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You put your life on the line: Young people's experiences of disclosing sexual abuse and/or sexual assault

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“YOU PUT YOUR LIFE ON THE LINE”

YOUNG PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCES OF DISCLOSING SEXUAL ABUSE AND/OR SEXUAL ASSAULT

by

Robin Walshe

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Social Science (Youth Work) Honours
At the Faculty of Health & Human Sciences, Edith Cowan University
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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This research comes as a response to young people's concern about the availability of appropriate services for young people seeking assistance in reclaiming their lives after experiencing sexual abuse and/or sexual assault. In order to understand what young people felt were appropriate services, it was first necessary to understand what happened when they disclosed to someone that they had been sexually abused or sexually assaulted. Qualitative feminist interview research techniques were used to ask seven young women "What happened when you disclosed to someone you had been sexually abused/assaulted?" The information given by the young women revealed that: the pre-disclosure stage had an important influence on the effects of a disclosure; emotional turmoil often followed a disclosure; betrayal and re-victimisation by family, friends and systems was a common occurrence; professional workers often displayed a lack of understanding and sensitivity; the young women showed strong determination and courage and; disclosure is a process of discovery and reclaiming your life. To expose the reader to the intimacy of the disclosure process, the dialogues from the young women are used extensively throughout. The study also includes reflections on being involved in such a study from both participant and researcher viewpoints.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in text.

Signature:

Date: 23/12/95

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CHAPTER ONE: A STARTING POINT

The purpose of this study is to understand the disclosure process from a young person's perspective, by asking the question "what happened when you told someone you had been sexually abused or sexually assaulted"? The study was undertaken because several young survivors of sexual abuse had indicated that their experiences were minimised or denied and current services were not adequate for their needs. My intention has been to design a process that would allow me to listen to, hear and describe the voices and experiences of young people. Clearly, it would be crucial not only to ask the young people themselves but to give them the opportunity to verify my understanding of the findings from such a study. I reasoned that giving young people this control, on what is written about them, would begin to contradict their experiences of themselves as powerless subjects.

My interest in undertaking such a study was sparked while on placement as an undergraduate student when I was confronted by two 14 year olds who wanted me to settle an argument they were having. Apparently a male worker had been accused of sexually molesting a young man who had been in his foster care. The young girl, even though she had no proof, was convinced the allegations were true, whereas the young boy was equally convinced that the allegations were false. I was totally unprepared for the whole situation. I also felt betrayed, not by the young people but by the alleged perpetrator, who was known to me. On confirming that allegations had been made, and investigations were under way, I felt at a loss as to

why the agency and university staff had not informed me that these allegations had been made. Did the staff just hope the young people would not talk about the alleged abuse? Did they think or hope it would all just fade away? Did they keep quiet on the assumption that 'the less said the better'? Had they entered into a state of denial, common when sexual abuse or sexual assault is discovered? Of course it is possible that staff had been restrained from discussing the incident because of complex institutional and legal policies and procedures.

Emily Driver (1989) argues that denial is a minimisation of sexual abuse through the acceptance of some of the myths about incest which purport that women and children lie and/or fantasise about the abuse; evoke or seduce their perpetrators; and that it only happens amongst certain classes of people:

Incest denial and incest myths seem to have three purposes: (a) to silence the survivor; (b) to protect the attacker; and (c) to comfort the community member or professional worker with the idea that she or he is totally removed from the experience of the people in the 'case', and free from any implication of responsibility or collusion: thereby to reinforce the illusion that incest is an isolated aberration rather than a fundamental pattern of societal abuse (1989, p. 27).

Was the secrecy surrounding this one incident a reflection of other 'cases' of sexual abuse and/or sexual assault? Were workers, and others, by their silence, colluding in the ongoing violence towards women and children in our society? Were they internalising the many myths about sexual violation that blame the survivor and protect the perpetrator? Were they silencing the survivors, protecting the perpetrators, and distancing themselves from having to accept the extent of sexual violation in our society?

The literature reveals that denial of sexual abuse and sexual assault is not a new phenomenon. Historically the emergence of new knowledge about the extent and effects of sexual abuse has resulted in a period of that knowledge being denied, minimised or suppressed (see for example Herman, 1981; Hetherington, 1991; Hooper, 1992; Masson, 1984; Olafson, Corwin & Summit, 1993; Rush, 1980). Issues arising from rape and domestic violence were placed on the political agenda once more in the 1970s and 1980s during the period that is referred to as the 'second wave' of feminism. During this time many women spoke up about their personal experiences of sexual abuse and sexual assault. This consistent disclosing of sexual violation led to the 'discovery' of the extent of child sexual abuse (Driver, 1989; Hooper, 1992; Kelly, 1988).

Extent of Sexual Victimization.

During the last three years I have become increasingly aware of the extent to which sexual violence is perpetrated against women and children. Over this time I have been confronted with many disclosures of sexual abuse and sexual assault her/histories. The accounts have come from many people, female and male, from as young as four to as old as 73. I have listened to people's stories and read people's accounts of their own, and other people's, experiences of sexual violation. I have attended seminars, forums and workshops on sexual abuse, sexual assault, ritual sexual abuse, child witness, counselling sexual abuse/assault victims, and recovered memory. I have read, researched and written about theories examining why this type of violent behaviour happens (see for example, Brownmiller, 1975;

Butler, 1978; Driver, 1989; Fortune, 1983; Grubman-Black, 1990; Herman, 1981; Hooper, 1992; Justice & Justice, 1979; Lew, 1993; Rush, 1980; Waldby, Clancy, Emetchi & Summerfield, 1990; Walshe, 1994). I have also counselled victims of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Finally I have had to 'come clean' and confront my own herstory of the sexual abuse/assault experiences I have encountered throughout my adult life. None of this has been easy or free of emotions. None of the reading or theorising prepared me for the extent of those emotions or the constant desire of myself and others to deny and minimise.

Many studies have been conducted to determine the extent of sexual abuse, sexual assault and rape (Cashmore & Bussy, 1987; Russel, 1986; Waldby, Hay, & Soothill, 1983; Wilson, 1993). Studies in the USA by Finkelhor (1984) and in Australia by Goldman & Goldman (1988) suggest that 25% of females and 10% of males have experienced sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence. More recent studies into sexual abuse perpetrated against males suggest the prevalence rate for males is closer to 25% (Poropat & Rosevear 1993). While studies into prevalence rates, or reported incidences of sexual abuse and sexual assault are inconclusive, what is evident is that sexual violation is not an isolated occurrence. No matter how we ignore, minimise or deny, sexual abuse and sexual assault occurs more often than we like to admit. Olafson, Corwin & Summit (1993) see the current suppression or backlash (of suppressed or recovered memories of sexual abuse) as being linked to Freudianism, sexual modernism, and gender politics and argue that acknowledging the extent of sexual abuse in our society would cause upheaval in all political discourses, including the helping professions:

To many of those in the helping professions the news about sexual abuse seems to darken one's very vision of human nature and human possibility. The full realization that child sexual victimization is as common and as noxious as current research suggests would necessitate costly efforts to protect children from sexual assault (1993, p. 19).

Clearly some people seem to be overwhelmed by incidences of sexual abuse and withdraw from having to think too much about it, colluding in the denial of the reality of the extent of sexual violation in our society. Freire (1972, p. 126) suggests that some people "retreat from a reality that is so offensive to them and to even acknowledge that reality is threatening." Understandably, people retreat from reality for many reasons and often it can be for their own survival. Nonetheless, retreating from a reality such as the extent of sexual violation places others, including survivors of sexual abuse, at risk of further violation be it sexual, physical or emotional. Furthermore the denial enables perpetrators to continue abusing, knowing little will be done (Driver, 1989; Kelly, 1988).

In July 1993, Perth Inner City Youth Service (PICYS) and The Youth Sector Training Council (YSTC) conducted a Young Women's Forum, which I attended. The forum was held at the request of a group of young women who had indicated that no appropriate service was available for them. The majority of the young women who had requested the forum had suffered sexual abuse and had not received adequate or appropriate assistance. They stated that their needs were being ignored and the effects they suffered from the sexual violation minimised or denied. Many of their friends had suicided, others were experiencing problems with drugs and alcohol. These young women wanted action, they wanted appropriate services before many more of their friends killed themselves. Their concern about

suicide is reflected in the 1994 United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report, *Progress of Nations*, which showed that Australia has a relatively high rate of suicide among young Australians. The report stated that 16.4 per 100,000 of 15-24 year olds committed suicide. (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council Working Party on Child and Youth Health. 1994).

In November 1993 I attended a two day seminar on *Ritualistic Abuse* presented by the Ritualistic Abuse Consultancy of New South Wales held at the Education Centre, Perth Zoo. In November 1994 I attended a three day seminar *Working with Dissociation* presented by the W.A. Country Members Committee of the Australian Association for the Study of Dissociation held at Princess Margaret Hospital for Children. Both seminars highlighted the extent of ritualistic sexual abuse, repressed or delayed memories of sexual abuse, and its denial, disbelief and minimisation by the 'general public' and professionals. Some of the women attending the seminars spoke with me and stated they felt they could not access current services because they were not believed and their experiences were minimised. Some of the young women found the effects of the abuse debilitating and felt they could change that, given adequate services. Clearly these young women felt there was no adequate service for them and that they felt that some of the helping professionals were denying or minimising the existence and /or effects of ritualistic sexual abuse.

Possible Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse.

Several studies (Barnacle, Tattersall & Bruun, 1993; Conte & Schuerman, 1987; Finkelhor, 1984; Healy et al., 1994; Hawkins, McDonald, Davison & Coy, 1994; Kelly, 1988) indicate that people who have been subjected to sexual abuse can suffer a range of outcomes directly related to that abuse. Suicide is seen as one of a number of these effects. Other effects include loss of trust, low self esteem, pregnancy, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, anxiety, depression, and other psychological and psychiatric problems. Similarly, child sexual abuse may, in some instances, be related to the subsequent experiences of severe drug-related problems, long term homelessness; vulnerability to further victimisation, and some offending behaviours (Brown, 1993).

Driver (1989) argues that suggesting that people are permanently damaged by sexual abuse places that person in the position of being 'less than' other people. This can create another myth - the myth of the irretrievably damaged person. This position assumes that survivors of sexual violation are incapable of overcoming the effects caused by the sexual abuse. Clearly this is not the case, therefore, while acknowledging that sexual abuse and sexual assault can effect people in certain ways, it must also be acknowledged that those effects need not be permanent. Arguably, with effective intervention and support the survivor can regain control over their lives and lessen the trauma associated with the sexual violation.

Importance of Appropriate Intervention

Clearly, there is now an extensive literature available on the different issues relating to sexual violation. This knowledge came about through women who had been victimised speaking out about their experiences. Disclosing, making it known to others that they had been sexually violated, enabled a wealth of information to be shared with others who had experienced similar situations. Furthermore these disclosures enabled many professional workers to adapt their therapeutic practices to assist those who had been violated (Herman, 1981; Hooper, 1992; Olafson, Corwin & Summit, 1993; Rush, 1980).

Early disclosures informed many therapeutic and research practices amongst people who work with survivors of sexual victimisation. Educational promotional material distributed to community agencies and schools highlight the importance of appropriate disclosure practices. (see for example Sexual Assault Referral Centre pamphlets). Raynor (1989, p. 33) suggests that "disclosure work is a rapidly developing science or art". Raynor was referring to the 'work' of professions in obtaining either medical or other evidence to support a perpetrator being charged and having to appear in court. However, being sensitive to a disclosure of sexual violation is important whether the end result is the gathering of evidence for court purposes or part of the process of overcoming or lessening the effects of the sexual violation. Several studies (Black, Buddle & Leach, 1987; Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Cashmore & Bussey, 1987; Churchill & Cameron, 1987; Sandor, 1994) have indicated that effective intervention along with appropriate

support is important in reducing the trauma associated with the sexually abusive experience. Part of this effective intervention is the ability to provide a supportive environment in which the sexually victimised person believes any disclosure will be handled in a respectful and helpful manner.

Barriers to Disclosure

Even though it may be recognised that disclosure is an essential part of effective intervention and therapy, there are many barriers to disclosure. These include not being believed; fear of being blamed, feelings of guilt or shame; fear of being abandoned or not being loved anymore, of being separated from family and friends; or fear of physical harm to themselves or others (Brown, 1993; Dinsmore, 1991; MacFarlane, Cockriel & Dugan, 1990; Ritz, 1993). Young children especially find it difficult to disclose, particularly if the perpetrator is a father or stepfather or other close family member or friend. The child is dependent on the adults in its life to provide basic sustenance and shelter. "Adults, and parents in particular, hold a dominant and powerful role in relation to children and they assume immense importance in the eyes of children" (Cashmore and Bussey 1987, p. 3). Furthermore children are reliant on the adults to teach them which behaviours are appropriate and which are not. It is therefore not difficult to understand the implications this has for children and young people. Apart from the barriers to disclosure already listed a child may be confused about acceptable sexual behaviour and not feel confident enough to challenge any behaviour from an adult. Many children have been threatened with dire consequences if they tell anyone

about the abuse; children are either coerced or threatened into 'keeping the secret'. If disclosure does occur, either purposefully or accidentally, the intervention which follows can have as many emotional consequences as the actual abuse (Cashmore and Bussey, 1987). Clearly, disclosing to someone that you have been sexually abused or assaulted is a difficult and often traumatic experience for survivors. However, studies indicate that the survivor feels relieved when they have told someone about the abuse, (Briggs & Hawkins, 1993; Cashmore & Bussey, 1981; Macfarlane, Cockriel & Dugan, 1990 ; Rayner, 1989) especially if the trauma associated with disclosure can be lessened by appropriate responses.

