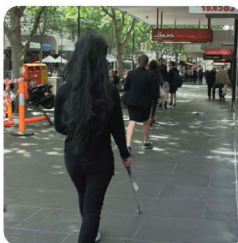


Project Report

HEAR US:
OUR STORIES MATTER



A DVD to help people with a cognitive
disability seek help if they have been hurt

Published by Merri Community Health Services Ltd
Hear Us: Our Stories Matter—Project Report

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Accessible formats

This document is available for downloading from the following websites, www.mchs.org.au and www.yarracity.vic.gov.au in PDF and RTF. There is also a Plain English version available.

Disclaimer

This information in this report is intended as a guide only. It is not a substitute for legal advice.

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Yarra City Council message

Yarra City Council is pleased to support Hear Us: Our Stories Matter through our Investing in Community Grants Program.

These grants give Council the opportunity to provide long-term funding for projects that make a positive difference in the community.

This DVD plays an important role in promoting community access and inclusion by bringing together stories of people with a disability who have been victims of crime and have accessed the justice system. These stories encourage people with a disability to feel confident about approaching Victoria Police, community legal centres and other organisations that provide vital victim support services.

Council's support for this project is part of our strong commitment to break down the barriers to social inclusion for people with a disability. Through our active Disability Advisory Committee, which I am proud to Chair, we are well aware of the issues that impact upon people with a disability and their vulnerability to negative treatment in the community, including violence.

Hear Us: Our Stories Matter shares compelling stories of these experiences and the opportunity for our community to listen and support their fellow citizens.

Cr Jackie Fristacky
Mayor, City of Yarra

Merri Community Health Services message

Merri Community Health Services (MCHS) is proud to have produced Hear Us: Our Stories Matter, providing the opportunity for people with a disability who have been the victim of a violent crime, to share their experience with the broader community.

MCHS is committed to providing accessible and appropriate services to the community, including the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program. Hear Us: Our Stories Matter was developed because people with disabilities who are victims of violent crime are less likely to access support. This resource will hopefully encourage more people to access support, share their story and report crime to Victoria Police. The four stories shared in the DVD highlight that experiencing violent crime is traumatic and that everyone, regardless of their background or ability, has the right to seek support. The DVD gives information on how to get help and illustrates the positive outcomes for the participants once they received services.

MCHS thanks the four people who were brave enough to share their story in the hope that more people will feel that their story matters and come forward to get help.

Mr Nigel Fidgeon
Chief Executive Officer, Merri Community Health Services

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“Australians with disabilities are among our nation’s forgotten people. But it is time for their stories to be heard—and acted upon”

SHUT OUT: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia. National Disability Strategy Consultation Report prepared by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, 2009

Objective of the project

Hear Us: Our Stories Matter created the opportunity for four people with a disability to equally voice their experiences of being victims of violent crime, in relation to the crime itself and the supports provided to them as a result of the crime. Through their involvement in the project, the participants were able to highlight the rights of people with disabilities and encourage others to seek better outcomes. The DVD will contribute towards developing a wider range of accessible and appropriate systems, processes and resources, to improve the opportunities for people with a disability to participate fully in justice systems and victims services.

Background to the project

Violence against people with disabilities is underreported and underrepresented. This was highlighted in the project’s literature review, including studies, reports and articles from the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and Australia over the past 10 years. While there has been a gradual increase in worldwide awareness and knowledge about the nature and frequent occurrence of violence perpetrated against women with disabilities, people with a mental illness and people with sensory or intellectual disabilities, the representation in statistical

data and current service provision does not reflect the reality and experiences of people with disabilities.

Recent research highlights the need to improve the way services are delivered to people with disabilities, particularly women. By telling people’s real life stories, the DVD explored what supports and services people with disabilities needed, to achieve their desired outcomes after being a victim of violent crime. The project linked two of the most current and relevant initiatives that focus on people with disabilities, The Victorian Victims Charter and the Australian Human Rights Framework, in order to highlight the outcomes of the strategies and frameworks and develop partnerships with relevant services.

In August 2009, the Victorian Victim Support Agency began developing a Victims Charter for Disability (1). Two of the six components identified in their strategy were relevant to this project:

1. Improving confidence in and access to victim support services
2. Entitlements to support through Victims Assistance and Counselling Program (VACP) and the Victims Support Agency (VSA) Helpline.

The central theme of the Australian Human Rights Framework (2), is the promotion and respect of human rights. The 'Convention of the Rights for People with Disabilities' states that facing barriers in their participation as equal members of society infringes upon the human rights of people with disabilities (3) (4) (5) (6) (7).

Australia ratified this Convention in 2008 and has developed a National Disability Strategy aimed at improving the involvement of persons with disabilities in their own lives (8), and empowering them with their economic, cultural, civil, political and social rights (6).

Understanding the law is an integral component to gain access, protection and support services and those who experience barriers with communication are denied the ability to claim these rights (7). Victims with disabilities are less likely to access and benefit from victim's support services through the criminal justice system (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14).

The content and format of current literature, resources and advertising targeting victims of violent crime does not have any meaning to those unable to communicate in conventional ways (6) (7) (9). This limits people with a disability from accessing information on specific supports that are available and means they have to rely on others to disseminate or interpret the information for them. This is compounded by the possibility that the 'others' may be the perpetrators of the violence or abuse (5) (6) (9), or that 'others' make the decision not to disseminate this information due to incorrect or misaligned perceptions of the person's rights.

