilt

Explosion
Domestic violence is a crime

Adapted with the permission of Moree Women’s Refuge Ngalia House Inc (02) 6752 3944
Not Knowing How to Reconnect

When I was growing up my Mum would dump me at my grandmother’s place. She said she would come and pick me up and then she would never turn up. So they’d get angry, not necessarily with me but the situation. I knew what was going on, so it impacted on me. I felt like I was a pain to everyone, so I became quiet and unseen. I never wanted to worry anyone so I just didn’t talk to anyone about anything. Unlearning that isolating behaviour is difficult but I know isolation has stopped me getting a lot of help that I could’ve got if I could’ve reached out.

If you haven’t had love it is really hard to receive it. It is probably harder to receive love than give it. I don’t know how to respond to people loving me. I didn’t know how to cope. I have started to, but before, I never have had any idea. I’m still not the grandmother I would like to be, but I just can’t get there. I know it is to do with love.

When one of my sons was willing to show his love for me, I pushed him away. I couldn’t handle it. I didn’t feel I deserved his love. He really felt it when I pushed him away. Then I realised I was pushing away my own son’s love. He was persistent and kept showing me love and I’m learning to show it back to him.

Disconnecting was how we survived the abuse of childhood, dissociating from our painful experiences. Isolation became a problem in adulthood because we were unable to give voice to our needs or problems, which facilitated healing. Some of us carry so much shame that we believed we were unable to be loved and incapable of loving. This led some of us to place our children in foster care or adoption programmes, as we felt we must be incapable of giving them enough love and nurture. Some of us still push away the love of our children believing that we are unable to respond adequately to our children’s needs. We grieve such decisions, recognising they stemmed from the lies that were embedded into our minds as a result of the past CSA experiences. We believed we were failures at everything, so we never dared to think we could make a success of something as important as parenting. Consequently, we ran away from parenting and things that might require responsibility, thinking we couldn’t possibly do them. Some of us are re-establishing connections with our children, reclaiming our ability to give and receive love in ways that can sustain meaningful relationships.

Reflecting on our situation after so many years can re-open wounds and fill us with deep pain, sadness, grief and remorse over our enormous losses as mothers. We don’t like to speak about these hurts, but acknowledging the pain has been part of our healing. We keep working at facing the pain, loss and grief. We are also learning to give and receive unconditional love. We started by caring for pot plants and small pets, learning that they could flourish if we gave them what they needed; not too much of any one thing, but a balanced approach to help them grow and thrive. From these simple lessons we are increasing our confidence in our ability to love and care.

Some of us have no difficulty giving love to our children. We are determined to parent well, even though people do not believe we can do it. We have become more single-minded about proving them wrong. Sometimes we follow the saying ‘fake it until you make it’ and we fake our confidence. We are
I had my daughter when I was nearly 19 and from the time I found out I was pregnant I couldn’t wait to have her. When I look back now, I understand why. She was something that I could love and have for myself. To actually hold and love her was something I had never had before. I never had a cuddle from my mum. She never told me she loved me, my brother never spoke to me, and my dad was never there. All I wanted to have was this little person to hold and love, and kiss and say ‘I love you’. I think I loved her so much because I went through my whole childhood not having any love.

determined to do the right thing by our children and bring them up in a safe and loving home. For some, this is being achieved but it is taking great strength and energy. We are proud of how we have created change for our children. They know love and safety so they can move into a better future with their children.

The incredible pain of facing our losses and gaining new insights into why we have behaved the way we have can be overwhelming. Reflecting churns up feelings of guilt and sadness and we ask ‘How much is enough?’ Others are unsure if they have actually got out all that they want to say. We recognise that we can’t turn the clock back and we have to face the fact that we will never regain our childhood and for some the child-rearing years are over. However, as one woman said,

I am starting to actually recognise and feel the anger within me and that is a new thing. I have never known it was anger, let alone that it was OK to express it. This group has allowed me to recognise the anger and know I am still OK. I have finally got the permission I need to let that energy out, and I want it to be in a way that is helpful to me. That is what I have always needed; to cry with anger and frustration and grieve everything that I have lost. I have hit my pillow and wailed at the top of my lungs for all that I have lost. I am reclaiming some parts of me that no-one can destroy and that is my spirit, my freewill and I want to become content in myself... that is my future.

The grief and anger about what you have lost and the knowledge this creates can lead to depression that can even end in suicide attempts. It’s really important to speak to someone and enact your safety plan if such thoughts and feelings are occupying your mind. To turn outrage based on dreadful life experiences into a life-transforming change takes immense courage, so please be encouraged that it is possible to heal. The one common message we want to press home to all readers is this; do something about getting help when you are younger.
We really wish we had started working on these things and dealt with them when we were young and had not spent so many years suffering when we now know our lives can be changed. We are all in the process of ‘becoming’ and no-one is the final product. We can’t change our past, but we can create a tomorrow that we can live with, perhaps even dare to thrive. We start doing this by living today the way we want to live it, acknowledging our past, but no longer letting it rule today or tomorrow in the destructive way that it has. Living one day at a time we are hopeful of creating a future in which we find contentment.

Facing the Grief

It’s difficult to lose connections. It’s a human need to feel like we belong somewhere, to a family or some significant people. Those connections with people keep us grounded to the earth’s people. Families give us a place to stand, an anchor to the world. Even if it’s not the perfect family, it’s our connection. It’s almost a basic need to keep connections in tact in some way, either via memories, or restoring the relationships in new ways. We all experience grief over the losses of family life when these significant connections do not work as we hope or plan.

When we grieve there’s a sense of loss over something or someone and it feels like our world has stopped. We need time to re-group because the people to whom we are connected keep us grounded, and these ties have been cut. Initially we’re not quite sure where and how and with whom we fit. It takes time to make sense of things and find new ways to locate comfortable connections. It is important to grieve what we’ve lost and work through that. We can do it by looking back to what was, and taking with us the lessons learnt and the parts that give us strength, acknowledging what hurts and making thought-through and deliberate choices about how life will be for us in the future.

This helps us feel a sense of continuity in life. We know where we’ve come from, where we have been and where we are now. We have at least some idea of where our future will move (in a hopeful and positive way – even if it’s one day at a time for the moment). We can imagine a functional future, plan toward it, and in this way our subconscious starts filling in the thoughts and planning the actions...
toward achieving that goal.

Grief forces us to change connections. We are in a limbo-like state for a while as we try to make sense of life without this person/situation in our life. We can get stuck if we can’t incorporate the changes. To make sense of what’s going on we ask questions like ‘What is happening? Is there any reason this is happening to me at this time?’ We acknowledge what has changed. There are times when the only sense we can make is to say ‘I’ll never understand this and I have finished examining it. That was then and this is my life now.’ Most people need to talk through past grief to explore their feelings and emotions, express them and decide what they want to do with that past so it can be incorporated into the here and now in a way that allows us to live in peace.

**Journal Exercise**

In your journal consider the following questions:

- What sorts of losses did you experience as a child?
- Have these losses continued into adult life?
- What are the losses that continue to cause you grief? Name them and list them.
- What feelings are stirred by considering the losses?

Now consider ways you might take action to acknowledge the grief you feel.

**Summary**

In this chapter you walked through some of the emotions and feelings that most CSA survivors struggle with. It is possible to write a chapter on each of these emotions because each one can present a personal battle in your life story. However it is unhelpful to get bogged down in the details of the reclaiming process and lose sight of why you are exploring the past. It’s important to consider the impact that living with these emotions has had on your life choices. Facing what we call ‘The Big Five’ emotions – shame, guilt, fear, anger and love, and learning to manage them in ways that are life and love affirming, is important to the healing process. These emotions influence your thoughts, your responses and your behaviours, so facing them enables you to action the responses of your choosing that are helpful in the reclamation and renewal process.

In Chapter 7 we will examine the issues that CSA survivors have to deal with to transition into their preferred future.
Dealing with the Perpetrator

It seems many survivors of child sexual abuse/assault (CSA) think about confronting the perpetrator at some stage in their healing journey. So how to deal with the perpetrator is an important issue, especially if that person/s is a relative. We want the secret exposed so our family know the impact CSA has had on our life. However we have uncertainties about what reactions we will receive and how we might act. Some of us want reconciliation and reconnection with our families. For others the opportunity to reconnect with our childhood family is gone. Some have had to cut all ties and are not going back to that situation and the powerlessness they experienced. Others have moved on by accepting that relationships with their childhood family have been permanently damaged by the perpetrator. Yet for some, the need for love and acceptance from their childhood family is a primal need that remains unmet. It raises questions as this woman states:
He is trying to get involved with my family and I know that is a dead-end street and I shouldn’t go there. Where is the balance for my children, so they have a relationship with these people, because my experiences are not theirs? Should I reflect my past on my kids? They are aware of everything that happened to me but it’s their choice about involvement. It is a fine line. As a child you are always looking to love your parents and when you are an adult you still want to love your parents, and you still want that relationship. It helps you with relationships in general, but where is the middle road?

Confronting takes strength, courage and planning. We have to weigh up how helpful it could be, to our growth and moving on. This issue is a source of inner turmoil and can be difficult to handle. Our aim in confronting the perpetrator/s and/or our family is to improve our understanding, seek acknowledgement of our experiences, recognition of our hurt, and break the wall of silence around the past abuse. Some of us confronted, hoping to find help in working through the past, hoping to break the silence and discuss openly what occurred. Some had an outside hope that the perpetrator might ask for forgiveness and perhaps even reconciliation. What most of us want is for the perpetrator to take responsibility for their actions. Some hope for an apology and acknowledgement that the perpetrator’s actions caused us harm and have continued to adversely impact our lives. To date no woman in our group has received a request for forgiveness or obtained acknowledgment of responsibility for the sexual abuse from the perpetrator. We are learning to live with that reality. It is a source of disappointment that can trigger responses which lead back to our former addictions. We want the perpetrator to step up and take responsibility for his/her actions, but none have done so.

The Perpetrator’s Reaction

Confronting the perpetrator, and/or the family brought reactions of timidity, shock, fear, tears and threats. In one case the perpetrator (foster father) was in his 80s and the woman recognised that confronting him may cause physical response that could harm him. She said she had to do it to move on. Her aim in confronting him was to see his reaction and to request family photos for her child. She had not seen him in many years. She was not confronting to obtain revenge. This is her story,

I knocked on the door of his unit. No one was home. So I sat down and waited. I waited two hours and then asked some other older women if Mr. X… lived here. They said ‘Yeah, that’s him over there.’ He had been hiding in the garden behind bushes pretending he wasn’t home.
After all those years he couldn’t face me. So I walked up to him and said ‘Remember me?’ He was shocked. He went kind of pale and sweaty. He invited me in. I asked him straight out ‘Why did you have sex with me when I was just a child? Do you know what you did in doing that to me?’ He cried. He had no answers. I did not want more than that because I could see he was pathetic. I just asked for my baby photos so I could have something to give my daughter and he found some and I left. I will never speak to him again. He is a pathetic, perverted old man.

The shock in the perpetrator’s face was the moment she regained personal power. She believes the face-to-face contact switched something in the perpetrator and he knew he had done something wrong so he was afraid.

Tip

Consider thoughtfully and thoroughly all the possible consequences before you choose to confront. Think about the potential price you may pay before you start. Your safety is paramount, so plan the response and talk through the plans with a trusted support person.

The Reaction Confronting Brought Us

Most of the group who were able to confront said they came away from the encounter feeling hurt and confused, angered by the continuing avoidance, denial and discounting. Generally, the perpetrator and the family did not want to know, or face, the truth about the past. Confronting brought back feelings of shame, blame, guilt, anxiety and fear. One woman was infuriated because just being in the perpetrator’s company rendered her powerless and she fell silent, unable to find her voice which effectively shifted the power back into his control. Such responses can lead us into potentially unsafe situations.

We now know from our experience that confronting needs to be done with the understanding that our personal growth does not necessarily match any similar development within our family, and we can come away from the encounter very disappointed and hurt. We also recognise the need to debrief afterwards so confronting does not send us into a downward spiral again and start the cascade of negative self-talk that follows such interactions.

Choosing to Confront

We have to know how we are going to handle the possibility of ongoing rejection and betrayal if the perpetrator refuses to acknowledge his actions, as this appears to be the most common scenario. If we
do confront, we need support. We might have an adverse reaction and we need to know we will not react in a dangerous and unproductive manner, where we put our own, or another person’s wellbeing at risk.