From my many personal communications with young people over the past three years it was apparent to me that many who had been sexually abused or sexually assaulted felt that current services were not adequate to their needs. They were not being given the opportunity to disclose in a supportive environment. It seemed apparent to me that research into this area was needed to understand what young people perceived to be adequate services. Therefore it was first necessary to understand the experience of disclosure from young people's point of view, to find out what happened when they told someone that they had been sexually abused or assaulted.

Definitions of Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault.

In asking young people about their disclosure process I needed to come to an understanding of what the terms 'sexual abuse' and 'sexual assault' meant. I

required a definition, which would be shown to each of the participants, that would clarify the definition for this research. Defining sexual abuse and sexual assault is difficult, given that ideas about them have not remained static. Legal definitions often differ from those used in rape crisis centres, and medical definitions can differ from those used by academics and researchers. The definitions used in social and professional circles can change from state to state and from country to country. Indeed, time has seen changes not only in defining what constitutes unacceptable sexual behaviour but also in choosing words to describe it.

Kelly (1988) in attempting a comprehensive definition of sexual violence which acknowledges the act and the consequences of that act, describes sexual violence as a continuum of behaviours from flashing and obscene phone calls through to commonly acknowledged instances of sexual violence such as rape.

Sexual violence includes any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl, at the time or later as a threat, invasion or assault, that has the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control intimate contact (1988, p. 41).

While this definition does not acknowledge that males are also victims of sexual violence and abuse it can be easily adapted to do so. However, this definition is unclear about whether an act of physical violence *on its own* is considered a sexually violent act.

A more recent definition by Wilson (1993) intended to define sexual abuse for male victims, offers useful insights, particularly if it is altered to include vaginal penetration:

Sexual abuse is sexual behaviour imposed by a person/s on another person by the misuse of their power, authority or trust. The sexual behaviour may include: fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, anal penetration by fingers/penis or any other object. It may also include exhibitionism, pornography and suggestive behaviour. Sexual abuse can include the use of faeces and/or urine. The perpetrator has more power than the victim at the time of the assault and misuses that power to take advantage of the other person (p. 12).

In this definition Wilson is clear that acts such as exhibitionism, pornography and suggestive behaviour can be *part of* the sexually abusive behaviour. However, I felt that any definition needed to recognise that some children who are in an abusive family situation are not aware that what they are experiencing is abuse. A definition also needs to make clear that abuse is not always, in fact is rarely, a one-off incident.

While it may not be necessary or possible to arrive at a universal definition, it is important to have a clear understanding of what this research accepts as a definition of sexual abuse and sexual assault, and that ultimately any sexual act can be defined as abusive or assaultive if the survivor experiences it as such. The following definitions acknowledge the power relationship that exists between the perpetrator and the victimised person; that males are also victimised and that anyone could be a perpetrator of sexual violence. It also takes into account the often coercive ongoing nature of child sexual abuse. Incest is included in the definition of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse always involves a more powerful person abusing this power and the trust which the less powerful child has in the adult or older child. This is usually coercive and may be seen as 'normal' by those

children who lack the knowledge to define the abuse as wrong. It is usually ongoing and usually starts with less severe forms of abuse and progresses over time to the more severe forms. Consent to child sexual abuse cannot occur: freely given consent cannot exist between a powerful adult (or older child) and a powerless child. The sexual assault can take the form of:- talking sexually to a child; showing the child pornographic material; making the child perform sexual acts on themselves or others including -fondling genitals; masturbation, oral sex, vaginal and/or anal penetration by fingers/penis or any other object. (adapted from Sexual Assault Referral Centre 1995).

Sexual assault.

Sexual assault is an act of aggression with a sexual component. It is an act of power, using sex and violence, or the threat of violence as a weapon. The aggressor takes power away from the woman, child or man, their body and their personal life. It includes any sexualised behaviour by the offender which makes the victim feel uncomfortable or afraid. This unwanted behaviour can take the form of: exhibitionism, voyeurism, touching, fondling, kissing, oral/genital contact, being forced to do sexual acts to oneself or others, penetration of the victim's vagina, mouth or anus. (adapted from Sexual Assault Referral Centre 1994).

Each of the women who participated in this study were given a copy of the above definitions which they read at the commencement of the first interview. All indicated that the definitions suited their particular situation, without entering into a discussion of what their actual experiences of sexual violation had been. This was in keeping with the purpose of the study. What was important was that the young women could see what meaning I gave to sexual abuse and sexual assault and had an opportunity to question that meaning.

The research method chosen for this study, Feminist Interview Research, enabled the participants to check the validity of the transcripts and the meanings I had given to their experiences. This is discussed further in Chapter Two. I had originally

intended to include entries from a journal about my own feelings and thoughts as I progressed through the whole honours project, however I found I could never actually write in the journal bought for that purpose. The reasons for this are given in the second part of Chapter Two, along with a discussion of the interview and transcribing process which include my reactions to those processes. Chapter Three contains selections of dialogue from the taped interviews so the reader can (partly) identify with the experiences of the seven young women who participated in this study. Chapter Four discusses the findings from the interviews and includes recommendations suggested by several of the young women which could be incorporated into a 'best practice' model for professionals handling the disclosure of sexual abuse/assault by young people. Chapter Five concludes the study and recommends areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

As discussed in the previous chapter one of the many issues faced by people who have experienced sexual abuse and/or sexual assault is denial or minimisation of their experience. Societal denial of the prevalence and effects of sexual abuse/assault and denial by others that it has happened, frequently leads to self denial. Disclosing the abuse, whether for the first or one hundredth time, often results in disbelief or minimisation of that person's experiences by the person they disclose to. This study, in exploring the disclosure process, required a research method that would enable me to listen, and question (in ways that were respectful), and allow the participants' stories to be heard. It also required a research method which would acknowledge that:

- the gathering of information about the disclosure process from young people who had been sexually abused and/or sexually assaulted would be a very personal and possibly, a very painful process;
- there would be potential for distress both to the participant and to myself;
- these young people are their own experts in knowing what had been helpful or unhelpful in their experiences of disclosure. Consequently, respect for the young people and their information would need to be implicit;

- the young people who would disclose to me had the right to information about the study and about myself. Consequently they would need information concerning my identity; my ability to relate to their experience, if at all; my reasons for doing this research; what would happen to the information they gave me; and their entitlement to say whether the information was interpreted in a way they felt comfortable with;
- research cannot be objective, and that I bring my own values and ideals to this study;
- researcher and participants do not have equal power in this situation: given the abuse of power that had already occurred in these young people's lives, I would need to be very aware and sensitive to issues of power;
- exploring or at least reflecting on what it meant to participate in such research, from both the researcher's and participants' points of view, was crucial.

I looked at several methods of data collection, including the use of questionnaires, interviewing groups of young people and holding forums whereby I could combine a group situation and one-to-one interviews, selecting the individual participants from those in the group that indicated they wished to be further involved. However, considering that the purpose of this study was to find what the experience of disclosure was for a young person I needed to scale down on the number of participants and be more specific. Therefore, rather than use a quantitative

approach or a combination of quantitative and qualitative, I decided to use a qualitative approach, informed by a feminist framework, to interview, individually, a small number of young people. Reinharz (1992) refers to this method as feminist interview research. It differs from ethnography in not including long periods of participant observation. It also differs from a survey or questionnaire approach by allowing semi-structured interviews that provide opportunities for clarification and discussion between interviewer and interviewee (Reinharz 1992, p. 18).

In this chapter I will explore several aspects of feminist interview research, clarifying what I mean as a feminist framework; and give some meaning to the term qualitative inquiry. I will also examine some key concepts and understandings of feminist interviewing. I will then explain the method chosen to analyse the information gathered. In this chapter I will also discuss the emotional conflict involved in undertaking this project and conclude with some of the participants' thoughts on the process of being involved in the study.

Feminist Framework

Placing this research within a feminist framework was both logical, given the involvement feminism has had in recognising and advocating against sexual abuse and sexual assault, and appropriate, as it acknowledges several of the above considerations and acknowledges the gendered power imbalance in society. Walby, Kanter, Herman & Hirschman cited in Reinhartz (1992) state:

Feminist research concerning incest . . . frames questions in terms of the gender and power of offenders and victims. In contrast, mainstream literature frames its questions in terms of sexuality, deviance or mental illness. . . . A frankly feminist perspective is necessary because otherwise one cannot understand why the vast majority of perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and father) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters and daughters) are female. . . and why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement, or why the recent apologists for incest have been popular men's magazines and the closely allied, all-male Institute for Sex Research (Reinharz 1992, p. 249).

As well as placing gender and power at the centre of social inquiry, feminist research assumes that:

- the link between method and theory is acknowledged;
- there is an obligation to try to maintain honesty between researched and researcher;
- the researcher can engage in dialogical and reflective process with the participants of the study;
- women's and young people's knowledge is valued and appreciated;
- the research has a social outcome.

(Duelli Klein, 1983; Lather, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

In particular, the feminist framework that informs this study sees the continuance of sexual abuse and sexual assault resulting out of a social order that is informed by patriarchal attitudes and structures. These are structures which have encouraged

the sexual division of labour and sex-role socialisation and perpetuate the imbalance of power between men and women; adults and children; people of different cultural or racial backgrounds; and able and disabled people. Furthermore, it acknowledges that most sexual abuse and/or sexual assault is perpetrated by men on women and children.

Qualitative Inquiry

Patton (1990) argues that qualitative inquiry is a naturalistic, inductive process that applies a holistic perspective to the phenomenon under investigation. Data gathered are rich in depth and description. The involvement of the researcher in the process of data gathering is acknowledged and each case under investigation is seen as unique and special. Each study has sensitivity to a social, historical and temporal context. Complete objectivity is seen as being impossible. The researcher is part and parcel of the research and will bring to the study their own experiences and insights, which are valued (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, qualitative in-depth interviewing allows the researcher to access the perception of those being interviewed:

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (Patton 1990, p. 278).

Qualitative, feminist interviewing allows for the voices of 'oppressed' people to be heard. Each participant is valued for their information and knowledge. It allows for

participants to respond in their own words, giving the study deep rich descriptive information to be analysed. In particular, the qualitative method chosen for this study, being semi-structured, open-ended interviewing, allows the participant to explore their own perception of the experience. "Such . . . interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1992, p.19).

Feminist Interview Research

Having access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories brings with it responsibilities and consequences. Many feminist writers acknowledge these responsibilities and consequences by advocating a participatory approach to research. This approach lessens the differences or separation between researcher and participant, producing a non-hierarchical non-manipulative interview relationship allowing the interview to be an interactive experience (Duelli Klein, 1983; Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This interaction between researcher and participant can be further enhanced by the researcher investing her own personal identity into the relationship by being open to answering questions posed by the participant, sharing knowledge and experience and giving support when needed (Oakley 1981).

Given the nature of this inquiry, the ability to be open to share experience and knowledge with the participants was an important one. Some of the participants were aware that I had a keen personal interest in issues relating to sexual abuse

and/or sexual assault. Seven of the original ten women indicated that their willingness to be involved in the study stemmed directly from this, stating they felt they could trust me with their information. The remaining three women responded directly from notices and knew nothing of my background.

My herstory placed me in the position of "knowledgeable stranger" (Evans cited in Reinharz 1992, p. 27). The knowledgeable stranger is positioned between interviewer as friend and interviewer as stranger, not knowing the participants but having similar experiences. Lather (1993) in a study on HIV positive women explores the question of insider/outsider status and acknowledges "the distance between someone who 'helps' and someone who is in it" (p.22). Lather came from a position of possibly being 'in it' (HIV positive) to one who was 'outside it' (HIV negative) and acknowledged that it positioned her in a particular way in her study. Similarly, I had the experience of my own disclosure of sexual violation; counselling people who have been subjected to sexual abuse and/or sexual assault; as well as the knowledge gained from reading and researching the topic, all of which was valuable. However, the participants of this study are unique, their experiences are unique and it is this uniqueness which I wanted to explore. My knowledge and personal experiences enabled me to gain some insider status but still positioned me on the outside. This is where I felt most comfortable.

I was aware that, according to feminist writers on the subject, the interview process can create an unequal balance of power between the interviewer and the interviewee (Finch, 1984; Stanley & Wise, 1993), and that the balance is in favour

of the researcher. I was keen to minimise this as much as possible. However what I did not expect was that I would be the one feeling less powerful at times. Cotterill (1992, p. 599) argues that "the balance of power within interviews depends, to a large extent, on the perceptions of the person being interviewed", and I agree with her. The majority of the women I interviewed were in as much control of the interview process as I was, creating a good interactive exchange. I also became very aware of their skill in reading body language and at times felt somewhat uneasy, hoping I was presenting as being attentive and genuine. I should not be surprised at their skill at reading people. These women had had to overcome some horrendous situations, which they had been powerless to control or change. Learning to be skilled at reading body language was a survival strategy. Most had learnt to take back control and were not prepared to let any researcher change that situation. Furthermore, for many of these women to have a 'empathic listener' was a powerful contradiction to their past experiences.

Nonetheless, despite all attempts to maintain honesty between the researched and researcher, and engage in dialogical and reflective process with the participants of the study, it needs to be acknowledged that I did have the ultimate control as the one who analyses and writes up the findings from the interviews. The responsibility for the outcome rests with me. Pamela Cotterill argues the research process can never be a truly equal one "because the researcher and researched have different expectations" (1992, p. 605). However, by applying these feminist principles the research process can be made a more equal exchange. The expectations of most of the women in this study were twofold: firstly, that someone listened to their

stories respectfully; and secondly, that by participating in this way they may help other young people. Chapter Three addresses the first part of their expectations and Chapter Four includes their recommendations for 'best practice' in listening to young people disclose sexual abuse/assault.