A common thread in all accessed literature is to make services truly accessible to all (5) (6) (9) (10). Providing assisted communication technology and literature

in a variety of formats should be proactive standard business (6) (8) (11) (12) (15) and not considered as a special procedure that is only be used if the need presents itself. A multidisciplinary approach (6) (10) should be used by all services in victim friendly environments, so that the person is the centre of the support and that all the needs of the person are addressed.

The fundamental right of a person with a disability to make an informed decision about how they want to proceed and which support service they would like to access needs to be promoted and protected. Hear Us: Our Stories Matter enabled stories to be told, heard and shared by people with a disability in a connected approach that allowed the participants to provide input into how a community functions, to contribute to community awareness about the existence of supports (5) (6) (8) (10) (11) (12) (15), and to provide information on the individual benefits of accessing supports. This project used the Living Stories process to achieve this.

It is also noted that people with a disability should be included in the development of policy, protocols and procedures in all areas of the justice system (6) (10) (11) (12) (15), and be equally represented as workers in the associated support services (5).

A major re-haul of what is perceived as a disability is crucial if Australia is to embrace all citizens as members of the Australian community. To fully offer equality, we need to move away from non-inclusive attitudes in which people with disabilities are burdens on society, are recipients of charity, have no valuable contributions to make, or are inherently different to other community members. The training document 'Monitoring the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' states that:

“Disability is recognized as the consequence of the interaction of the individual with an environment that does not accommodate that individuals differences and limits or impedes the individual’s participation in society” pg 8 (12)

In addition, people with disabilities should not be considered a homogenous group (11) (15). Society should be designed to enable all community members to fully participate (12), removing barriers so people with disabilities can get on with living their life (4) (13) (15), removing the concept of disability and focus instead on supporting everyone’s life relatedness and contribution (6) (15), and accepting disability as indicative of human variation (6).

“Impairments are not what disable people. What disables people is society’s attitude towards the impairment.” Hon Bill Shorten MP (4)

With this project, it was hoped that by assisting people with a disability to see and hear experiences told to them by other people with disabilities, it would encourage more understanding on how to identify and report abuse and how to seek support services for victims of crime. The benefit to those who participate was to have a chance to tell their stories and be heard by others, to share their experiences in a way that could help others.

“So when disabled people are unable to participate in their community as equal and independent citizens for fear of violence, the law and those who discharge it are failing the very people they are supposed to serve” Trevor Phillips (14)

Scope of Project

To begin the exploration into experiences of people with disabilities, this project acknowledged that the definition of ‘disability’ covers a wide array of conditions in the spectrum of intellectual, mental, sensory, and physical disabilities.

The objective of this project was not to debate or validate the incidences of violence against people with a disability. This project did not focus on the negative and discriminatory attitudes towards people with a disability by society, nor on the legal and policing communities’ perception on the credibility of people with disabilities.

This project operated within the ideology of the convention of the rights of people with disabilities, especially in relation to dignity, respect and equality and aimed at exploring:

- access issues to police and victim support services via communication systems
- how to raise awareness of victim support services and the help-seeking experiences of people with a disability via a variety of interactions and/or mediums.

The project focused initially on representing the experiences of between four to six individuals through the concept of ‘Living Stories’ and aimed to recruit the following participants:

- One female and one male, with an intellectual disability, both over the age of 18 years

Why living stories?

A Living Story is a vibrant and powerful medium in which to convey experiences of a person where the nuances may be lost in the static reading of a story in a case study. People can relate more to the experiences of the storyteller when using a range of their senses, they can see the effect the experiences have had on the person, and can feel some connection to the real person who is sharing their experience. There is no third party interpretation of responses or dialogue.

- One female and one male, with a mental illness, both over the age of 18 years
- One female and one male, with a physical and/or sensory disability, both over the age of 18 years

It was expected that these individuals:

- Would have supports allocated to accommodate their current communication needs prior to participation and for the duration of the project
- Would be able to understand the reason for the project
- Would agree to contribute positively to the ideology of the project and were committed to follow through to the completion of the project within the scope of their ability.

The stories in the DVD would provide direction on how services should be responding to the needs of people with disabilities.



Stage One: Collect & Connect involved

- Establishing a project management team and consulting with various people, including professionals in the disability sector, disability advocacy representatives (including people with disabilities) and community service organisations.
- Identifying appropriate stakeholders to establish a project reference group, ensuring that the project goals and objectives were appropriate and fell within legal and financial parameters.
- Developing a Terms of Reference to establish guidelines, priorities, resource and task allocations for all stages of the project.
- Establishing an appropriate interview process for participants, including the types and content of interview questions.
- Identifying criteria for suitable candidates for participation in the interviews (i.e. community organisation, socio-economic group, type of victim, age of person, residential status, stability in health status, an ability to commit to and understand the project).
- Seeking funding to deliver the project, make the DVD and host the Launch.
- Seeking ethics approval from the relevant ethics committee .
- Sourcing production companies to record the interviews and develop these into an accessible resource of living stories and help-seeking scenarios.

Stage Two: Gather Together involved

- Developing a marketing campaign to target appropriate interview participants.
- Sourcing and inviting each of the identified individuals to participate in a series of interviews.
- Setting up a counselling protocol so that each participant could have access to appropriate and targeted counselling at every stage of the process. This was to ensure that their participation in the project would not negatively impact on their lives.
- Obtaining informed consent from each individual to digitally record their interviews for use as audio and visual input into the DVD resource Hear Us: Our Stories Matter.
- Engaging with Disability Media and establishing a Memorandum of Understanding for the production of the DVD, and employing people with a disability to be involved with the music and acting on the DVD.