**Reframing the Perpetrator in Our Mind**

Based on these experiences, most of us chose not to confront the perpetrator. We think the best way forward is to reframe the perpetrator/s within our mind, so the power balance he/she holds is shifted back to us. We are reframing them as sick, weak, pathetic people. The reframed perceptions change the power dimension in the relationship and provide a position of strength from which the tables are turned and we regain personal power. The energy going into maintaining our rage can then be shifted into ways that facilitate our healing.

**Confronting: A Case Study**

One woman in our group confronted her family about the past. She wanted to break the silence and accelerate her personal growth, hoping to heal the relationships within her family. With all the group work she had undertaken she felt empowered to approach her family. Here is her scenario, spoken in her own words for your considered reflection.

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………..this group’s pulled us up to a certain level and when you get that far, you want to share it. Things are going well, I’ve got a job, and the kid’s are doing well so I rang my family to let them know! It was a very sad day. My mother wouldn’t speak to me, so I spoke to her husband. He’s always been okay with me, he doesn’t know what’s going on and has never been filled in on the situation. It’s a little bit like I’m the baddie… I can hear in his voice something doesn’t quite sit with him, with it all. So he’s prepared to hear me, so I talked. I told him all about my father. I talked about everything. I said this is why the situation is as it is.

What they then did was ring my father, because my mother was very upset, even though I never spoke to her. She was that upset her husband felt compelled to ring my father and so here we go, the poo’s in the hand and it’s flying towards the fan! I said to my mother’s husband, I’d ring back, see if maybe we can work something out. I asked my mother, ‘What’s talking to me going to do?’ She doesn’t have to have me in her house or anything like that. Why am I such a problem to her? I feel like I’m a nuclear missile or something! I said to X, ‘…that woman gave birth to me. What have I done to her in my life that she should look at me with such disgust?’

I rang back half an hour later and found X had rung my father. Well, that really upset things, didn’t it! As more and more people were getting involved it’s become a bigger thing, and as the day unfolded the more exposed he got. With every phone call there was a new person saying ‘What’s going on?’ X says ‘I can’t believe your Dad did that!’ I said ‘Well, X, take a look at my life. Have I ever not said this? I’ve always said something like this happened.
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All through the years you’ve been married (like 15-16 years) I’ve said something like this happened. Why would I make it up? Why would I want this in my head?’ He was weighing it up, I could hear it.

I said to X, ‘Look, a few months ago he admitted it to me, saying my mother wouldn’t give it to him and that sort of thing.’ I said, ‘You tell my mother every time she went away to visit her relatives, those things were going on. Every single time!’ That’s what probably threw her over the edge. But still… she’s got to deal with it. She’s in full denial. She’d rather see me run over by a car than to admit to any problem you know.

I said to X, ‘Just tell her I love her.’ It still didn’t help things. X said, ‘Your Dad wants you to ring him.’ I said, ‘Fine! No worries!’ So I rang him and I got to speak to his wife. All these years, I thought she had some idea of what was going on; by the conversations we had, I thought she had half an idea. Even the day that he admitted it to me we went to her house and we were sitting in the back yard and I’m saying ‘Well, it’s all in the open now’, and she’s agreeing with me, how good that was. I thought she knew what was going on. I mean, when I said to her on the phone, ‘Well, the shit’s hit the fan now, about when Dad abused me as a child’. She said “What?” I said, ‘When I was a child, he was abusing me.’ She said, ‘I didn’t know anything about that!’ So that conversation was short and sweet. I said, ‘Oh, jeez, I’m sorry, I thought you knew all this time.’ She said ‘No! I had no idea!’

Then I get a conversation with my father! He rings about two hours later or something like that. I said ‘Hello’ and he goes ‘This is your father.’ I said, ‘You’re not my father!’ He goes off! ‘You are an f------g b---h and I’m going to take you to the cleaners.’ I said ‘What are you talking about?’ He goes, ‘Well this thing you’re accusing me of when you were five.’ I said ‘I’m sorry I can’t remember the exact date whether it was five, six, seven…’ It went on and I hung up. I didn’t hesitate and say ‘…but, but, but’ or anything. There was no hesitation. It was just ‘F--- off! You’ve done enough to my life. Do you realise how much you’ve ruined my life with my family and everything? Do you know?’ He couldn’t say anything. He was like ‘…eh eh eh’ you know. It’s not the same. Even if I was drunk, I wouldn’t care. It’s all true! My kids are all in my corner. There are no qualms about that. When he threatened me, that inner child came back immediately. She was scared, because I know him. He is not a good person. …he has got
connections… people owe him favours. He’s always bragging about that and there could be anything done to me. I could accidentally be run over on my push bike… I have to be realistic, I’ve got children in my care and he’s scared. I heard it in his voice. He’s a desperate person. I am at risk at any point. In the past, he’s done things like made chain phone calls… lost me a job, or things like that. It’s quite easily done. He’s a crooked man.

(a piece of transcript is missing to ensure the woman’s continuing safety)

…I loved school. I’d go to school at 7.30 and run around the oval twenty times. Now I know what I was running away from. That’s when the running started. There’s no more running now, I will just stand my ground. He can run. I’d rather him put in the effort. That’s the point. I’d rather him go crazy. Let him see what it feels like. All the effort I’ve gone to throughout my life to get someone to believe in me. He can’t hurt me any more. He can’t get to my children. I’ve given up on parents, I think they’re weak! Pathetic!

My kids gave me support you know. They sat around the table while I was at work and had a discussion about it. They are proud of where I have come, not having anything, being on the streets, and now being able to provide them with a home and everything they need. They’re not going to let him take it away, and I’m not going to let him either. So what I’m going to do is sit back and see where it goes from here.

…whatever happens these three guys in my household are going to have children and I will have relationships with their children and keep their relationships with me. That’s all important. I think I’ve done damage, but not intentionally. It’s only damage of truth being exposed. It wasn’t vindictive. I was not screaming out for justice as much as credibility… for him to step up and take responsibility.

From reading this woman’s story you can see that the perpetrator uses controlling, threatening and intimidating behaviours to stir up fear in the woman. Her inner child begins to feel insecure again. In this way he can reassert control over the situation and the woman. This woman now hopes her family will see the truth of her childhood and understand the reasons behind the course her life has taken. She had hoped for validation to help restore her sense of self. Instead her father continues to portray her as the one with problems. He paints her out as a deranged and psychotic person who lacks credibility, however nothing could be further from the truth. This woman is in control of her mind. She was seeking restorative justice, not revenge, but his response was dismissive and dishonest, but unfortunately typical.

This story clearly demonstrates that confronting can have dangerous consequences. What is most important for this woman is to keep herself and her children in a safe and stable home environment. She chose to cease contact until he could take responsibility for his own actions. The hope this woman now holds is that her father’s partner, and her mother’s partner, will have enough integrity to
call her parents to account and encourage them to take responsibility for their actions. Her chosen response is to reframe her family in her mind and in so doing reclaim personal power and control over her life. The clear message from this story is that even when your motives are correct and your case is true, you may not get the results you want or deserve.

Tip:
If you choose to confront, you should never do so without support people in place. If you have a bad experience then please ensure you talk about it to a counsellor or therapist because these feelings should not be carried into the future.

Journal Exercise

• Have you tried confronting the perpetrator before?
• Have your confronted your mother or others in your family before?
• What was the result of that experience?
• What is the aim of the confrontation? What do you hope will happen? For each hope you have noted down ask yourself if it is possible, probable, or fantasy thinking?
• What are the probable consequences of confronting? (Eg if the perpetrator discounts your claim, becomes violent, trivialises your claims, ignores your claim). What will you do?
• What benefits and what risks might you encounter?
• If the worst possible consequence occurred how would this impact your future?
• If you do decide to confront, what method is likely to get the best results? Eg tape, letter, personal meeting? [NB In all types of confrontation we suggest enlisting the support of a trusted friend to read your letter, listen to your tape, rehearse your confrontation responses because they may give you insight into possible reactions you may not have thought of,]
• Make clear notes as to what you are going to say. Will you ask for specific things?

Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Service (OARS) released a pocket card with 5 restorative questions that you may ask the perpetrator (offender) to challenge the behaviours and perhaps commence a restorative process. You may like to reflect on these questions and see if they will provide you with the information, the process, or the outcomes you are seeking. The questions include: What happened? What were you thinking of at the time? What have you thought about since? Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way? What do you think you need to do to make things right?
If you lose control of your emotions during the confrontation, what will you do? [NB Have a plan ready to action that takes care of yourself in this risky situation.]

Ensure you have a debrief person ready to talk to immediately after the confrontation. Bring phone numbers of your safety support team with you and have them programmed on your mobile phone so you don’t have to search for them if you get frightened or upset.

After the event, ask yourself how did I go? What are you most proud of? Are you finished, or is there more to deal with?

Dealing with Intimate Relationships

Staying Present

There are times in relationships when things are overwhelming and confusing. We can appear to be coping on the surface but underneath our confidence and capacity is being eroded. It’s at these times that old patterns resurface and we want to disassociate from what’s going on so we are not hurt.

Many of us survived in a loveless and unsafe environment as children. Situations that make us nervous, fearful or anxious send us tumbling back into confusion and self-doubt, and withdrawing into ourselves is one safe option that we learnt in childhood. As children we coped with abuse and fear by dissociating from the situation and escaping to a safe place in our head. We created that safe spot to avoid getting in touch with our feelings because they were shameful and painful. This strategy worked when we were children, but as adults we have to relate with our emotions to sustain loving and responsive intimate relationships. We have to get in touch with feelings that we learnt to avoid. So if we get overwhelmed we choose what’s familiar and easiest and continue to withdraw. This process does not deal with the conflict, nor does it nourish our important relationships with our partners and our children. We end up feeling more hurt, confused, ashamed and full of self-doubt and guilt about our ability to love and relate. Such pain triggers the desire to stop the suffering and numb the pain with past response patterns that use alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, and hard work, to obtain relief.

Dealing with Sexual Activity

The topic of sexual activity created diverse responses in the group. There are those who are confused about sex. Even though we know the human body is ‘wired up to enjoy sex’, the shame and guilt we feel during sex can stop it from being pleasurable. Some women have never had an orgasm when having sex.
Others find themselves addicted to sex. Others struggle to stay present during sex. Many of us disassociate from our bodies during sex because it unleashes memories of childhood. Some of us examine our past during sexual activity as if we are trying to discover some missing or stolen aspect of our self. As we regain confidence in our sexual selves we are also reclaiming our sexual identity as women.

We looked at the social expectations in our culture concerning sexual activity. For example a sexually available young woman is considered a ‘slut’, a ‘whore’, a ‘skank’, but a sexually available young man is considered a ‘lad’, or a ‘stud’. Women are expected to be in control of their bodies and the boundaries around them, but men are somehow absolved from controlling their urges for sex. This message is played and replayed time and again in the media. As female children who were sexualised early, we were considered to be sex objects and fantasy toys to satisfy the perpetrators. This blurred the boundaries between love, trust, intimacy and sexual activity. We believed we had to do what was asked of us to get love. To get what we wanted we had to perform sexually, which led some of us to become promiscuous. Touching and intimacy became related to abuse in our minds. As children we were powerless to control our body believing we were the possessions of men, and this belief has made us vulnerable to ongoing abusive sexual relationships in adult life.

Tip
Every woman has the right to say NO to being touched or having sex. Every person has the responsibility to exercise control over their body. You do not have to hand over your body to any person unless it is your choice. The key to your future happiness is developing certainty about your boundaries and exercising control over your choices.

Some women have reclaimed control over their body by viewing themselves as a whole person with a body, mind and spirit. All relational activities nurture the whole person in some way. So having sex is more than a mechanical body activity. When we have sex, it can also be a physical, emotional and spiritual activity. We can have body sex, but if we are not engaged at an emotional level and there is no connectedness, it is less likely to be a nurturing or life-giving experience. It will not nourish your emotions that give expression to your spirit, instead sex is a mechanical exercise. In the context of a loving relationship where two people are giving their whole selves to each other, sex can improve each partner’s sense of personhood and connectedness as a couple. It is then that sex becomes nurturing and fulfilling, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and sustains us as individuals and couples. Orgasm is not essential for that fulfillment to happen. To experience this intimacy we need to trust our partners and this may be difficult. We know it sounds a bit like ‘Mills and Boon’ sex, because it has not been our experience. The CSA and ongoing sexual abuse has led us to believe the
lie that sex is purely physical and it does not affect our mind and spirit. In this way the perpetrators can believe they are not harming us as a person. We know that is not true. So we are beginning to see that while whole person sex is not a common experience for most of us, we hope the opportunity for life-enhancing sexual experience may be possible in the future.