Method of Analysis

The method chosen to analyse the information gained from the participants was thematic. The tapes were transcribed by hand and then typed into a computer. Some themes emerged from this early stage and these were coded and entered into Q.S.R. NUD.IST, a computerised package designed to aid in the analysing of non-numerical and unstructured data in qualitative analysis. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript and the initial ideas were confirmed by five of the seven women. Two of the women were unable to be contacted. The transcribed texts were transferred to Q.S.R. NUD. IST.

I commenced searching the data for common words that expressed feelings and moved through several themes. I then commenced a selection process of narrowing that information down to the actual disclosure process. I selected data that related directly to the disclosure process, what actually happened, concentrating on the actual actions and reactions of the people hearing the information. Once this was achieved I revisited the tapes and transcripts to confirm my findings. The information provided an enormous amount of rich material and I found I had constantly to re-focus on the topic of this study.

Recruiting Participants

The young women who participated in this study were chosen from volunteers who either responded to notices placed in selected youth agencies; belonged to a group who are advocates for survivors of child sexual abuse; or were personally approached by me. The target group were young people, female or male who were aged between 18-25, and who had been sexually abused or assaulted. Furthermore they had to be prepared to talk to me, and have their conversation recorded on audio tape, about what had happened when they told someone about that abuse or assault. As the time line for the study was short I could not cater for anyone who would require the approval of a third person, (such as a parent) to participate. Therefore this age group was chosen because, legally, they could make an autonomous decision to participate, and they fell within the definition of young people.

Youth agencies were selected in terms of the age group of young people who accessed the service. These agencies were contacted by phone to set up an appointment whereby I could explain my research proposal and answer any questions the agency staff may have. I also asked them to place a notice in a prominent place so that young people could read and respond to it if they wished. I felt by explaining the project to agency staff, they in turn could make an informed decision about their part in the project. I made it clear that they were not required, or indeed requested, to make a decision in either explaining the project fully or selecting participants for the project. It was simply to allow the agency staff an

opportunity to understand where I was coming from, and that my credentials were legitimate. Therefore, *if* young people asked about the project they could be assured that the purpose was to talk about what happened when they told about the abuse, not what happened when they were abused.

A total of twelve agencies were contacted. Two of these agencies specialised in working with sexual abuse and/or assault, although neither worked exclusively with young people. Most responses from the staff at the agencies were positive, welcoming the research, saying that it was both timely and necessary, because in their experience a large percentage of the young people using their service were disclosing sexual abuse. Some staff in these agencies requested information on how to train their staff in handling disclosure. I was pleased to send information and refer them on to other agencies which conduct training in this area.

Only one youth agency responded in a manner which I found disturbing. I was informed by a staff member of this agency that they had decided, in a staff meeting, not to allow the notice to be displayed. While I accepted that this is the agency's right, I was curious as to the reason for this decision and on asking, was told that "as this subject is a very personal and sensitive issue we feel that young people should not talk about it." I was surprised at this response and therefore sought clarification of what was actually meant by that comment. The staff member repeated that it was felt by the staff in this agency that young people should not participate as it would involve talking about sexual abuse. They felt this was not a topic that young people should talk about. I am still troubled that an agency which

has as its target group large numbers of young people feels sexual abuse is a topic that one should not talk about.

I found I had to be active in seeking out participants as the response to the notices was very slow, and time lines were shortened by delays in gaining approval for the project. I was hoping to attract young men as well as young women; however, the only response was from women. In retrospect to expect otherwise was ambitious, given the nature of the study and the reluctance of young people in general, and young men in particular, to come forward and disclose. It is only very recently that males have felt that they can disclose and be believed and supported in this process (see for example Grubman-Black, 1990; Hunter, 1990; Lew, 1993; Wilson, 1993). Clearly, the underlying, basic need for both females and males is to feel they can trust the person to whom they are disclosing. It is no surprise that the majority of participants were recruited because I was known, albeit very slightly, to them.

To increase my response rate I spoke about my project to a group of people who were advocating for survivors of child abuse. Several responses came from this group. I also contacted two women who had expressed interest in being involved in the study some time ago. These women had been part of the young women's forum I attended in 1993.

The Interview Process

I interviewed ten women, seven of whom were aged from 20 through to 25. The other three participants were women outside the age range; two were 33 years old and one was 51 years old. The decision to interview women outside the target group was because of their willingness to participate and my belief that I had too few participants. Refocussing on my original reason to do this study I elected to use only the information from the seven women who fell within the age group 18-25. This decision was made easier by the withdrawal from the study of two of the older women. The third understood and accepted my decision, having been happy with the involvement she had and indicating she would be interested in any other studies I might undertake. Although the information from the interviews from the older women is not included in the final study, these women played an important role. I gained experience in interviewing and transcribing and the women felt they gained insight into their recovery process. Each of these women were given their transcripts and the opportunity to discuss them with me. One woman took up that offer and we spent some time going through the transcript and reflecting on the progress she had made in reclaiming her life. Her therapist had advised her to tell people about her past abuse, but to choose the time, place and person so that the experience would have as positive an outcome as possible. It was an inspiring moment. I was part of the recovery process for this woman; I am clearly not her therapist, but a fellow traveller she has encountered on her path to recovery. Recovery is a process. This woman wanted to be involved, to tell her story and I wanted to allow her that involvement.

Each woman interviewed was given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. Three suggested numbers and then left the decision to me, two wanted to use their own names, as part of their resistance to being silent, and the remaining two chose names they had always liked. After further discussing the implications of using their own names, we decided to play with their names a little, the end result being a name derived from their name. In this way the two women felt they identified with the pseudonym but their anonymity could be maintained. The pseudonyms used for the seven young women participants are: Amber, Cherry, Mary, May, Nell, Penny, and Susie.

Each participant was first spoken to over the telephone where the aims and estimated duration of involvement in the project were outlined. Each participant was told that there would be an initial, audio taped interview that would last approximately one hour. Then several weeks later, a follow up interview would be held, to discuss the transcripts and the initial findings from those transcripts. Participants were also told that they could withdraw from the project at any stage. Once this was understood and agreed to, arrangements were made to meet and conduct the first interview.

The interviews were held either in the participants home (5), my home (3) or a neutral location (2). All participants were given a copy of the project proposal and signed a consent form after being informed, again, about the project and their right to withdraw at any stage; that they did not have to answer any questions asked;

and that I would stop the interview at any time they indicated. Possible distress and how this would be handled was also discussed.

I had set up strong networking and support systems for myself and had checked with one specialist agency and two private counsellors for their availability should any of the participants or myself become distressed. During the first telephone contact I discussed the possibility of distress with each participant, checking that they had their own support systems in place. I felt I was prepared for any signs of distress with the participants and myself. However, I discovered during the interview process that I was unprepared for the overwhelming emotions I encountered.

I had stated clearly to the participants that my interest was in the process of disclosure and not in the accounts of the sexual violation. However in some, if not all, interviews the sense of the pain, betrayal and sadness of both the disclosure process and the events prior to disclosure surfaced. How could it not? However, I was not prepared for some of the horror and the initial amount of negative effect disclosure had on some of these women. I felt the women were much more reflective than I was at this stage. Although the majority did show some emotional distress, it felt okay to have that between us. At the point of interview neither the woman being interviewed nor myself was overwhelmed by the escape of this emotion. We just acknowledged it was there and shared it. Finch (1984) describes this informality and sharing between the interviewer and interviewee as an intimate conversation, possible because the interviewer is seen by the interviewee as a

"friendly guest, not an official inquisitor; and . . . in effect, [creates] an easy, intimate relationship between two women" (p.74). This is indeed how this interaction felt.

While I was able to contain most of my distress during the discussions, I found it surfaced very soon after I was away from the participants. On more than one occasion I drove home yelling and screaming in my car, with tears of anger and frustration pouring out over what these women had experienced in disclosing their sexual violation. This was an appropriate coping strategy for me at the time; the release of the anger and frustration enabled me to continue interviewing other young women without my distress getting in the way.

In one interview I was confronted with a disclosure that the woman had been raped just two days before. This interview was one of my first and I was finding it very difficult to concentrate, a small child was in the room, the television was on and the woman I was interviewing was going from one story to another. I was trying to make some sense of what she was saying while trying to observe whether I was in interviewer mode or counsellor mode. With all this distraction, it was some time into the interview before I realised she was talking about a recent event, a recent rape, a rape that had happened just a couple of days ago. I stopped the tape immediately and wanted to stop the interview completely but she insisted we continue. After spending some time discussing the recent events we continued the interview. I drove home from that interview feeling very confused about what part I had just played in this woman's life. I had a lot of unresolved issues. I was reflecting on the issues raised by the ethics committee about not

confusing the role of researcher and counsellor. I was concerned that while I had listened empathically and given as much information as requested, I still felt as if I needed to do more. I was left wondering if I had handled this woman's disclosure appropriately.

The disclosure of the rape and the consequences of our discussion led to a complication I had not envisaged. I had recently started a short term contract as a worker in an agency that specialised in sexual abuse and assault. While on duty for telephone crisis counselling, I received a call from this woman. I found myself facing a dilemma I had not anticipated. I decided I could not, ethically, attend to the call and requested someone else do so. Several nights later I was again confronted with the same situation. I thought about what I was doing and decided to take the call. I needed to resolve the issue. I needed to explain who I was and give her the opportunity to decide for herself what she wanted to do. I decided to take this action because it was likely that I would come across this woman during the course of my work and I also had knowledge of her calling and I was withholding that from her. I was making decisions for this woman that I had no right to make. I had information and knowledge that, no matter what one might feel about relative objectivity, it would influence my interactions with her on my second interview and it felt deceitful not to talk to her. Should I continue to include her in the research, should I pretend I could separate the two incidents? I found I could not, I needed to respect her rights and acknowledge the power I had over her in withholding that information. I needed to give her the choice. Fortunately, she was pleased I was responding to the call and, furthermore she absolutely

wanted to continue in the research project, suggesting this further development would add to the project. She continued to access the agency I worked for and although I was not involved in her case I did not have to pretend I wasn't aware of her presence in that system. As it turned out, I did encounter her at the agency in the course of my work and we were able to exchange hellos without feeling awkward.

Nonetheless, despite having resolved the issues of clear boundaries between my work as a counsellor and my work as a researcher, I thought long and hard about whether to include this inner turmoil in the final write up of the study. I had initially left it out but found, on reflection, and discussing the complications and doubts with others, that it was an important part of the study and emphasised this particular woman's determination to have her story told. In addition, it also highlights the distancing we frequently do around emotional distress: to exclude this seemed to me to collude in the suppression of emotions, and suppressing emotions colludes in the silencing of the survivors. Furthermore, reflecting on what it meant to do a study such as this one was part of what I wanted to explore as a researcher.

Kelly (1990) comments on the assumption by many feminist researchers, such as Oakley, that face-to-face interviews are unproblematic and argues that while face-to-face interviews, particularly about sexual violation, enable the participant to reflect on their experience and discuss issues relating to sexual violence more generally, they do involve the researcher in a more emotional and responsible

role. Kelly asks what role does the researcher have in hearing about distressing incidents disclosed for the first time? What responsibility do they have in ongoing support for such an event? As discussed in Chapter One, disclosing, or reflecting on experiences, can be a positive experience, if handled appropriately. Was my response appropriate? I did offer some support and information in this instance but I was aware I was not able to offer ongoing support, and at the time I felt uncomfortable about this. I was clear that ethically it was inappropriate to become this woman's counsellor: my role was as one woman listening to another woman's disclosure of rape and distancing myself from becoming more involved, or offering ongoing support. I am still reflecting on this.

Transcribing The Tapes

Another area I found I was ill prepared for was in the transcribing of the tapes. I had purposely left the transcribing until I had completed several interviews. I wanted to have several interviews of raw data without any information influencing the others. Furthermore, if I wanted to clarify common details or ask about that I could do so in the second interview. I had conducted the interviews and felt that I had released the emotions I had encountered during the interview stage. I had debriefed with my support network and felt I was ready to begin the transcriptions. I discovered that even though I was confident that the emotional distress had been dealt with I discovered this was not so.

I found myself in a world of distress, pain, betrayal and personal anger: I was immersed in these women's stories in a way that I could not be during the interviews. Even though I had released a lot of anger and distress directly after the interviews, this was different. It was just their stories and me, alone together with no restraints placed on my feelings. In order to transcribe the tapes I needed to listen to the stories over and over again. I became intimate with their stories. All I could see was what had happened to them. I was numb, I was angry, and I was filled with lots of emotion. Although I was, to some degree, aware of the effect this was having on me, I was unable to reach out, to access my support networks. I closed off and ignored them. I isolated myself. I became steeped in hopelessness and an enormous feeling of inadequacy and anger. I couldn't write. I became ill. When it became obvious that researching this topic to such a depth, doing paid work in the same area, (which also involved disrupted sleep), was too much for me to cope with, I decided to stop work. I took a break. I recovered. I found strength, alongside the pain, in the women's stories. I started to write and continued the project.

This period in the study was very intense and I found it difficult to put my feelings into words. I had intended to keep a journal but after several attempts gave the idea away. Kelly, Regan & Burton (1992) experienced similar feelings while doing research into young people and sexual abuse. Using questionnaires for their study rather than face-to-face interviews did not lessen the emotional reaction to the information. Their feelings of despair, anger and rage surfaced during the coding of those questionnaires:

The intensity of that period is hard to put into words, as is documenting our individual and collective coping strategies . . . Whilst we talked of keeping

research diaries, the fact that we did not suggests that making ourselves consciously reflect on what we were doing daily threatened the fragile balance we were maintaining. . . We became 'safe' to tell, and for us sexual abuse was indeed everywhere. In virtually any situation, no matter how unlikely, women and men would begin telling us about their experiences . . . It made it hard to maintain boundaries (p, 158).

