

asca e-health

Health news from Adults Surviving Child Abuse

Autumn 2009

Welcome to the Autumn edition of ASCA's e-Health newsletter. This is the inaugural edition of ASCA's e-health newsletter, a publication designed for health care workers who offer therapeutic and counselling services to adult survivors as well as front line workers who see adult survivors in their work.

ASCA is the key national organisation working to advance the wellbeing of people and communities affected by any form of child abuse or neglect. A key aspect of our mission is to work in partnership with health care workers to ensure that adult survivors have access to trauma-informed services.

Through the *e-Health newsletter*, we will keep you up-to-date with the latest developments in research and best practice with adult survivors of child abuse. In this edition of *e-Health*, we will provide a brief introduction to ASCA and our range of projects and services.

Introduction to ASCA

ASCA was founded in 1995 to provide support for adults with histories of child abuse and neglect. Since then it has grown into the key national organisation advocating for the needs of adult survivors to be acknowledged and appropriately addressed.

By conservative estimates there are over 2 million Australian adults surviving child abuse. A 2008 Australian university-initiated study of over 21 000 older Australians found that over 13% of those surveyed reported having been sexually or physically abused in childhood. It found that:

Child abuse survivors are

- almost two and a half times as likely to have poor mental health outcomes,
- four times more likely to be unhappy even in much later life
- more likely to have poor physical health.

Childhood physical and sexual abuse

- increase the risk of having three or more medical diseases, including cardiovascular events in women
- cause a higher prevalence of broken relationships, lower rates of marriage in late life
- cause lower levels of social support and an increased risk of living alone
- are associated with suicidal behaviour, increased likelihood of smoking, substance abuse, and physical inactivity.

A recent report by Access Economics found that the projected cost of child abuse to the Australian community, calculated over the lifetime of abused children, was between \$13.7 billion and \$38.7 billion.

A number of studies have highlighted that adult survivors of child abuse frequently experience difficulties accessing services and finding suitably qualified health professionals. Many describe their experiences with services as 're-traumatising'. In addition, research indicates that services are often reluctant to work with this client group because of their perceived resistance to change, their ways of relating to health professionals, and the nature of the work.

ASCA is committed to working in partnership with health workers and services to build a trauma-informed health care system that can meet the needs of adult survivors of child abuse. We know that workers want the best outcomes for their clients, and the complex needs of adult survivors are often challenging. Over the last ten years, there have been a range of promising new developments in treatment for adult survivors, and we believe that these can be integrated into a range of contexts for the benefit of workers and clients who have a history of child abuse.

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Workshops for health professionals

ASCA provides two workshops for health workers to develop their skills in working with adult survivors of child abuse. The workshops focus on models identified as 'best practice' by clinicians specialised in working with survivors, and we emphasise the following principles:

- provide a safe place for the client
- ensure client empowerment and collaboration
- communicate and sustain hope and respect
- facilitate disclosure without overwhelming the client
- be familiar with a number of different therapeutic tools and models
- view symptoms as adaptations
- have a broad knowledge of trauma theory and provide the client with psycho-education
- teach clients adaptive coping strategies (i.e. teach clients self care, distress tolerance strategies and arousal reduction strategies)
- teach clients to monitor their thoughts and responses
- teach clients interpersonal and assertiveness skills

ASCA's ten 'best practice' guidelines for working with survivors of childhood abuse are outlined, discussed and explored in depth throughout our workshops.

ASCA one-day Workshop for Health Professionals – Good Practice for working with adults surviving child abuse

This workshop is designed to provide an overview of the long-term impacts of child abuse, and introduce workers to effective ways of working with adult survivors. The cost is \$175.

The workshop will cover:

- Understanding abuse
- Childhood responses to threat/coping strategies
- Coping into adulthood
- Impacts of childhood abuse
- Pathways through which adult health can be compromised
- Good-practice guidelines for working with adults surviving child abuse

Location	Date	Time
Melbourne, Mercure Melbourne	29 May	9am to 5pm
Brisbane, Urban Hotel	26 June	9am to 5pm
Canberra, Olims Hotel	10 July	9am to 5pm
Darwin, Novotel Darwin Atrium	7 August	9am to 5pm
Sydney, Harbourview Hotel, North Sydney	13 August	9am to 5pm
Perth, Mercure Hotel	28 August	9am to 5pm
Hobart, Mercure Hotel	18 September	9am to 5pm

As one attendee stated in her feedback sheet, "Thanks again for the wonderful training you provided at the workshop for health professionals. The next day I had a call with child sexual abuse as the presenting issue. For the first time ever I did not have a reaction of "Oh no I am out of my depth here" to that type of caller situation. So I would like to say a huge thank you for helping me to adjust my feelings around these types of calls and for giving me more tools to facilitate & collaborate resulting in a more supportive counselling call."

Two day short course for front line workers in collaboration with MHCC

ASCA has developed a two day short course for health care workers in collaboration with the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC). The aim of this course is to better equip front line workers who contact survivors in their work. This training course will be delivered in Sydney by ASCA through the MHCC on 22–23 June 2009.

In addition to all of the material included in the one-day workshop, this 2 day workshop will include

- Treatment models
- Application exercises
- Working with dissociation and 'self-harming' behaviours
- Reflective practice and vicarious traumatisation

Please register for the workshop through the MHCC website: www.mhcc.org.au/learning-and-training/courses.asp

ASCA workshops for adult survivors – Creating New Possibilities

ASCA provides a set of 4 psycho-educational workshops for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect, and their supporters: the *Creating New Possibilities* workshops.