At this time in our healing journey some of us are prioritising spiritual connection and emotional nurturing in a trusting relationship as the main drivers for sex. Some are choosing to prioritise relational experiences over body pleasures such as orgasm. We are not yet at the point where our body is relaxed enough to completely relax within a sexual experience without worry and tension. We recognise the physical activity of sex is available to us anywhere, but that is not what most of us want. We would like the intimacy of emotional and spiritual connection and believe we are worthy of it. We have come to believe sex without love can be psychologically damaging and we are not willing to open ourselves to more hurt.

When I talk about things sexually I am still in a confused stage and sexual conduct to me is a mystery. How to be me and not go back into the past…, you can put yourself back in that mental situation of your childhood during the act of sex. Then you have the guilt of doing that as well. It’s enough to stop you wanting to have it, or it can drive you to have more and more to try and wipe out the memory and get it out of you.

…mentally I was there with him. It was like it did this big cycle from my father to him and we had it out. Everything came out, all the ugliness… I got injured and nearly died, but I look at it now and think I was purged. I know now that I am capable of a deep committed sexual relationship, with orgasm. I know now I don’t have to put up with abuse, whereas before in relationships it was abuse and mechanical sex. When you have been abused, it becomes part of the furniture. Now I know that I am a spiritual, mental and physical being with boundaries that were violated at that one time with those assaults. I have been up and down, but now I go slowly and things are getting better. It is a slow, sure thing, not the quick fix. When I choose to have another relationship I will be able to commit more fully and not feel like I have to hold back. I am comfortable about my boundaries and aware of who I am.

Journal Exercise

• How would you describe yourself as a sexual woman?
• What messages have your childhood experiences given you regarding sexuality, your body, love?
• What problems/issues do you have regarding sexual activities?
• Which are the most fulfilling and joyful expressions of love and intimacy for you? How can you build more of these into intimate relationships?
If you struggle with your body image, what is stopping you from being comfortable?

What do the voices of discomfort have you saying to yourself?

How can you silence these voices so the voices of happiness and joy in your body can surface more often?

**Becoming Comfortable with Our Body**

Many of us are not comfortable with our body. Some cannot look at themselves naked. One woman struggles to touch her body. Others cannot get health checkups such as pap smears and breast examinations for fear of exposing their body and having it touched by a stranger. Before we are ready for intimate relationships, we have to be at ease with our body so we can focus on keeping control of the boundaries around our body. Once we are at ease with ourselves, then we can move on to becoming relaxed in the presence of other women. In female friendships we learn how to talk openly, give and receive touch such as a hug or brushing one another’s hair etc. For some, isolation during the adolescent years deprived us of experiencing supportive female friendships and rediscovering that shared companionship is helping us work out who we are. It addresses our loneliness because we have some people with whom we can share ideas and experiences and talk through life’s problems.

**Dealing with Boundaries**

Boundaries are our established attitudes, values and beliefs around important aspects of our life that help us to define who we are. Boundaries can be made in all our dimensions such as physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and financial etc. For example, a physical boundary can be my environment, my living space and my body, so we can separate that into personal space and our home. Defining boundaries takes time and a willingness to work out where you stand on issues. Try to establish what your limits are regarding certain conditions, preferably before you are placed in a difficult situation. Asserting boundaries is about recognising your rights and seeing that there are things that you can do to keep yourself safe. All relationships must have boundaries that assert our rights as women of worth. We have the right to be treated with respect, dignity and equality.

I have noticed that people will treat me differently if I have strength. I am now starting to feel my own strength and I can see the impact it can have on other people and it makes me more empowered. I have a clearer picture of where I want to go and even though I want to set the boundaries, I want to be able to move those boundaries as I get stronger. I want to be free, without anyone else breaking into my personal space. That is the difference.
The boundary thing is a big thing in my life. It is so new that I have to be aware of it all the time. If I am around someone that may be manipulating me or something, I can usually tell because I go into a state of confusion. It is my way of saying there is something wrong. I recognise I get restless and a bit antsy and snappy... I am becoming more aware of what is going on around me and it makes choices a lot clearer. It is changing my whole world, this boundary thing. I never knew about any of this before. I find I can now sever a relationship that is taking me over without hurting that person or feeling hurt myself, and that is a really good thing.

I asked them if they had noticed that I am handling things better now. I asked them if they could imagine me twelve months ago saying NO to J or K? I recognised this person drains me emotionally and she uses my situation for her benefit. I am thinking about what I need to heal and grow and to become whole, because that affects my children.

In setting a boundary we are putting a set of safe limits around ourselves that help us define ourselves and maintain and protect ourselves. Boundaries help us to know where we begin and stop. They help us know when an issue or problem is ours, and when that problem or issue belongs to someone else. Countering childhood experiences, where your boundaries were not defined or respected, makes it scary to start to identify closely and safely with people. We now see that threats to our

Setting, maintaining and adjusting personal boundaries helps to prevent ourselves and our loved ones from being re-abused. The process starts with defining boundaries and then building on the ones we recognise in ourselves as the strongest, so we can move forward. We need to validate our strengths and recognise our weaker boundaries so we can reinforce them and control who enters our personal space. It helps to focus on our strengths as it gives us confidence to assert our boundaries and then to celebrate our progress. Move slowly and evenly, grappling with one boundary issue at a time as this improves the chances of success. Don’t tackle too many issues at the same time because it will make you feel overwhelmed and sets the scene for negative self-talk.

Setting boundaries can be difficult. It may be a new skill to us and a taken-for-granted skill for other people. Some of the group are re-establishing former friendships and this is proving to be difficult because many of our ‘old’ friends still behave as ‘victims’. Our compassion and desire to help our friends can slip into a form of rescuing. We then add their problems to our own, or they become dependent on us. Having too many problems becomes burdensome because we have enough work managing our own issues without adding another person’s problems to that load. That’s not to say that we should not help others because this is a meaningful healing activity. However, we first need to establish the boundaries around ourselves and recognise what are our limits. If we maintain these boundaries we do not get trapped into taking on too much responsibility for others, because this is when we become overwhelmed and anxious. We have been accused of being ‘changed’ and ‘uncaring’ when we assert our limits. We have been put down for being unavailable and this can lead to feeling guilty. Nevertheless, it is good self-care and wise to assert your own boundaries and maintain them. As we become stronger then we may be able to tackle helping our old friends.
boundaries can be subtle. Learning to recognise that our limits are under attack takes time. A few strong indicators are becoming confused, upset, or having anger welling up inside us.

The best part about learning to recognise boundaries and assert them is the sense of personal control we feel. This control grows as we practise setting and maintaining boundaries with success. We found it helps to obtain feedback from those we trust as to how we are progressing.

We have found emotional boundaries the most difficult to control. There are times when other people’s behaviours challenge us, yet our response is all we can control. We now make choices to respond or not, in the knowledge that we will usually have to live with the consequences of that choice, so we try to plan our responses. We have found that it is more useful to work out where we stand on an issue and confront it by speaking the truth in love. If we don’t deal with truth we can’t actually deal with the shame that we feel after we have held onto a lie. Thinking about the consequences of what will happen if we don’t deal with an issue and recognising what the consequences are likely to be, help us to work out which response we should make to a particular situation. The only person’s behaviour we can change is our own and setting and maintaining boundaries helps to manage relational living.

**Boundaries with Children**

Boundaries help us understand the rules of engagement in families. The boundaries that we set in any relationship need to be consistent, but remain flexible and open to revision if necessary. Consistency is especially important with children, who tend to push the boundaries to see if adults mean what they say. Consistent boundaries for children help them predict the outcomes of their interactions. It helps to try to negotiate and agree upon a boundary whenever possible because this helps everyone remain committed to keeping them. The children know, ‘If I do this to mum she will probably respond in that way’. It helps them to decide if pushing a boundary is worth the risk to gain what they want. Our parental responses build over time. If children are unsure of what the anticipated response will be, or get different responses to similar situations, it adds to their confusion and they do not see the worth of adhering to boundaries. This sets the scene for a lot more rebellion and boundary pushing behaviour. It can be hard work because all children try multiple ways to get what they want and sometimes we do feel like giving in, because we just don’t have the energy to hold our ground.

The children can talk to me and treat me in a certain way and it doesn’t matter about my response. My kids talk about suicide if they don’t get what they want and stuff like that. I want to know how to situate myself...

I still want to be able to deal with my kids. They have been violent towards me if they haven’t been able to get what they want …I want them to grow up and be socially well adjusted.
Boundaries provide stability when everyone knows where the boundaries are and the consequences if the boundaries are broken. It is best if the consequences can be worked out together with the child, whenever that is practical. Consequences should always be logical and fit the breach of the boundary. We need to follow through with the consequences if the boundary is broken. If the child is not used to boundaries they may resent it and become angry. It helps to reward a child when they respect and honour the boundary as this reinforces the behaviours you are looking for. The standard of behavioural expectations are set and agreed to with the children and they know what is expected of them. In the long-term it saves a lot of anger, yelling, manipulating and hurting. Boundaries are open to revision, but your and your children’s safety and wellbeing is the key factor to consider when altering a boundary. You should only revise boundaries once you have thought through the likely consequences of the proposed changes.

The restricted access that some of us have to our children adds pressure to boundary setting and maintenance. There may be different boundaries being set between parents, and children get mixed messages about respecting boundaries. Our love for our children drives our responses and our desire to maintain connection with them can lead us to give in because we don’t want to appear mean or tough.

Some of us have found that we need to assert safe boundaries with older children because they have placed us in unsafe situations and left us vulnerable to abuse either financially, physically or emotionally. In such situations our guilt over the past can lead us to take a soft option and make decisions that may not be in the best interest of the child, or ourselves, for the longer term. Under no circumstances should we subject ourselves to violent behaviour because no relationship ever grows this way and we will end up suffering again. For some women it has meant withdrawing from family relationships where our boundaries are disrespected. We are trying to role model self-respect by setting and maintaining our personal boundaries. If we don’t do it, our children are unlikely to respect our boundaries, or their own.

Tip

It is loving to our children and ourselves to set and maintain boundaries. It is important to let your children know where the boundaries are. They may be negotiable at times, but being consistent in boundary setting keeps everyone safe and children need a stable and predictable environment if they are to grow and flourish.
What to Do When Boundaries are Breached

When our boundaries are breached it’s important to bring together the person who stepped over the boundary and the person who had their boundaries disrupted, so the behaviours can be challenged in a calm manner. This is difficult because guilt and shame can cause people to react by running away from the issues.

Journal Exercise

Look at the table below and think about a time when you were aware that your boundaries were breached. Answer the questions in each section of the table.

Table 7.1 Effects of Breached Boundaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person whose boundary was breached</th>
<th>Person breaching the boundary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Look:</strong> What happened? The who, what, when, where, why of the issue</td>
<td><strong>Look:</strong> What happened? The who, what, when, where, why of the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did it affect you at the time?</td>
<td>What were you thinking at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Think:</strong> What have you been thinking about since this occurred?</td>
<td><strong>Think:</strong> What have you been thinking about since this occurred?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would make it right for you?</td>
<td>Who has been affected by what you did/said? In what way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s happening within the relationship in me? In the other person?</td>
<td>What’s happening within the relationship in me? In the other person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can I do to make this person more clearly aware of my boundaries?</td>
<td>What do you think you need to do to make it right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have I learnt about maintaining my boundaries?</td>
<td>Which area can you move forward with now? How? When? What order?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What people / places will help support me to become stronger about asserting my boundaries?</td>
<td>What is the most important action I can do right now to make this right again?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Action it:** Nothing will change until you take some chosen action. **Action it:** Nothing will change until you take some chosen action.
Dealing with Spiritual Emptiness

Having faith has brought me relief and release. Believing in God has kept me going. I fought with it for so long, I was a very depressed person and I went and did a course on understanding depression. I had a lot of anger. I found faith in the Lord and it is very hard to explain, but it has lifted from me and I have found inner peace. The past doesn’t break me up anymore and it doesn’t hurt me like it used to. I have an identity as a child of God. I have hope and a reason for living.