This was indeed where I was, researching sexual abuse, working as a crisis counsellor in the area and listening to friends disclose their experiences. Reflecting on this now, it is difficult to know if I would change any part of that process. However, I would not place myself in such a demanding position again. Neither would I discount the value of face-to-face interviews that evoke such emotional responses. I would pace myself differently and pay more attention to outside interests so that my emotional response could be balanced with the rest of my life.

Returning to the women for the second interview, as part of the validation process, I found the discussion of the transcripts provided further insight into their individual disclosure process as well as an insight into how they felt about being involved in the research project. All the women who had been interviewed received a printed copy of their transcript by mail and then I telephoned them to arrange an appointment for the second interview. I was able to reinterview five of the ten women. It was at this stage that two of the women, who were outside the target group, withdrew from the study and two others were not able to be contacted.

Participants' Response to Involvement in this Study

Most of the women expressed some embarrassment at the way that they had expressed themselves on tape. I had transcribed the tapes word-for-word, including all the 'umms' and other idiosyncrasies of their individual speech patterns. Once I had explained that I did that in order to re-live the interview, to use the transcripts to prompt as accurate a picture as possible of the pauses, hesitations and other reactions to the questions and that it would not show up like that in the end product, they were comfortable. I also offered to provide them with an edited copy of their transcripts, an offer which some of the women took up.

Three of the women wanted to clarify some of the content of the interviews while two others wanted to include additional information. All felt the involvement in the project had been a positive one even if it did bring with it some amount of distress. Having the transcript, their stories in writing put some focus into their recovery or as Penny said:

My first reaction was to the grammar, it was a shock to see that I actually spoke like that. Then, when I read through it again, I was a little sad, it was like reading someone's case history, except it was mine. I was sad for that little girl I was. I read it again and I discovered how strong I was, and how far I have come in [reflective pause] reclaiming my life. How able I was in coping with my life. It's really good to have this written down, I can keep it for the rest of my life and I can look back on it and reflect on how far I have come.

and Susie:

When I first received the transcript and read through it, I felt initially disappointed regarding how incoherent I sounded. I've written a few things down that I hope encapsulate my experience, because I found I didn't answer the questions in some instances very clearly. I felt really pleased that you were undertaking this line of research, I think it is really

important. I'm very glad to be a part of it. I found after we had talked, I was a bit flat emotionally, when you talk about these experiences, you actually experience it all again. It's all valuable experience though and I feel comfortable with what I have said and the way the questions were helpful and accurate.

Other participants simply expressed they were comfortable about the way the interviews were conducted and that the information was able to be verified and that they were hoping their involvement would help other young people.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE WOMEN - "PUTTING YOUR LIFE ON THE LINE."

Describing how it felt to disclose to someone about sexual abuse, May said "You're putting your life on the line when you tell someone about the abuse". Seven young women "put their lives on the line" for this study. Disclosing the disclosure process to me was an exercise of trust involving these young women and me. This has been a difficult chapter to write because I could not possibly include everything that the women told me, although I would have liked to because they are worth listening to, every word. I have selected material which captures the essence and does not distort the experiences of these young women or the trust they placed in me.

What we will see from the following stories is that, disclosing sexual abuse or sexual assault is a risky business. For some of the women, fear of what might happen if they did tell kept them from talking about the abuse for many years. Fortunately some, like Penny, found someone they could trust and a safe environment in which to do so. For others like Nell and Cherry, telling resulted in horrific consequences of family betrayal and more sexual and emotional abuse. Susie and Amber found that professional support was insensitive, minimising or dismissive. People had a lack of understanding of the complexities of abusive situations and for Cherry the sheer dismissal of her feelings caused a lot of unnecessary distress. Some of the women point to a lack of willingness or understanding of sexual abuse issues by professionals. All agree that disclosure

needs to be handled with respect, care and sensitivity, and in a place where they feel safe and comfortable.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to give the reader an opportunity to listen to those stories themselves, to get to know a little about the disclosure experience that these young women had, to hear what it was like for them, to understand that while these young women have experienced sexual abuse and/or sexual assault it is, as one young woman explained, a "part of my life, not all of it." Largely I will suspend drawing too many conclusions as yet as I would like to maximise the chance for the young women's accounts to go uninterrupted. However, discussion about the issues raised in these dialogues is explored in the next chapter.

Amber (20)

Amber was sexually abused when she was three years old by a male friend of her family, who was living with them at the time of the abuse. Amber 'forgot' about the abuse until she was in primary school when "something reminded me". At this time Amber disclosed to her mother who dismissed what was being said and would not engage in conversation around that topic. Amber blocked the memories again. The memories re-surfaced again when Amber was feeling depressed and suicidal, seeking assistance from a psychiatrist:

I was in a state of depression . . . I was on the verge of suicide and I had to go on anti-depressant tablets. Now I can see how it all fits in, it was just after I started remembering the abuse and, at the time I just didn't think it was relevant. I didn't know what was going on in my life.

Amber had told the psychiatrist she was recalling memories, that she felt she was in a dream-like state:

It was, he said like "so you dreamt this had happened". I never went back and saw him again. He's a well respected, well known psychiatrist, which hurt pretty much. So I kept everything to myself after that. I didn't tell anyone until probably a year and a half later when I had other problems in my life and I started to address it.

It took a further 18 months and a foray into drugs and alcohol, before Amber was able to disclose a third time. The third attempt had mixed results, with Amber being believed about the sexual abuse she had experienced but not wanting to accept the victim status which was given to her. As Amber says:

I had a pretty bad time in my life, I was experimenting with drugs and my life was falling apart and I went and saw the school guidance counsellor. And I was getting counselling with her and then, sounds funny, but I'm a great fan of Ophra Winfrey and one night, it was in 1992, she had a show on about sexual abuse. And the next day I rang, I don't know, a sexual abuse centre and said how I got flashbacks and said how my life is pretty well messed up and do you think I was abused? and she said "you sound like a classic victim". And I remember screaming on the phone not to say that about me because I just didn't want to accept it. And then I did accept it and I rang up the school guidance counsellor and told her "I think I know what's wrong with me". And she came over to my house. She believed me straight away, she was very supportive. And then that's when I got my first lot of counselling, not through her but through another agency, a few years back.

I asked Amber how did it make her feel for the school counsellor to accept and believe her:

It was hard because that meant I had to accept it myself. And at that time I was still saying maybe it didn't happen, maybe its just like imagination. So that was hard as well. But it was good in a way because I accepted it and I started to deal with it. At that point in my life I think I just

had to accept it because I was still kind of, even when I was doing counselling I was still kind of in a bit of denial. Something was still in me, you know, why is this still happening, why are you getting all these flashbacks, you just made them up, something like that.

Once she had accepted that her memories of the abuse were real, Amber felt she was able to move on and deal with the effects the abuse has had on her life:

I see it as accepting it, then you go through different processes of it. And I guess it happens when you're ready, you know, the process. I can see now I am ready to get down to the nitty gritty of it. I guess you could say in the last four years I haven't been able to get angry and now I am. I think that's good. I'm ready to get all that anger out.

I asked Amber what it feels like to tell someone now, three years after her initial acceptance of her memories, and having participated in some counselling:

I want support. I don't want people feeling sorry for me. That's the last thing I want. I want people to acknowledge how much it has influenced my life. It's really affected it, it's been a big major influence and I want people to acknowledge how strong I've been through it, how I've been through a lot, that's what I really want. [long pause] feel a bit better with it and if people don't like it, that's their problem, it happened to me. I've reached this point where I can be like that. I mean I'm not ashamed. I guess that's it, I've accepted it more and I'm feeling better at, from it. [long pause] Life's a lot better now.

Cherry (20)

Cherry was sexually abused in her own home by her stepfather from the time she was eight and until she was 12 years old. Although her stepfather was charged with the offences relating to the sexual abuse, he received only a fine and returned, shortly after the court case, to the family home. As a result of his return to the family home Cherry left home and lived on the streets. Cherry was sexually

assaulted by a stranger when she was 17. A third assault situation occurred when Cherry was held up with a gun at her head. Cherry has attended several different counselling and therapy situations, some of which have been helpful and some of which have not.

Cherry first disclosed to her best friend about a year after the abuse commenced. Her friend didn't want to believe her and some time later Cherry felt she understood why, her friend was also being abused by her own father. Cherry next disclosed three years later to another school friend. This was to set in motion a chain of events that Cherry had no control over. These events clearly had negative consequences for Cherry. As Cherry explained:

It wasn't until year seven that I told my friend. Anyway she told her boyfriend about it and it was like the town, the school gossip, he stood on a bench and yelled out as the siren went " *Did your father rape you?*" it was all out in the open then. It was the worst way I could think of to come out . . . So then in high school everybody knew and I had, we were doing sexuality in health studies, and this guy came up to me and he just, he said "your father fucked you didn't he" . . . "did you enjoy it?" and I went huh? So I remember being taken up to the office, the school principal asking me all the details. I told her, she wanted to know all the graphic details, I told her. They rang mum up, mum was, she was abusing me, calling me everything, "you lying tramp" like. Anyway I lost my temper and said crying "well if you don't believe me go and ask Karen", my sister. Anyway they went and got Karen out of class and she said "no big deal, yeah it's true". And mum just went "umm". And that was it. It had to be reported, the whole school knew, something had to be done about it. So we went and stayed at a friends place that night. She [mother] told him to get out of the house, we went and filled out the court statement to the police.

Cherry was expected to continue with her everyday activities as though nothing had changed. This included attending the same school, until a couple of days before the court case:

Anyway it got to two days before the court trial and I'd been going to school everyday. I hadn't had anytime off school, and mum goes to me "you can have the day off" and I went, oh good, she goes "we'll spend the day together". She took me up to Hill Park and I was having a lovely time, the peacocks, kangaroos, just me and my mum. It had never been just me and my mum before, and I thought it was just great.

Anyway who shows up? He [stepfather] did. She had arranged it all. Anyway they did this great big guilt trip on me, "look love, I'm going to go to jail for seven years, you'll hurt little Sam", my little brother, who I had partly raised 'cause mum was working all the time, "you'll hurt your sister and brother if I go to jail, you'll hurt Nanna. Everyone in the family will be devastated. But, if you change your statement to say I didn't penetrate", even though there was the medical evidence and everything, "if you change your statement and say I didn't penetrate you, I won't have to go to jail, I'll still get fined, but I won't have to go to jail".

I turned around and said to mum "ok, here's the deal" [long pause] oh can you believe it [Cherry was shaking her head in disbelief as if she had just realised the impact of what she had said at that time, and again very quietly] I said to mum ok here's the deal. [After a short pause and a shrug of her shoulders Cherry continued relating her experience to me]. "Fine I'll change my statement, if you can promise me that he never comes near me again. That means he's not allowed anywhere near me, . . . So mum turned around and said to me "so you're telling me, me and him are finished aren't you". I said "after what he's done to me you still want to be with him?". And she did. But I said "No! finished". She still blames me, she still blames me.

As well as having to come to terms with her experience of the sexual abuse, the knowledge of that abuse being known in the small town community in general, and her school community in particular, Cherry had to make a deal with her mother for her own safety, take on responsibility for what might happen to the perpetrator and, how the rest of her family might react to a prison term for her abuser. Furthermore Cherry found no consolation in the court process, she was confused as to what she perceived as a lack of punishment for the perpetrator. Cherry was also upset at the

help the perpetrator received and the lack of acknowledgment or help for her. As if this were not enough to contend with, Cherry was confronted with her mother's betrayal when the stepfather moved back into the family home:

Anyway, well it went to court, he got a \$1000 fine . . . don't ask me how they work it out to a \$1000 fine. . . went to the bank the next day, paid the fine, went and got psychiatric help. And I get no compensation, no help. He's back within two weeks, moved in, mum's turned round and said "you want him out you go and tell him". I did. He wouldn't go.

No one in town would speak to me. Not one soul would speak to me. I got put through the wringer just so she could have her little fling with him. And the hardest thing that's been . . . little Sam doesn't know about it. He was only a little tot when it happened and the one person who's never going to find out is little Sam. 'Cause he won't hate his dad, he will hate me, mum told me that. And the other thing that was put on me was "if you ever tell your father", my real dad who I've always been close to, "you ever tell him, he'll kill [stepfather] and his death will be on your conscience"

Cherry left home when she was 15, moving to the city, where she lived on the streets or in youth hostels for 18 months. During this time Cherry was sexually assaulted by a stranger and held-up at gun point by another stranger. After these attacks Cherry went to live with her aunt and entered into therapy. This therapy helped Cherry understand and cope with the effects the sexual abuse was having on her life. Cherry felt safe and comfortable with the therapist, enabling her to speak openly and freely, allowing the hurt and anger to surface so that she could 'work through' her issues.

At the time of our interview Cherry was living on her own as she said: "in her own space". She had been able to find casual employment from time to time and

bought furniture and bric a brac for her home from her earnings. She was very proud of her achievements and felt her life was "on the mend", Cherry finally had control over her life and her thoughts:

When I was 15 I believed that, even though I 'd lost my virginity, I hadn't because / hadn't given my consent. And so when I was 15 and I finally did, I did give my consent. That, to me is when I lost my virginity that's the way I believe you should think about it. When, when they raped me, I didn't have no control over it . . . there was no power for me. I have my life back now. I have the power.

