

Submission to Royal Commission for Family Violence

My background

I am a survivor of both family violence and child abuse. I have recently published a book on my recovery from family violence – Carving a Piece of Heaven. It is the only book on the topic of recovery. Recovery is a lifelong journey, but complete recovery here means that all the necessary steps are taken to cover the basis so an individual can function and contribute to society. He/she can gain a sense of freedom and identity. After all the hard work the individual will find a purpose and direction in life. It is a difficult journey that requires one to truly forgive and begin to focus on the future.

I was in an abusive relationship for 18 years; it took me a good three years to recover. I experienced physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse in the relationship. I can testify that complete recovery is achievable and attainable but it requires a lot of hard work. You cannot handle the situation in isolation; you need friends, family and counsellors to pull you through. It takes a lot of courage and strength to walk through it. You will have setbacks along the way provided you keep heading in the right direction that is all that it counts.

Complete recovery does not mean that from that point forward, you are trouble-free. Sometimes you will feel blue for no particular reason. You don't need movie like Fifties Shades of Grey to remind you of the abusive situations. But when it comes, you will know how to manage the emotions better. You will go through the self-care routines to tell yourself you deserve to be loved. When you start to achieve something of significance, you can use the achievement to defend yourself against all the lies that you are made to believe.

Little is said about the intergenerational bondage to family violence. A great number of the victims and abusers grow up in abusive families. Therefore as children they witness and experience abuse. There are two ways one will react to childhood trauma. One is to become the perpetrator or victim of abuse, or knowing the harm and trying to break away from it. The former is easy but the latter is difficult and full of challenges because there is shortage of positive models that they can imitate. Unfortunately many children who experience abuse may not recognise the abuse until much later in lives; therefore they may not form any strategy to break away from it. Or some may never accept the fact they are victims of child abuse and find changes unnecessary. It takes one of us at a time to break the chain of abuse.

That is the reason I lobbied the government for National Curriculum Reform so those children who experience neglect in the family can have a way of breaking through. The program is aimed to implement nationwide so there is positive environment to support their intellectual development. The detail of the Kindergarten program is available at www.enrichedlife.net under National Curriculum. It is a fifteen year program aiming to lift the self-esteem of young people and give them tools against the negative influences of their environment.

Essential programs should not be cut

I am strongly against the Federal government decision to cut funding for the Women's Legal Centres, Family Violence specialists at Community Legal Centres, housing support, homelessness services and financial counselling. The number one issue facing those who decide to leave is where we can stay. Without proper housing many women and children will be trapped in violent situations with no way out. Then we will need specialist legal help to sort out our finances and other legal issues that we face like intervention order application, property settlement, parenting agreement, family law court application, and disputes with lawyers representing us. With little savings and low income, we cannot afford legal costs in the Court.

Instead of cutting funding, the government should increase funding to those areas of service to shorten the waiting list for those whose lives are in danger and in need of protection from their abusers. With all the public campaigns running at the moment, family violence is becoming intolerable in our society. Hopefully many victims will come out of their hiding places and seek help. We need to ensure there is adequate service to cater to their needs.

Savings can be achieved by ensuring the victims can attain complete recovery and be ready to contribute to society within a short time. There should be employment pathways for them so they can gain a sense of dignity and know that their hard work can generate results to keep them motivated.

Road to recovery

Counselling only offers me an outlet to express my thoughts in words and hold me accountable to my actions. It does not offer a plan on how to get my feet on the ground because no one understands how the recovery process works. That's why I decided to write a book about my journey of recovery to share my experience. ***I want to apply for funding to educate counsellors in the field on how to assist us so we can achieve complete recovery within a shorter period of time. I also need to make video to encourage the victims to break the ties with their abusers. It is the hardest part of the recovery but very necessary. It cannot be handled by counsellors because they have no experience on the subject. If it is not handled properly, it will only re-traumatise us because the reason why we hold on to the relationship is we long for the abuser's acceptance and approval. We will suffer intense guilt when we attempt separation.***

The key to recovery is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not forgetting; it is about letting go of your anger, judgement and resentment. It is easy to get trapped in the past and wondering why we are treated that way without ground. Moving on also required one to put a stop to the past and focusing on oneself. No one can look at the rear mirror and keep moving forward. If you refuse to let go of the past, you will be trapped in hatred for years and continues to experience the pain even though you have left the relationship. Forgiveness will allow you to draw a full stop to the past and begin a new life. There is no need to punish yourself over and over.