Many of us felt we had ‘a crushed or broken spirit’ and wanted healing from spiritual emptiness. Some women said they drank or used as a response to a wounded heart, a spiritual core that was hurt. The spiritual issues we want to address include, improving our ability to give and receive love, to ignite hope, find meaning in the past and present situation, and locate our purpose to recover, heal and live. These spiritual issues go deeper than just our emotions and feelings, moving to the core of who we are and who we want to become. They provide the motivation we need to live and work at our healing. When our spiritual core is stronger we believe we will move from surviving to thriving.

What do we Mean by Our Spirit?

I believe there is a strong spiritual core to everyone. Everyone has an individual essence that is ignited at birth… we just have to keep that inner spark burning. It is no one’s right to put that out.

There are many and varied understandings of the human spirit. Many place it in a religious framework that can help people to understand who they are. In this project we sought to give our own understanding to what we view as our spirit. It may help you to work out your own perspective on this subject.

The spirit is deep within us joining together our body and mind, our emotions and feelings. Our spirit gives us a hope and a vision for our life. It is expressed through our emotions, but it is more than emotions and free will. The spirit makes us alive in a total sense, instead of just a mechanical sense. It is what gives our life meaning and purpose, and purpose is to the mind what water is to the body. Our spirit energises our life and our whole being, making us feel alive, rather than just existing. The spirit responds to relationships that nurture and love, and is crushed by hatred, abuse and violence.

My spirit is the difference between life and death for me, because it is the thing that I believe that even at the worst moments I was comforted by it. It is my guide. As my spirit is gaining strength my loneliness is dissipating. I always feel like there is something by my side where ever I go, and I am guided by it. Without it, I think I would be dead. It is my vision. I call it God.

We should be compassionate and gentle with ourselves to nurture our spirit. If others in our support team provide understanding and kindness our spirit will flourish.

It’s a difficult dimension to describe and we recognise some people will say it is irrelevant to them, but for us it has been just as important to our healing as the emotional and physical dimensions. We describe it as the dimension that binds the others together to give us a sense of ‘togetherness’,
‘wholeness’, ‘integration’, and ‘life’. For some this spiritual dimension has been organised using a religious framework, and we obtain from that understanding a source of hope, purpose, meaning, identity and love. This provides a guide to making sense of life and how to live. It gives a framework on which to reclaim and construct our life, which is helpful.

Those of us struggling with addiction recognise the psychological triggers for addiction can create a long-term ‘battle’ which some view as spiritual. A battle between what is right and holds us together, and what is destructive and pulls us apart. Addictions stop us from getting in touch with our inner spirit. One woman notes that since she stopped using alcohol and drugs she has more clarity in her mind. This helps her face life’s issues because she is finding within herself the inspiration and motivation to recover. She said,

I feel the spirit may be the glue that holds the pieces of my life together and this glue is just now beginning to set. My sense of identity and my sense of self is like jelly that hasn’t set yet. It turns to water in the heat of self-doubt, and it is only able to set if I can reduce the heat. I calm down and cool off when I connect with the spirit within me through prayer and meditation.

With loving nurture the spirit heals a little bit at a time; enough to allow us make the next step on our healing journey. The next step isn’t going to come unless we are ready to take it. We can’t force spiritual growth or healing on anyone. It flourishes when we love ourselves and have a nurturing environment and compassionate people around us. We are all in the process of becoming. We are not just the product of our past. This may seem cliché, but we are recognising it as a liberating truth in our lives that is developing as we reconnect with our inner selves.

Tip

Some discoveries we made about healing the spirit that you may wish to reflect on and use if you find them helpful.

- Recognise previous living and relationship patterns can be transformed.

You have to come to a place where you are looking at your problem and you say, ‘OK I have seen this and looked at it enough. I now want healing and peace from this.’ That’s what I ask God for. I want to be a whole person. Then eventually I hope I can get to the stage (and I am moving that way) where I can find encouragement from what I have been through, knowing I am a better person because of it. Yes, I am truly getting there. I’m much more at peace with my past now.
• Recognise your wounded spirit can be healed.
  
  I would like to say to my father, ‘You took a piece of me when you put that pillow on my head and put me in the dark, which is where you left my soul. From that point I have been scratching and crawling around trying to find and grab the pieces of my spirit and keep them together enough to keep me going… enough to have a baby and do it totally differently to what you did’.

• Recognise circumstances that trigger feelings of confusion, anger, shame, guilt, blame, doubt and fear, as these are risky situations. Find a safe place to reflect and share your concerns.

• Be prepared to spend some time reflecting on difficult situations and think about your attitudes to your situation which may be unconsciously contributing to your suffering. Think about your desires, fears, values, beliefs, attitudes and demands that you may be placing upon yourself. Where do they come from? Who are they connected to? What experiences are they connected with? Is there a reason you stick with these views? If you want relief from suffering then you need to take the time to bring into your conscious awareness the values and beliefs you hold that contribute to your experience of pain. You will experience the most healing if you hold on to beliefs that return you to compassion for, and connection with, others.

• Building human relationships within a faith community is healing to our spirit.

• Getting alongside another person to tell your story and share your pain with a compassionate listener is healing.

• Prepare strategies to handle your negative experiences which produce suffering (revisit Chapter 2 for ideas).

• Learn to ‘centreing’ strategies that help you focus your energy on the places where it is most needed to heal. We find meditation, prayer, deep relaxation exercises help. Meditation and prayer still the mind and help us gain control over our thoughts. There is sound evidence in health research that says prayer is more potent and helpful than many medical interventions in healing different biophysical diseases, but especially in healing mental health needs.

• Find contentment in simple things that ease emotional tension.
  
  I might not have much in my little abode because I am starting from scratch but the contentment of my son sitting across from me and my daughter sitting next to me, regular friends, watching a movie… I think you can’t put a price on that.

• Find support and relief in religious faith and the presence of your higher power. For some the connectedness they feel and the opportunity to participate in faith communities is providing a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to participate in life in ways that are supportive and nurturing. Additionally, the values of a faith provide help to focus life and make sense of suffering.
I went to church by myself when I was 11. My mum and dad had split up and I wouldn’t go with him, so I went to church by myself. To this day I don’t know why, but obviously something drew me there at that time. My mum had a nervous breakdown and by 11 I was taking over her role. I got my brother to school and looked after my sister. I know going to church got me through it. I don’t remember what it was, but it cushioned something for me so I could live and move on.

- Reading the sacred text/s of your faith can provide hope and inspiration that heal the spirit. It helps us know who we are within the bigger picture.

  *It allows me to put my story with your story and together our story can be placed in his story (God’s story).*

This web of relationships is what holds us in place in the world. Most sacred texts give us an account of our story and our place within that story, so we know where and how we are connected into life.

- Nurturing creativity takes your mind into areas that nurture the spirit… painting, cooking. Do something that gets your head out of the darkness of looking inward and shifts your focus outside of yourself.

- Getting out among the natural environment nurtures the spirit: go for a walk along a beach, in a park, in the bush, feel the wind, the sun, smell a flower, pat a dog, feed some ducks… there are many wonderful nourishing activities you can use that connect you to nature.

**Journal Exercise**

- What do you define as your spiritual dimension?

- If this aspect of your life is important to you, then think of times when you were most full of contentment, peace, hope, joy, love etc.

- What were you doing or experiencing at that time that can give you clues as to how to nourish your spirit?

  Note these down for each of the emotions detailed in point 2.

- How can you build more of these experiences into your life?
Summary

It is not enough to just face the issues that child sexual abuse raises and the concurrent feelings and emotions. To action change and work out preferred ways of living and being you need to consider the issues and plan to action ways you can deal with these important subjects. Some common ones we discussed in this chapter include the ongoing impact of the perpetrator/s and the subtle hold they can continue to exert over our lives. You will need to deal with intimate partner relationships and the aspects of trust, reciprocity, love and communication within those relationships, as well as the vexing activity of sexual relations within such a relationship. An important aspect of reclaiming healthy relationships is the recognition and maintenance of healthy personal boundaries within partnerships and within families. The final area we considered briefly was the area of spirituality. Some women struggle with an inner emptiness that leaves a yearning for inner peace and love, and a desire to renew a sense of meaning and purpose in life. The suffering that CSA invokes can lead to a deep need to examine the spiritual core of one's self so we reclaim our right to personal wellbeing and wholeness.

The final chapter deals with the process of discovering yourself and the various aspects of the healing journey that facilitate transition and the reclaiming of a stronger sense of self.
Feeling ‘Normal’ – What Does that Mean?

We had many discussions about feeling ‘different’ and wanting to feel ‘normal’. The strong social push for uniformity can make us feel as if we will never fit because our life experiences were peppered with disrupting events that hinder us from discovering our full potential and feeling like we belong in society. We now know it’s not helpful to think of ourselves as ‘abnormal’ because it reinforces the old story. Looking back, we can see that some of us had insufficient interpersonal skills because they were not role-modelled in our families. As we grew, we lived what we knew and were attracted to what was familiar. We have struggled to manage relationships, thinking that bullying and intimidation were appropriate ways to show love in family relationships. Focusing on our deficits makes the situation worse, so we are choosing to work with our strengths.
Fear drives a lot of our choices. We fear things may go wrong with the ideal mind picture that we hold about how our life could have been. Some of us have a romantic mind picture of how a situation will unfold and when it doesn’t unfold as we had hoped, we become disappointed which wells up a raft of emotions such as disappointment, sadness, worry, anxiety, anger, confusion and fear. Alternatively, our mind picture may be shaped by unworthiness and shame so we don’t believe we are worthy of the good things that happen to us. Some of us have been conditioned to think disappointment, rejection, shame and guilt are our lot in life. We believe we are destined to failing and become afraid to think about optimistic future possibilities. It is confusing and fearful when life looks like it is getting better for us and we can jeopardise our healing if we let this fear drive our behaviours to move back to more comfortable older patterns of living. We know that talking about the fears reduces this anxiety. Gaining personal control of our life situation inspires motivation within us and provides a sense of peace and contentment that is difficult to explain to people who take this feeling for granted. We describe it as the ‘satisfaction of feeling normal’. As we feel more normal our sense of personal identity becomes stronger. As we grow more aware of whom we are, it becomes easier to feel at ease with, and connected to, other people. This in turn brings a sense of harmony and inner peace, because we finally feel like we belong.

How we see ourselves is shaped by how we think other people see us. We observe ourselves through our interactions with other people. As a child your family are key people who influence your sense of self. If you’ve never had many positive affirmations in the formative years, it’s hard to structure yourself as similar to others, or what we term ‘normal’. Additionally, the popular media reflects back to us a variety of images from television, magazines, books and radio about family, marriage, romance, sex, being feminine, mothering etc. These images often increase our sense of difference. We become more aware that we do not measure up in looks, to wealth, to intelligence, to charisma, to employment, to status, to sporting ability, and so on. This serves to diminish our sense of self-worth. How we situate ourselves in the light of other people’s reactions to us, reinforces our ideas about what is normal and whether we think we measure up to others of our gender, class and social standing. Part of our healing is to continue to focus on associating with positive people who can provide realistic reflections of our newly developing sense of self, so our mind pictures of ‘normal’ become more realistic and achievable.

I’ve always been the one that’s run away. I’ve wanted to be a part of the normal family. I know, ‘What’s normal anyway?’ but I want to feel like I belong, like I’m the same. A big part of starting to feel normal for me was owning my own muck ups, taking responsibility for my actions.

You’ve got a mind picture of how you see your children reacting with you and when it doesn’t happen it’s so disappointing. Then the whole raft of emotions well up – rejection, worry, sadness, fear, anger, confusion, shame and guilt. I am trying not to blame myself for it and having more realistic expectations about what is possible each day.

