

Things I wish you knew

I was three years old when I started experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. I lived in a public housing home with my mum in [REDACTED] I adored my aunts who were unapologetically themselves and deeply caring, helping care for my mum and I. I loved to read and was deeply curious. Before violence began, I was confident exploring the world with my mum by my side. I saw beauty all around me.

I experienced domestic, family and sexual violence for most of my childhood. The person who abused me was allowed to continue abusing people for more than thirty years. Adults missed signs that I was experiencing violence. All disclosures I made as a child were met with one of two main responses – “that is so big, I cannot possibly help you” or “that is so big, you must be making it up”. I learned that systems would always help abusers and not victims.!

People do not know what they do not know. Teachers and school counsellors, social workers and psychologists, police, lawyers and judges all helped to extend abuse. Government decisions lock in this reality.

Some politicians even use communities like mine and people like me as political footballs. Domestic, family and sexual violence victims and survivors are punished when others speak for and about us. We are best placed to make decisions about our lives. Many of us are fighting to be heard so that no one else experiences what we experienced. **The challenge for you is to listen and respond.**

#1 - The power of recognising patterns.

A key skill that survivors learn is to identify, recognise and interrupt patterns.

Survivors never passively receive violence – they are always resisting, disrupting and interrupting violence. When experiencing violence, recognising and responding to patterns is crucial for keeping ourselves safer. It must be said too that those who do not survive domestic, family and sexual violence were also always recognising patterns and resisting violence.

When we rely on survivors to solely recognise and respond to patterns of violence, it means that survivors become skilled at giving the person using violence something that they want – usually power and/or control over the victim-survivor/s.

People using violence often repeat the same patterns of violence. Identifying those patterns can help survivors feel a sense of control within the chaos and terror created by the person using abuse. This can include identifying opportunities to deflect violence, for example by distracting the person using violence when they repeat patterns of behaviour that have previously led to abuse. Interrupting patterns can stop the escalation of abuse.

In healing and recovery, recognising patterns in ourselves can be key for shifting the impact of violence on our bodies. When seeking support, recognising supports that mimic patterns of behaviour similar to the violence that we experienced is crucial. Healing and recovery is able to begin when we can find supports that meet our needs without shaming us.

[REDACTED] – personal submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.



#2 - Families who have experienced intergenerational domestic, family and sexual violence are experts in violence prevention.

Preventing domestic, family and sexual violence also relies on successfully identifying, responding to and interrupting patterns. **Families who have experienced violence across multiple generations expertly identify patterns in future generations and respond to them, in turn aiding collective healing and recovery.**

These families know that healing never stops and is never a wholly individual pursuit. Each family member is walking their own path towards healing – at times carrying a heavier load to allow others the room that they need to move closer to recovery.

These families understand that flexibility, trust and relationships are crucial.ⁱⁱ They also understand that compassion is crucial – sitting with people through highs and lows, allowing people room to be themselves, acting as a mirror and reflecting the goodness in people back to them while simultaneously responding to the hurt and pain that they are carrying.

Violence prevention can also mean physically caring for people when they are unable to care for themselves. It can mean communicating with people in the way that makes the most sense to them when decision-making and other cognitive functions are diminished. Violence prevention also means being vulnerable and honest about the physical and emotional impact of flashbacks and other symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly experienced by survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence in childhood, to disrupt fear and shame

#3 – Survivors are skilled at telling their story over and over again.

Survivors tell their stories in so many ways. We have so much practice telling our stories to different people that we learn how to best tell the story for different audiences – police, social workers, teachers, Centrelink staff, courts, doctors, and even politicians.

At best, you are happy to listen to our stories. You will look at us with pity in your eyes, nod along while we speak, and maybe even shed a tear. You will tell us that this never should have happened to us and that we are so brave. You will stop short of letting us determine the decisions that impact us.

A select few survivors are chosen to tell their stories again and again. These stories inform decisions and **this is important**. The decisions that are made, however, are ultimately made by someone else.

Survivors do not tell their stories again and again without consequence. Constantly telling their stories takes a toll. It involves constantly exposing their wounds so that you can peer inside. Simply taking a look around and saying that we are “brave” does not cut it.