Stories are
our gifts to
a world that
doesn't see
us

Sarah Black, author 17

Stage Three: Living Stories involved

- Interviewing the four participants and recording this footage on digital video.
- Filming digital video footage in the City of Yarra Local Government Area.
- Collecting footage from the reception areas of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre, Northern CASA and the Northern Victims Assistance and Counselling Program.
- Videoing role plays with an appropriate actor for the How To Seek Help scenes.
- Seeking continual support and endorsement from the agencies involved in the project.
- Using the information collected to:
 - Transcribe the interviews into case studies.
 - Provide each participant with the opportunity to meet and read, or have read to them, both the transcript and the summarised version of their interview, and then watch the first draft of the DVD.
 - Select suitable footage to be included in the DVD.
 - Engage an Auslan interpreter to appear in the corner of the DVD footage.
 - Create audio description to be added to the final edited footage
 - Design the DVD cover using the philosophies of accessible formatting.
 - Create a booklet to attach to the DVD cover with a Plain English summary of each story, including a list of contact numbers and web pages to a variety of victims support services within Victoria.

How did the project go?

The idea for this project originated early in 2010. At that time, the focus on people with disabilities accessing the justice system and victim support services was only minimal. Statistics were hard to find, the National Disability Insurance Scheme was still in discussion stage and the many reviews and research projects that have been published over the past four years were not yet in the public domain. The project met with many challenges and barriers during the project journey. It also engaged some wonderful people who were willing to travel the journey. This is story of the project.

Strengths

Seeking funding

The project successfully received a grant through the Yarra City Council 'Investing in Community' grants program at the end of 2011. This funding was a three year grant for 2012 to 2014

Meeting with the Production Company

After some research, the Project Officer approached Grit Media (now Disability Media Australia) to produce the DVD component of the project. They had been highlighted during the literature review component of the project brief. Their 'Tell Someone' videos, made for the Southern Metropolitan Region Integrated Family Violence Executive, were created to educate and inform people with disabilities about family violence.

The benefits of engaging with this company were:

- Their extensive experience in working with people with disabilities eliminated any of the possible communication or accessibility issues that could have arisen.

- They were familiar with using subtitles, Auslan screen in screen and audio descriptors.
- They employed people with disabilities as actors and music artists, whom we could access.

Meeting the four participants

The four interested participants were all very positive and eager to tell their stories. All four had different experiences and showed great inner strength in sharing their stories. The Project Officer met with each participant three times individually and at the end of each meeting, all four were still eager to continue with their involvement. They were all advised about the process of de-identification, and encouraged to choose their own persona for the interview. They all took delight in selecting their persona name.

The interviews

Each participant was offered a mock interview to become familiar with having a digital video camera in the room and to become familiar with the interview questions. They were encouraged to invite a support person with them if they wanted. This footage was not kept. Each participant was positive and eager to continue after this stage.

The second interview involved a lot more setting up, with lights and sound checks and a few cameras and people. Participants were again encouraged to invite a support person with them if they wanted. Each participant remained positive and focused and interviewed well.

The interviews were then transcribed and shown or read out to each person to gain consent about the use of their words. Once the first draft of the DVD was ready, they were all able to view this with us (or with their support person), so as to give consent for the visual component.

When the cover for the DVD was designed, each participant was invited to comment and the feedback was very positive.

The DVD

Extra footage was filmed around the City of Yarra municipality and included in the DVD, and all the community services that volunteered to be part of this image collection were very accommodating and eager to be involved. The staff at the reception areas of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre and Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault, and all the staff who work at the Chifley Drive site of Merri Community Health Services, were welcoming and supportive of the disruption to their usual services.

Catch phrase

During the process, every participant and advisory group was asked about selecting an easy phrase to use through the DVD. This was to create a universal phrase that could be recognised by all support services. "I have been hurt, I need help" was chosen as the phrase.

I have
been hurt,
I need
help

Access to this DVD and Report

Once the DVD has been released, a copy of it will be made available on the websites of Yarra City Council and Merri Community Health Services.

This will make the DVD more accessible with flexible options for those who use the accessibility features on their computers or tablets, such as screen size, contrast and volume control.

This report will also be made available in a variety of formats on the websites to allow for larger text, text-to-talk facilitations and other accessibility programs.

Challenges

Setting up the Advisory Group

Establishing the Steering Committee took considerable time. During 2011 the Project Officer met with a variety of people who were willing to provide feedback on the Project Brief and comment on the potential positive influence of the project but they were unable to commit to being on the Advisory Group.

The first meeting of the Advisory Group occurred in February 2012 and was attended by seven people. At this meeting the guidelines, processes and Terms Of Reference were established. The group also discussed the definition of violent crime and the parameters of disability in relation to this project.

Ethics Approval

The project received ethics approval from the Department of Justice Ethics Committee in February 2013. This process was lengthy and meticulous as the target group was deemed to be at higher risk of residual harm.

The flyers, information for participants and consent forms were all produced in both general text and Plain English so as to reach the appropriate audience.

Marketing and attracting participants

Over the following months, the project was promoted and the Project Officer attended numerous agency meetings, network meetings, advisory groups and talked to many people.

Flyers were sent to a wide range of community groups and neighbourhood houses and emailed to networks and organisations who had contact with people with disabilities.

Finding and recruiting participants for the project was challenging. The Project Officer found it difficult to contact people with a disability outside of the two Disability Advisory Groups.

