

# The journey of a lifetime:

## Group work with young women who have experienced sexual assault

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### Background

The Sexual Assault Support Service in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, has a long history of running various kinds of groups for adult women survivors of sexual assault. Largely as a result of hearing back from women, the Service has long recognised the immense benefits of groups in breaking down isolation, normalising feelings and behaviours, providing a witness group to women's stories, and creating a strong sense of solidarity as women stand up to the effects of sexual abuse.

In 1995 we began to realise that perhaps it would be useful to develop a group for the large number of young women who were accessing the Service. Often these young women would contact the Service at times of crisis, and then disappear for months until the next crisis. As workers we began to wonder whether one-to-one counselling was meeting the needs of some of these young women. Although they would say they felt comfortable using the Service and that it was beneficial to them, as workers it was frustrating that each crisis seemed to be a re-run of the previous one. There seemed little opportunity to have conversations with the young women that might in any way lessen the powerful legacies from their experiences of sexual abuse and the crises that were ensuing. We also wondered if the relatively formal structures of one-to-one counselling were in some way off-putting to many of these young women. We wondered if this was why they would access counselling only in desperate times.

Through our conversations with individual young women, it became clear that many of them were struggling with similar issues: isolation, fear, self-hate, overwhelming sadness at loss of family, and the blaming of themselves for the abuse they had experienced. It also became very apparent that they all had much wisdom to offer. The potential benefits of providing a context in which they could connect with each other became more clear.

As a result of these conversations, we began to facilitate a young women's group. We hoped to provide a space in which young women could come together to talk about issues in an informal way. It was hoped that meeting together in a group would break down the intense isolation and feelings of 'being different' that many of the young women were experiencing. It was also hoped that the group would provide a way in which some of the young women could keep in regular contact with the Service. For us as facilitators there was a strong sense of hope that if a context could be created for conversations to happen now, then perhaps the legacies of sexual assault wouldn't still be dominating these women's lives in years to come.

We began with an open group program based on a series of information sessions around safety, self-care, self-harm, fear, anger, relationships, and other issues related to the effects of sexual abuse on people's lives. In hindsight, we wonder how useful these sessions were. Our own tentativeness at imposing any structure, and our own fear of asking too much of the participants, resulted in the sharing of lots of food, laughter and fun, but not much dialogue around the issues of surviving sexual assault. Still, it was a beginning.

We then decided to change the group format completely and use more of a narrative approach. What we ended up with was a closed group that ran one evening a week for ten weeks. Each group session was two hours long. We also held a weekend camp in the seventh week. We based much of the format and content of the group sessions on the 'Discoveries' program developed by Sheridan Linnell and Dorothy Cora (1993).

This group proved much more useful from both our perspective and the perspective of the participants. The comments from the group participants were extremely positive with threats of a 'sit in' if the Service even contemplated not running another young women's group. Our experience of facilitating this group and being with the young women, especially during the weekend camp, inspired enthusiasm for future groups and generated many ideas as to what these groups might look like.

These ideas gradually took shape to form the 'journey of a lifetime' group. This paper describes this group, the content of the sessions, the experiences of the young women, and our experiences as facilitators. As well as describing the groups, we've also included some of the documents that are involved in this 'journey'. Like many journeys, the 'journey of a lifetime' involves tickets, passports, travel books which describe some of the hazards and deceptions of travelling through difficult terrain, and writing letters home. Like other journeys, it also requires a map - which doubles as our group flyer.

## **The flyer**

In previous groups we had witnessed how powerful the use of metaphors and analogies could be. Within previous groups, conversations often likened the women's stories to the process of a journey. The young women had found that having an image of themselves as travellers roller-blading on a bendy highway, or like certain characters (real life or fictional) was an important way that they could use to stay connected to who they wanted to be. Thus we wanted to create a flyer that captured some of the spirit and excitement of starting out on a journey. We hoped that the idea of a treasure map would ignite people's curiosity, and promote the idea that the group might lead them to undiscovered treasures. The concept of a journey also appealed to us as we felt that it conveyed the idea that looking at issues in one's life is not a smooth, linear path; that it can often be hard work and involve travelling backwards and forwards between places. We have spoken with many young women who have experienced sexual assault who have told us how they feel as if their lives will always be captured by the effects of sexual abuse. Visually we wanted the flyer to convey a sense of hope and possibilities.

## **Deciding on the topics**

The decision about which topics to include in the twelve weeks was a difficult one to make. After talking with many young women about various ways to structure the program we decided to have all the topics mapped out before the group started. This was because the feedback we had received from young women was that they felt much less apprehensive about coming to a group when they knew what the topic was going to be. Many young women said that it was scary enough just to come to a group, and that if they had not had some idea of what the conversations would be about then they would not have felt confident enough to attend. In response to this feedback, we decided on structuring the topics in advance and discussing at the start of each week what that session would entail.