Mary (21)

When Mary was 15 she was sexually abused by a male friend of the family. This abuse involved threats to her life, with the abuser pointing a gun at her on several occasions. The abuse continued for 18 months, until Mary was "able to stand up to him". At the time of our interview Mary had not told her family and didn't think she ever would. Mary had not considered counselling or therapy at the time of the abuse, thinking people would make too much out of the situation or they would not understand the complexity of the issues. Mary also felt, as it was her problem, that she had to deal with it.

Mary first disclosed the abuse to school friends. This first disclosure was at the time the abuse was still occurring:

While it was going on I told them, and they said "well just don't go over there." But they didn't understand the whole, because it was really complicated, the whole thing, it wasn't just really clear cut, it was [pause] oh he threatened me and all that type of stuff. And it wasn't easy to say " well I just won't go over there", when he's over all the time. I, well, you know, I

don't really blame them, because they didn't understand, it was really hard to explain it to them. Like, to them like, it was really clear cut. Just don't go over there. Like because he was, like, my life was threatened. It wasn't until I got older that I was able to stand up to him.

When still at school and while the abuse was continuing, Mary had tried to talk to the school counsellor about another matter but on the three occasions she tried he did not keep the appointment:

I thought about going to the school counsellor about something else. I waited for 15 minutes and he didn't turn up. And, like, I tried three times.

I asked Mary what happened after she had told her friends and after deciding that the school counsellor was not available to talk to:

Well I didn't mention it again. If they asked I just didn't say anything about it. Didn't want them saying it was my fault and stuff like that. Because if they weren't going to listen to try to understand then there was no point really in arguing about it. But I just [long pause] I don't know, I'm just that type of person who thinks, like, really big problems like, I keep them to myself, I work them out myself. When it was happening like, I used to just come home and everything would be fine, I'd push it away. And now I can't remember most of it.

I then asked Mary if she had ever told her parents and she replied, shaking her head to indicate no:

I didn't tell my parents because it would cause too much stuff. It's like they would blow it out of proportion to how I was feeling really, about the whole thing. It would have made it worse really, you know, they'd want him charged. So I didn't want them to know because they trusted him, you know all that type of stuff. They didn't need to know. They didn't really need to know. I didn't want to put myself and them through it. If I was *really really* upset and couldn't deal with it I would have told them. [long reflective pause] I would have been shot down in court. There was no point really.

Mary then told me that she disclosed spontaneously to a friend about a year ago:

We just like, you know close friends stuff, like . . . it was easy to talk about it so and we were just talking about things, you know deep and meaningful. She was really good about it.

I asked Mary how that felt, being able to tell someone that treated her disclosure in this way

Better? I don't know, because by that time I had really, you know gotten over the whole thing of it. Well, you know, pushed it away. I don't know, yeah, but it was good. Someone that understood, you know, let me explain properly and not judge straight out. And she understood just how complicated it was and that it wasn't just clear cut.

Mary went on to tell me other friends she had disclosed to since thought she should go and seek some professional counselling because they are surprised that she was and still is able to "push it away". Her friends didn't feel it was healthy to "bury stuff like that". I asked Mary what she thought it was that enabled her to deal with it like that:

I don't know . . . because it's really weird actually, considering everything, that happened to me. I should like be really cut up about the whole thing but I wasn't. I mean I took it very calm, the whole thing, I don't really know why. I know it went on for a very long time I don't know how I did it but [long thoughtful pause] Yeah well, I've been wondering that, so have people that I've told. They say "are you all right?", and I say yeah. I don't think I have really got real deep into it . . . I've just shut it out. Which is weird 'cause I want to counsel kids. But counselling for myself, telling a stranger, issues of trust, whether they will understand, you know.

Penny (22)

Penny was sexually abused by her father when she was five, with the abuse continuing for the next three years. Penny had always felt that there was no one she could tell. Her mother was withdrawn and not given to shows of emotion. Her older brother was not close and in fact, physically abused her. School personnel did not seem to be interested in any of the children's personal lives. The family was isolated, living on a farm, away from any other families. They did not have visitors or go to visit other people. Penny retreated into a world of fantasy, books and food. As she became older and the fantasy and books no longer afforded her the release she wanted Penny turned to drugs and alcohol. Penny was "kicked out" of home when she was 16.

It was ten years after the abuse stopped, when Penny was eighteen, that she finally found someone she felt she could trust to tell. Prior to that disclosure, Penny had attempted to disclose to other professionals, to whom she had gone to seek help with other issues (aside from her incest experiences). She reflected on their inability to either pick up any possible links with her current problems and the sexual abuse, or if they did, the insensitive way it was handled:

First time I was about 16, for issues about lesbianism, more than issues re being an incest survivor, they didn't pick up related issues. Other professionals were psycho or hospital type people. If they did pick up on related issues, they would directly ask questions like, "have you experienced sexual abuse in your life?" and I found that really confronting. There was no way I could trust anyone at that stage in my life to say "yes", and I would not. I would go the opposite kind of thing. "What do you think. I'm here for depression, I'm not here to talk about bloody abuse". And like they would, maybe they would see the link between the depression and being an incest survivor and stuff like that but they didn't explain it. Like

they know, trip. Like "we're the experts". They would ask all these questions of you but not actually explain why they are asking them, or where its leading to. And perhaps, if they had been a bit more, [willing to enter into a] more equal power relationship with me, then I would have been more willing to discuss how I was feeling.

Penny feels the insensitivity of the professionals she saw hindered her being able to tell them about the sexual abuse:

*They deal with the wrong things. Rather than dealing with the most important things. They don't seem to recognise what a sensitive area [disclosing] it is. I mean it's something most incest survivors, when they first see someone in regards to what they have experienced . . . it's huge feelings of guilt and shame. And feelings of badness and stuff like that. And not being believed and, being judged and everything like that and then to have some, oh whether it's a youth worker, or psychologist or whatever, just *trample* all over what your saying. And challenge what you are saying, not believing what you're saying and, kind of minimise what you're saying. Yeah it kind of makes you not want to open up and talk to them.*

I asked Penny to tell me about her experience when she elected to tell someone she had been sexually abused:

The first time was with a youth worker who I had known for six months and had probably daily contact with her, except on weekends. I was externally supported by youth workers at that time so I had quite a lot of contact with her. She was the first person I told.

I then asked Penny how that came about:

It came about because I hadn't made the, put two and two together, Like what I was experiencing at the time, was due to my incest stuff. This particular youth worker was very out about breaking the silence and speaking out about incest. Making the person who had experienced it realise that they were in the right. Their experiences were ok, it was ok to feel that way. And it was the perpetrator who was the person who was wrong and bad, [who] should be full of shame, rather than the person who had experienced it. And she was always raving on about it, to anyone who would listen. And she also spoke about her own experiences, which was

really good . . . I think I saw her as a role model nearly. I thought "wow she's doing youth work", . . . she's actually made it. She's not like a failure and like she, was doing amazing marvellous things. And at the same time she was an incest survivor, wow really amazing. And she always went on about how there could be, often there is, a link between suicide, depression, whatever. So yeah, so I felt that she would believe me and that she would listen to me.

And she encouraged young women to speak to her about issues like that and, always put posters up everywhere . . . for sexual assault referral centres and places like that. Or any groups that were having workshops that were running for, young women to attend, like on issues that had arisen from sexual abuse and incest or sexual abuse or stuff like that, just giving as much information as she could. And making it known that she was available, would listen to people. And I think we, I and some of the other young women, saw her as someone who would listen to us because she spoke about her own experience, experienced the same kind of thing, showed that there was hope and that it was a process . . . like healing and stuff. Like you can do it.

Penny went on from that disclosure to seek counselling from professional services but found them to be inappropriate for her, some could only offer limited services while others used therapy styles she found too confronting:

I went when I was in a bit of a crisis and they informed me that I would be there for no more than 12 appointments. My problem with that was that it was only up to the eighth appointment that I am just getting trust with them and then like eventually start to tell things like that are important to me and then its like "I'll see you later" or "I'll refer you on to someone else" And I think there is really, to my knowledge, no services that offer like long term counselling specifically for incest survivors or sexual abuse survivors.

Another place I went to the sort of therapy they were using, [pause] I found it quite challenging and I'd been seeing counsellors for a couple of years. I think for people who. [see someone].for the first time,(even though their area is dealing with incest survivors), like the form of therapy doesn't seem to be appropriate. But because there are so few choices a lot of women would go there and perhaps think this is too full on and go.

And then they don't really have any choice after that. Unless they go to private people who are too expensive really. But I decided, I've made that commitment to myself, I will do that. I know at times in the past I would have thought "why waste money on myself". And it's not the issue of money so much as it's more that I don't even like myself enough to spend that sort of money on me. A lot of the people feel like that. And money aside, there has got to be more counsellors and services that are there long term and that are affordable or free. I think they should be free, not the sort of service which says "oh well we can see you for so many weeks and then you have to go and find someone else". When in fact there is no one else they can really see who's really appropriate. Every once in a while people get lucky and find someone good but, there is not much out there especially for young people.

May (23)

May was five years old when a local businessman started sexually abusing her. The abuse continued for eleven years until it was accidentally discovered by May's boyfriend. When I asked May to tell me what happened when she first told someone about the abuse she said she told her sister about the abuse when it first happened, when she was six years old but unfortunately nothing was done at this stage.

I then asked May when was she next able to tell someone about the abuse. She explained that disclosing was taken out of her hands to a large extent, she was 16 at the time and was seeing a boyfriend:

Well what happened was, that a guy,[boyfriend] started to get serious and he also wanted to use the fact I was abused. He asked me to ask [the perpetrator] for \$1800. And I did and he refused. Then the next thing I know he [boyfriend] had phoned the police and reported the abuse. So that's how it come out.

I asked May if she had told this boyfriend about the abuse, she shook her head and said he found out:

Oh well . . . I took a sickie off work because I'd been raped before work. I came home at the normal time and my boyfriend was waiting for me, he had turned up to have lunch with me at work. I lied to him and said I'd been at work all day and he took my word for it. And then he put his hand across my stomach and, I screamed he pulled up my shirt and my stomach was black and blue because I had been punched by the guy who raped me. It just came out then. And he [boyfriend] decided he would use it to see whether he could get some money out of it. And that's how it come to a head.

May was scared to go to a counsellor as she felt they may not believe her. Fortunately, May was referred to a counsellor she felt comfortable with and was able to relate what had happened:

He [the counsellor] listened and he was understanding it seemed like he actually believed me. I thought no one ever would, he was just, he listened. He was there when I needed him, he was supportive and he listened.

Even after many years of counselling May still feels that people will not believe her story, but she is determined to tell and write about her experiences. She feels it is very important that stories of sexual abuse and sexual assault are told. She also recognises how difficult it is for young children to tell:

Well, who are you when you're young? Especially who's going to believe you when you're young, no one does. No one does and that's a fact. What makes it even worse is if family do anything to you. The police and courts don't like getting into family issues. They just simply, they don't like to get involved, they stay out of it so you can't get any help there if family are abusing you in anyway. So it is really hard to come forward . . . it's a privilege in a way, if someone that's being raped actually trusts you and goes to you for help. Because they are putting everything on the line, but at the same time you are wondering whether if the person's going to use that, [the information disclosed] in my case the person did. It all depends on how

they are going to react, whether anything gets done or not . . . you just don't trust anyone you know, that's what I'm trying to get across in my book. You know, it *is* a common thing and it's got to be recognised.

I feel sad for the people in today's society . . . It's grown more serious and there is more of it happening . . . the police say, it's just too complicated. In other words it's too much work for them to do. Which makes it harder for the kids these days to, you know, tell other people because the police just don't want to buy into it.

I asked May "how do you think we could change that, how do you think we could make it easier for others":

It's a miracle if a kid does come forward because they've been hurt usually, usually they've been hurt by an adult. So it's a miracle if the child even has the courage to come forth. When someone does, they have to be listened to. The child feels bad enough as it is because the person [perpetrator] has already off-loaded the whole guilt onto the child. And it's just basically someone reaching out for help, not knowing whether they're going to be rejected or believed You need people who have been there because, you're looking for someone who has come through it all right. . . . Those people are so badly needed. Someone, you know, that would fill them up with extra hope, that "hey look I can come through this", you know, this person has, it may not be as bad as my case, but they've come through it, if their case was worse and they still come through, you know, it's just like an inspiration. . . having someone that understands, that has come from that background. You don't need a college degree to counsel rape victims, you just need people who have been there, come through it, that's what you need and that would help a lot, understand what I mean?

Nell (23)

Nell was 13 when a male, who had been working around the family home, sexually assaulted her. Disclosing to her parents had some totally unforeseen and devastating consequences for Nell. Her sense of self worth was destroyed and she has experienced many abusive relationships since.

I asked Nell to tell me what happen when she told someone that she had been sexually assaulted:

My father, well I think he got the idea from the workman, yeah it was like, it was like, I said to mum "I don't like him" [the workman], he came back to the house, he had taken a set of keys, he came into the house, mum and dad were still in bed, he came into my room, I mean he was about 40 years old. I locked myself in the toilet after it. I told mum what had happened, she called dad and he said "you're a female you deserve it". Then dad started on me . . . It went on for about three years. I had this memory in my mind that women deserved it, or I did something to him to make him do it.