“When it comes to victims of crimes, a person with an intellectual disability is twice as likely as other people to have a crime committed against them. The majority of women with an intellectual disability have been taken advantage of sexually by the time they reach adulthood.”¹⁸

DAIS Executive Officer, Mr Martin Butcher - Disability Advocacy and Information Service (DAIS)
Media Release: 7 October 2013

In response to this challenge the project parameters of intellectual disability were broadened to include all cognitive disabilities, thus widening the eligibility criteria.

At the marketing stage, the project did not receive any feedback or queries so it was not possible to identify the barriers to participation for people with disabilities. The project management team and the advisory group discussed the following possibilities:

- The information was not reaching people with disabilities directly, as this often relies on a third party passing the information on.
- People with disabilities who have been victims of crime were not comfortable or confident to tell their story.
- The lack of response was indicative of a broader issue in the community where people with disabilities are often not encouraged to have a voice and tell their stories and are less likely to report violent crime.

Small selection of participants

Four people agreed to be involved in the project who had all been involved in the justice system and received some victim support services. The project was not able to include people who had not yet accessed the justice system or victim support services.

Delays

Every stage of the project took longer than

anticipated, from seeking funding and gaining ethics approval through to recruiting the participants. This delayed the interviewing and DVD production components of the project.

Due to the sensitive nature of the acts of violence described by some of the participants, there was concern about the inclusion of such information in case there were pending or future court cases. These concerns were taken very seriously and investigated to ensure the safety of the participants and that their involvement in the DVD would not impact negatively on them in any way.

Following the investigations, recommendations were made to re-edit the interview footage to ensure that there were no negative ramifications for the individuals.

The DVD cover design and the writing of this final report were also put on hold while these enquiries were underway. There was also an initial idea of attaching a label on each cover with a Braille description of the title. However, time delays meant that this was not achievable.

While at times these delays caused frustration, the input from the Advisory Group and key partners was invaluable and has ensured that the final DVD will be a very valuable resource for people with disabilities.

What did the project find out?

Procedure

The questions that the participants were asked were open-ended in structure and simply phrased so as not to dictate how their story was captured. This allowed the stories to be about the participants' experiences in their own words or signs.

The questions focused on what happened after the act of violence, not about the violent act itself. The participants could chose to disclose more if they wanted to. They were also not asked specific questions about their disability and again it was their choice to disclose if they wanted to. The focus of the story was on what they had experienced, not on their disability. If the person did not answer any part of any question, it was not repeated. The questions were rephrased a few times to ensure the person was choosing not to answer directly rather than not understanding the question.

The preamble was the same for each interview, explaining that:

- We will now ask you the questions written on this page and the next page.
- Your responses will be recorded on this digital video camera.
- You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer.
- You can end the interview at any time you want.
- You can ask for a break at any time.

The participants were shown a couple of

pre-approved prompts for when they needed to expand their response or when a yes or no response needed to be extended so that the statement could be used on the DVD.



Question One

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

This question was introduced to give the audience a chance to connect with each person before they started talking about what had happened to them.

This question highlighted that people with disabilities were going about their usual lives just like everyone else. They were attending appointments, making friends and getting an education.

They like doing the same things as everyone else, such as playing ball games, walking, listening to music, reading, knitting, singing and swimming.

Question Two

Can you tell me about the time you were hurt by someone else?

(Prompt questions)

What happened? (no need to get intricate details – just a summary)

Who else was there?

How were you feeling at the time?

The four people who volunteered to tell their stories were all willing to talk about the time they were hurt and were clear about how it affected them at the time.

Fred had made a new friend at the place where he lives, and when he discovered she had been kicked out of the flat by her boyfriend, offered to help her out. He gave her a small amount of money and walked with her down the street. At this point, she physically assaulted him and took his keys. He felt scared and in danger and wondered why this was happening to him.

Sylvia was asked by a man, who lived close by, to his place for a coffee. While there, he sexually assaulted her.

“I felt awful after it happened, embarrassed and ashamed.”

Paul was a young child when he witnessed family violence and experienced psychological abuse by his father. He doesn't know why the abuse happened but it had an effect on the rest of his life, especially his teen and young adulthood years.

Anuque was on a tram when a person boarded who was using loud coarse language.

“It made me very uncomfortable as vision impaired to listen to, and I would think, for a sighted person to be able to see, his behaviour”.

When Anuque spoke up and mentioned she was going to call the police, the person physically assaulted her.

Question Three

Can you tell me what happened next?

Due to the differing timelines these events occurred in, each person's experiences just after the incident vary. It is interesting and pleasing to note that the two events which occurred more recently involve immediate contact with the police and support services.

Having some mates close by, Fred was able to flee to their shop and they supported Fred to call the police. Fred reports that the police responded quickly and organised to take his statement.

Anuque was supported by other people on the tram, who assisted her to leave the tram and stayed with her while she called the police. She felt very scared, disorientated and upset by the experience, and was glad that there were other people to surround and support her. She was worried the person who had hurt her would hurt her further. The police attended the scene and told her they would follow it up.

There has also been an impact on Anuque using public transport since the assault.

While she still uses public transport, she will not use that particular tram line anymore.

Paul experienced family violence for about five years before his mother filed for an intervention order but he states that he did not get any support until the year later, once the divorce was granted. Paul talked a lot about how his dyslexia impacted on his ability to understand what was happening at the time and how he had to deal with it.

“I was dealing with depression, anxiety, fear from my family environment, dealing with a dad that didn’t know, understand what it was like to be me”.

He still does not like to talk about it that much as he finds it rather confronting, even at his current age.

Sylvia’s sexual assault happened a long time ago and she did not tell anyone initially. The man who sexually assaulted her had told her not to tell anyone and she was frightened. At the time, Sylvia was too frightened to tell the police or anyone else. She was too ashamed of herself.