Despite these decisions to have a fixed structure, we wanted the groups to be flexible. A considerable amount of time throughout the program was spent talking with the group about how useful they thought the group topics were and whether we needed to be doing things differently. During the twelve weeks the group members did come up with other topics they would like to discuss but felt that these extra topics would be ideas for a future group, as they wanted the current program to stay as planned.

The actual decision of which topics to include was based on our experience of one-to-one counselling with young women. In those conversations the most common themes centred around issues pertaining to secrecy, self-blame, self-doubt, self-loathing, and fear. Thus we decided to include these topics in the group sessions. As the group was going to be a closed group where many of the participants would not know each other, we also felt it was important to have an introductory session and a goodbye party at the end. We included a session that looked at some of the community attitudes they had faced, and what they had been told or had heard about sexual assault. This, to us, seemed an essential topic to include so that the young women would have the opportunity to contextualise their experiences. The rest of the topics involved experimenting with using letters and reflective teams within the group. We hoped that these would be ways for the group to connect and honour each other. We hoped that acknowledgement from each other would be more powerful than anything we as facilitators could offer.

### **The group members**

The group consisted of seven young women whose ages ranged from 14-24. They were an extremely diverse group in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, current living situations, and current lifestyles. They were all survivors of childhood sexual abuse and some had experienced more recent sexual assaults. Three of the seven group members were quite familiar with the Service as they had been using it for one-to-one counselling. For the others the group was their first contact with the Service, having been given flyers from workers in other agencies.

### **The group program - outlines**

The following outlines describe the main themes for each week and some of the focus questions we used to start discussions. They do not do justice to the conversational nature of the group and need to be read more as reference points for conversations. They were often the starting point from which we tried to initiate re-authoring conversations. Sometimes these conversations happened as one large group, sometimes in pairs or small groups. We have not included here the introductory exercises we used with the group each week.

#### **Week 1: Daring to say hello to the travel brochure of dreams.**

After thorough introductions, the first week involved speaking about the flyer, the outline of the group and introducing the concept of the journey. We explored group agreements, expectations in relation to commitments to the group and, where appropriate, structured in support for people between the groups. We then gave out a handout about 'Hopes and Fears' which we asked participants to fill in and then discuss in small groups. Then we came back into the big group and explored the question, 'What hopes and fears do we have in common?' We found that this in some way created a sense of common ground between participants and seemed to help participants feel a sense of support from one another.

In the second half of the first group meeting we introduced the metaphor of a journey. As discussed earlier, we have found in our conversations with young women that such a metaphor conveys a sense of movement and possibilities - even when the journey is at times difficult. Throughout the group, right from sending out the flyer, we had many concerns about how the young women would relate to the metaphors and externalisations we planned to use in the weekly sessions. We did not want to present these analogies as being rigid or as being the only ways to understand particular problems. Rather, we hoped to present them as tools or starting points to assist the young women to develop their own understandings of the problems they were up against. We hoped that by using various metaphors and analogies the result would be a greater separation from the problem for the young women involved in the group. Our experience has been that it is so much easier for people to see and/or to move in the direction that they prefer when they have a clear view of what is getting in the way.

Throughout the group sessions the metaphors and analogies were presented much more tentatively than the written word conveys. We spent some time each session checking out if a particular image fitted with the participants' experience and what words they had used to describe what we were talking about. We often ended up with a variety of metaphors and names for problems.

We asked the group members to consider where and when they started this journey. We asked questions like:

- *What was the starting place like?*
- *What did it look like?*
- *What did it feel like?*
- *What would you call it?*
- *Where are you now?*
- *What does it feel like here?*
- *What would you call this place where you are now?*
- *Where is this journey taking you - the place where you want to be?*
- *What will this place look like?*
- *What will you be like?*
- *What will be different about your life?*
- *What will it feel like to be where you want to be at last?*
- *How will you get from where you are to where you want to be?*
- *What personal strengths will help you keep moving forward?*
- *What might trip you up, get in your way, force you to stub your toe as you move forward?*
- *What is it about you that will help you to get around these obstacles?*

We have found that often it is helpful to provide some metaphors or ideas to get participants started. We often liken the journey as similar to being in a tunnel - describing the sense that it will never end, that they don't know what is coming next, and that sometimes it feels like the tunnel is closing in on them.

After speaking about this, we asked the group members to use paper, coloured pens, crayons, magazines and other things to represent the journey that they are on. And we asked them to give their work a title. We then invited a large group discussion in which each person shared their representation or title with the group.

One young woman drew an elaborate map that resembled something like a street directory. The street names were things like 'Secret Circle' and 'Unworthiness Street'. She was on her way to a place called 'Nearly Home', and described where she was at present as being on a road to 'Nearly Home' that had a large sign that said 'No U-Turns'. Another young woman described her journey as being about a quest for a secret love, which was a love for herself.