We all grow up with different mixes and blends of skills. Some are skilled socially, some academically, and taking the time to
I broke up with him over the weekend. The kids were watching for some kind of flip out. I just said “NO! This can’t happen”. There’s no going back to that kind of thing for me. I told him “You have to go away.” The kids were waiting for the explosion which, in the past, would have happened. But not now. I saw through this relationship how strong I am. He didn’t want to let me go, because I was helping him, but I am not in a position to help him at present. The signs were there “No future! No future!” I saw the weakness in him and I thought I don’t want any part of this. I’m not immediate yet with my actions… but I’ve definitely shaved off a lot of time with seeing things and I’m more certain that I won’t put up with it anymore.

look at ourselves gives us a clearer picture of the strengths we have to work with. In the group we see who we are, and who we are not. We see what conditions effect and affect our actions and behaviours. In the group we notice skills, strengths and qualities in others, and they can see qualities in us that we may not see in ourselves. It helps to note these down and remind ourselves of our strengths and skills.

The process of feeling ‘normal’ is facilitated by recognising our former patterns of living, now knowing where these are likely to lead. We talk about our past attitudes, beliefs, values and the thoughts we used to cope with life. This sense-making work is facilitated by the ‘Look, Think, Act’ process. With reflection we can see other options and may choose new ways to live. The motivation to make necessary changes is ignited within us in three key ways. They include:

1. **Motivation grows when you recognise strengths and build on them**

Our courage, intuitive understanding, protective behaviours, self-reliance, perceptions and our capacity to recognise danger signs grow with focused attention. Remembering and talking about the past allows us to separate our selves from the abuse story, so our wellbeing is less enmeshed with that past story. The more we separate ourselves from the CSA experiences the more we can see our strengths. These have been submerged under the shroud of dark thoughts, feelings and attitudes that are part of the abuse story. Separating brings a renewed excitement and motivation to discover more of ourselves. Seeing growth continues to feed our motivation to keep having a go and our coping skills increase as we have successes. Our ability to bounce back from setbacks improves, which in turn fuels our motivation. The upward spiral begins and continues if we work with our strengths and stop the voices of the abuse team to speak into our decision making processes. We noticed that paying attention to issues that preoccupy our thoughts and dreams often highlights our deeper concerns and fears. We then take notice, name it, and see if we need to get more support to discuss the issue before it becomes a problem that overwhelms us. This pro-active approach to decision making will keep us growing stronger. We do have setbacks but we learn and move on.
2. Trusting others who can reinforce our new patterns of living

The importance of a safe group of people who have been through similar experiences has been vital to exploring the confusion that accompanies a childhood built on a foundation of betrayal and fear. It is important to have a few people we can trust who affirm us, confirm our progress and confront us when we slip back to old ways. It helps to grow our self-belief. This is not dissimilar to the notion of sponsors in 12-step programmes. The qualities we need in such a person are safety, honesty and sincerity. They have to be prepared to do the hard thing and take a risk with us, but they must be authentic and have our personal growth as their key agenda. The person needs to be trustworthy, available and committed. Unless all these qualities operate together, safety can be compromised and the ability to keep disclosing and growing is delayed.

3. Belief and trust in a higher power which provides spiritual strength

We recognise our life must be built around values that protect us and enrich us so we become resilient. For some this has been a personally constructed value system, while others have found such values for living in organised religion. The belief systems of religious faiths provide a ready framework to understand our identity and concepts such as revenge, shame, forgiveness, doubt, hope, meaning, purpose. They help us make sense of emotions such as love, hate, guilt, anger and fear. Belief in a higher power is enabling some of us to do the inner searching and self-examination that facilitates healing. It is providing us with coping strategies and rituals that provide stable anchor points in our lives. Additionally some are finding spirituality is giving them a sense of connectedness to other people, the natural environment and to a higher power. We have access to that spiritual power, which we can call in at any time to help us cope.

Taking Responsibility – What Does That Mean?

We are learning to take responsibility and work with what we have. We are learning not to take on issues that are not our responsibility. We try to avoid being self-critical and self-blaming or other-blaming, because blame fosters guilt and always seems to make our relationships weaker.
Our behaviours have consequences and our actions and conversations may trigger different responses from the receiver than we hoped for. The receiver of the communication is accountable for their response. We are not responsible for the other person’s unfavourable reaction to what we say and do. They are not responsible for what triggers unwanted responses in us. However, we all have a responsibility to look at our own behaviour and see if there is anything that we can alter to help communicate our message in the most socially acceptable and sensitive manner. If we are careful about how we behave and speak in relationships, we will be more likely to get the desired outcomes from our interactions.

When exchanges don’t have the outcomes we had hoped for, we can feel as if we have let others, or ourselves, down. Instead of getting angered or upset, we now seek to learn, from our successes and our mistakes, fresh ways to communicate. In this way our needs are understood, we understand other’s needs, and that increases each person’s sense of contentment and wellbeing. We need to practise anticipating the likely consequences of our action/interactions so we can think through how we want to respond. In that way we walk away from our interactions with a win/win situation. We may need to change tack if we are getting undesirable consequences to our exchanges. This insight allows us to stay in control of our situation while honouring and respecting the other person with whom we are interacting. The most difficult aspect of this learning process is the way we handle conflict and learn to negotiate and resolve tension without apportioning blame. These are skills that grow with practise and reinforcement. They are challenging, but we are reaping the rewards as we gain confidence in using our skills.

We discovered that once we demonstrate competence in a social activity or conversation we are given more responsibility, even when we do not necessarily want it! This creates new fears in our lives. Fear of what might be expected of us and insecurity about whether we can live up to these new social expectations. Challenges keep us all growing and developing, and we know we can call in support if we need it. We do make mistakes, but everyone does, and we are learning from these errors aiming to do better the next time. Instead of wallowing in misery and despair when we get things wrong, we are trying to accentuate the positive. Miserable thoughts increase despondency and that leads us to give up, and that is not an option we would now choose.
Forgiveness – What Does That Mean?

Forgiveness is an important element of healing for some of us. It is not essential or achievable for everyone, but it is something we all think about, therefore it’s worth exploring some of the meanings we give to forgiveness, because there can be multiple understandings of this concept. In forgiveness some find they can let go of the blame, shame, guilt and resentment that they have carried around for years, and this brings relief from the suffering. For those who have strong religious values, forgiveness seems most important to moving on. We talked about why this is so. Forgiveness cannot be coerced or forced because that usually increases resentment, anger and bitterness. For forgiveness to bring release or relief it should be a free choice, not an obligation.

Forgiveness is not about releasing the perpetrator from their responsibility, or forgetting what happened to us. It is about setting ourselves free by relinquishing some of the built-up resentment and anger. Forgiving in no way assumes we were guilty in relation to the CSA. Abuse is about power and control, and as children we were not responsible for, or even complicit in, the abuse. We are entitled to righteous anger and to seek resolution and restorative justice for the abuse. Forgiveness is not about condoning or even excusing the perpetrator, nor is it about denying the sexual abuse ever took place. It is about releasing ourselves from the ongoing potential unforgiveness has to increase our pain. It does not imply that we should restore a relationship with the perpetrator, unless that is our desire. In fact for most of us it’s impossible to do, because our desire to forgive is not matched by the perpetrator’s ability to face up to what they have done so they can amend their responses and support us in the forgiveness process.

Notions of forgiveness are shaped by society and in our culture forgiveness plays an important role. For some it has enabled inner peace. The child sexual assault resulted in shame, blame, guilt and resentment that contributed to self-harm, self-loathing and the desire to disconnect from others. Forgiveness is moving some of us from avoiding those who have hurt us, to communicating directly with them, if this is a safe choice.

Forgiving seems to be more important to those who have direct family relationships which they want to reinstate in some modified way. It is not important for those of us who do not know, or have distanced ourselves from the perpetrator. In conversation we are able to locate aspects of the perpetrator or the family members (mothers in particular) that we feel able to forgive. There are positive behaviours that we enjoy, but in general, the lies, double standards and abusive behaviours are not able to be pardoned. Only one woman has managed to separate the perpetrator from his behaviour and in so doing she has been able to find within her the ability to pardon and reconnect with her family, while maintaining a coexisting outrage about the perpetrator’s behaviour. The rest of us cannot do this at this time.
Forgiveness may be motivated by our desire to make sense of our experiences so we can understand the perpetrator’s motivation. We discussed this and discovered that we usually cannot make sense of the perpetrator’s actions and trying to do so often increases self-blaming and the ‘Why me?’ questions. For those who have been able to forgive, it involves a conscious choice to reframe the perpetrator in such a way that we move from embittered anger to a position where the emotional impact is less harmful to our wellbeing. One woman says she sees her perpetrator as sick, and this has diminished him in such a way that she can forgive him. In forgiving she claims to have freed herself from the deep hatred and fear she carried for many years.

Another woman said forgiving is opening the door to a different relationship with her family. It is enabling her to view the perpetrator as weak and flawed and her mother as a victim of his abusive control. In doing this she is able to forgive her mother and has since reconnected with her to form a relationship based on this new understanding. In this way her outrage about the abuse is able to coexist with her desire to reconnect with her mother.

Forgiveness can only take place after acknowledgement of the CSA and the silence surrounding the CSA are broken. Complete forgiveness requires acceptance from the perpetrator/s that his/her actions and behaviours were/are wrong and have caused us to suffer. Such acceptance is not possible for most women in our group because the perpetrators are unwilling to face their actions and behaviours. Neither are they willing to try and understand the adverse impact their actions have had on our lives, so forgiveness will probably never be complete. We discovered that forgiveness is not a one-off event because reflecting on our past and the outrage, the betrayal and the hurt is requiring repeated forgiveness over time.

Tip

If your relationship with your childhood family still exhibits control or abuse it is an unsafe option to consider reconnecting, and we discourage you from reinstating such a relationship.

It is important to emphasise that your forgiveness never pardons the perpetrator of sexual abuse from the legal consequences of their abusive actions. The offending perpetrator should be the one to ask for your forgiveness and then it is your free choice as to what you will do with that request. Most survivors do not get that choice because the perpetrator/s never asks for forgiveness. Others have no option to ask because they cannot speak to the perpetrator, or they do not know who the perpetrator was, or where the perpetrator lives. Forgiveness does not imply you
have to forget that the abuse happened, because you cannot forget. It is important to realise the pain of your past abuse may return and this in no way represents a failure to forgive on your part.

You may find forgiveness becomes possible at the end of a process of exploring your attitudes and needs around forgiving. We recommend you do this with a professional counsellor. We explored these questions as a starting point:

- What are your reasons for wanting forgiveness?
- Who or what do you want forgiveness from/for?
- How do you want the long process of forgiveness to proceed?
- Is forgiveness really necessary for your healing?

Journal Exercise

Journal your reflections on forgiveness.

Ask yourself:

- What do I hope forgiveness will bring me?
- What things might change if I forgave? How?
- What societal beliefs have me thinking forgiveness is the answer to my healing? Are these beliefs valid?
- Is forgiving about relinquishing your anger and resentment, pardoning the perpetrator, or reconnecting with family, or is it about something else?
- Has the perpetrator (and/or the family) shown any sign they recognise their responsibility for the abuse? Have they shown remorse?
- What am I feeling inside of me regarding the perpetrator and the subject of forgiveness?
- What emotions are rising up in me when I think about it?

Reconnecting – What Does That Mean?

One of our most basic human needs is to live in relationships where we can give and receive love. This remains an area of considerable tension for us. We are uncertain about what to do with our childhood family situation. In some respects we want reconciliation and reconnection with some members of our families. Yet this has met with mixed responses. Some women have been able to reconnect and can now talk about their past in a calm manner with family. Others have been met with
open hostility. It is clear that it can be an unsafe option to reconnect with our childhood family if they are abusive. Yet it is difficult to sever these connections because we hope that our primal need for the love of a parent might be fulfilled.

We need to weigh up whether our healing can afford the setback that rejection triggers in our personal growth. Rejection leads directly to feelings of despair, shock and sadness. We believe it’s better to wait until we are stronger in our new patterns of living and responding before we return to such relational situations.

Tip

There is no place in your life for any person who is abusive because they delay your healing. If you are going to attempt to reconnect with your childhood family you need a safety plan before you attempt it. You may never have to use the plan, but it’s not easy to think up a plan when you are hurting from a bad reaction. It is at these times that your brain will click into old patterns of responding and before you know it, you may be drinking or using again. You may never have to put your safety plan into action, but you should know which support people to call and their phone numbers. It may help to bring a friend with you. If that’s not possible make sure you have organised a friend to phone you or meet with you afterward, so you can debrief. Have the names and phone numbers of two safe counsellors or support people you can call, programmed into your mobile phone before you go. If you don’t own a mobile phone, borrow one from a friend and learn to use it so that you can take it with you. If you cannot access a mobile phone, buy a phone card and take it with you in your wallet with phone numbers for your support people listed on the back. You may also want phone numbers of places like Crisis Care (see Appendix A). Crisis Care can give you shelter for three days in case you are unable to return to your home. In those three days you can get professional help, so that you are in a safe place at all times.