Then when she thought that she should tell someone, she told her doctor. Unfortunately, her doctor just told her to stay away from the offender. Sylvia felt that she could not do this, but she did not know what else to do.

It took her many years before she told someone else about the sexual assault and they assisted her to go to the police. Sylvia had to live with the memories, the fear and the perceived shame.

Question Four

I am interested in knowing a bit about what types of support services you used.

Anuque said that she had some initial difficulties contacting the police officer in charge of her case and that she had to speak to a few other officers first. Once she had organised a time to make her statement at the police station, Anuque was provided with an Independent Third Person from the Office of the Public Advocate. She was also linked into other support services such as counselling.

“The services allowed me to tell my story about what happened, without being judged and without having other people’s opinions.”

Paul’s experience of family violence happened a long time ago and in another country. Although Paul and his family received some initial support from a court appointed psychologist, he did not receive any other assistance to deal with his reactions:

“The emotions, the phenomena of abuse, a vicious circle of where you are trying to deal with the abuse and the ramifications of that, within that environment”

Paul believes the ramifications of the psychological and family violence has impacted on his self esteem and has led to an inferiority complex.

Fred’s experience with support services have been very positive. The police helped link Fred and his family into some support services. Through this, Fred accessed some counselling, and got some legal advice from a lawyer. Fred stated that the counselling was fantastic.

Independent Third Persons (ITPs) are volunteers who assist people with a cognitive disability or mental illness during interviews, or when giving formal statements to Victoria Police. ITPs are trained by the Office of the Public Advocate (OPA)

“It has helped having the counselling, someone to talk to about it, as the counsellor made it easier to get right deep down to the point.”

Sylvia said that she did not know of any other services that were available then, but would have liked some support. She is aware that not telling anyone at the time was a reason she did not have access to services. It was not until many years later, when she became upset when she and her companion dog were denied access to a bus, that she was linked into support services and started to receive counselling.



Question Five:

What would have been helpful to you at the time?

Both Fred and Anuque said they were happy with the services provided to them. Anuque felt that she would have liked more assistance from the tram driver on the day, although understood he may not have been able to.

Sylvia was quite upset by her doctor's advice at the time and would have liked more support. She possibly may have gone to the police earlier if this had been offered.

Paul spoke more about needing support with his dyslexia but also mentioned that it would have been beneficial if people

he and his mother knew had approached them personally and asked how they could help. They were feeling very alone. He also reflected that they did not approach anyone asking for help so it was a dualistic issue.

It is important to note here that there was not enough information provided during the individual stories about the participants' experiences of the court system. This meant that the project was unable to explore how well people with disabilities are represented in the court system, how participants felt about being in a court room or what services were provided to them through this process.

Question Six

Can you tell me what we could do to be more helpful in the future?

Paul reflected on how to support people with dyslexia when they are experiencing trauma or stress from an assault. He believes that it is important to approach people in this situation with patience and compassion as there are a variety of issues occurring. He talked about people (with dyslexia) not being able to externalise what they are feeling or experiencing and that they need to have an outlet. He spoke a lot about being non-confrontational and being flexible in allowing a person to tell their story.

He reflected that the best way to assist a person with a disability is by being open and patient. He believes it is very hard for people who are experiencing domestic violence or mental abuse to open up and it is very difficult for them to trust others. It was very difficult for him in his situation to trust other people with his emotions.

“A person with dyslexia is equal to everyone else who is experiencing domestic violence, or psychological violence.”

Paul believes he should have had the same opportunities to receive assistance and compassion and to have this provided in an alternative fashion.

Sylvia was asked the prompt question: “What advice would you give to somebody if they told you the same story as yours?”

She replied, “I’d say I’m sorry and I’d say I’m sorry for you. I’d say move away, move away. I don’t know why it happened to me. If that happened again I would go to the police.”

Fred talked about wanting to feel safe and have more visible access to justice services, similar to how ‘Crime Stoppers’ operates.

I’m glad that I’ve had these services because, because if I didn’t, I either would have been in a state of depression, I would have like, either been on drugs and I would have just been a broken person.

Fred

He also stated that he would like to feel safe if he ever had to go to court. As he mentioned this a couple of times, it appeared that he was a bit worried about what would happen to him in a court room.

As Anuque was happy with the services offered to her, she did not have any comment for this question.

Summary

What can be learnt from these stories?

The stories in Hear Us; Our Stories Matter highlighted that each person was unique in their experiences, their disability and their reactions. Each person felt scared, frightened and worried about what had happened to them. Those who were offered counselling did benefit from it and the more recent events involved reports to the police.

The four people who participated in the project were very courageous in making the decision to take part and their decision will help others know they can also come forward and tell their stories. They all agreed at their initial interview that telling their story would help others to tell their story.

It was reassuring to discover that Fred and Anuque were offered support services and counselling without a pending court appearance or decision. Being referred to the Independent Third Person program was very positive and it is possible some of the other participants were provided with this service but did not mention it in the interview.

One of the foundation ideas behind this project was to explore alternative ways to provide information to people with disabilities. Paul was the only participant to make comment on this. The other three participants already had support systems in place to assist them with access to information.

Sharing these stories is one way to influence how future services are made available to people with disabilities. These stories can be shared with other people with disabilities who may feel empowered to come forward with their own story or seek help if they have been hurt.

These stories can be shared with those who provide community services and victim support services to raise awareness about people with disabilities. The catch phrase “I have been hurt, I need help” has been selected as the message to impart to all services, so that they can recognise that any person using this phrase when approaching their service may need an alternative version of communication to receive support. It is hoped that recognising this phrase will encourage the service provider to consider how they are interacting with the person with a disability.