We followed this up by asking each person to name a skill, some piece of knowledge that they have accumulated, or a strength, that helps them to keep moving forward. The following questions then acted as a basis for a group 'brainstorm':

- *Having glimpsed what's at the end of the tunnel, how might this group help you to keep moving along towards this?*
- *Are there other group agreements we need to add?*

Some of the responses to how the group might 'help you to keep moving along' included: support, encouragement, sharing thoughts, providing hope, security, being here, knowing I'm not the only one, and being inspired by other people's journeys.

To end the first week, we invited reflections about the meeting and about what it meant to each person that they attended the group.

## **Week 2: Rewriting the book of tricks, lies and bullshit.**

The focus for this session was to try to create a space in which the young women could contextualise their experiences of sexual assault. After a group round responding to the question, 'Was it harder or easier to stand up to the fear of coming here tonight?', we tried to invite conversations that would articulate the broader context of the young women's experience of abuse. We invited a group brainstorm that was written up on a whiteboard, orientated around the following questions:

- *What are some of the ideas that people have about women and girls who have been sexually abused?*
- *How might these ideas affect women?*
- *Which of these ideas have pushed you around the most?*
- *What are the things that you have heard said about people who sexually abuse women and children?*
- *What have you heard said about mothers of children who have experienced sexual assault?*

We then split the group up into small groups and each small group took one of the above ideas that had pushed them around and discussed the following questions:

- *How did you get this idea?*
- *Who encouraged this idea?*
- *How did they trick you into believing this, i.e., what did they tell you? What did they do?*
- *Who benefits when this belief pushes you around?*

Participants wrote their discussion points on large pieces of paper and we stuck these lists to the wall. We then went back into the large group to discuss everyone’s reaction to reading the lists.

After a short break we then introduced the ‘book of tricks, lies, and bullshit’ to the group. We explored the idea that often tricks and lies are presented as the truth, and that part of the journey to escape from the effects of sexual abuse is to identify the tricks, lies and bullshit in order to make sense of one’s own experience. We checked with participants if this fitted for them - and it did. We talked with the participants about making up a book that listed some of the ‘tricks, lies, and bullshit’, a book that could be continually updated. We asked the participants if they thought that some of the information that had come out of the earlier group brainstorm was part of the ‘tricks, lies, and bullshit’. The young women agreed, and we then typed into the book the responses to the questions we discussed earlier (i.e. ‘What are some of the ideas that people have about women and girls who have been sexually abused?’ ‘What are the things that you have heard said about people who sexually abuse women and children?’ and, ‘What have you heard said about mothers of children who have experienced sexual assault?’).

We found that this ‘book of tricks, lies and bullshit’ in some way demystified the experiences of the young women and assisted them to understand how they had been recruited into confusion and self-blame.

### **Breaking from tricks and lies**

In order to create a context in which the young women could identify times in which they had broken from the tricks and lies that cloud experiences of sexual abuse, we asked each participant to think of the first time that they had an inkling that some of what they had been conned into believing was untrue. We asked the group members to discuss in pairs the following questions:

- *How were you able to recognise and step away from the tricks, lies and bullshit?*
- *What kinds of things did you have to do, or tell yourself, to step away from the tricks?*

From these discussions we then compiled the following book of trick, lies and bullshit:

<b>THE BOOK OF TRICKS, LIES AND BULLSHIT</b>
<b>What is says about women and girls who have been sexually abused:</b>
If you speak out you ruin the family name
they asked for it
what they were wearing ☐
if people knew they wouldn’t go out with you
they are making it up/lying
if you go to court it will make it worse

they are exaggerating
counselling will make it worse
it's the way they acted, e.g. kissed someone, went somewhere
forget it now
they are crazy
they are bad anyway
it's your fault □ because:
she's a slut
she was drunk/stoned
you have had sex with him before, what's the difference
she didn't say no, she didn't fight, scream, shout, etc.
it's a woman's role
she should have told straight away
they are damaged for life
forget about it and it'll go away
it's every woman's fantasy
<b>What it says about abusers</b>
he was just breaking her in
It's normal
they're sick
he was confused about his position in the relationship
he was drunk/drugged
we should feel sorry for them
his mother didn't give him enough love
it won't happen again
he was abused himself
they can't control themselves
he doesn't have any friends
they didn't understand what they were doing
it's part of their culture/religion
all men do this
he was really old/young
he's too old to go to court
don't ruin his name/his life and his family's name/career
<b>what it says about mothers whose children are sexually abused</b>

they didn't do their job properly
they should know
didn't she have the intuition to know what was going on
she didn't banish that person from the family
she taught her daughter how to be a slut in the first place
she didn't protect her children
she left her children in the care of that person

After a time these conversations broadened out to the larger group. We asked further questions:

- *What are some of the ways you have avoided stepping in the bullshit?*
- *How have you been able to start to develop your own shitometer?*

Some of the ways in which the young women have resisted the tricks and lies included: 'listening to the little voice inside me that said everything was not okay', 'realising I need help and acting on that', 'reading the Courage to Heal', 'having willpower', 'being honest to myself', 'allowing myself to have feelings', 'not putting off my happiness', 'coming to the group', 'telling myself that speaking out can't be worse than the abuse', 'constantly saying to myself that my thoughts are as important as others', 'telling myself that people are responsible for their own actions - it's not my fault'.