As well as the sexual assault by the workman and the sexual abuse from her father, Nell has experienced other sexual assaults. Nell told me she had a mental illness and that she felt that because she had a history of being admitted into hospital psychiatric wards, she is never believed about her experiences of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Nell used the following as an example of what she meant:

The next one [rape] was when I went to a party, this was the worst one because I'd started doing a course on different aspects of women's health and reading that, you know - that women don't deserve to have this happen. I was assaulted at this party . . . I called my sister . . . went down the doctors with her, and I just lost it totally. She said maybe we should get you around to hospital. At the AAA hospital the nurse said "we can't have you up here as a psych patient because there is a boundary limit, and you are out of your boundary, we have to transfer you to BBB hospital. So I spent four days in there [AAA] with no counselling no nothing because I was not classified as being their patient I was BBB's. When I was transferred to BBB, I had an escort. Shit. I was so humiliated by it. I went in there, BBB I mean, I knew the guys in there, I had been in there many times . . . one of the nurses, said look why don't you ring up the sexual assault [service] and he got the number. And I phoned them. But they couldn't really help until I was released from hospital.

When Nell attempted to report the rape to the police she felt they were not interested:

I went around to the police station to make a report. It was three in the afternoon. At seven, at night, I was still waiting . . . The cops, guys, that were there, said "it's not our problem we want a female to interview you". At eight a female cop came. . . two of them. They just sat there and looked at each other, they didn't say a word to me for ages. Then they said "describe what happened". I felt awful I had no idea what to expect. So I told them, after that they got another female cop in, they had to go out and do a body search or something weird. I remember the sergeant came in, she was so nice, she said "no, its not your fault". She told me that all the way through. She said "do you want to go back to the hospital" because they knew I was there . . . kept ringing up trying to find out where I was. She said "look we can finish it tomorrow" and I said "I will never come back tomorrow so I want to get it done now ". So she took the statement.

The man who had assaulted Nell threatened to kill her if she continued with the charges. As a result Nell was frightened, believing he would kill her and that she was too vulnerable to go through a court case. She was also frightened that the police would be angry with her wanting to drop the charges:

I spoke to a nurse who was in charge of my case that day and she, she came into the interview with the police with me. The police were as nice as punch, you know, so friendly, no problem "we'll drop the charge, you haven't caused us any problems, but you will have to sign a statement to drop them". Dropped them no problem. But there was just no one to go to, to talk about it to.

Even though Nell was frightened by the perpetrator's threats, she was disappointed by the willingness of the police to drop the charges so quickly and doing nothing to protect her from the perpetrator. Nell is convinced it happened this way because of her mental illness herstory.

Susie (25)

Susie was sexually abused when she was 11 years old. The abuse was by her father, and continued for five years until Susie was 16. A major family crisis involving Susie's father brought the realisation, to Susie, that what had happened to her as a child was not normal family behaviour, it was sexual abuse:

I didn't know it was abuse at the time . . . I told these events to my sister and she recognised them as abuse, I didn't. I grew up thinking I was abnormal anyway, like I came from a very dysfunctional family so I thought this was part of the dysfunction. Like . . . I suppose the family I was in, I thought it was normal. So when my sister recognised, she had a bit more awareness on these issues I think. She told me, she goes "that's sexual abuse what's happened". And I threatened her not to tell anyone, as I told her in confidence about these things that had happened. So it was my mum and sister who knew first and they went and booked me in to see a counsellor.

Accepting what her father had done to her took some time and as Susie states, "maybe the accepting is still happening." Although Susie felt her acting out behaviour now had some meaning, she was still in shock:

I was really shocked, but at some level I thought, yeah that's what it is, I sort of acknowledged it, and really was quite detached from it still then, I think because I had been so disassociated from it for so long. It wasn't until I went into therapy about it and was really working out emotionally, then it all 'hit the fan', as it usually does. But I was, I suppose in shock, because I was sort of 'in my head' so to speak and I could intellectually work out . . . what happened, but actually emotionally working with it, that didn't come until about a week later.

Susie next disclosed to a counsellor, in an organisation that specialised in sexual abuse counselling:

I made this appointment and my sister came with me. I got told that there was going to be two people listening to me when I disclosed because the other woman was studying a thesis on this and she wanted to be in the

room when I told. And I, at the time, wasn't too bothered by it but, when the actual stuff started coming out about it, it was very overwhelming to have two people there listening to me disclose. I actually found it very difficult to talk about in front of them. I actually went back there once more and then I decided to go some where else. . . I told them that I found it really difficult, because they would actually, I didn't think they had it clear what they were going to do, like what questions they were both going to ask me, they were both firing questions at me at the same time trying to find out what had actually happened. I found it was a bit like an inquisition and it was very difficult to talk, you know.

I felt like I had got to the very tip of the iceberg about what had happened to me and I sort of briefly told them. . . they kept pressing me on my legal rights and what I could do, and that was the furthest thing from my mind at the time. I realise they had to tell me about my legal rights, because it was illegal what had happened, but that seemed to be the main concern of theirs, rather than the psychological state I was in . . . I found that a bit soul destroying at the time. I was going to look for support and guidance on what was going to happen next, because I just felt like, I didn't have, I was losing the plot really. . . They sort of explained to me what was going on, and how that was going to enable further studies into this rah rah rah, and I could see the benefits in what she was doing, but for me I felt like, I wasn't very clear, what I was happy with. I wasn't in a fit state to decide for myself whether that was good for me or not. It sort of felt like, it was difficult enough to talk about the stuff that I needed to talk about and acknowledge what had actually happened to me, without these two women sitting there.

And I felt there was a lot of distance between us, it wasn't a very personable place to be, in the sense of relating to someone else. I didn't feel I had any trust then, put it that way, and I found that over time, with the people I've seen, that's probably one of the most important things you've got to strike up with your counsellor to talk about these things. Because your trust had been destroyed basically. And so if you can't build that up with someone else, a complete stranger, then you need to really look at that and work out what you're really comfortable with and what you're not.

I asked Susie what it was like for her to talk about the sexual abuse to someone now, nine years after talking to her sister and having done a lot of counselling:

I find it difficult sometimes now, telling someone who has not had that happen to them. A couple of years ago I would never have attempted to do this for fear of rejection and judgement, fear of losing a friend, this has happened before. I have accepted what has happened to me quite a while ago, so to talk about it now, it is not encompassing in my whole life. Whereas, before, it seemed too close, too painful. *It is a part of my life, it is not the whole of it now.*

Many issues were raised by the women in disclosing their disclosure herstories to me and not all can be covered in a study of this size. However what appears to be of overriding concern to these young women is the lack of sensitivity and understanding from professional workers as well as the betrayal and disbelief from family and friends. These and other issues are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCLOSING - A LIBERATING RISK

Disclosing to someone, be they family, friends, professional counsellors or therapists, was for these seven young women a very risky and often painful experience, albeit ultimately a liberating one. All the young women experienced a time of emotional isolation from other human beings, including family and friends: a time whereby they were totally alone with the knowledge of their experiences, with no support and no one to talk to. However, all the young women felt, at some stage, compelled to tell someone about the sexual abuse. Furthermore, they did so more than once, despite many setbacks, and responses that ranged from abusive to supportive. These young women showed a strong determination to continue to disclose the abuse, whatever the risk. They knew that disclosing the sexual abuse enabled them to start the process of overcoming the effects and limitations the sexual abuse had caused in their lives. Each disclosure brought with it new knowledge about themselves, and about society's seeming condoning of sexual violation. They were able to place themselves in a context other than one of self blame and guilt. This knowledge commenced and enhanced the liberating process of reclaiming their lives.

During this chapter I purpose to further the exploration of young people's experience of disclosure by looking at some of the main themes that emerged from discussions. These themes are: the pre-disclosure stage and its importance to the disclosure process; emotional turmoil encountered after disclosure; betrayal by

family, friends and systems; re-victimisation; denial and/or minimisation in professional settings; determination and courage shown by the seven young women; disclosure as a process of discovery and reclaiming your life; and best practice for counsellors and therapists. These themes were consistent throughout most of the young women's herstories even though the outcomes were often different for each person.

Pre-Disclosure Stage

The pre-disclosure stage for four of the young women included the time when they were still being abused, the abuse stopping only because some form of outside intervention occurred. For three of these young women intervention occurred because someone broke a confidence and alerted others to the abuse. Briggs & Hawkins (1993) note that even though children are reluctant to report abuse to someone "on their own initiative, they are more willing to respond to opportunities for reporting given by adults" (p.7). Penny was able to disclose because a Youth Worker gave her the opportunity for disclosure by being outwardly open about the incidences of sexual abuse. Susie was also given the opportunity to disclose by her sister who gave her permission by not being protective of their father's behaviour. The following intervention by her sister had a positive outcome for her.

However, disclosure did not always or necessarily have a positive outcome for these young women. For Cherry and May, intervention by others caused further emotional abuse. Cashmore & Bussey (1987) state that while children want to stop

the abuse they are often unable to disclose because of the fear and secrecy surrounding the abuse. This is particularly the case when the perpetrator is known to the family. Penny's fear of being blamed, not being believed and thinking that something terrible would happen if she told, kept her silent for ten years after the abuse had stopped.

Five of the young women who participated in this study had been sexually abused by a family member, in four cases it was their biological father and in one case a step father. The remaining three young women were sexually abused by men known to the family. This made it difficult for these young women to disclose to anyone about the abuse. Cashmore & Bussey (1987) argue that once the abuse has been discovered and disclosed "the way the disclosure is handled, sometimes including disbelief, seem to cause greater difficulties for the child" (p,2). All of the young women in this study expressed feelings of fear of telling someone else about the abuse. Some expressed feelings of shame for having been abused and/or guilty that the abuse continued over a length of time. Having their bodies and trust violated by a trusted adult resulted in a lack of confidence and self worth, and a sense of betrayal for these young women.

Emotional Turmoil

If there is one thing that is evident from these accounts it is that each of the young women in this study suffered emotional turmoil throughout the abuse and pre-disclosure stages. However for some the emotional upheaval was at its height after they had disclosed and been believed. It would seem for some of these young

women that to disclose and be disbelieved or dismissed was a known response, one that they expected. Therefore when someone did listen and they were able to explore their feelings more they began to accept the reality of the abuse. They were able to name their experiences and to own them, in the sense that they acknowledge that these experiences of abuse happened to them, that they were real. While disclosing for these young women did eventually lead to the beginning of their reclaiming process, they felt the trauma associated with the disclosure could have been lessened with appropriate support. This time was often a very confusing and isolating one for these young women with most constantly moving from the position of belief and acceptance back to disbelief and minimisation. Dinsmore (1991) states that this is a common stage that many survivors of childhood sexual abuse go through and can be seen as a crisis stage. Bass & Davis (1988) also see this period as a time of emergency, a time when a survivor may want to talk constantly about the abuse to others while at the same time often feeling isolated. Constantly focusing on the sexual abuse experiences makes this time a very difficult one for the survivor:

When I first found out it was like this dam had been unblocked. I'm able to talk again. Yeah, it was quite incredible. I felt very isolated for a very long time in it all. I just went through months and months and months just crying. I spent about six months just crying, go to work come home and cry, go to work come home and cry. I was getting very isolated and feeling like I wasn't getting the direction I needed in how to cope and if it was going to end [the crying] I didn't feel it was going to end. I was in that period where it felt like its never going to stop, this is my lot. I'm just going to be a sobbing maniac for the rest, for the next couple of years, that did pass. But in that time I decided to go and do some group work and my sister came along (Susie).

While this emotional turmoil stage may be well recognised among therapists and counsellors who specialise in sexual abuse/assault cases, it may not be as apparent with other professionals working with young people. As Penny observed:

If a youth worker gets people to talk about their childhood stuff and there's not enough follow up, then that's bad. They don't realise disclosing could be quite an emotional thing. I have known young people who have drunk themselves silly after feeling really good about telling a youth worker. They feel really believed and then there's no follow up. They're not prepared themselves for this huge, all these emotions inside them and they just don't know how to feel and they go off and get extremely drunk for two weeks in a row or something and the youth workers aren't there to provide support, like all the way. Youth workers have to realise it's an enormous thing to disclose to someone for the first time or even the second or one hundredth time for some people, depending on who they are talking to. So [workers] need to realise that the young person can appear really cool about it but quite often there is a lot of emotion going on. They've got to be prepared to offer ongoing support.

What is apparent from talking to these young women is that they felt had they been able to access a lot of appropriate support when they first started disclosing then their recovery process would have been less traumatic and consequently more helpful.

Betrayal

Betrayal of trust is often mentioned in the literature on sexual abuse as being the most hurtful consequence of sexual abuse because it makes it extremely difficult for survivors to trust again (Beitchman, Zuckler, DeCosta, Akman & Cassavia, 1992; Butler, 1978; Brown, 1993; Dinsmore, 1991; Lew 1993). Finkelhor & Brown (1985) identified three forms of betrayal for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The first refers to the betrayal the child feels when they realise that a person they

trusted, often the father or stepfather, has violated them. The second occurs when they discover that significant others, often the mother, are unable or unwilling to believe them. Finally the survivor may feel betrayed when they realise that their parent has been unable to protect them against the abuse, even though they may have been supportive after disclosure. A more recent study by Webster & Le Brocq (1995) found that betrayal issues amongst a group of young mothers who had experienced both sexual abuse and homelessness was more encompassing and had evolved into a way of life. They found three distinct realms of betrayal; family, systems and friends. The experiences of betrayal for the seven young women in this study also fell into categories of betrayal by family, friends and systems and these incorporated the three forms of betrayal outlined by Finkelhor & Brown (1985). Each of these forms of betrayal is illustrated below.

Betrayal by families

For five of the seven young women in this study the first betrayal by a family member was at the hands of the perpetrator, who was either their father or stepfather. Further betrayal by other family members followed.