Reconnecting with Our Mothers

For some women the reaction of our mothers at the time of our sexual abuse remains one difficult area to make sense of. We asked, ‘Where was my mother when all this was happening to me? What caused her to respond in the way she did?’ On discussion we found research documentation that says child sex offenders use specific strategies to isolate the abused child from the rest of their family and especially their mothers. They trick them into abuse situations and the most common tactic sex offenders use is to cause a division and feuding between the mother and her child [47]. The perpetrator creates the context in which the child and the mother become blind to the undermining role he plays in their relationship [48]. This understanding has helped some of us to reframe our perspective on our mother’s position within our life story in such a way that reconnection has become possible.
We met and she got some painful stuff off her chest. It’s been going around in her head. She needed me to be able to hear that and see I could still be in her presence. It was amazing, but oh so painful. I was able to say that was me using alcohol but it is not me now. I am sorry for the pain my drinking caused you. I think it was a healing thing for us both, but boy did it hurt.

Reconnecting with Our Children

There is significant pain in working through relationships with children when they remind you of your shortcomings. For some of us the pain is still too raw to be able to contemplate reconnecting at present. Some of us never cut ties with our children and they provide a great source of love, joy, comfort and inspiration. Reconnecting with our children has meant we need to give them space to express the emotional pain they may have experienced when we were not as fully present in their lives as we would have liked to be.

For some women in our group the addictions we had, meant that our children’s lives have been impacted by this experience. Some of us have reconciled relationships with our children by asking them to forgive us for the fact that we were not as present as we should have been, or for other issues that may have caused them to suffer. We are talking about this and helping them to understand the reasons behind our former attitudes and actions. It is part of their, and our healing, but it does comes at a personal cost. The realisation that our children still love us has been both humbling and good for our self-esteem.

As our knowledge, understanding and insight grow we can see our children hurt themselves in similar ways to what we did. Some are reliving patterns of violence in marriage, some are using addictions to cope with life. This is one of the most painful aspects of our recovery. In some ways it continues to make us feel disappointed, confused, sad and guilty. We really want to be able to rescue our kids, but we know it’s not possible, just as it wasn’t possible for us to be rescued. This continual reminder of the impact of our behaviour on our children does cause us sadness. We understand that we could have done things differently had we known then, what we know now. We gain our strength by continuing to turn to others to speak about our pain. We want to be the parents that we would have wanted, and that our children deserve. We want our children to learn from our mistakes, by being there and helping them. We want them to see that we will not do to them what our childhood family did to us, which was to cut us off if we were ‘misbehaving’. We are trying to be role models to our children by living our own healing journey one day at a time, sharing with them a more hopeful way of living and trying to create a future that becomes stronger and healthier. We try not to dwell too long with regret and remorse, instead we use that energy to make our current relationship with our children loving and nurturing. We want our children to see that there isn’t a hurdle that they can’t get over, if they have support. In reconnecting with our children we are trying to provide them with as much loving support as we can.
We are finding joy in the simple aspects of nurturing and being with our children. For many of us, violent partner relationships hinder our ability to access our children. The ability to reposition our partners in our thinking, as weak and unable to manipulate us, has facilitated our reconnection with our children. As this woman reflects:

I’ve got the power to do it. I’ve got the confidence to do it. To actually speak to him… I’ve got the courage and the strength now because I can see he’s really quite pathetic. He is. Since then it’s been really great, waking up in the morning and going into the kitchen and making sandwiches for lunch, getting breakfast ready, making sure the kids clothes are done, just keeping the house clean, even doing shopping and things. Just being there for them and meeting their needs has been really, really good.

The most important aspect of reconnecting is to proceed slowly and continue to maintain control of the situation by establishing and maintaining boundaries. When we see just how far we have come in one year, we are hopeful that our healing and motivation to keep working at changing our behaviour will enable our children to grow. We can use the insights we learnt from the past to renew our relationships and make them more compassionate and loving in the future.

Transition – What Hinders It and What Promotes It?

The movement in transition is not a straight pathway. We have all found that from time to time we slip back into old ways of responding. We need to find new ways to manage issues that raise painful feelings within us because we have many points of vulnerability. It is physically and emotionally draining to change the way we think and we know that we will feel flat, tired and depleted at times. To

I feel I’ve done nothing that is too late to change, or too late to repair. What has made me better with my children, is thinking about what my mother and father were to me. It increased my determination to make my children’s lives different no matter what, even if I did fall down, even if I did stuff up badly. There’s times when I felt so much shame and I was asked ‘What kind of mother are you?’ I’ve had threats to take the children from me over the years. I went so low mentally and spiritually that I got to see the world’s end was near for me, but then I recognised my kids were not going to be better off without me, no matter what happened. They needed their mother in their lives. So now I think one day at a time. If I can give them a little bit, it’s something, and that is better than nothing. I got nothing from my parents – just abuse, so I want it to be different for them. As long as they can see I love them and that I am trying to do my best for them. I realise it’s not too late to turn it around if I want to. What I said to them in the last couple of years is that we’re all back together and we’re working it out together, so we sit and talk about it. They tell me they see how it was and discuss where I was and where I am now. They are happy and proud of how far I’ve come.
heal, we have to face the pain. When problems arise and the urge to run from our pain is foremost in our mind, we are learning to face the suffering and live through it by working on changing our attitude to our circumstances. We may not be able to change the situation but we can work on our own attitude toward it. So that is where we focus our energy. Instead of running we try to take the time to look and think about what’s going on. Then we can do something to action change and avoid the former addiction responses.

It is that package of feelings that I have to deal with that continues to rip me open. When I was two years old I was home with my brother in my arms and watching my mother being kicked down the passage, then when I was 8 months pregnant with my second son my husband was kicking me down the passage and eight weeks ago I saw my son do the same to his pregnant girlfriend. That is my alcoholism. Those wounds are ripped open again and again in me.

Tip

There are certain trigger situations that we have identified over the past year that we know contribute to us slipping back.

They include:

- having too many decisions and interpersonal issues to work through at one time;
- becoming too involved in tragedy and pessimism, either in our circle of friends, on television, or in local and global media;
- feeling overwhelmed by interpersonal situations;
- interpersonal conflicts that raise deep hurt and make us feel rejected;
- the deep desire for positive relationships with our family/children which is not reciprocated by them can cause feelings of rejection and pain;
- seeing abusive behaviours being repeated to/by other people, especially our children; and
- losing a balanced perspective on situations.

There are times I’ve been thinking about the needle, maybe in the same way X has been thinking about drinking. I have been fighting my way through. I know it is happening to me. I know something has triggered this in me and I need to find out what. Something’s there. I will get lost in there if I am not careful. If I stop trying to figure it out I’ll withdraw and isolate and that leads back to the needle. That’s why I get so exhausted. I’m always trying to work out what’s going on? What’s happening? I fight to know my God. I fight to feel. I fight to come back. I try to figure out what’s going on. Where is this pain coming from? What is happening to me?

The transition to independence brings several hurdles. One hurdle is the desire to prove to ourselves and to everyone else that we can make the transition alone. This pressure makes some of us reluctant to come and ask for counselling help when we need to sort out issues that well up within us. We can feel that being in independent housing means we need to prove we can do everything alone and that can be isolating. If we don’t get help to talk through our issues we may become confused and withdraw more. This can lead to disconnection and isolation which triggers the old patterns of responding by using addictive substances.
Working with a group really helps because we encourage each other by listening to one another’s stories and locating the strengths. It’s not just hard work to stay away from addictive patterns of living; we see it as a battle for and within our mind. Our strengths grow when we think through the impact of what might happen if we use impulsive reactive responses and take chosen actions.

Transition can bring with it grief and loss. The world that we know has changed. Sometimes we choose the changes (eg entering a recovery programme) but other times the changes are forced upon us (eg. experiencing family violence). We lose our identity and our circle of friends when we give up drugs and alcohol, because we cannot maintain those friendships in recovery, because they are centred on drinking or using. We do not want to go back, but it takes time to find ways to reclaim aspects of our past identity and incorporate them into a new sense of self, with which we feel OK. Sometimes we are uncertain of who we are now, because we’ve had to re-define and re-establish so much of our self that we feel unsure about who we really are.

These early stages are a confusing limbo state, where the task is to see what has changed and how and where we can accommodate the changes. We enter a time of great self-absorption which is painful, trying to establish a new sense of self in the face of on-going change. We know that if we stay with that self-absorption too long we become more and more withdrawn and inward-focused, which can lead to depressive illness. This stage is about making sense. The question in this stage is Who am I in the face of CSA? Who am I in the face of violence? Who am I in the face of addiction? We need to create the ‘me’ that we can live with contentedly.

Transition occurs when we have come to an understanding within ourselves that we are OK. We can then move the focus out of ourselves and toward others. People develop an identity based on how they think others see them, which affects how they see themselves. We can see an image of ourself in a mirror but we don’t see ourself as a person. We see ourselves as a person in the way other people interact with us; who are we as a mother, or a friend? If we don’t like what we see, we can either choose new people to interact with, or we have to accept what others see as OK. Alternatively, we can work on changing our relational behaviours so people see a different aspect of us. This takes
time, thought and personal investment. Nothing will change if we just look and think. We have to action our plans because that’s what creates the changes we want. If we don’t take action we won’t change our situation. No-one can drive a car just by looking at it, or thinking about driving it. We have to turn the ignition and take some organised actions to make the car move. Changing our sense of self takes time and it helps to have other trusted people like our support team or counsellors to help with that process.

Using new responses is a delicate process, something akin to making a soufflé which rises, but if the oven door is opened too soon it collapses! It takes time to solidify our changing thought patterns and we need time to practise new skills and responses to familiar scenarios and people.

Tip

Transition is facilitated by several factors. You need to find your personal mix of the right ingredients (your thoughts, feelings, attitudes, life skills, information) mixed in the right place (in a safe environment with safe people with the right therapeutic responses) at the right time (being ready and having appropriate information available when you’re ready to hear/use it). Be gentle with yourself and take small steps toward your future. Affirm your progress and keep your focus on near horizons of hope. Below is a list of considerations that will facilitate the transition process. Choose only the best because that is what you deserve.

Choosing the Best – When Only the Best is Good Enough

**Best help:** consider who has the best capacity to help you. Focus on obtaining that help, (preferably not people who are currently dealing with their own issues). Use a support group, workers, counselling and social work services and friends who are established in their recovery journey.

**Best people:** invest in relationships with positive people who will affirm you. This may mean you have to be prepared to shed people (perhaps only temporarily) who are wasting your energy, or are delaying your healing.

**Best role models:** observe the way other people manage their lives and relationships, solve their problems and negotiate their conflicts, because this will help you consider new strategies to cope. Then practise these strategies so you can incorporate them into your current way of living.
**Best drugs:** you may need medication such as antidepressants to help you deal with past issues so you can interact effectively.

**Best responses to stress:** try deep breathing, relaxation techniques and meditation. When you’re really stressed you shallow breathe with the top of your lungs. To cut the stress response you’ve got to breathe out slowly, hold about 5-10 seconds and breathe in slowly and deeply. Repeat that three or four times, and you’ll notice you are calmer. It drops the level of stress hormones in your blood. Do it whenever you have to face a stressful situation. Say to yourself ‘I am calm, relaxed and in control of my situation’.

**Best expectations:** keep the social expectations of yourself in your new role realistic and in check so you don’t feel pressured to conform too quickly.

**Best amount of time reflecting:** don’t spend too much time looking inward because it can become navel gazing. When you recognise the situation for what it is, don’t dwell on it. If you stuff up, don’t dwell on it. Accept it was a less effective decision and move on to decide how you can do it differently next time. Think up a strategy for the next time you are in a similar situation. Limit the putdowns you say to yourself because they foster guilt, shame and blame, and lower self-esteem.

**Best perspective:** it is important to have realistic expectations of people and events. Do not put an overly romantic emphasis on social and family events such as Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries. This prevents serious disappointment.

**Best response:** take the time to think before you respond to important situations, because snap responses tend to be reflex reactions that are grounded in the past.