Before we finished the second meeting of the group a final round took place reflecting on people's experience of the session.

### **Week 3: Leaving behind the burden of secrecy.**

In this week we wished to explore how secrecy can often permeate lots of aspects and areas of people's lives - especially those who have been subject to sexual abuse. In our consultations with young women this has been identified as a very important issue to talk about. The following questions informed the discussions in the group:

- *How do families and society encourage secrecy, especially in children?*
- *How does society / families react to anyone who doesn't play the secrecy game?*
- *Who benefits from secrecy?*

As facilitators we tried to discuss secrecy in terms of the different feelings around 'exciting' secrets that are about fun, pleasure, and closeness; and 'scary' or 'yucky' secrets that betray closeness. We explored how often the latter can become a burden.

In small groups we invited discussions about the following questions, and asked participants to write their responses on large sheets of paper:

- *Have there been times when secrecy has burdened your life? For example, what habits has secrecy recruited you into?*



- *Who has encouraged secrecy in your life and how? For example, by isolating you, or setting you up so that you feel unable to talk to those closest to you.*
- *What fears support secrecy?*

Back in the large group we discussed any similarities that people noticed between each group's responses.

### **Breaking from secrecy**

In order to create space for participants to consider the ways in which the effects of secrecy can be challenged, we invited individual participants to:

- *Think of a time when secrecy didn't 'steal your voice' and 'strangle your vocal chords', to represent this by using crayons, pens, collage, etc., and then to 'give your work a title'.*

Back in the large group we asked participants to share the title or representation with the group. We asked, 'What does it tell you about yourself that you stood up to secrecy on this occasion?' and, 'What one thing would be different about how you treat or think about yourself if you weren't weighed down by the burden of secrecy?'

The young women spoke of how free it would feel to have a choice about whether to keep something a secret or not, how they would be able to actually speak rather than be silenced, and how they could be nicer to themselves if the shame of secrecy wasn't so strong.

### **Week 4: Trusting your instincts in the forest of deception.**

In this week we wished to introduce the idea of the 'forest of deception' - a place into which people can be led and from where it is often hard for them to find their way out. The 'forest of deception' is a place in which it is often difficult for people to trust their own sense of reality as there are so many shadows and voices. In our experience of talking with young women who have experienced sexual assault, exploring the metaphor of the 'forest of deception' has enabled a language to be found for the confusion that often accompanies experiences of assault. After briefly introducing the idea of the 'forest of deception' and checking that it fitted for the experience of the young women in the group, we asked the following questions:

- *Who plants the seeds of this confusion and self-doubt?*
- *How do they encourage its growth?*
- *What affect does this forest of deception have on the people who find themselves in it?*

Small group discussions then occurred around further questions:

- *How were you tricked into not trusting yourself and your own reality?*
- *How has this training affected your relationships with others?*

After coming back into the big group, we invited the group members to speak about any similarities that they had noticed in the stories shared in the small groups.

### **Breaking from deception**

In order to illustrate the ways in which the young women had sought to free themselves from the forest of deception, we invited the participants to ‘think of a time when you were able to trust your own mind and/or body and not doubt yourself’. We then asked the participants to discuss, in pairs, how they were able to stand up to the training in secrecy and self-doubt, and how they were able to trust themselves on those occasions. We returned to the large group to consider the implications and meanings of these examples. We asked, ‘What do these examples of being able to trust yourself tell the group about you?’

Some of the responses of the young women to this question brought forth descriptions of themselves as ‘strong’, ‘courageous’, ‘someone who could make their own decisions’, ‘determined’, ‘persistent’ and ‘powerful’.

To end the week’s discussions we asked participants how the group was going for them. We checked with them whether they felt it was on track and whether we were talking about the sorts of things that they wanted to be talking about.

### **Week 5: Escaping the clutches of the guilt bandits**

In our experience it is very common for young women to feel a degree of responsibility for the assaults that they have been subject to. Within this group session we tried to deconstruct why this is the case. The metaphor of the ‘guilt bandits’ proved useful in assisting us to do this. Before we introduced the concept of the ‘guilt bandits’ we asked the following questions:

- *What are some of the tricks and cons that abusers use to deny responsibility for the acts of sexual violence they commit?*
- *In what ways do they try to shift the blame to other people?*

We then introduced the concept of the guilt bandits: bandits that can seem to come from nowhere, who hijack people’s thoughts and then leave them feeling confused and captured by guilt. We asked whether the idea of ‘guilt bandits’ fitted with the young women’s experiences, and then asked the following questions:

- *How come the ‘guilt bandits’ haven’t been caught?*
- *Who supports them?*
- *How do they do this?*

We then invited the participants to discuss, in pairs, the following question:

- *When the ‘guilt bandits’ have you in their clutches what do they tell you about your childhood and/or the abuse to try and keep you from getting away?*

As facilitators we discussed our experience of working with survivors of abuse and assault and how we have often found that women still secretly blame themselves/or feel guilty in relation to some aspect of the sexual abuse. We spoke about how we have often come across the ‘guilt bandits’ in our conversations with women who have been subject to abuse. We then asked the following questions to the whole group:

- *How active are the ‘guilt bandits’ in your life?*
- *Do they run wild or are they restricted to certain areas?*

After discussing where the ‘guilt bandits’ were having an influence and where they were being restricted, we asked each participant in the group to think of a time when they saw the ‘guilt bandits’ coming and managed to escape. We asked them to consider how they were able to escape their clutches. We invited them to represent this on paper by using words, crayons, collage, etc., and to give their work a title. This was then shared with the whole group. While the representations were being shared we asked two questions:

- *What do you think the rest of the group notice about you that you were able to outsmart the guilt bandits?*
- *If you knew when the ‘guilt bandits’ were about to appear - what difference would this make in your life?*

We took delight in some of the responses to these questions. The young women articulated that they were ‘much more clever than the guilt bandits’, that they were ‘able to recognise some warning signs that the bandits were around before they were captured’, that they were ‘fitter than the bandits’. Many of the participants thought that being prepared for the bandits would make a difference as they could remind themselves of the ‘tricks, lies, and bullshit’ so that when it came out of the bandits’ mouths they would recognise it straight away.

We invited the group members to notice during the following week if the ‘guilt bandits’ tried to sneak up on them.

#### **Week 6: Pulling yourself out of the quicksand of self-hate**

This week we wished to introduce the idea of self-hate being like quicksand. Before we did, however, we quickly checked if anyone had bumped into the ‘guilt bandits’ during the week and, if so, how they had dealt with them. Then we moved onto the topic of self-hate. We spoke of how we believe that babies are not born thinking that they are short, bad, helpless, and damned unfortunate looking. We tried to introduce the idea that the stories we have about ourselves are created in a context, and that, when people experience self-hate, they have often been recruited into these ideas by other people and circumstances. We introduced the idea that self-hate is like a type of quicksand - initially it can be just a bit squishy and uncomfortable, but then you can be sucked right in and feel unable to move. We checked if this description fitted with the young women, and it generally did. In order to expose the origins of self-hate in the lives of the young women, we then asked the following questions:

- *How do you recognise that the quicksand of self-hate is starting to squish up between your toes and block your ears?*
- *What do you find yourself thinking or feeling?*
- *Who leads you into the quicksand in the first place?*
- *How do they do this?*
- *What are some of the messages that society gives to women that sink them further down into the quicksand?*

We then invited the participants, in small groups, to discuss the following questions:

- *How were you tricked into believing you are not an OK person?*
- *How has this self-hate affected your relationship with yourself and others?*

After coming back into one large group, we talked about the things that stood out for people in the small group discussions. We then asked the question:

- *Who gains most when self-hate has control of your life?*

### **Breaking from self-hate**

The previous conversation exposed the quicksand of self-hate for what it is and created a language to describe it. Creating space for participants to break from self-hate was our next aim. We asked participants to think of a time (if even for a second) when they were able to stand up to self-hate and entertain the idea that they might be okay. We asked them to:

- *Think about who would stand with you in knowing that you are an okay person. It might be someone you know now or it might be someone that you knew as you were growing up.*
- *What do/did they see in you that led them to the conclusion that you are an okay person?*

Within a large group discussion we invited conversations about who would stand with each participant in knowing they are 'an okay person'. We asked why these people would stand with them, and the histories of their connection with these people. We evoked the people and the histories within the young women's lives which stand against self-hate and which acknowledge the qualities, skills and knowledges of the young women. We asked further questions including:

- *How can you keep hold of the voice or presence of these people when you are sinking into the quicksand of self-hate?*
- *What kinds of things could you do or say to yourself to stop the quicksand of self-hate sucking you down?*

Some of the responses included: 'talking to the people in my life that know I am okay'; 'reminding myself that I am lovable and that people do care about me'; 'listening to music to drown out the self-hate'; 'doing homework as it feels good to complete something and takes the focus away from the self-hate'; and, 'making time for myself'. One young woman spoke of how she wears a ring that belongs to her grandmother who she feels really loved her for who she was, and how touching the ring is a way of reminding herself that she is lovable.

To complete the night we did a final round orientated to the question, 'What have you learnt about yourself tonight?'

### **Week 7: Holding onto hope in the face of fear and terror.**

The focus for this week was fear. In order to catch up with where everyone was at, however, we began this session by asking, 'How have people gone in being able to step around the quicksand of self-hate during the past week?' After a group round on this topic we turned to the issue of fear. We introduced the topic by asking a series of questions:

- *How do we recognise fear?*
- *What happens physically in our bodies?*
- *What is useful/not useful about fear?*

- *What name would you give to the 'unuseful' fear?*

As facilitators, we then introduced the idea that perhaps terror (or whatever name the participants gave to the 'unuseful' fear) was like an unwanted person/companion on their journey. We checked this idea with the young women and they confirmed that terror was like an uninvited traveller who was following them around and seemed to find them even when they didn't want to be found.