Only having four participants tell their stories limited the array of potential responses that could have reflected a more diverse range of experiences. The DVD gives a limited version of the experiences of people with disabilities in the justice and victim support services.

The DVD was unable to explore contributing factors to the violent acts, as the stories were not specifically related to gender, culture, socio-economic status, religion, gender-orientation, family status or geographical influence and only one of the participants clearly related their experiences back to their disability and how their disability factored into how they reacted after their experience. Sexual violence towards women is a prevailing issue in society and women with disabilities are more likely to experience a sexual assault, however the assumption can not be made that Sylvia's experiences were directly related to her disability.

It is important to also note that as the interviews were not tightly structured, and the individuals were not prompted to name services, it is possible they accessed other support but did not mention them in the interview. It is also possible that aspects of their cognitive disability impacted on their memory and recall; two of the participants did struggle to recall names of services while telling their story.

It could be difficult to foresee what could have been helpful for participants if they were not already aware of what was out there or still are not aware. It is difficult to draw a conclusion about what was or was not offered to each person in this case.

Conclusion

With only four participants in the project, it is hard to draw conclusions on the accessibility of services for people with disabilities who have experienced violent acts.

The four participants in the project had already accessed support services in some way in order to hear about the project. The challenge of engaging people who were not linked in with any services meant that their stories remain untold.

There are still many barriers for people with disabilities in accessing victim support services and this project has highlighted one of these, getting the information out to the people who need it the most. Were people with disabilities too scared or worried to tell their story, or did not realise they were a victim, or did not think it would get them anywhere? Did they even receive any information about the project?

Those that did tell their stories felt that they were helping others and they were able to

share that accessing support, especially counselling was very beneficial. This project has highlighted that the stories are valuable and the people who are telling them are valuable. Their experiences and emotions are the same as any other member of the community. Everyone should be able to tell their stories.

It is hoped that this project, and the DVD produced, will be a small stepping stone in the right direction to improve opportunities for people with disabilities, especially those with cognitive disabilities, to have a voice and be heard.



“I’d say I’m sorry and
I’d say I’m sorry for
you. I’d say move
away, move away.
I don’t know why it
happened to me. If
that happened again I
would go to the police.

Sylvia

The case studies

Fred's Story

Fred is a young adult who works at a large supermarket and wants to complete a VCAL Certificate II in marketing and sales. He loves hanging out with his family, watching films, listening to classic tunes and playing soccer.

A couple of years ago, Fred experienced an act of violence. He had made a new friend at the place where he lives and believed her story about her boyfriend kicking her out of the flat. He offered to help her out by giving her a very small amount of money. While going for a walk with her, she started to hit him and took his keys. Fred shouted at her and tried to get her to stop hitting him. He felt scared and in danger and wondered why this was happening to him. His keys were important to him but he knew he had to run away.

He ran to a nearby shop. They helped him make the call to the police and Fred told them where he was and what had happened. He stated that the police came to have a talk to him very quickly.

They said they would try to find the girl who hit him. The police took a statement from Fred about what happened, and when Fred's parents came to get him, the police went through the statement again with him. They checked that everything that had been written down was true.

Fred spent a bit of time with his family after this to recover from the shock of being hurt and having his keys taken. The police helped link Fred and his family into some support

services. Through this, Fred accessed some counselling, and got some legal advice from a lawyer.

Fred stated that the counselling was fantastic.

"I'm glad that I've had these services because, because if I didn't, I either would have been in a state of depression, I would have like, either been on drugs and I would have just been a broken person."

He also said that it "has helped having the counselling, someone to talk to about it, as the counsellor made it easier to get right deep down to the point."

When we asked him how long he would need these services for, Fred indicated that he would like them "for whenever it takes". When we asked Fred about anything else he would have liked access to, he talked about a service like Crime Stoppers where you could go to if you were a victim like him. He also talked about wanting to feel safe if he ever had to go to court. He stated that he would like to go to court as it "starts making me a better person."

Fred told us also that the police did speak to the girl who hurt him and they got his keys back

After note: Fred's mother has informed us that the case did not go to court as there was there was insufficient information gathered at the time of the assault.

Sylvia's Story

NOTE: We interviewed Sylvia using facilitated communication through two concurrent AUSLAN interpreters. The words used to create this case study are taken from the transcript of the interview, which means we were relying on the verbal translation. Sylvia was then provided with a copy of the transcript to read and her feedback was that it reflected what she had been communicating to us.

Sylvia relies on a Disability Pension and has to be careful with her money. She shares her life with her companion pet, Bacon. She and Bacon like to go out and about as she gets bored at home. Sylvia also likes to knit, especially jumpers, cardigans and slippers.

A long time ago, Sylvia was living in a block of flats. A man who lived close by invited her to his place for a coffee. While she was there, he had sex with her repeatedly and used force. Sylvia said 'no' to him when he told her he wanted her to stay in his bedroom.

The next day the man asked her to have sex with him again, and she said 'no'. She did not want to have sex with him again and was angry that he asked. He then threatened he would hurt her and then he had sex with her again. She did not want to and she was sick of it.

Sylvia kept asking him 'Why me, why me?' She wanted him to leave her alone but he just 'kept going and going all the time'. He would say 'come with me' and she knew why. She did not want to have sex with him but she knew he wanted to have sex and would have forced her.

"I felt awful after it happened, embarrassed and ashamed."

She wanted to kill herself because he had sex with her. She was frightened that he would hit her. She was frightened of him and frightened because he lived so close.