To recover is a very painful journey; you start to discover who you are bit by bit. It is like peeling the layers of an onion. At the start, you have to defend yourself by forming some kind of resistance to the words he/she said. Telling yourself that those are lies and concluding those are tools that he used to press your buttons so you will submit to him. It takes time to look back and figure them out one by one. Not all the days are good days that you can take the time out to figure things out. Most times you spend on coping with the present. The truth will come out as you take time to talk it out. Therefore you need to keep friends and counsellors around you for support. You have to pick yourself up from where you fall.

Substance abuse is a serious issue in recovery, many become addicted to drug, alcohol and even prescriptive drugs to numb their pain and fall asleep easier. Therefore they should be supported to resist those temptations in counselling. When we became demotivated because at the start everything is against us, there is a need to help the victims to stay at present. We cannot handle too many things at once, even though there are so many things screaming for our attention. The primary thing is to put on a brave face to our children to ensure everything is under control. Then we focus on the daily chaos to alleviate our worry and use meditation to soothe us. Practice focus on one day at a time.

We should take time to smell the flowers through walks in nature when the children are at school to alleviate the fear and worry. Any issue that we have even though it is pressing; there is nothing more important than looking after ourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. When there are things that we found it hard to resolve, take the issues to friends and counsellors.

Once the stress level is under controlled, you should be encouraged to look for work to improve our self-esteem. Since we are prone to harassment and abuse at the start and have not had the courage to build boundary, the government should provide incentive to companies that are willing to offer positions to the victims with prospect of growth. That is very important to keep us motivated so that we can break the cycle of poverty to be better providers for our children.

In the process, many friends and families may abandon you. Learning to expand your friendship circle is very important over time. The fact is no one can hear bad stories upon bad stories and not get distressed over time. Some friends are there for a reason, some friends are there for a season, there are those who will be there for life. You will never know if you isolate yourself from potential hurt.

Forgiving all those who wrong against you, managing your fear, cutting ties with the abusers, staying at present, learning to erect proper boundary, and restoring a healthy self-esteem are the milestones for recovery. You need hope and courage to walk through it. You will be misunderstood, taken advantage of, abandoned, harassed but eventually recover and gain a sense of freedom. It is very difficult for victims who do not have religious belief to forgive and hope that there is a better future, often we struggle the most when we are alone facing the walls at night. The victims should be encouraged to explore religion to help them to embrace forgiveness and be hopeful that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

For those who have children, the children should be in counselling as well because children who witness violence are as if they experience it themselves. Children living with violence also suffer low self-esteem, anger related problem, guilt, and addiction to activities or substances as a mean to cope

with difficult situations. Many studies have found the effect of stress in the mother can harm the development of the foetus. Therefore the sooner the women are to seek help; the better is the chance of recovery and less damage it will be for the next generation.

Cost estimate to educate the counsellors in the field nationwide

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| Salary | \$75,000 |
| Air Fair | \$5,680 |
| Accommodation | \$3,020 |
| Car Hire | \$1,280 |
| Meal | \$1,050 |
| Printing Materials | \$5,520 |
| Conference Room Hire | \$3,500 |
| Food & Catering | \$2,300 |
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| Total Cost | \$97,350 |

Cost estimate to produce video to break ties with abusers

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| Salary | \$5,000 |
| Video Product Cost | \$15,000 |
| Materials DVD (300 copies) | \$3,000 |
| Stationary | \$100 |
| Travel | \$350 |
| Postages | \$4,500 |
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| Total Cost | \$27,950 |

Total cost of the project

The total cost of the project is \$125,300 that will be conducted nationwide to educate family violence counsellors across the country on how to get us back to our feet in the shortest time possible. There are steps in the process that cannot be hurried because each individual is different. However on the whole the individual will find themselves progressing along. Setbacks from time to time are expected and allowed because we are not machines. Our physical, emotional and spiritual beings have to be accounted for in the recovery process. The duration of the abuse, the severity and the forms of abuse we experience will impact on the time we spend on recovery.