We invited participants to discuss the following questions in small groups:

- *When did you first notice that terror became part of your life?*
- *How does terror affect your life?*
- *How does terror affect your relationship with yourself and others?*

We came back together into the large group to discuss the similarities that had been noticed between people's stories.

### **Breaking from terror**

To create space to acknowledge the ways in which the young women were resisting the effects of terror, we asked the following questions.

- *Think of a time when terror wasn't travelling with you.*
- *What was different about this time?*
- *How did you feel?*
- *What were some of the things you felt when terror wasn't with you?*

Within these discussions the word 'hope' was often spoken about. We followed this up by asking the participants, in pairs, to write a definition of hope. We asked:

- *What is hope?*
- *How would you explain it to an alien?*

And then we shared these definitions.

Having done this, we asked about the effects that hope has on terror. In our experience we have found that hope has dramatic effects. At this point, we introduced the idea of the 'Book of Hope'. We invited participants to think about and/or to write their own story of hope. We were very curious about stories of hope. We asked lots of questions:

- *When did you start to recognise you had hope?*
- *What effect has it had in your life?*
- *Are there people who have taught you about hope, or from whom you have borrowed some hope?*
- *What would it be like if you invited hope to become your constant travelling companion?*

Some of the definitions of hope which the young women offered included: 'Hope is the deepest wish from the heart, that was a dream from childhood'; 'Hope is having a reason for going on'. In response to the idea of hope being a constant travelling companion, participants

felt they would be 'more able to handle life's ups and downs', that they would feel 'more confident' and 'less scared' about trying things that they don't try now but would like to. They spoke of how it would be exciting and such a relief to travel with hope and not with terror.

Before we ended the group we also discussed with participants how they thought the group was going. We asked about whether they thought it was meeting their expectations. We asked: 'Is it useful?' 'Are the weekly topics relevant?' 'What are we missing out?'

### **Week 8: Letting everyone know where I really am.**

To begin the group this week we invited a group round on the following questions:

- *Did anyone invite hope to join them during the week?*
- *Did anyone have further thoughts about hope and the place it has in their journey?*
- *Did anyone think about their story of hope?*

The focus for this week was to enable participants to reflect on their journeys and to catch-up significant people in their lives about how far they had come. As facilitators, we tried to explain the idea of dominant stories and how they can be created and influenced by other people's ideas about us and our lives. We tried to explain the idea that there may be many other stories we all have about ourselves, stories we think are more relevant to who we are or want to be.

We asked the whole group to brainstorm:

- *What are some of the stories you have heard over and over, about yourself?*

Having done this, we invited the participants to think through their journey so far. We asked them to think through where they started out, where they'd been, where they stayed awhile, and the places they'd heard about that they'd like to visit. We invited the participants to recall who they were at the start of their journey and who they were now. We asked the young women to think about some of the places they'd been, like the 'forest of deception', the 'quicksand of self-hate', lugging the burden of secrecy up some huge hill, and the places where the 'guilt bandits' hang out, etc. After inviting them to think this all through we asked the following questions:

- *Now that you can recognise these places, have survived them, and have taken at least one step away from them, what would you tell others about what you have learnt about yourself in the process?*
- *Who might still think you believe the book of bullshit, that you're lost forever in the forest of deception, totally overshadowed by the burden of secrecy, imprisoned by the 'guilt bandits' and over your head in the quicksand of self-hate?*
- *What would you like to say to these people who have a way out-of-date story of where you are and who you are?*
- *What would you like to say to them to catch them up?*

We invited the participants to spend the next half an hour writing a letter to themselves, to someone else, or to the group, to catch them up on where they were now and what they had come to know about themselves.

After a short break we invited reflections on the process of writing the letters and asked people to read out a sentence, a paragraph, or the whole letter. We asked participants: 'What have you realised about yourself whilst writing the letter?'

At the end of this group we explained how the process of the next two weeks would involve interviewing some of the young women and having the rest of the group act as a reflecting team to their stories. We asked for people to volunteer to be interviewed, or to think about volunteering to be interviewed, about their journey so far.

### **Weeks 9 & 10: Rehashing the trip and looking at the photos**

We began the group this week by asking:

- *How was it during the week thinking about your letter and where you really are at?*
- *Did anyone catch someone up with the information that was in the letter?*

The rest of the session was taken up by interviews of the participants. Each participant who wanted to had a turn to be interviewed by one of the group facilitators. The rest of the group then reflected on what they had heard and were interviewed by the other group facilitator. This process took about 40 minutes. Before we did the first interview we explained carefully the role of the participants who were reflecting.