He told her not to tell anyone. Sylvia thought that she should tell someone, so she told her doctor. Her doctor just told her to stay away from him. Sylvia felt that she could not do this but she didn't know what else to do.

Sylvia was too frightened to tell the police or anyone else at the time. She was too ashamed of herself. She also did not know of any other services that were available but would have liked some support. She is aware that not telling anyone was the reason she did not have access to services.

A while after this, Sylvia had an upsetting experience with a local bus service. The bus driver would not let her take her hearing dog on the bus and drove straight off. Sylvia contacted the 'Hearing Dogs' to tell them about her experience because she was upset and they linked her into a counsellor. Although this counselling was initially about helping Sylvia with her feelings about the bus and her dog, accessing this service eventually led to Sylvia asking for and receiving other support services and then eventually counselling for the sexual assault.

(Authors note: Sylvia did eventually report this assault to the police).

Sylvia ended the interview with her response to the question "What advice would you give to somebody if they told you the same story as yours?" with, "I'd say I'm sorry and I'd say I'm sorry for you. I'd say move away, move away. I don't know why it happened to me. If that happened again I would go to the police."

Paul's Story

Paul is American and grew up in a small town in California. He is one of two children. He likes to write and watch films and certain sports. He likes taking bike rides and loves reading, especially about a variety of things as he feels that, as a writer, he needs to know.

When he was a child, Paul experienced mental abuse [sic] from one of his parents and also witnessed physical domestic abuse of his mother. Although he does not remember exactly when it began, he believes it was around the age of six or seven. Paul was being home-schooled at that time because he has dyslexia.

Paul does not know why the abuse happened, but it had an effect on the rest of his life and especially his teen and young adulthood years.

Paul says the hard part of experiencing mental abuse is that you cannot see it.

"It happens when someone yells at you, is being confrontational with you and does not understand the effects the dyslexia has upon you."

He says his father did not understand or maybe did not comprehend that he had dyslexia and did not know how to deal with it or have the patience to understand Paul's experiences of living with dyslexia.

Paul's father would yell at him, berate him for being ignorant, for being difficult. All Paul was trying to do was understand what he was and what he needed to know. Paul often needed to learn things a second time to be able to understand it.

Paul explained how hard it is for someone (with dyslexia) to externalise their feelings, the emotions of being outside of yourself but yet inside of yourself.

"It is a weird duality."

Support for people with dyslexia was non-existent where Paul lived in the mid 1990s. His only support structure was that his mother also had dyslexia and understood what it was like and so she home-schooled him. His parents were both college educated and initially both took responsibility for the home schooling.

When his father would home school him, he would say to Paul, 'Oh why don't you get it, why don't you get it, why can't you do your multiplication tables?' and Paul would shut down.

Some days would leave Paul crying or feeling confused about how his father was treating him. He did not understand how Paul was learning or how he learned best.

Paul witnessed physical domestic abuse of his mother. He still does not like to talk about that much as he feels it rather confronting, even at his current age. When he was around 11 or 12, his mother filed for an intervention order and his father was removed from the house. He still lived in the same town and they did initially tried to work out their differences. Once his mother realised there was no way of dealing with the issue, they went through a legal divorce. Up until this point they did not receive any real assistance from anyone.

Once the divorce proceedings commenced, a court appointed psychologist was provided to the family, which was about a year after the issue of the intervention order.

Paul did not receive any other assistance to deal with "the emotions, the phenomena of abuse, a vicious circle of where you are trying to deal with the abuse and the ramifications of that, within that environment."

There were not many resources at that time for Paul's family to ask for in that area.

When asked about what would have helped his family at this time of his life, Paul explained that it would have been beneficial if people they knew personally had approached them and asked how they could help and how to help with a son with dyslexia. They were feeling very alone.

He also reflected that they also did not approach anyone asking for help so it was a dualistic issue.

"If people understood what I was experiencing and had been more open to it, they would have understood that I was dealing with very complex emotions internally. I was dealing with depression, anxiety, fear from my family environment, dealing with a dad that didn't know; understanding what it was like to be me".

Paul believes the ramifications of the mental violence and witnessing domestic abuse, impacted on his self esteem and lead to an inferiority complex. He felt he was not good enough; he felt stupid, especially when compared to a brother who was a 'straight A' student. This was something that affected him for a long time.

In response to the question "Can you tell me what we could do to be more helpful in the future to support people with a disability accessing victim support services," Paul had a lot to say. He believes that it is important to approach people in this situation with patience and compassion as there are varied issues happening.

He talked about people not being able to externalise what they are feeling and experiencing and that they need to have an outlet. He suggested they be provided with opportunities to act out what has happened

to them in a role-play, write it down, or ask other people around them who are personally involved, to explore what that person has experienced.

He reflected that a person providing a much-needed service can understand the best way to assist that person (with a disability) by being open and patient. He believes it is very hard for people who are experiencing domestic violence or even mental violence or abuse, to open up and it is very difficult for them to trust others. It was very difficult for him, in his situation to trust other people, to trust others with those emotions and experiences, even though they knew what was happening. It was very difficult for him.

In a small town environment he was even more exasperated as there was very limited assistance available. He explained that it can be hard for the affected people to be able to approach help services. He talked about judgements, that being judgemental is not a good thing and does not help the process. It does not matter who is involved in that process.

He did not think others understood what was happening in his brain. He understood words and concepts quite well but when it came to mathematics and numbers, it was very difficult to explain why he did not understand. Often others would jump on him and say, 'Oh no, you've done it wrong, you've done it wrong, you've done it wrong'.