Being betrayed by family members came through many of the young women's herstories from feelings of being abandoned to feelings of not being believed and/or blamed for the abuse or the disruption that followed some disclosures. Cherry felt betrayed and abandoned by her mother when the abuse was discovered by the school principal and then she felt betrayed again when her mother conspired with the stepfather to have Cherry change her statement to the

police. If this was not enough she felt betrayed once again when her mother allowed the stepfather to return to the home after the court case. Understandably Cherry's sense of trust had certainly been broken. The resulting lack of trust in people made it very difficult for Cherry to form relationships, including therapeutic ones. For Nell, the ultimate betrayal occurred when her father sexually abused her after she disclosed to him and her mother that she had been sexually assaulted. Nell felt the inability or unwillingness of her mother and other family members to protect her resulted in her being sexually abused by her father. Penny, Amber and Susie had betrayal issues in regard to their mother's seeming inability to protect, believe or support them. In Susie's case, even though her mother did support her, she had difficulties understanding how her mother could not know what was happening:

Mum could recognise times when I had tried to tell her when I was young. So I felt that there was a lot [of unresolved issues]. I mean I was in a very strange sort of relationship with mum for the next couple of years because of how she could let that happen. I felt very supported but there was also all these other feelings, things to work out and how I felt about it

Nonetheless Susie was able to discuss her experiences with her mother, while Amber finds her parents are still either unable or unwilling to listen to her. Her issues of betrayal were around the fact that her parents minimised the effects and were either unwilling or unable to support her in her recovery process:

They don't understand how it's affected my life. I don't think my father can. He gets angry because I scared him when I overdosed on drugs and I messed up a small part of my life. That really shits me. I was going through a really hard time, it was the only way I could deal with it. I wish he could understand that. My mum knew it happened. Every so often I tell her I've been to counselling again or I'm getting nightmares and

she says "oh that's a shame - you've got my support". But I don't, because she doesn't do anything, she's not there for me. I guess it's her own fears. I'm not going to get angry at her because that's the way she deals with it. I think they don't want to talk about it because they might feel responsible. I don't know. We just don't talk about it. I'd like them to just acknowledge it.

Amber feels that her father does not believe her because of the age she was when the abuse happened, that she 'forgot about it' and the media coverage surrounding the repressed memory debate (see for example Berliner & Williams, 1994; Cameron, 1994; Herman & Schatzow, 1987; Olio & Cornell, 1994) which often supports the myth that children lie or fantasise about sexual abuse. However Amber recalls telling her mother and that her mother seems to remember her telling her. Amber has these feelings of betrayal from when she first told her mother and now given that her parents are not supportive.

Betrayal by friends

The young women involved in this study felt that friends offered little support. The exception was Mary's second disclosure to a friend. As the women became more confident of themselves and their ability to determine whom they could trust, the support from friends seemed to have increased. Many spoke about how, during the early stages of disclosing sexual abuse, friends often betrayed the confidences placed in them. Cherry's experiences with her school peers was also mirrored in the findings of a study by Webster & Le Brocq (1995) whereby some of the young women were being teased and harassed by schoolmates, and the information about the abuse broadcast about the school. Amber and some of the other young women in this study found their friends were unable to cope with the information.

They either changed the subject, talked about their own problems in ways that were dismissive of the young women's experience, or offered unhelpful advice:

I had a girl friend tell me "well you have to learn it's not your fault" it's like no shit woman. She thinks it's just as simple as that. That everything would be fine after that. I've had people just freeze up and I think maybe they don't believe me. You know or they just don't want to acknowledge it. Like "wow this is too freaky for me". Or they just don't respond and you feel like a total dickhead and you think "shit I shouldn't have told you it's made me feel worse. So I don't tell people unless I really have to (Amber).

Amber's friend may have felt she was being helpful and responding in a way that is often portrayed in self-help books and in pamphlets distributed by sexual assault services. While this type of information has been helpful in dispelling some of the myths of sexual abuse, perhaps most have been too simplistic in their approach and a fresh approach which recognises the difficulties and complexities might ultimately be more helpful.

Betrayal by systems

Sandor (1994) in discussing issues related to mandatory reporting of abuse, argues that the State of Victoria has a "poor track record of dealing with abused adolescents" (p,19). Furthermore this is replicated in other states in what Fogarty (cited Robson, 1993, p 22) states as "systems abuse, abuse by actors in the system and abuse while homeless after escaping family violence". Robson (1992) found that young people were either running away from home or being removed from the family home because the criminal justice system is not adequately structured to ensure the perpetrator, not the victim, is punished. Young people

accessing welfare agencies were often disbelieved (Brown, 1993) with a consequently unhelpful response. Children are often seen as unreliable witness in court action against the offenders of sexual abuse leading to many cases not getting to court, or in those which do reach court, the perpetrator being found not guilty (Dixon, 1993).

In this study, three of the young women have been involved with the legal system. For two, Cherry and May, the discovery of the abuse led to the decision to prosecute the perpetrator being made by authorities outside the family. Susie made her own decision to charge her father over the sexual violation. However she felt let down and betrayed by the legal system when her father appealed his sentence and won a reduction from six years to eighteen months. Susie is currently appealing against this reduction in sentence but is not confident that the legal system will support her. In Cherry's case she felt betrayed by the legal and welfare systems, who brought the action against the perpetrator then did not challenge her when coerced by her mother and stepfather to change her statement. Cherry felt that as the courts had medical evidence they should have pursued or at least questioned her retraction. She also felt betrayed when the outcome of the perpetrator's actions was only a fine. Furthermore, he received court assistance for counselling while she was left with no assistance or support. Cherry felt that because there was no follow up by the court or welfare agencies the perpetrator was able to return to the family home. Cherry disclosed that this resulted in her sister becoming the next victim of the stepfather. This left Cherry feeling responsible for her sister but

frustrated because she felt the legal system would do nothing to stop the abuse. Cherry also felt this was the reason she left home to live on the streets in the city.

Nell's sense of betrayal within the legal system was the lack of support or belief from the police when she reported a sexual assault. Although one of the officers did believe her, Nell felt that because she had a mental illness her case was quickly dropped. During my work with counselling sexually victimised people I have encountered many occasions where young people told me that no one believed them because they were either inmates in mental health institutions or had been diagnosed with a mental illness. Brown (1993) suggests that a number of studies inquiring into the proportion of psychiatric patients who had experienced childhood sexual abuse was high-than-normal with other prevalence studies. Clearly the issues faced by Nell are different from those faced by the other young women in this study, and this highlights a real need for further research into sexual abuse and/or sexual assault amongst people diagnosed with a mental illness.

Re-Victimisation

Beitchman, Zucker, DaCosta, Akman & Cassavia (1992), in a review of studies related to re-victimisation found that in all but one case, women who had been sexually abused in childhood were more likely to be subsequently abused and assaulted than women who had not been abused as children. Re-victimisation in the form of sexual abuse, sexual assault or physical abuse was evident in three of the seven cases in this study. However if emotional abuse directly related to the sexual victimisation, were to be included, then all seven of the women were re-

victimised. These young women suffered emotional re-victimisation at the hands of family, friends and professional counsellors. This was often in the form of minimisation and denial of the abuse or the effects the women suffered from that or treating the woman as a victim, with the young women feeling like they were to blame for the abuse in some way. This left them feeling without any real power to change their current circumstances. Often they felt they were not given adequate information or professional help. Conversely when one of the young women did undertake professional counselling she felt her family used this to keep her "a victim" :

So as soon as I finished counselling, well my supportive family, and yes they have helped me out a great deal and I'll never forget that. But to use my counselling against me. Everyone gets moods, everyone gets moods. But whenever I got angry or sad or any other emotion than happy - "go back to counselling - you need help" (Cherry)

Denial and/or Minimising the Abuse or Effects of the Abuse in Professional Settings

There are many accounts of denial and/or minimisation of the effects of the abuse running through these women's disclosure herstories. Some of the accounts have been covered under the betrayal sections and some which will be discussed here could also be included in the betrayal section. However, it is important to acknowledge the level of denial and minimising that these seven women perceived as part of their disclosures, particularly in the helping professions.

Denial and minimisation by people in the helping professions were certainly two consistent themes throughout this study. It was my perception of the denial and/or minimisation of the effects and necessary involvement in breaking the silence about sexual abuse that encouraged me to undertake this project. Denial and/or minimisation within the helping professions requires further study. There are many institutional and systemic complexities tied up with professionals' own distress when it comes to questions of denial. This makes talking about professional denial and minimisation a complex problem. However Dinsmore (1991) sees this denial as 'collective denial' which occurs "when professionals, friends and family minimise the incest, deny that incest has occurred, do not respect the survivors healing process, or accept the notion that sex between an adult and a child is not harmful" (p.47). As discussed in Chapter One, Driver (1989) believes that denial is very much fuelled by the myths surrounding sexual violation. A Dutch study into the inadequacies of professional assistance given to incest survivors found assistance was hampered by several factors including the professionals shortcomings in knowledge and skills as well as workers own emotional resistance to listening to the survivors (Frenken & Van Stolk, 1989). Olafson, Corwin & Summit (1993) found similar denial and minimisation occurring amongst professional workers in the USA.

In this study the six young women who accessed professional workers were often disappointed at what they perceived to be a lack of understanding and sensitivity, to them as survivors of sexual abuse. For these young women the lack of sensitivity from professional counsellors often left them extremely disappointed, at times feeling as if they were further abused. Furthermore, they felt that specialised

services were inflexible in their approach and dismissive of the survivor's ability to determine what was the best therapeutic approach for themselves. While the women did acknowledge limitations to services because of funding issues, they often felt that the professionals lacked training or didn't use the training they had received. In several instances the women were left feeling even more isolated and confused than they had been before they had access to the professional help.

Susie explains:

I got into a strange relationship with this [counsellor]. When I tried to talk about things she'd just cut me off and was very clinical and was. . . she just couldn't hear it basically. I went there for a while but it got into. . . I was in a really bad state. I couldn't work out if it was me or if it was her. I just thought no, I can't even discuss this with her. She was really angry so I sort of found it very confronting to question the way she went about her work. I don't find it professional now, but at the time I was very daunted by it. Sort of like you're the victim and they're the person there to help you rather than a bit more of a two way process.

Susie continued in this counselling relationship because she felt it was what she deserved. At this stage she was not confident about making her own decisions about what was right for her:

When you're coming out of dysfunctional ways of thinking, and you're used to being abused mentally like that, you accept that quite naturally. You even think this is the way I should be treated. . . You're trying to work through your own emotional baggage and what's gone on in the past, let alone what's actually happening in the session and taking that on as well. [you think this] is what you deserve, what you've been expected, how you've been treated and that's how you expect to be treated. So it's a bit of a nasty situation to get into. It doesn't go anywhere and that's how I felt and the whole sessions were becoming contrived and I was being really emotionally blocked from them.

This highlights what the young women felt was the subtle coercive nature of some of the services offered by professional workers. As shown in some of the dialogues with the young women in Chapter Three, these women felt that the counsellors they saw did not really understand their position as survivors. This was often because the young women felt the time given to 'work through issues' or the length of sessions was inadequate, or the actual therapeutic style chosen by the service inappropriate. For these young women the early stages of their disclosure herstories was a time of inconsistencies and confusion and a time of learning that they had the ability to make their own decisions. It was a particularly sensitive time for them, as survivors, and they felt this was not always acknowledged by the professionals. These young women found that professional workers not only denied them the space to talk about their abuse, they often minimised the impact that talking about it could have on the survivor. Professionals frequently expected a trusting relationship to be developed within a set time frame. Furthermore, an authoritarian or expert approach from a counsellor reflected the approach often taken by their perpetrator; this in turn left the young women feeling vulnerable and uneasy.

Perhaps this is why several of the young women felt that counsellors who work with sexual abuse survivors need to have come from a similar background. Cherry's comments were similar to those expressed by the other women:

Because most of the counsellors haven't been there, they don't know what it's like to have been raped, they go through a text book. No one is a text book case, you can go to uni for years but what have you really learnt from life? Have you been there, have you experienced it, have you done it? You know what I mean? You have to experience it to know what someone else

is going through. Everyone goes through different things and different emotions and you've got to feel it with them. Without the great big sympathy trip. It helps if the person knows 'cause then its easier for you to talk about it openly. You can really feel what the other person is feeling, its easier to get it out of the person and the emotion and all the things that are going through, all the doubts, you know what they're going through, so you know what to look for. You know the suicide signs, you know when they, you can tell by the look on their face, when they don't want to disclose any more. You know, you've been through it yourself and it's a hell of a lot easier than going to someone that's " yeah, right I've been to uni - I've got my degree right, I know this I'm going to do this." But they don't.

While it is important that we do not diminish the significance of experience and the capacity of therapists to 'know the area', we need to take care with the idea that similar experiences are what counts the most. Gil (1990) expresses concern about what she terms as the therapist survivor. She acknowledges that there are advantages to being a therapist survivor such as: a greater ability to empathise; possible deeper understanding of abuse because they have experienced abuse themselves; greater readiness to listen and believe what they are being told; and greater familiarity with some of the difficulties faced by survivors. However the down side, according to Gil, is that the therapist survivor may have some very strong opinions on how to overcome the effects of the abuse and that these may be imposed onto the client. She also sees difficulty in a therapist disclosing their own abuse thereby moving the focus from the client to themselves. Some of the young women did express concern when counsellors and therapists talked about their own issues during the counselling sessions. However, in these cases very few counsellors seem to raise issues related to the therapists' involvement in sexual abuse: most were related to issues about their family, relationship difficulties and

work issues. The young women were understandably annoyed with this and felt it was very unprofessional and a misuse of their time in therapy.

Counsellors are supposed to be one step above. You know they are supposed to be the professionals and you're supposed to be the one confiding. I don't know why but I do it every time I really do. I just have a way about me that brings it [counselling session] from a professional one for me to one where they end up disclosing to me. [about their personal problems] There was only the one, who managed to stay professional, but even he ended up disclosing parts of his personal life. To tell me he had so many kids, his goldfish's name. I didn't need to know that. I mean sitting there listening to that. I didn't go there for that (Cherry).