We felt very apprehensive about how this process would work with the group. Thoughts and worst nightmares were often envisaged in terms of what would be said, whether the group members could stick with the process, what if they found it boring □ and so on. Being now on the other side of the experience, it was definitely a highlight for the participants, and for us. Not all the group members wished to be interviewed which was respected by everyone in the group. The conversations with the individual members were largely about adding more detail and richness to some of the themes that had already come up in the group. One young woman, who had to appear in court the following week, chose to talk about her decision to report the abuse and her worries about going to court, one participant used the time to reflect on the first time she spoke out about the abuse, another talked about her relationship with her family, and others discussed their battles with self-blame and secrecy. One young woman really wanted to be interviewed and, upon starting to have a conversation, found that she was silenced by the intense emotions that speaking up with an audience brought forth. Watching her fight to speak was a really moving experience for all the group, and the group members in the reflecting team were able to powerfully acknowledge this young woman's courage and resilience in being able to get to the point of taking that risk. The comments and conversations that the reflecting teams had were ones that the person being interviewed experienced as respectful and uplifting. Here are some examples of the kinds of things said by team members:

- *How were you able to share it with your friends? 'Cause you had so much horrible stuff happening at home, and all those people trying to alienate you; it was just amazing that you could share it with your friends, that you could trust them.*
- *I haven't got a question but I wrote down some, like, I don't know what you call it, like a positive list. You do what I do. You list everything you do that is good as just being courageous. You've got so many other qualities that are more than being courageous. You're strong, you're enthusiastic, you're definitely open 'cause you got*

*up there first, you're honest about your feelings, you're friendly, and you believe in yourself. All these other things just swamp it being just about courage.*

- *What more does that little voice say? And how do you know to listen to it, and that it's right?*

Some of the comments made by the group generally, about the process or their experience of being interviewed were:

- *It was right before going to court. Made me feel so strong to share how far I'd come.*
- *When I get really scared I'll remember the group, and know that you are all with me.*
- *I'm in awe of myself as I look back on my journey and see all the changes.*
- *I felt so inspired.*
- *Felt more connected to the group.*
- *The group's strength, courage, and positive energy really stood out.*

### **Week 11: Too much of a good thing can be wonderful**

The aim for this week was to create a context in which the young women could celebrate some of their achievements. We began by asking:

- *What things are said and/or done to girls and young women that might encourage them to minimise or hide their achievements?*

We invited the young women to discuss the following questions in small groups:

- *How much of the time does the belief that it is not acceptable if you think you are good at something, stop you from recognising your achievements and believing people when they give you compliments?*
- *What has it stopped you from seeing about yourself and your achievements?*

After reflecting on these conversations back in the larger group, we then invited each participant to imagine what it would be like if they stood up to the belief that too much praise is a damaging thing. We asked the group to:

- *Imagine if you could recognise your own achievements, 'toot your own horn', and truly believe people when they gave you a compliment. What would be different about you and the way you feel about yourself?*

We asked the participants to represent on paper what would be different about them and the ways in which they feel about themselves, and to give this work a title. Some of the representations and titles included; 'Surprise', which was a drawing of a person with some of the qualities she had discovered written around the person; a drawing of a moving train that was moving past the station of disbelief; and 'I would', which listed some of the things this young woman would now do.

We ended the session on a round that we called 'tooting your own horn'. Each participant was given a party horn and was asked to toot their own horn by naming one thing that they really appreciated about themselves.

### **Week 12: Saying goodbye to the group and continuing on with the journey**



This was the last group session. We tried within this group to prepare people for the transition of leaving the group and continuing the journey of their lifetime. We invited the participants to get into pairs to discuss the question:

- *What are your fears about being without the group?*

Upon returning to the big group, we invited reflections about the small group discussions and asked the group to 'brainstorm' around the question:

- *What are you taking away from the group that will help you stand up to those fears?*

We then gave each participant a piece of paper with their name written on it. The other group members were asked to write down what their experience of travelling with this person during the last 12 weeks had been like and what they had appreciated about them. This was done for each person in the group.

To end the group we invited a final round orientated to the question:

- *What is something that the group has given you, that you would like the group to know you are taking with you on your journey?*

Some of the responses included: 'a greater sense of pride in myself'; 'knowing that I have a journey'; 'good memories'; 'my train's speeding up'; 'a shitometer that I will listen to'; 'the knowledge that I'm not insane'; 'feeling stronger in myself'; 'the strength to know I can continue on without the group'.

We gave out Passports and Tickets which represented that the preparation for the next part of the journey was complete. We also spent some time as facilitators thanking the young women and reflecting on what the group had meant to us (see below). As a thank you we gave the participants a small button that was the shape of a teapot on which we had drawn a golden heart. We wrapped this button up in a piece of paper on which was written a quote by Leela Anderson:

*I was reminded of a small brooch a friend had made for me, a round and voluptuous silver tea-pot, with a golden heart in the middle of it. This gift symbolised a passing comment I had made about the meaning of connection in my life: how I thought all acts of revolution, perhaps particularly in women's lives, whether they be political or of the heart, began over a cup of tea. Somehow the birth of connection is, for me, in the ordinariness of acts like the sharing of tea. (1995, p.24-25).*

We talked about how this quote consistently reminds us of the importance of connection, and that it is out of the little things and the ordinary that the extraordinary comes. This also seemed very relevant as the sharing of food had been a significant part of the group. Then we partied!