Survivors are being generous with you at their own expense. Trust that survivors know their audience and how to tell you what you need to hear.ⁱⁱⁱ **Listen with curiosity - be sure that you are not ignoring the parts of the story that you would rather not hear.**



#4 – Sending the most junior social workers, police and teachers to the most disadvantaged places constructs the people living there as a punishment.

I grew up in Adelaide's northern suburbs in a large public housing [REDACTED] I attended a primary school with very high levels of disadvantage.

When disadvantage is relegated to outer suburbs, it is out of sight and out of mind for others. It becomes a place that exists only in public narratives. Assumptions about a place and the people there that are based in fantasy become reality when decisions are made about communities based on public narratives.

I did not truly grasp how people were imagining my home community until after I left the area. Constant comments from teachers that my classmates and I would never amount to anything suddenly made a lot more sense. I recognise these fantasy narratives about marginalised people and communities much more readily now, especially when they relate to people living in poverty.

I made small disclosures about the abuse I was experiencing all the time. My experiences flew under the radar and blended into the many other issues present when the majority of children in a school do not have what they need to thrive. Our families were battling constant discrimination based on class, race and ability. No one is thriving in this environment.

Occasionally, I worked up the courage to make more overt disclosures to teachers, school counsellors, psychologists. Each time I received one of two reactions - "that is so big, you must be making it up" or "that is so much, I cannot possibly help you with that."^{iv}

After almost [REDACTED] years spent working on gender, inequality and domestic, family and sexual violence, I now know that the violence I was experiencing was particularly extreme – sitting at the pointy end of the range of violence children are experiencing in their homes.

This violence was able to continue for a decade. It was able to continue because no one wanted to see the violence as legitimate – instead violence was seen as normal within communities like mine.^v

I have heard over and over again – from police, academics, teachers, social workers, politicians and lawyers that people from my home community are "just violent", "will never amount to anything", "that we are beyond hope" – that we are disposable.

These attitudes are mirrored in the responses to people from my home community and in my experience of repeatedly disclosing violence. We are told "you are beyond help and beyond hope".

Imagine what it would take for you to decide that a small child should continue to experience violence, and that an entire community of people deserves to experience violence.

These attitudes towards disadvantaged people and communities are inevitable when we are treated as the training grounds for the most junior police, social workers, teachers, and so on. Responding to complexities in people's lives is difficult and skilled work. When entire communities are constructed as training exercises, they are also constructed as punishments for people in entry level positions.

[REDACTED] – personal submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.



#5 – Healing from violence requires resources.

Nobody heals alone. It is a relational practice.^{vi}

Constant efforts to undermine your sense of self worth, dull or confuse your inherent instincts, and quiet your inner voice get in the way of self-knowledge.^{vii}

Children who experience abuse where this has occurred are cut off from developing key elements needed to properly function in life. Functioning in relationships with other people requires that each person knows their own desires and can communicate about them. Moving safely through the world requires that you know your limits. Moving through the world and enjoying life requires knowing your desires.

As a child, experiencing violence that impedes your ability to communicate, know yourself, know your desires and know your limits has a deep and lasting impact. Your instincts, inner voice and sense of self are the compass that guides you through life.^{viii}

Moving safely through the world after violence requires getting to know yourself – learning when, how and why, you suppress your inner voice, desires and limits. Learning to observe yourself, seek to understand yourself and then adapting based on this knowledge is a skill that most people spend their lives mastering.


Getting to know yourself in this way is exceptionally hard to do when your nervous system is dysregulated most of the time. A dysregulated nervous system is responding to danger – sending all of your body’s resources towards keeping you safe from the threat of violence. Other energy intensive activities are much harder to do when this happening – thinking, feeling, observing and understanding can be very difficult.