We have currently scheduled Workshop 1 and 2 and times and venues are displayed on the ASCA's website. Workshops 3 and 4 will be developed and scheduled as soon as funding becomes available. ASCA is currently seeking funding from the Federal government so that it will be able to deliver these workshops more widely including to rural and regional areas.

Creating New Possibilities workshops are open to all adult survivors of child abuse and their supporters — including ASCA members AND non-members. The feedback from these workshops has been uniformly positive: "What an excellent idea to provide these workshops. This is an opportunity to put my past experiences and resulting behaviour into context". "I found the aspects of self-care very helpful. In many ways, I still neglect to learn to pamper my spirit and mind and body. Learning to do this more will help in my recovery." "Until now, I could never understand why my behaviour and emotions were 'irrational', and the impact they had on myself and others. I never fully understood how my abusive past impacted my life".

National audit of services for adult survivors of child abuse

We are currently seeking health care professionals/agencies to join our network of service providers. This is the first Australia-wide audit to specifically seek health care workers/services with the skills and expertise to provide care and support to adults surviving child abuse.

If you are working with adult survivors of child abuse, and you are interested in being listed on an online referral resource for adult survivors, please fill out the questionnaire on our website: <http://www.asca.org.au/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=113>

ASCA advocacy

In February 2009 ASCA launched a National Advertising Campaign to raise awareness of the needs of adult survivors of child abuse. The campaign included television, radio and print advertisements, and was designed to confront the misconception in the community that adults should simply “get over” child abuse. We have since released phase 2 of the campaign, a set of print ads with a more targeted education component (see page 4 for one of the ads).

Our goal is to stimulate debate within the Australian community and challenge the conspiracy of silence over childhood abuse. Alongside the campaign, we have been lobbying the federal government over the marginalisation of the needs of adult survivors. For more information regarding ASCA’s campaign, media coverage around the campaign or details of how you can help please visit our website www.asca.org.au.

New research

A research study from Douglas Mental Health University Institute in Montreal, released in February 2009 showed that abuse in early childhood could dramatically alter the way the brain copes with stress in adulthood. This research is the first to discover that childhood trauma can shape the way genes work and adds further scientific knowledge to prior research in this area. The study examined samples from the hippocampal region of the brain of 36 people — 12 suicide victims with a history of childhood abuse, 12 suicide victims without a history of childhood abuse and 12 people who had died suddenly of accidental causes. The hippocampus, the area of the brain which helps to process information and lends time and spatial context to memories and events is known to develop differently in abused children.³

The hippocampus and the amygdala are part of the limbic system, a network of brain cells sometimes called ‘the emotional brain’. The limbic system is the area in the brain that initiates the fight, flight or freeze responses in the face of threat. A study by Teicher et al.⁴ found a 38% increased rate of limbic abnormalities (‘emotional brain’) following physical abuse, 49% after sexual abuse, and 113% following abuse of more than one type combined⁵.

The amygdala processes emotions before the cortex gets the message that something has happened. For example, the sound of a loved one’s voice is communicated to the amygdala, and the amygdala

generates an emotional response to that information (for example, pleasure) by releasing hormones. When someone is threatened, the amygdala perceives danger and sets in motion a series of hormone releases that lead to the defensive responses of fight, flight or freeze. Because the amygdala is immune to the effects of stress hormones it may continue to sound an alarm inappropriately, as is the core of PTSD.⁶

The hippocampus helps to process information and lends time and spatial context to memories and events. The hippocampus assists the transfer of initial information to the cortex which works to make sense of the information. However the hippocampus is vulnerable to stress hormones, in particular the hormones released by the amygdala’s alarm. When those hormones reach a high level, they suppress the activity of the hippocampus and it loses its ability to function. Information that would make it possible to determine between a real threat and an imagined threat never reaches the cortex and a rational evaluation of the information isn’t possible.⁷ If a particular stimulus is misinterpreted as a threat, this leads to immediate fight/flight/ freeze responses (to non-threatening stimuli). This causes this system to respond to minor irritations in a totalistic manner⁸.

Another study⁹ shows alterations in cortisol production in children with histories of abuse and neglect. >

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... means that adult survivors will be more likely to be highly stressed, have difficulties with anger and emotions, and be prone to self-harm, anxiety, suicide and depression.

This state of chronic 'hyper-arousal' persists for many survivors throughout their adult years as well. Even when the abuse and violence has ceased and the environment is 'safe', many adult trauma survivors still perceive the threat to be present; their fear is maintained and becomes pathological¹⁰. A study by Joyce et al.¹¹ found that experiences of childhood abuse were associated with high cortisol levels in depressed adult survivors. Research shows that environments of extreme stress lead to increased cortisol levels¹² which can lead to decreased hippocampal volume. Decreased

hippocampal volume has been associated with poorer declarative memory which places adults at greater risk of developing PTSD-like symptoms, and is closely correlated with experiences of depression and physical inflammations.¹³

The new research¹⁴ found that a gene, called NR3C1, which influences the brain's susceptibility to stress hormones was less likely to be activated in people who had been abused. Those who had been abused had lower levels of expression of the gene for the glucocorticoid (cortisol) receptor, which is critical for the stress response pathway. This new study is the first to demonstrate that a genetic process appears to underlie such changes. The nervous systems of children who are abused run on a constant high because they are constantly anticipating further danger. Their bodies are flooded with fight-or-flight hormones.¹⁵ This impacts on how the brain develops and the stress regulation method. The impact on the hippocampus, the area which controls feelings, means that adult survivors will be more likely to be highly stressed, have difficulties with anger and emotions, and be prone to self-harm, anxiety, suicide and depression.

Endnotes

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ASCA Advertising Campaign, Phase 2