**Best consistency:** your new self is a bit like jelly, not firmly set and prone to melt under the heat. By practising a consistent application of boundaries and behaviours you will solidify your identity.

**Best sleep:** ensure you get adequate rest by sticking to a regular sleeping pattern. Get over the counter sleeping medication, herbal remedies, or prescription tablets if you need them but get enough sleep to regenerate your mind.

**Best framework:** having a framework to live by helps take some of the work out of everyday living. Some of us have found religion provides us with that framework. In these beliefs we have found an identity, hope, meaning, purpose and inner peace.

**Best attitude:** disappointment is inevitable, but misery is optional, so when things don’t go as
planned find the learning in that situation and move on. It requires courage to face your fears, and perseverance to fight your fears. Fear drives anxiety and anxiety erodes confidence, which paralyses your ability to move forward. It is important to be gentle on yourself, but real. It is not good to ‘beat yourself up’ over mistakes and setbacks, nor is it useful to live a lie and pretend nothing is wrong. It is safer and more helpful to face each issue squarely and recognise where the stuff-ups are occurring (look), then think about what you learned and what you want to change (think), and then set about planning how to action an appropriate response, and do it (action)!

**Best reward:** you should affirm and congratulate yourself every day. Make it a part of your daily self-talk.

**Best healing:** although the healing journey is painful and will probably continue to present hurtful situations. Remember, you are worthy of the best possible healing of your body, mind and spirit so you can thrive, not just survive.

**Journal Exercise**

For your final journal entry answer the following:

- What aspects of this healing journey have been most worthwhile?
- What actions that you have taken are you most proud of?
- What aspects of the future are you most excited by?
- What do I need to action next to keep my healing on track?

**Understand Your Rights**

This List of ‘Rights’ is developed from the work we have covered. We would encourage you to recite it often, remember it and add any other rights that are unique to your circumstances.

I have:

1. The right to be treated with respect by everyone at all times.
2. The right to have, and express, my emotions, feelings and thoughts.
3. The right to be listened to and have my thoughts and opinions taken seriously.
4. The right to express myself in safety and with creativity.
5. The right to say ‘No’ without fear, shame, blame or guilt.
6. The right to ask clearly for what I need.
7. The right to establish and maintain my own relational boundaries.
8. The right to ask for support, help and information from professionals.
9. The right to make my own mistakes and learn from them.
10. The right to assert myself and choose not to assert myself.
11. The right to be free of the burden of CSA.
12. The right to do be a thriver, not just a survivor.
13. The right to .................................................................
14. The right to .................................................................
15. The right to .................................................................

Summary

This final chapter has focused on discovering yourself. There have been aspects of yourself that have been hidden from view for a long time, while you were focused on feeling different. It’s a common experience for CSA survivors to have a sense of being different and alien to the rest of the society. In hearing your own story and working through aspects of it, we hope you discovered within that story great strengths. As you action changes toward your preferred future reclaim the strengths in your story. Enjoy the opportunity to take back responsibility for yourself and your chosen way of life. Forgiveness and effective ways to re-establish relationships that connect you to your significant others are important aspects of this healing journey. The final section of this chapter engaged the factors that promote transition that might provide you with the best choices for your preferred future.
So Where are We Now?

There will be times of suffering in the future. That is part of being human. Transition and transformation occur in the way we look at, think about, and take action to address our weaknesses and problems. Building our personal capacity and our ability to bounce back is not about living life without any struggles. It is about facing the issues and emotions and dealing with them one day at a time. In this way we face our challenges, learn new life skills and coping strategies so that the next time we face a similar issue it is easier to action our desired response. We have known suffering but we have learnt from it. We understand others and have compassion for ourselves and other CSA survivors. The journey of self-discovery has been difficult and at times painful, but most agree it has been worth it. We are making the transition. The remainder of our life will be more to our choosing.

We hope this book has given you information to make informed choices. We trust it has provided you with strategies to use and suggestions to try. Above all we want the book to give you hope and inspiration to continue your healing journey with us. We will reclaim our lives and take back personal control so we build our preferred future!

To close, we share a few comments to demonstrate that we are moving on.

It started with no self-esteem… raped… abused… accused… not believed… I started sliding from there. Every now and then I got a charge and I’d try and lift myself out of it. As I got older I could not let things slide off my back as much. When you’ve got young children, you start thinking, if… and then came the flashbacks of the sexual abuse, of what my parents really like. I coped by
going full on into everything – work, party, it didn’t matter just as long as I was running ahead of my feelings. That’s what I think the difference is between then and now. I’ve turned around and faced it. It can never get me again. Never. Never. I’ve been down to rock bottom. I had nothing left at all when I came to this door. Nothing. Not a handbag, no self-esteem, not an ounce of my spirit, no light in my torch at all. I was finished with the world. That is behind me now. I don’t need to run anymore.

It was like my life was a big fruit salad and it had been thrown all over the floor. I had nothing – empty. Then I began the picking up process… grapes, cherries, the bits of me I liked, if you know what I mean. The talking spread the fruit out in front of me and then I began to choose what I wanted to pick up. I picked up the best bits and consciously left others behind. What I’ve done wrong was through circumstances beyond my control, or when I was out of control, but that was then and this is now. I think what I’ve done wisely is to find the little bits of wisdom that were within me and reclaim those treasures and made myself again.

I have developed skills and found some skills I had before, that I lost in the mess I got into. Once my confidence went, my family went, my sex life went, my ability to think went, everything went. Your self-esteem rules you. How can you negotiate with a government agency if you’ve got no self-esteem? I should never have been kicked out of my house in the first place, but I had no self-esteem when I was in such a low place. I didn’t even pay rent for six months. I just thought, stuff the world! I didn’t pay my bills. Now I recognise what an idiot because I have debts to clear, but it was my protest. I know there are consequences and I just don’t want to go there again. No more! I am turning it around, now I can see where I have been and I won’t go back there. I’m moving on!
It is stressful and hard work because these are not familiar ways of living and being yet, but the big cop-out would be to say ‘It’s too damn hard’ and quit. I won’t cop-out any more. I am responsible for teaching you how to treat me. If you’re treating me in any way that I am uncomfortable with, I am responsible for that, because I haven’t told you how I want to be treated. I’m living every day and in that day alone. I know where it will take me. One day at a time I will create my future.

I’m good. I am making my own decisions. I’m quite able and willing to make my own mistakes. I mean, there are mistakes that I would rather not have made, but I can make them all by myself and own them now. I like it. I love my life. This is the most favourite time in my life and it’s good. I’m the happiest I’ve been, not because things are going perfect at all, but because I’m living daily with my own issues and sorting them out instead of them controlling me. I am working it out. I’m dealing with all the usual life things that come up for everyone, dying parents, friendships that we start to build upon and then have to make a decision. It’s really neat to be in a position to work things out well. I’ve got control at last!

I can see my whole life. I’m beginning to see how it’s been, how it was all a big blur. I have met so many people; all have helped me through by giving me information. I’m beginning to see that. I used to wonder how people could write books on their lives, because mine was a big mess. I’m beginning to see sections that fit together. I can see how I have grown. I am at peace with who I am. I love my higher power! That’s where my life is. That’s my hope and that’s what I love. My higher power is here with me now, guiding my tomorrow with love and helping me grow. I am happy.
References


35. Sam, M., *Through black eyes: A handbook of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.* 1991, Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care: Maryborough.

36. South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, *What are the myths and the facts about Incest and Child Sexual Abuse.* 1999.

37. Stojadinovic, T., *For the first time somebody wants to hear*: *the effects of childhood sexual abuse on women’s experiences of pregnancy, birth and mothering*., *in A research report for health professionals.* 2003, Women’s Health Statewide: Adelaide.


Support

Support Service Phone Details

The following list of services is an abbreviated sample of some of the groups that you may want to access for counselling, information, courses, accommodation and other support organisations to assist you on your healing journey.

For a complete list of services in your local area please see your White Pages Telephone Directory under the Business & Government Listing and check the first letter of the service you are trying to access. These phone numbers are correct at July 2005. They are provided to assist you, but they are not a comprehensive directory. Phone numbers do change from time to time so if a number doesn’t work, check the telephone directory.

If your have access to the internet you can find the contact details and list of services of most agencies listed at Infosearch  http://www.infosearchweb.com/. Just type in the council area and the type of service you are looking for and click on the service to see if it is what you require, their hours of operation, contact details etc. You can also get information from your library, or local government council to see what assistance is offered by local community groups in your area.

Crisis Services

Ambulance, Fire and Police (emergency and life threatening service): 000

Crisis Care (4pm-9am Mon-Fri and 24 hours on public hols): 13 1611

Domestic Violence Crisis Service (Accommodation): 1300 782 200

Lifeline: 131114 [in South East Mt Gambier 13 1611]

Mental Health 24hour crisis service: 13 1465 outside metro area: 1800 182 232

Police to attend: 11444

Rape and Sexual Assault Service 24 hour emergency line: 8226 8787

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1800 806 292
Help lines

**Abortion Grief Counselling:** 1300 363 550

**Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse:** 1300 657 447

**Al-Anon/Alateen Families of Alcoholics:** 8231 2959

**Alcohol and Drug Information Services (24 hour Counselling):** 1300 131 340

**AIDS Council of SA:** Freecall ™ 1800 888 559 (Free from fixed Telstra line)

**Anglicare: Emergency Assistance:** 1800 061 551

**Child Abuse Report Line (24 Hour):** 13 1478

**Child Support Action Group (non custodial parent support line):** 8341 1225

**Domestic Violence Helpline:** Freecall ™ 1800 800 098 (Free from fixed Telstra line)

**Drug-Arm Australia:** 1300 656 800

**Emergency Accommodation Services SA:** Freecall ™ 1800 003 308

**Family Drug Support:** 1300 368 186

**Gambling Helpline 'Break Even' Network:** (24 hours) Freecall 1800 060 757

**Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 (Free from fixed Telstra line)

**Medicines Line:** 1300 888 763 (local call cost)

**Men’s Line Australia:** 1300 789 978

**Mission Australia Helpline:** 1300 886 999

**Parent Helpline (24 Hour):** 1300 364 100

**Poisons Information Centre:** 13 1126

**Pregnancy Helpline (National):** 1300 139 313

**Respond SA, Adult Childhood Sexual Abuse Helpline:** 1800 176 900

**SANE Mental Illness Helpline:** Freecall ™: 1900 688 382 (Free from fixed line)

**Sexual Health Hotline:** 8364 0444 (country callers only); 1800 188 171

**Suicide Prevention Medical Specialist Information:** 1300 360 980

**Teen Challenge Suicide Helpline:** 1800 771 777

**Toughlove South Australia (parent support line):** 1300 365 494

**Translating and Interpreting Services:** 13 1450
Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (Vet Line): 1800 011 046; Health Line: 13000 131 719
Violence Against Women – Australia Says No (24 hours helpline): 1800 200 526
Women’s Healthline: 1300 882 880

Indigenous Specific Services
Aboriginal Family Support Services: 8212 1112
Aboriginal Hostels: 8267 4222
Aboriginal Housing Authority: 8235 4333
Aboriginal Sobriety Group: 8223 4204
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service: Freecall ™1800 079 098
Nunkuwarrin Yunti (health service): 8223 5011
Nunga Mi:Minar Women’s & Children’s Shelter (Accommodation): 1300 782 200
Weena Mooga Gu Gudba Inc. (Ceduna): 8625 2183   DV Worker: 0428 726 653

Social Support
Abuse Prevention Programme (for >65 years):  8232 5377
Adelaide Day Centre for Homeless: 8232 0048
Adelaide Diocesan AIDS Council: 8234 9180
Addiction Counselling Service: 8334 3333
Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse (Mt Gambier): 8725 9308
Alcoholics Anonymous: 8346 3255
AIDS Council of South Australia: 8334 1611 or 1800 888 559
Anglicare SA (Magdalene Centre- Day Centre) 8305 9370 full list in White Pages
Archway Rehabilitation & Community Services: 8305 9650 Sobering Up: 8447 7811
Baptist Community Services (Support Services): 8357 1755 full list in White Pages
Centacare Catholic Family Services (CSA Counselling): 8210 8200; 1800 812 300 full list in White Pages.