Your nervous system needs to be assured that the threat of danger has passed and allowed time to come back into balance. Memory is impacted when the nervous system is impacted – making learning about what caused the nervous system to react a very difficult task to perform alone. It is also difficult to eat or sleep while a nervous system is dysregulated – appetite is suppressed and the body and mind stay alert. This is called hypervigilance.^{ix}

A dysregulated nervous system swings the other way after the immediate threat has passed. This is called avoidance.^x The nervous system slows down the body – requiring more sleep and less stimulation, making day-to-day duties extremely challenging. In these times, looking after yourself is difficult. Doing anything that is aligned with the threat that caused the nervous system to react elicits fear and can cause the body to shut down more.

Moving back to safety, away from hypervigilance and avoidance, is very hard to do without support. In these moments, you need people who can help you take care of yourself without judgement – helping with cleaning, cooking, leaving the house, finding professional support and similar essential tasks.

Survivors of violence who have developed complex post traumatic stress disorder can find it difficult to develop trusted relationships.^{xi} When relationships that you needed for survival were dangerous, it is difficult to rely on others for survival. This is despite the fact that no one can survive entirely alone.



Learning how to regulate the nervous system is critical for healing and recovery. In my experience, soothing the nervous system and guiding it towards regulation requires mostly simple things - a safe place to live, access to nutritious food, ability to make decisions about your life, being able to meaningfully participate in the world, movement, being able to share openly with people capable of seeing and receiving you, and emotional regulation skills. However, each of these things requires time, skills and financial resources, particularly for accessing a safe home and nutritious food.

Building trusted relationships requires time – to build skills and put them into practice. The more focused a person has to be on surviving, the less time someone has to develop these skills. Time spent surviving is time spent managing – not thriving and caring for yourself.

Putting together a care team of trusted people who can support you when things are hard also requires time and resources. It is now almost impossible to access the social safety nets that were previously more reliably commonplace. Public housing and bulk billing doctors are now scarce. Mental health care plans do not extend to the full range of available and qualified mental health professionals.

Most government social services require that people comply with an arbitrary set of rules in order to receive support - delaying and deferring opportunities to make decisions for yourself, determine your future and therefore hone your instincts and move towards a safer life. Instead, these services are often violent – perpetuating the same violence that caused the nervous system to develop towards dysregulation.

This is not a system that is geared towards healing. A system geared towards healing would increase access to safe housing, nutritious food, relationships support and education, and decision making.

About me

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I am here to tell you that survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence never passively receive violence. Violence is always resisted.

I am here to tell you that children experience domestic, family and sexual violence. I am here to tell you that failing to recognise children’s experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence are keeping children trapped in violent situations for longer.

I am here to tell you that systemic responses to survivors make recovering from domestic, family and sexual violence much, much harder.

I am here to tell you that survivors are everywhere. We are researchers, we are advocates, we are policymakers, we are practitioners.

I am here to tell you that survivors are best placed to make decisions that will impact them.

I am here to tell you that recognising the inherent dignity and personhood of all survivors is the first step towards ending domestic, family and sexual violence.

████████████████████ – personal submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.



ⁱ Bryant et al. (2024) [The Language of Women's Prisons: Reflecting on violence and desistance](#); Reeves et al. (2023) [Incredible Women: Legal Systems Abuse, Coercive Control, and the Credibility of Victim-Survivors](#); Victims of Crime Commissioner (2023) [Silenced and Sidelined: Systemic Inquiry into Victim Participation in the Justice System](#). See also Flat Out, [Resisting Systemic Collusion Power and Control Wheel](#).

ⁱⁱ See also Carlson et al. (2024) [What works? A qualitative exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs that respond to family violence](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Insight Exchange resources including [Being Safety](#).

^{iv} See also Buchanan et al. (2023) [What Helps Young People in Australia Create Healthy Relationships After Growing up in Domestic Violence?](#)

^v See for example evidence given to the Yoorook Commission on damaging assumptions about Aboriginal people and communities and domestic and family violence.

^{vi} hooks (2004) *A Will to Change: Men, masculinity and love*.

^{vii} See also Small Steps 4 Hannah community education programs' focus on instincts.

^{viii} Thank you to my counsellor for teaching me about this.

^{ix} Putica and Agathos (2024) [Reconceptualizing Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A predictive processing framework for mechanisms and intervention](#).

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