"No. No.No. You don't jump on that person or everything they do incorrectly, you need to say look, you can go about this a different way."

One thing that has happened quite often in his life, is confrontation. "If I'm confronted with a situation and a person doesn't understand that I have dyslexia, that's when I shut down. When someone is confrontational

with me, when I experience what I perceive to be violence, mental violence, or even physical violence, I shut down. And that's when people who are giving assistance in health services or even mental health services, they need to understand not to be confrontational."

Paul explained the importance of being open and finding what that person's interests are and not exploiting it and building trust on that before you confront someone about a situation.

"You have to build up that sense of honesty with that person. You have to take it step by step. You can't just dictate this is how it is, you have to understand what that person is experiencing. If I had the compassion and the patience from other people who actually understood the situation, it would have ended up differently."

"When offering help services, it is important to acknowledge that even if it does not register from the very beginning, that with constant assistance and constant diligence, that person will eventually get there."

Paul explained further, that an important concept when you have someone with dyslexia is acknowledging they are different and are equal. A person with dyslexia is equal to everyone else who is experiencing domestic violence or psychological violence. He believes he should have had the same rights to assistance and the same rights to receive the same compassion but have this provided in an alternative fashion.

Paul had some experience dealing with a psychologist when he was a teenager. He explained that at first it did not work, until she finally identified the dyslexia. He talked about developing a trusting environment for people with dyslexia or autism, to have

them "relate those experiences in an honest, open platform, where you won't jump on the person (laughs). That doesn't help."

The violence that he experienced and saw for many years affected him but he feels that externalising is important. You must be able to provide that person with an outlet, be it non-verbal or verbal. You have to be able to provide a situation where that person in time will be able to externalise that and say, "This is what's happening to me!"

When Paul returned to mainstream school after the home-schooling finished, there was still no assistance for someone with dyslexia in the mainstream school system. However, he did eventually attend a community program that was designed to support disadvantaged students to complete their secondary school experience.

Anuque's Story:

Anuque lives with some of her family, and has two brothers. She likes to go swimming, play the piano and sing. She has had vision impairment from birth, with only 30 percent vision in one eye and total blindness in the other eye, this makes it tricky to get around.

She uses a white cane (also referred to as a white stick) and Anuque says this enables her a level of protection and allows other people who do not have a vision impairment, notice she may need help.

"Once the person sees the white cane, then they know that I need help."

Anuque accesses a lot of public transport to get around and to catch up with friends.

On the day of her assault, Anuque was on her way home from collecting a letter from a hospital for an upcoming appointment. She was on a tram and was kicked in the leg by a person who was possibly drunk or drugged.

She was sitting on the tram behind the driver's cabin and had heard the guy board the tram one stop after she had got on and she became worried because he started to say some nasty words to everyone on board.

She began to feel very insecure and told him that she was going to contact police because of the inappropriate words that he was using.

"It made me very uncomfortable as vision impaired to listen to, and I would think for a sighted person to be able to see, his behaviour".

She said to no one in particular that she was going to contact police because of the very bad language he was using, as it made her feel uncomfortable and feel threatened and scared. His response was to kick her leg.

Anuque called the police and the witnesses were able to describe the perpetrator to the triple zero call-taker. A lot of her fellow passengers offered to help her and two witnesses were able to help her off the tram and accompany her while she waited for the police to attend. She would have liked to get some assistance from the tram driver, however she understands that he may have been unable to leave the driver's cabin.

Anuque felt very scared, disorientated and upset by the experience and was glad that there were other people around to support her. She was worried the person who had hurt her would hurt her further. The police spoke to her briefly and then began looking for the man who hurt her.

Anuque went home after this experience, and did not make a statement to the police straight away. When she tried to organise a time to go the police station to make her statement, she had to speak to several police officers because the main police officer that was in charge of the investigation was often

unavailable. She mentioned that other police officers needed to step in to help her arrange a time to attend the police station and to organise the Independent Third Person.

Anuque made a statement at the police station with an Independent Third Person accompanying her. She stated that she had used an Independent Third Person at an earlier time and was still accessing counselling from that previous incident.

The police also linked Anuque into support services and counselling. Anuque says these services were useful and have been helpful.

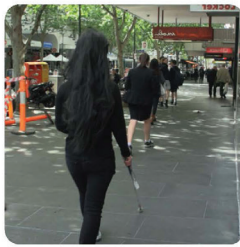
"The services allowed me to tell my story about what happened, without being judged and without having other people's opinions.

The services that I have used so far have been very helpful and I can't think of anything at this stage that needs to be improved and I've been very happy with the services I'm receiving and have received in the past".

There has been an impact on Anuque using public transport since the assault. While she still uses public transport, she will not use that particular tram line. She feels that she knows the environment and the area where she was hurt "is very well known for people who are affected by both drugs and alcohol and therefore I think it's just sort of a matter of being very aware and I just wouldn't want to get hurt again."

If you have been hurt, you can get help.

- Call the Police 000
- Call the Victims of Crime Helpline
1800 819 817
- Call the Women's Domestic Violence
Crisis Service of Victoria 1800 015 188
- Go to a Police station
- Go to your local Community Service
- Tell your doctor
- Tell a friend or family member



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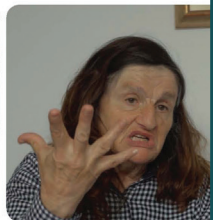
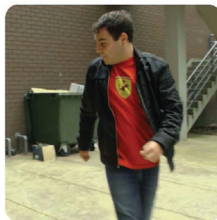
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