## **Our experience of facilitating the group - dilemmas and reflections**

Facilitating this group was truly an enriching experience that taught us much about working with young women, about facilitating groups, and about how we prefer to work with the people that come to our Service. There was great delight, much pain and sadness, many

laughs, and a personal sense of fulfilment in watching how the group responded and participated in the group sessions. Each week we would all be inspired as the small, and large, ways in which these young women were reclaiming their lives emerged.

On reflection, one of the inspiring things for us as workers about the group was that it seemed to fit with how we wanted to be with the people who consult us. Right from the start there was a sense that this would also be a great journey for us as workers, and that we were also taking lots of risks and stepping into territory we hadn't been before. This led to us deciding to be very up-front, direct and honest with the group right from the beginning. We spent lots of time explaining why we were asking what we asked or what the thinking was behind a certain activity, and getting feedback on how it was going for the participants. This process contributed greatly to create an atmosphere of respect and trust that permeated the twelve weeks. The group members seemed to have a very real commitment to and respect for the group and each other. For us, as workers, the atmosphere of honesty and transparency gave us a freedom to relate as we wished to, rather than this be limited by how we thought 'professionals' should relate.

One of the most difficult aspects of facilitating the group was witnessing and giving space to hear some of the pain that was so present in these young women's lives. Many weeks we wondered if the participants were finding it too hard, if we were pushing them too far, and if they would keep travelling with us or get off at one of the points along the way. Checking with the group, and being really interested in how they were finding the sessions, was the only way to reassure ourselves that, although they were finding some of the sessions hard going, they were nonetheless very useful. There were many occasions when we had to stop ourselves from rushing in and trying to make things better which, in hindsight, were often times where we were feeling perhaps more uncomfortable than the group participants. Humour seemed to be as abundant as the pain, and was used so many times by the group as an antidote to diffuse some of the intensity. At times it seemed that the group members used humour to let us know also that it was okay to be talking about the things that we were.

Another theme that was present throughout many of the group sessions but which is not obvious when reading through the weekly outlines, was the young women's relationship with their mothers. This was often a difficult balancing act for us as facilitators as we wanted to expose some of the ways that mothers are often conned by the perpetrators of the abuse, whilst at the same time not excuse or minimise the pain that the young women felt as a result of some of the actions of their mothers. Often we were trying to bring the person who had committed the abuse back into the picture, as he had paled into insignificance against the rage some of the young women felt towards their mothers. For many of the young women the belief that they were unlovable, seemed to be cemented when they strongly held the idea that even their mother did not care about them, had not wanted to protect them, had not wanted to believe them, or loved the person who abused them more than they loved them. To challenge this belief it was essential to try and deconstruct some of the predominant ideas in society about mothers generally, and about mothers whose children have experienced sexual abuse. These issues were very significant in our discussions in week two about 'tricks, lies and bullshit'. Looking at how mothers are conned by perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and how men who abuse often try to shift responsibility to mothers, were important discussions to have.

At the same time, working with these young women brought many invitations from all kinds of discourses, and sometimes directly from the group members, to 'be their Mum' and to 'fix

it all up'. Knowing the damage that creating this kind of expectation or hope can do, we were very up-front about the limits of what we could do. This, along with other aspects of the group, led us to re-think much of our training in what it means to be a professional, and what a professional relationship should be. Some of the most helpful learning for us was around the difference between having limits as a worker, or as a Service, as compared with the ideas of professional boundaries. In our experience, concepts of 'professional boundaries' had in the past left us feeling like we were not being true professionals if we disclosed information about ourselves, or if we showed our emotions whilst with someone with whom we were working, or if we connected with the people who consult with us not only as workers but as other women, other parents, etc. Challenging these ideas while maintaining a commitment to accountability and transparency was powerfully reclaiming of who we wanted to be as workers.

Being involved in this group was also inspiring in the amount of fun, creativity, and hope that it generated. Taking risks with how we structured the group, what conversations we had, what we revealed personally about ourselves: and then witnessing some of the results of those risks taken, was immensely sustaining. The 'journey of a lifetime' took us into territories we had not explored before. We look forward to the next one. Who knows where it will take us.

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## Notes

1. Lisa and Chris were both counsellors at the Hobart Sexual Assault Support Service. They have since moved on. Chris can be contacted c/- Upper Murray CASA, PO Box 438, Wangaratta VIC 3676, Australia. Lisa can be contacted c/- 4 Creek St, Berridale NSW 2628, Australia.

All group members gave permission to publish in this paper details of the group's experiences and their written work.

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