Amber, Cherry, May and Susie felt that having a counsellor who had been through a similar experience would be very valuable provided clear boundaries are set. These young women felt just knowing the counsellor had "been there" was enough: they did not expect or want the counsellor to talk about their own issues or experience. In discussing the fine line between setting boundaries and having a counsellor disclose they had experienced similar abuse, Cherry speculated how it could work and said:

It's such a fine line. I mean it really is a fine line. It is really hard not to step over it. There has to be some sort of line no matter what, so that you're not dealing with the other [counsellors] persons problems. But for them to initially tell you that they have been through it, that would help. The counsellor has to be someone who hasn't forgotten what it's like but they've dealt with it. They could initially say "we've been through it". Some people will turn round and say "but you're not me, you haven't got my feelings", right but then the counsellor could say "no we haven't got your feelings - how did you feel?" and it goes onto a professional base.

The young women felt a counsellor from a similar background as themselves would treat them more as equals and see themselves as less of an 'expert'. The issue of

counsellor's background seemed to be more an issue of the professional having appropriate knowledge, understanding and empathy, and consequently an approach to their client that respected the clients abilities, strength and courage in overcoming the effects of the sexual violation.

All the women who wanted assistance in coming to terms with the effects the sexual abuse has had in their lives did eventually find counsellors and services that they felt were suitable for them. What did concern them was the time and emotions spent looking for suitable counsellors when they expected these to be found in the services they first accessed.

Best Practice

All of the young women in this study suggested ways they felt could have made their disclosure process easier. Most suggest that more knowledge about sexual abuse and sexual assault needs to be distributed to places such as schools, youth agencies and other community agencies as well as to the general public. Some suggestions included positive role model stories in the newspapers instead of the current emphasis on the fear and terror of being attacked. Along with the education focus the young women felt that appropriate, in depth, training needs to be given to people working with children and young people, such as teachers, police and community and youth workers. Furthermore, some of the young women felt specialist agencies need to be more flexible and sensitive in their approach. These young women found that services that were less formal in the environmental setting helped them feel comfortable. Having a counsellor who allowed you to

express whatever emotion you happen to be experiencing at the time was preferable to those who inhibited you from doing that. Cherry's experience of two different services encapsulates what the other young women said:

I went to [agency A] once and you could see the look, it was pity and if you can see it in their face and it was so condescending. Telling me its not my fault, I know its not my fault, you don't have to tell me its not my fault. Telling me I shouldn't feel guilty. I know I shouldn't feel guilty but that doesn't stop me from feeling guilty. It was just so condescending. I thought, what am I doing here? And they push you and they want the first meeting they want full gory details. First you have to wait in a waiting room, fine. Then a person comes out, all chirpy "oh how are you?". You feel a little nervous. Then you go into this room and they sit directly in front of you. That's a put off as it is, like you've got no, [room to move] it feels like an invasion. You should be able to sit where you want, where you're comfortable. Not just there's two chairs in the room and you're sitting there opposite each other. They've got your file in front of them they're jotting down right, doesn't work. You've got to feel comfortable when you go to counselling. It has to be a comfortable environment.

The first time you disclose you need space. The thing about [agency B] is - they've got armchairs and you can sit where ever you want to sit. If you want to sit in the counsellors chair, you can sit in her chair, it doesn't matter where ever you feel comfortable. And we had set times I'd go twice a week. You knew what was going on the first initial meeting they talk to you, your name, what you want to do, what you've done like getting to know an acquaintance. It's done in such a way, their talking to you, you do feel nervous but you can sit where you want, speak whatever you want. You don't have to be polite and they will take that. I found [this agency] was best because it was person to person and it was in such an environment where you felt comfortable, even the waiting room, kids toys, magazines.

That and the fact that you could go in there and if you felt like crying you cried. If she pushed your buttons you got angry; if you just wanted to be quiet you could. I'd go out and feel like an emotional wreck after I'd been there. Total wreck totally exhausted but I felt great. It was like, it's like you've been in this room with the door closed and you've let all of these pent up feelings out. But it's ok. You go out of the room, you step outside, it's fine. It's like sending me out to a whole new day - you feel totally renewed - refreshed even. I went up there and I used to jog home, I felt so refreshed.

Disclosure - Process of Discovery and Reclaiming Your Life

This study confirms that for these young women, disclosing sexual abuse is part of a process of gaining new understandings about themselves, the perpetrator, family, friends, people and social processes in general. This process, through talking about the experience, commenced with accepting that the abuse occurred and coming to intellectual and emotional understandings of that. Putting that understanding into a personal and societal context was the next step in the process. From there, further disclosing focused on deeper understandings about how the sexual abuse had influenced perceptions of themselves and the society they lived in. This does not mean that the process was without setbacks. As Amber recalls:

Through the first lot of counselling I learnt to accept it, then afterwards I got into drugs again, I overdosed and had to get my stomach pumped. I nearly died and at that point, I thought this is crazy. The hospital referred me to another lot of counselling. And there I learnt how to deal with the effects. Like how to deal with stress when things were bothering me and I learnt more of the effects of the abuse. Afterwards I did ok. It was probably over a year ago when I had my last counselling there. And now, just recently, because I've had the break up of the relationship. I haven't been happy with my life for the last six months I realised this is it. Every thing is changing, I want happiness and I'm going to go out and get it. I want to deal with a lot more things. So hopefully it will make me a happier person.

Amber's process is similar to what Dinsmore (1991) sees as the process of recovery. This process is seen as more a spiral than a straight line, with some survivors going through a stage then returning to it later and experiencing it in a different way. Dinsmore (1991) cites Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's identification of

stages of dying as being similar to the stages that survivors of sexual violation go through. The first stage is the denial and isolation of what happened, then come the stages of anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. Dinsmore (1991) argues that overcoming the self-denial is an important first step in the recovery process. Bolton, Morris & MacEachron (1989) assert that 'breaking the silence', disclosing to someone is the first major step in the recovery process. This is then followed by accepting the experience as an abusive one. From these two initial steps comes the ability to 'work through' the issues and effects of the abusive experience.

Each of the young women in this study went through, at least a part of this process. Some of the young women started the process immediately the abuse was no longer occurring, while others waited years for an opportunity where they felt safe enough to disclose. As discussed in Chapter One, disclosing to someone about sexual abuse is difficult and many children take years to disclose. "This depends on the quality, nature and parameters of the relationship they have with trusted adults" (Sandor, 1994. p.19). Developing trusting relationships was a ongoing process for these young women. Penny watched and waited until she found a person she felt she could trust with her first disclosure as a young woman. Others had that option taken from them when others intervened. Mary is undecided if she will seek counselling for her abuse; however the process is not reliant on professional assistance: it's possible many survivors chose this option. Susie learnt to trust in her own abilities to know what was acceptable practice for her.

Determination/Courage

The sense of determination and courage of these seven young women was evident throughout the interviews. Despite the many setbacks from family, friends and/or professional workers, they continued to seek out those people within their family or friendship groups as well as professionals who would assist them to reclaim their lives. This determination was fostered in a belief that they deserved better: somewhere along the way they had discovered they wanted their lives to change. Nonetheless while rejoicing in their courage, clearly the road to reclaiming oneself is not an easy one. This, as Amber says, is something and they would like acknowledged:

Just believe me and don't shut me out or change the subject. Just go "damn it's a shame it's happened to you hey" just acknowledge it. Don't talk about your own problems, I had a girl tell me "well you have to learn it's not your fault." Like no shit woman, she thinks it's just as simple as that. I think people need to be educated a lot more and a lot more people could probably deal with it, a lot more people would be happier, it's such a cruel thing, everybody wants to deny it and they go on feeling miserable, like shit, and if we talk about it more people could feel much better if it happens to them.

As previously discussed, part of the reclaiming process is in disclosing about the abuse and/or assault. If the survivor is listened to in a caring respectful manner then a healing process is under way. Kondora (1993, p.13) states "there is transformative power in telling the story of incest, [abuse/assault] not the details of the abuse, but the story as it is lived." This "transformative power" was certainly evident in the narratives of the seven young women in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION OR A BEGINNING?

My purpose in doing this study was to find out what happened when a young person disclosed to someone that they had been sexually abused or sexually assaulted. The study was initially undertaken because several young survivors of sexual abuse had indicated that their experiences were minimised or denied and current services were not adequate for their needs. Furthermore my own personal experience of seeing the silencing and secrecy surrounding sexual abuse incidents frustrated and confused me. While the study confirmed much of what had been indicated by the young women at the forums and seminars it also provided a contradiction. My worst fears were confirmed, but at the same time, exceptional optimism was discovered. The worst fears were that some people continually denied, minimised or ignored the experience of these young women's sexual violation, and/or the effects that had. Over and over, throughout these narratives the young women told of instances where this happened. It was also often confirming what the perpetrator had told them would happen. Many of what is referred to as the myths of sexual abuse and or sexual assault turned out to be real for these seven women. They were blamed for the sexual abuse and family disruptions; perpetrators were believed and assisted, not the young women; suggestions were made that the young women may have enjoyed and perhaps initiated the sexual abuse; they were seen as having allowed the abuse to continue therefore it was their fault again, and terrible things did happen when they told someone.

Contradicting all that, I discovered a determination and strength I had never experienced before. This determination, strength and courage came from the seven young women who told their stories to me. They were absolutely determined, once started, to continue their liberating process of reclaiming their lives. They would no longer allow their lives to be determined by what had happened, all were committed to taking back control. Not only had they managed to survive the sexual abuse and/or sexual assault, they had also managed to survive the often abusive and/or dismissive attitude of family, friends and professional workers.

This study does not claim to be representative of all young people, however it is clear that these seven young women felt betrayed by the lack of understanding and/or care from family, friends and various systems such as the courts. Furthermore, these young women perceived a lack of sensitivity, knowledge and skill from workers that they had expected would be able to assist them.

Perceptions of the inappropriateness of services provided to these young women were very real for them, as were the consequences. However, they do need to be placed in the context of their own stage of recovery and understanding. As discussed in previous chapters, the way previous disclosures were handled will influence how the new disclosure is perceived and if they have been able to develop a trusting relationship (Black, Buddle & Leach, 1987; Bolton, Morris & MacEachron, 1989; Cashmore & Bussey, 1987; Ritz, 1993). Time constraints of

several services hindered this very necessary development of trust for these young women. Commitment to a particular style of therapy was seen as being restrictive and, at times, triggered memories of being blamed and punished for 'not getting it right' or being a 'bad girl'. The young women felt that in the early and/or crisis stages of disclosing to professional workers a much more flexible approach is required than the ones currently offered by the services they approached.

It is apparent from this study that, for these young women, disclosing their sexual abuse and/or sexual assault often had, in most cases, an immediate negative effect. However, by continuing to disclose, and refusing to be placed in a position where the effects of the abuse constantly interfere with the quality of their lives these women have become liberated from the oppression placed there by the perpetrator. What was also clear is that many restrictions were placed in the way, making this process more difficult than it need be.

As stated, the herstories of these seven young women cannot be said to be representative of all young people's disclosure process, however they do offer some very important insights and suggestions. This information may make the reclaiming process an easier one. Such suggestions may assist workers, who come into contact with young people, to think about how they may react to someone who may disclose to them. Some of the issues that these seven young women faced in coming to terms with and disclosing to someone about their sexual abuse herstories are fundamental to thoughtful and caring practice in any professional workplace. These are the issues of having someone listen respectfully

to what is being said; having their experience and their strategies to deal with that experience acknowledged and validated; acknowledging that often young people have the ability to be their own experts in knowing what type of counselling works for them and where possible accommodate that; being clear about what services are available and how the service, and individual workers in that service, operate. The young women who accessed youth specific services indicated these suited their needs more than services that were generic. Perhaps the reasons for this could be explored and relevant aspects of youth specific services included into generic services.

This study has highlighted for me the need for further research in several areas including:

- using the information gained from this study to see if the areas of concern for these young people are replicated in a much larger sample;
- examining how professional workers respond to clients disclosing sexual abuse, focussing on the effectiveness of the styles of services available, and types of therapy used;
- exploring the level of minimisation of sexual abuse on people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness and how this can be lessened;

- investigating why the myths around sexual abuse and sexual assault are continued and reinforced and how they can be eradicated or at least minimised;
- exploring the effectiveness of current educational promotions about sexual violation;
- replicating what worked well for these young women in the youth specific services to work with young people who have been sexually in other services;
- exploring the role of the courts and other authorities who make decisions on behalf of young people, particularly in the age group 13 -18, how this effects their ability to make their own decisions;
- examining what gets in the way of services and workers' 'best practices'. For example resources; agency policy; industrial considerations; training, legislative and procedural processes; work culture; social background; race and heritage.

My interest in different approaches to undertaking research has also been sparked. I am especially interested in looking at how people are labelled and how they internalise that label. This interest was generated when Susie stated "it's part of my life, not all of it".

The approach undertaken in this study, feminist interview research, with an emphasis on including the researcher's involvement in the research process has, at times, been very emotionally draining. However, I feel it makes an important contribution to understanding both the complexities in doing qualitative, feminist interview research and the emotional impact on researcher and participants in such a topic explored in this manner. Furthermore, on reflection I am pleased I did it this way as it gave me valuable insight into myself and the participants. The knowledge and insight gained from this research will influence how I work in the field and how I undertake further research.

The seven young women who participated in this study have shown that despite the many obstacles along the way their courage and determination have placed them well on the way to reclaiming their lives. I want to end this study by thanking them for sharing a part of their journey with me.

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