Child Abuse Prevention Services: Freecall 1800 688 009 (Free from fixed Telstra line)

Child Adolescent Mental Health Service: Northern 8161 7389; Eastern 8207 8999; Southern 8204 5412; Seaford 8326 1234; see list in White Pages for country

Community Health Centre (Counselling) Aboriginal Health 8182 9206; 8243 5611 Northern Women’s 8252 3711; Southern Women’s 8384 9555; Pt Adelaide 8240 9611; Inner Southern 8277 2488; Noarlunga (CSA) 8384 9555; Migrant 8237 3900 Parks (CSA) 8243 5611, 8243 5612 full list in White Pages

COPE: (Counselling) Library: 8245 8100. Bookshop: 8245 8111

Dale Street Women’s Health Centre (CSA Counselling): 8444 0700

Department for Families and Communities: Enquiries: 8226 8800

Eating Disorders Association: 8212 1644

Emergency Accommodation Services SA (Accommodation): 1800 003 308

Exodus Youth Service: (Youth Counselling): 8356 6999

Family and Youth Services (Information): full list White Pages 8226 6735

Gambling Addiction Treatment Services: 8267 6069

Hills Fleurieu Women’s Health Team (Mt Barker: CSA Counselling): 8393 1833

Hutt Street Centre (Counselling, Day Centre, Meals): 8223 2068

Living Hope (Counselling): 8277 4033

Lutheran Counselling & Welfare Centre: 8269 1935

Marion Youth Centre (CSA Counselling): 8377 1055

Mary Street – Adolescent Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme: 8340 4422

Mediation Services: 8350 0376

Men’s Information and Support Centre (Counselling): 8212 0331

Mental Health Resource Centre: 8221 5166 full list in White Pages

Mental Illness Fellowship: 8410 5249; 8221 5160

Migrant Health Service: 8237 3900 full list in White Pages

Migrant Women’s Support & Accommodation Service Inc. (MWSAS): 8346 9417
Narcotics Anonymous: 8231 4233
Northern Violence Intervention Programme: 8396 1345
Parents Supporting Parents Flag (Gay/Lesbian service): 8241 0616 or 8269 0718
Playford Primary Health Care Services (CSA Counselling): 8252 9900
Poisons Information Centre: 13 1126
Port Augusta Regional Women’s & Children’s Support Service (Counselling & Accommodation up to 2 months): 8642 4357; AH.1800 655 716, 0428 326 529
Pregnancy Support ‘Genesis’: 8281 5312
Pregnancy Support ‘Birthline’: 8331 1223
Pregnancy Counselling (Termination Counselling): 1300 737 732
Relationships Australia (CSA Counselling) Clients: 8223 4566, 1800 182 325.
Respond SA, Adult Childhood Sexual Abuse Services (CSA Counselling): 8419 2000
Riverland Domestic Violence Unit Inc. (Accommodation & Counselling): 8582 2100.
Salvation Army (Emergency Relief): 8227 0199; 8379 9388 full list in White Pages.
Service to Youth Council (Accommodation & Counselling): 8211 8466
Sexual Abuse Support Service, Christies Beach: 8382 3554
Sexual Crime Investigation Branch: 8207 5800
Sexual Offenders Treatment Assessment Program: 8362 3022
Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Clinic 275): Freecall 1800 806 490
Side Street (Youth CSA Counselling): 8202 5871
South Eastern Women’s Emergency Services: Freecall ™ 1800 631 385
Southern Domestic Violence Service Inc. (Accomm. & Counselling): 8382 0066
Southern Junction Community Services Inc.(Youth CSA Counselling): 8382 3554
Spark Resource Centre Inc. (Pregnancy and CSA Counselling): 8226 2500
Streetlink Youth Health Service (Drug and Alcohol Counselling): 8231 4844
Teen Challenge (Counselling): 8287 1685; 1300 889 288
UnitingCare Wesley Bowden Inc. (Drug and Alcohol Counselling): 8245 7100
UnitingCare Wesley (Counselling and support services): 8202 5111 see White Pages

Warranilla (Drug & Alcohol Detox Unit): 8130 7500, 1300 131 340

Western Domestic Violence Service Inc. (Counselling & Accom.): 8268 7700

Women's Health Statewide (CSA Counselling): 8239 9600

Women's Housing Association Inc (Accommodation >18yrs): 8349 4460

Youth Health Services (the Second Story) (CSA Counselling): 8232 0233
Contact details for the South Australian services that assisted in this project:

**Addiction Counselling Services**
Highgate Building
103 Fisher Street, Fullarton, S.A. 5063
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8334 3333
Website: www.addictioncounsellingservices.com.au

**Alcoholics Anonymous**
18 Third Street, Brompton, S.A. 5007
Phone: 08 8346 4004; 08 8346 3255 (A.H.)
Hours: 9.30am – 4.30pm Monday to Friday
Website: csoasa.cjb.net

**Baptist Community Services**
35 King William Road, Unley, S.A. 5061
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8357 1755
1800 045 004
Website: www.sabaptist.asn.au/bcs

**Catherine House Inc.**
PO Box 6031, Halifax Street, Adelaide S.A. 5000
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8232 2282
Website: www.catherinehouse.org.au
Centacare, Catholic Family Services
33 Wakefield Street, Adelaide, S.A. 5000
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8210 8200, 1800 812 300
Email: cfs@centacare.org.au
Website: www.centacare.org.au

Dale Street Women’s Community Health Centre
47 Dale Street, Port Adelaide, S.A. 5015
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 444 0700
Website: www.whs.sa.gov.au/services_dale.php

Domestic Violence Crisis Service
PO Box 6578, Halifax Street, Adelaide 5000
Hours: 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8413 8121
Helpline: 1300 782 200 24 hrs, 7 days
After Hours Crisis Care: 131 611

Domestic Violence Helpline
Hours: 24 hours, 7 days a week
Phone: 1800 080 098
www.ucwesleyadelaide.org.au/domesticviolence

Drug & Alcohol Services South Australia (DASSA)
Hours: 24 hours, 7 days a week
Phone: 1300 13 13 40 – toll free
Gambling Helpline: 1800 060 757
Website: www.dassa.sa.gov.au

Gambling Addiction Treatment Services
6-8 Walter Street, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006
Hours: 9am to 10pm 7 days a week
Phone: 08 8267 6069 (7 days, 24 hours)
Website: www.gatscounselling.com
Mission Australia Hindmarsh Centre
35 Richard Street, Hindmarsh, S.A.  5007
Sobering Up Unit
Hours:  5pm to 9.30am 7 days a week
Outreach Programme
Hours:  9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone:  08 8346 4015
Website: www.missionaustralia.com.au

Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services of SA Inc
231 Morphett Street, Adelaide, S.A.  5000
Phone:  08 8218 0700
Hours:  9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Website: www.oars.org.au

SA Mental Health Services

Ramsay Health Care
Note: Private Health Cover Required
Website: www.ramsayhealth.com.au

The Adelaide Clinic
33 Park Terrace, Gilberton, S.A.  5081
Phone:  08 8269 8100
Hours:  24 hours, 7 days per week

Fullarton Private Hospital
293-295 Fullarton Road, Parkside, S.A.  5063
Phone:  08 272 0233
Hours:  24 hours, 7 days per week

Kahlyn Day Centre
40 Briant Road, Magill, S.A.  5072
Hours:  8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday
Phone:  08 8331 0811
Relationships Australia (SA)
55 Hutt Street, Adelaide SA 5000
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
9am to 9pm Tues, Wed and Thurs
Phone: 08 8223 4566 or 1300 364 277
Country Clients Free Call 1800 182 325
Website: www.relationships.com.au

Respond SA: Adult CSA Counselling
Phone: 08 8419 2000

Salvation Army Social Service
39 Florence Street, Fullarton, S.A. 5063
Hours: 8.30am – 4.45pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8379 9388
Website: www.salvationarmy.org.au/sa

Service to Youth Council Inc
Youth Agency
Adelaide: 72 and 80 Currie Street
Woodville: 65 Woodville Road
Elizabeth East: 10 Saratoga Road
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8211 8466, 08 8408 1313, 08 8282 0129
Website: www.syc.net.au

SHine SA Inc
17 Phillips Street, Kensington, S.A. 5068
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8431 5177
08 8364 5033 (appointments)
Website: www.shinesa.org.au
Sidestreet Counselling Service
14 Pitt St, Adelaide, S.A. 5000
Hours: 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8202 5871
Website: www.ucwesleyadelaide.org.au

Southern Junction Community Service
13 McKinna Road, Christie Downs, S.A. 5164
Phone: 08 8382 3554, 1800 807 364
Residential care: 08 8384 7321 (24 hours)
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Website: southernjunction.org.au

Southern Women’s Community Health Centre
Alexander Kelly Drive, Noarlunga Centre, S.A. 5168
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8384 9555
Website: http://www.whs.sa.gov.au/services_swhealth.php

Streetlink Youth Health Service
27 Gresham Street (1st Floor), Adelaide, S.A. 5000
Hours: 1.30 to 4.30pm, Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri
Phone: 08 8231 4844
Website: www.ucwesleyadelaide.org.au

The Second Story Youth Health Service
(Division of Children Youth and Women’s Health Service)
Adelaide: 57 Hyde Street
(Hours extended to 7pm Friday)
Christies Beach: 50A Beach Road
Elizabeth: 6 Gillingham Road
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 1300 131 719
Website: www.cyh.com
UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide
10 Pitt Street, Adelaide, S.A. 5000
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
(Thurs. evenings by appointment)
Phone: 08 8202 5190
Website: www.ucwadel.org.au

Women’s Health Statewide
64 Pennington Terrace, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 1300 882 880 (cost of local call)
1800 128 098 (toll free)
Website: www.whs.sa.gov.au

Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service
Level 2, Norwich Centre,
55 King William Road, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006
Hours: 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday
Phone: 08 8226 8777, 1800 817 421.
After hours and emergency: 08 8226 8787
Website: www.yarrowplace.sa.gov.au
Useful Websites

The following are a few of the many useful websites with information and support resources for CSA survivors. Each site will have many additional links to resources that can assist you in your healing journey.

**Adult Survivors of Child Abuse (Australia):** national Australian support organisation

**American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence (USA):** a guide to prevent a perpetrator finding out sites you have been visiting on the Internet
http://www.abanet.org/domviol/internet.html

**Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (Australia):** research, information and links

**Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse (Australia):** research and resources on domestic violence in Australia (many links)
http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au

**Australasian Legal Information Institute (Australia):** legal information
http://www.austlii.edu.au

**Beyond Blue (Australia):** national Australian Commonwealth initiative on depression (mental health links):
**Broken Rites (Australia):** A non-denominational support group for people abused in religious institutions.

**Bursting the Bubble (Australia):** Website for children who have been abused: resources and links
http://www.burstingthebubble.com/

**Centres Against Sexual Assault (Australia):** many resources and links

**Department for Families and Communities (Australia):** Gambling self help book from

**Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre (Australia):** many resources and links

**Information on Survivor Flashbacks (USA):** survivor page
http://www.alltheseyears.net/flashbacks.htm

**Men Against Sexual Assault (Australia):** Information and links.

**National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (Australia):** Commonwealth Government violence prevention reports and programmes, database of programmes for adolescents.

**Office of the Status of Women (Australia):** Is Domestic Violence Too Close to Home?
A kit for rural women (services in each state).

**Pandora’s Box (USA):** many resources and links about CSA
http://www.prevent-abuse-now.com/index.htm
Psychological self help (USA): on-line self help book for mental health
http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/

Recover Canada Wellness Network (Canada): chat group and resources
http://www.vansondesign.com/RecoveryCanada/SAResources.html

Recovered memories (USA): clinical psychologist run site with resources and links
http://www.jimhopper.com/memory/

Rosalie's story (Australia): survivor story and resources
http://www.fox.net.au/~woody/rosalie.html

SHOUT (Support, Heal, Overcome, Understand and Triumph over sexual abuse) (Australia): on-line chat site for survivors.

Sibling abuse (Australia): resources
http://www.saf.au.tt

South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (Australia): survivor resources

Survivors on the Net (UK): http://www.survivors.org.uk/ Australian branch

The Canadian Women’s Health Network (Canada): information and resources
http://www.cwhn.ca/resources/csa/ab_parenting.html

The Morris Center (USA): many resources and links
http://www.ascasupport.org/2801a-resources.htm
Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS)
Foundation of SA Inc.

Catherine House Inc.

Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd.