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About Untangling the Web..

The first edition of this booklet was part of a larger project on sexual abuse and mental illness. This project arose from a concern expressed by mental health staff, who were supporting consumers living with mental illness moving into the community after a period of institutional care.

Staff from the Princess Alexandra Hospital and District Mental Health Service formed a Trauma Research Group, Chaired by Dr Frances Dark and Mr Anthony Weller.

There were three concurrent projects undertaken by the Trauma Research Group.

- Research to determine the prevalence of sexual and physical abuse histories in consumers of the PAH & District MHS
- Development of a staff training package
- Development of the consumer resource booklet - Untangling the Web.

Untangling the Web was initially funded by Disability Services Queensland, and disseminated to project 300 consumers in Queensland. Diane Seifert and Julie Neild of the Princess Alexandra Hospital - Division of Mental Health worked collaboratively with various agencies to produce the first edition of Untangling the Web. We would like to acknowledge the staff from the various agencies who contributed to its production: Queensland Wattle League, Transition team – The Park – Centre for Mental Health, Sexual Health Counselling Service, Family Planning Qld, QuIVAA, BRISSC and Best Personnel.

This revised edition was completed by Diane and Julie after an evaluation which canvassed recipients of the booklet, Government and Non-Government service providers in Queensland, NSW and Overseas.

This booklet has been reprinted as part of the Responding to Sexual Assault & Promoting Sexual Safety Project, through funding provided by the Mental Health Unit, Queensland Health.

“Portrait of the artist as a child”

You don't exist you can't exist
You wouldn't let it happen
You don't exist you can't exist
You didn't make it stop.

I hate you I don't like you
You've left me all alone
I'm hurting and I'm crying
And still you do not come.

It could be me it must be me
I'm making all this happen
My doubting you my hating you
Is making all this happen.

I need you if I love you
Will you make it stop?
I'll like you and I'll love you
I could make this stop.

You do exist you must exist
I'll promise to be good
I know you do I want you to
Oh please God, make it stop.

Margaret Haselwood

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is any sexual behaviour that is unwanted, unwelcome and uninvited. Some people call it sexual abuse or sexual violence. Sexual assault can be physical, verbal or emotional. It can happen to anyone, women, men and children.

Some people with a mental illness have also suffered from sexual assault. This booklet is designed to help people who have a mental illness understand the issues regarding mental health and sexual assault.

If you would like more information, or would like to know who you can contact, go to page 24 for a list of mental health and sexual assault agency contacts.

SEXUAL ASSAULT MAY INCLUDE:

Being forced to have sex, even when you say no.
Being touched when you don't want to be touched.
Being made to touch someone.
Being made to look at another person's body or private parts.
Being pressured to be sexual with someone in order to get what you need, or as a favour.
Being called names that are sexual and make you feel uncomfortable.
Being made to look at pictures or videos that are sexual, when you don't want to.
Being made to go further sexually than you want to.
Being given something in exchange for sex.



ROGERS STORY

I was sexually abused by my father. I can't really remember when it started but it went on for a few years. It often hurt and I really hated it. The worst thing about it was lying in a bed at night and waiting, thinking that he would come into my room. I usually pretended that I was asleep when I could hear his footsteps but that really didn't help me much. He also would come into the bathroom when I had a shower and pretend that he had to help me wash and clean myself just so that he had a reason to touch me. Maybe that is why I have a problem with washing and cleaning today – I just can't stop washing and I always have to make sure I am perfectly clean even when my skin comes off my hands. When I was seventeen I tried some drugs because I thought that might help me feel better. The doctors think that my schizophrenia might have been triggered by the drugs. I am not sure. All I know is that I don't like the voices because they often comment on what my father did to me and tell me I am dirty. I also often think that everyone knows that I have been sexually abused by my father and I worry that people think I am to blame.



DID YOU KNOW?

Untrue: People are assaulted because they deserve it.
What we know: Nobody deserves to be sexually assaulted.

Untrue: It could only happen to me.
What we know: A lot of people with mental illness have been sexually assaulted sometime during their lives. For some people this happens as a child, for others this happens as an adult. You are not alone.

Untrue: Sexual assault only happens in dark alleys at night.
What we know: Sexual assault can happen anywhere - at home, at school, in hospital, in a park or at a party. It didn't happen to you because you were in the wrong place. You did nothing wrong.

Untrue: People who sexually assault are strangers; they wear dark coats and look weird.
What we know: They could be anyone. They could be a family member, someone you work with, a doctor or nurse, another patient, someone that you know or a stranger. Most people know their abuser. Most abusers are male.

Untrue: Because someone's body became aroused it was somehow their fault.
What we know: Our bodies sometimes become physically aroused through touch, even if we don't want to have sex.

Remember that it's not your fault.
You have the right to be safe.
**YOU ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR
OTHER PEOPLES ACTIONS.**

SEXUAL ASSAULT & MENTAL ILLNESS

Some people with a mental illness may have been sexually assaulted in their past, and as a result may experience symptoms of different illnesses and disorders such as:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Personality Disorders
- Dissociative Disorders
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Eating Disorders
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorders

For people with these disorders, or other illnesses such as Schizophrenia and Bipolar Affective Disorder, the stress, memories and feelings of an assault can make the illness worse.

People with a mental health issue are more at risk of sexual assault. This may be because:

- Sometimes they are in places that are not always safe.
- Someone may have taken advantage of them when they were unwell and someone bribed or tricked them.
- The sedation effect of medication and the symptoms of the illness make it difficult for them to keep themselves safe and use protective behaviours.
- Sometimes people use substances such as marijuana, speed, alcohol or other drugs that affect their ability to use protective behaviours.

If you would like more information on any of these disorders or other mental illnesses go to the mental health contacts on page 24 of this booklet.

WHY DID IT HAPPEN TO ME?

Maybe they were stronger or bigger, or looking after you, or someone who seemed important, or someone who you were told to listen to or respect.

Maybe you were threatened, or told to be quiet, or told to tell no one.

Maybe they said they would give you something if you were sexual with them.

Maybe you just needed somewhere to stay, or something to eat, or needed some drugs.

Maybe you thought they would be your boyfriend or girlfriend if you had sex.

Maybe you couldn't think straight at the time.

Ultimately the "why" does not change the fact that you were sexually assaulted - nor does it change the fact that it was not your fault.



REACTIONS TO SEXUAL ASSAULT

PEOPLE THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM.

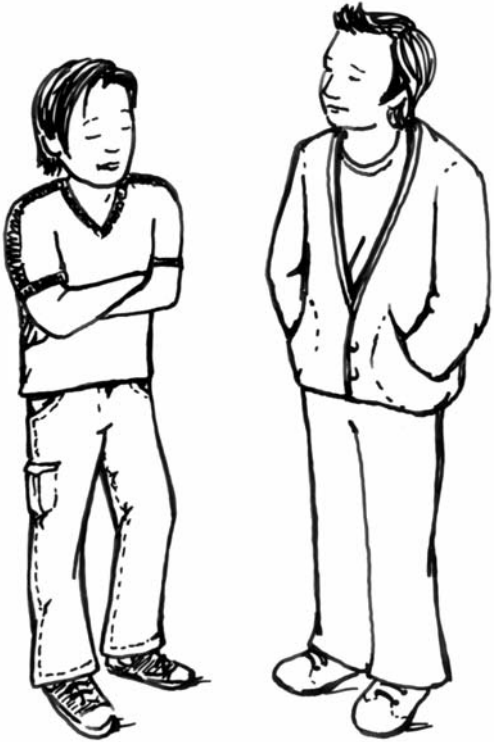
Robyn:
When I was unwell in hospital, I had sex with another patient. When I wanted to talk about it, no one believed me. They said I was psychotic!

Jennifer:
I believe you; let's talk about what we can do.



Robert:
"I was out of it in a park
when it happened...I must
look gay or else why did
they pick me?"

Malcolm:
It doesn't matter
where you were, if
you were out of it,
what you look like or
if you are gay. It can
happen to anyone.
I'm really glad you
told me, it's important
to get it out.



It is important to share your stories. It is important to get help.

SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT MAY HAVE MANY EXPERIENCES.

You might feel:

- Shock
- Shame
- Anger
- Depressed
- Fear
- Confused
- Anxious
- Lonely
- Guilty
- Numb
- Out of control

Do you have someone you feel comfortable with or a therapist or counsellor who you can talk to about these experiences? Trained staff can help you with what you are experiencing, and assist you to work through these experiences and/or feelings. It is important that you can identify why you are experiencing these, as it will assist you to work through them.



You might have:

- Flashbacks, memories or strong images about what happened.
- Suicidal thoughts.
- Reminders about what happened, such as sounds, smells or colours.
- Problems with eating food and/or a poor appetite.
- No memories of the sexual assault until much later.
- Nightmares.
- Voices or visions that only you know about.
- Thoughts or attempts to harm yourself.
- Confused thoughts about touch and sex.
- Difficulty trusting people.
- Worries that everyone knows what happened.
- Questioned your sexuality.



All of these reactions are common. You may experience one or some of these, you may have other experiences that aren't listed. Do you have a counsellor or therapist who can help you manage these reactions without hurting or harming yourself.

SOME WAYS YOU MIGHT HAVE TRIED TO COPE.

- Drinking too much alcohol.
- Taking too many drugs.
- Forgetting or neglecting to take your medication.
- Hurting, cutting, burning yourself.
- Blaming yourself.
- Trying to ignore what happened to you.
- Not letting other people get close to you.
- Moving on when problems got too hard.

You might not do these things.
You might do other things as well.
You might have good and bad days.

Can you identify any behaviour that may be a result of your past sexual abuse?

Are these behaviours helpful or harmful to you?

Who can you talk to about this?

KIM'S STORY

I was sexually abused from the age of 12 until I was 17 by my brothers. Because of what happened to me I've suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts, experienced voices and visions. I first became unwell with these at 12. I tried to cope on my own for many years, by the time I was 21 I had my first admission to hospital; I had tried to kill myself by overdosing. I've spent many years wondering why, trying to find out who 'Kim' was and where did she fit, trying to accept me for who I am and liking the person I am. I've since learned many ways to cope with life and its problems. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. My past is behind me and my future is in front of me. I am now enjoying life; I am enjoying being a wife and a mother to my 3 children. I am enjoying me.



HELPING YOURSELF RELAX & DISTRACTING YOURSELF WHEN YOU FEEL DISTRESSED

- relaxation
- trust
- nurture good thoughts
- express how you feel

How can you relax?

Learn Yoga
Learn to Meditate
Learn Self Defence
Learn something new
Just go for a walk

When I got help I learned that doing something with my time helped me to not focus on the bad things. I learned to paint so that the images weren't in my head.

This relaxation technique can help you to take your mind off things you are worrying about, make you aware of your immediate environment, help you to relax and make you feel safe. The more you practice it the better you will get at doing it.

Say 5 things you can SEE around you
Say 5 things you can HEAR around you
Say 5 things you can FEEL in your body

Say 4 things you can SEE around you
Say 4 things you can HEAR around you
Say 4 things you can FEEL in your body

Say 3 things you can SEE around you
Say 3 things you can HEAR around you
Say 3 things you can FEEL in your body

Say 2 things you can SEE around you
Say 2 things you can HEAR around you
Say 2 things you can FEEL in your body

Say 1 thing you can SEE around you
Say 1 thing you can HEAR around you
Say 1 thing you can FEEL in your body

It does not matter if you use the same things to see, feel or hear when repeating the exercise. At the end of the exercise, take a deep breathe in and slowly out again, saying the word "calm".

Get help from someone you trust:

Someone who listens to you.
Someone who believes you.
Someone who will help you.



Who can you talk to that you trust?

- A friend or family member who has not abused you and believes you
- Trained sexual assault staff
- Mental health staff
- General practitioner

Nurture Good Thoughts

Often how we think about ourselves can influence how we feel. If you only think bad thoughts about yourself you will only feel bad. To help you feel good about yourself you need to find some positive thoughts.

Which of these affirmations fits best?

- I am a valuable person
- I am a beautiful person
- I am full of potential
- Each day brings new opportunities for growth
- I am worthy of being loved
- I have lots of good things to offer the world

What are some other positive affirmations about yourself?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Try building a list of things that you are good at.
Refer to this list often.
Remind yourself of these when you are feeling down.

Do things to express how you feel:



It is important that you find a way to express how you feel and what you are thinking. Some people find physical activity gives them an outlet, whereas other people prefer creative or artistic outlets. It is important you find something you are comfortable with.

Do any of the activities on this page interest you?

Are there others you would like to do that you can list below?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

KEEPING SAFE.

If you experience suicidal thoughts, impulses to harm yourself or misuse drugs or alcohol you need to have somewhere you can be assured of your safety. Some people are able to manage their feelings at home or in another safe place. For others it may mean being in hospital. To assist in designing your "safe place" you need to know what helps you when you feel suicidal or feel like hurting yourself, and what doesn't.

Are there friends or family who can offer safety or help?

It is important to identify these as it can help you know "safe" and "not so safe" places or situations you can be in. This can help you plan and manage your safety

Have there been times that you have felt more at risk of sexual assault?

Can you identify these times...

Eg. After taking my medications, I get so sleepy...

Eg. After using drugs, I've often done things that I would usually not do...

My list...

.....
.....
.....

What helps me when these occur:

.....
.....
.....

What does not help me when these occur:

.....
.....
.....

This safety plan is your individual plan, as some people may find what helps them does not assist others. This plan can guide you when you feel like harming yourself. It is important to discuss this with mental health staff, as your management may include being in hospital if your safety is at risk.

To design your plan use what you find assists from your list on the previous page eg. Phoning my sister, Watching TV, Giving my neighbour my excess tablets. It's important to know what does not benefit you, or situations that make things worse when you're already upset eg. Being touched, listening to a particular song, an open bedroom door, particular time of the day.

My Plan:

When I'm feeling that I want to harm myself I will.....

Eg. Go for a walk, do some housework

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What I will avoid at these times is.....

Eg. Sitting in my room

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If after trying my best to manage, these feelings do not get better I will.....

Eg. Take some PRN, call my mother

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If I begin to feel at risk of hurting myself I will.....

Eg. Call my doctor, go to hospital

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

PERSONAL SAFETY & SAFE SEX.

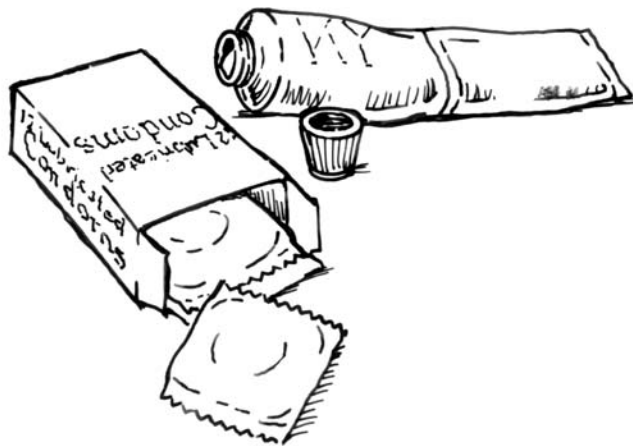
If you choose to have sex:

- Take your time, you should not feel pressured - are you doing this because you want to for your partners and your own enjoyment?
- Just because you've kissed or touched someone doesn't mean you have to have sex.
- Just because you've had sex with someone before, does not mean you have to have sex again.
- Sex is meant to be private.
- If you get paid for sex, you still have a choice about who you have sex with.
- Everyone has to say "yes".
- Everyone has to be old enough to decide.
- Practice safe sex.



SAFE SEX

- Safe sex is about protection from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- A condom is the best barrier to protect from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.
- There are places and people where you can go to learn about safe sex, if you wish to learn more about this you can contact:
 - Family Planning clinic
 - Sexual Health clinic
 - General Practitioner



PERSONAL SAFETY

- Your body belongs to you. You decide who touches it.
- You can be safe.
- You can say “no”.
- You can tell someone what happened to you.
- You can learn protective behaviours; your local sexual assault agency can assist you with these.



You are important.

You have rights:

- ☺ You have the right to tell, be heard and be believed.
- ☺ You have the right not to tell if you don't want to.
- ☺ You have the right to information.
- ☺ You have the right to make your own choices.
- ☺ You have the right to seek legal advice and pursue the same.



Looking Back

You think nothing changes
You think it will always be the same
You think it will never go away

Believe me it does, it will,
Look back and see how far you have come
Look back and enjoy the distance between then and now
Know this, the memory does the damage

Don't deny it, just put it in its place
You would only be denying your very existence
Acknowledge it, it's made you what you are today
You have strength; you've come this far

You struggle with forgiveness
You struggle with loving
Don't. That's not your job
Learn harmlessness

Margaret Haselwood

MORE INFORMATION:

This booklet is designed to give you some initial information about sexual assault and mental illness.

If you want more information on a range of topics including:

- Mental Illness
- Crisis Management
- Suicidality and finding a safe place
- Sexual Assault

For information about **Mental Illness** you can contact the following services for the information you need or to find who can help you:

- www.mentalhealth.gov.au – Australian Commonwealth Government site, provides links to 'Beyond Blue'
- 3271 5544 – Mental Health Association (Qld) Inc.
Website: www.mentalhealth.org.au
- Health Insite – easy access to health information
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au
- www.sane.org – Independent organisation committed to improving the well being of Australians affected by mental illness.
- 13 11 14 – Lifeline 24 hours
Website: www.lifeline.org.au

For information about **Sexual Assault** you can contact the following services for the information you need or to find who can help you:

- 1800 010 120 – 24 hour Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline
- 3262 9877 – WWILD – SVP Service (for women with intellectual and learning disabilities)
- Zig Zag young women's resource service – 3843 1823
Website: www.zigzag.org.au
- Family Planning Queensland – 3250 0200
- Sexual Health Clinics – you can contact your local hospital for contact details in your area
- 1800 811 811 – 24 hour Domestic Violence Telephone Service

☺ You do not have to give your name when you call
- These are confidential services.

☺ These services will be able to find you help in
your area.