

Newsletter

Edition Dec 2024

£12 p.a. subscription for non-members
or organisations

free for SURVIVORs
who are Members
of CIS'ters

Charity registration:
1184857
(previously 1123125)



CIS'ters IS NOT a therapy group: it is a small registered charity, run by survivors
“we might be victim/survivors, but this is not all that we are, or can be”

2024: It's Been A Tough 12 months

Email: helpme@cisters.org.uk **Phone:** 023 80 338080 (answer phone)

Feedback from the Office

Thank you very much to the small number of Members who have completed and returned a **survey** form to us. **We do, please, need more – so** let us know if you are willing to complete a survey form. We can either email you a copy or send it to you via post plus a SAE to return it to us.

The responses you give in the survey form is going to, very much, help trustees strategise ‘what happens next’ for our small charity – and we can also use the content within funding applications. Our future is very dependent upon being able to raise funds.

Remember, we are survivor-led, which means that YOUR VOICE is critical. So, if not already sent in a completed survey form, please leave a message for us on our helpline 02380 338080 asking us to send you a form, or email us on helpme@cisters.org.uk



Weekend (Residential) Workshop for Members:

Our next weekend residential workshop is in **May 2025**.

We do need to charge a fee to attend this event, but it is heavily subsidised.

If you are a Member and would like to know more about the weekend workshop in May 2025 and/or what further subsidies might be available, please contact our office. Kate.

‘Flow’: A Film About the Disclosure of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Trauma-informed care is growing in importance in health and social care, with disclosure as a vital first step. Yet evidence suggests that individual interactions with professionals may not facilitate trauma disclosure. ‘Flow’ aimed to address this.

The film represents a high-quality, behaviour change resource that can be utilised in a wide range of circumstances. It was co-produced by representatives from the University of Sheffield, NHS England, the Department of Health and people with lived experience of childhood sexual abuse.

Flow follows the story of Amy, who is preparing for her art exhibition when a comment reignites traumatic childhood memories. She wants to approach her General Practitioner for help but is hindered both by family loyalty and barriers to disclosure within the NHS. ‘Flow’ has been used both in statutory services and non-governmental organisations, as well as being selected for inclusion in two film festivals. It represents an innovative way to communicate research results and foster change.

The high-resolution version of the film is available at: <https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/events/flow>.

The full article is available via <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13607804241248347> and is very representative of how difficult it is to disclose sexual abuse that has occurred within a family, to not only health professionals, but also to other family members.

FAMILY TIMES – CAN BE OK, BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE

Festive Times are not always a happy time for many of us that grew up in dysfunctional or dangerous households.

It can be hard over any holiday season that is designated as ‘family time’, especially when we might want to simply survive it. Or not participate in it at all.

Or perhaps we want to participate as much as we can, but we’d like for it to be OK when we want to hide in a cupboard for a bit.

On our website <https://www.cisters.org.uk/the-impact/surviving-christmas/> we have an alternative guide for surviving Christmas ((with grateful thanks to Beacon House, Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team (based in Sussex)) which we feel can be adapted for any ‘family time’ festive period – and a really useful guide those of us who are NOT living in a ‘happy families’ TV advert.

In 2015 published > Focus on Survivors: Hear Me. Believe Me. Respect Me.

Key Conclusions:

- Misinformation about CSA in the UK risks skewing and undermining targeted strategies to tackle typical forms of childhood sexual abuse.
- Greater professional vigilance in asking service users if they had experienced CSA – rather than relying on people to self-disclose – would be important for bringing forward processes of support and recovery for survivors. This would be a vital and cost-neutral step towards more proactive help for survivors and a more efficient service response.
- The impact of poor service experiences is more than the absence of effective help at one point-in-time. Instead, poor service experience is associated with a delay in survivors accessing future services and with survivors using more services over a longer duration. As such, a poor service can have a long term impact and represent a barrier to support for survivors. In contrast, a good service response can result in survivors coming to a point of recovery or resolution sooner in their lives while at the same time making more efficient use of service resources.

In 2018 published > I'll be a survivor for the rest of my life.

Key Conclusions:

- All the survivors in our study indicated that delayed disclosure (the long duration of time between disclosure and engagement in specialist support services for adult survivors of CSA) resulted in the emergence of complex issues related to the experience of abuse, which had a detrimental impact on their mental health.
- Most participants indicated that their first engagement with support services after disclosure was with statutory services, predominantly with their General Practitioner and emergency response services.
- Participants indicated that the primary focus was on the mental health issues associated with survivors' experiences of CSA. Participants cited that these support services neglected to address the survivor's experience of sexual abuse in childhood directly, failing to ask pertinent questions which would have assisted disclosure of CSA.

All participants' narratives indicated that poor experiences with statutory services had acted as barriers to and delayed engagement with future support services. Poor experiences of disclosure(s) and not feeling listened to, believed and respected by support services had acted as barriers to future support services.

Most participants described the process of self-referral, often following a particularly difficult period as the predominant route into effective services, finding organisations through self-exploration.

Participants specified that voluntary organisations had often improved on previous negative experiences, providing empathetic understanding and a gateway to other voluntary support services. They acknowledged the positive impact that voluntary/ charitable organisations had in their aims to provide a safe environment for survivors to be listened to and believed, without shame and guilt.

The participants described how mental health statutory services had only offered/provided short term intervention at times of crisis, focusing principally on the treatment/diagnosis of the participant's mental health, and often lacked an understanding of the long-term trauma experienced by adult survivors of CSA. A number of participants indicated that the comorbid mental health issues suffered by survivors of CSA (such as, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and a range of personality disorders) were recognised by health professionals as beyond the remit of support available within statutory settings. The survivors reported feelings of gratitude for the support and personalised approach to intervention provided by specialist support provided by voluntary/ charitable organisations, often citing that they believed their lives had been saved by these organisations.

The study suggests that there is a need for better information and greater access to multi agency staff, better local knowledge, with better education and training

A REMINDER > WHO CIS'ters ARE

We were set up in 1994/95, with the name being created at that time. It was designed to reflect:

CIS = childhood incest survivors

'ters = for the female siblings that experienced the abuse

Initially only for adult female victim/survivors of incest, this definition was subsequently widened in 1996 to acknowledge that many within our community were sexually abused, as female children/teens, by members of their immediate/extended family – that were not always blood relatives.

So – our approach is to respond sensitively to any email or phone call to our helpline, providing information on the nearest specialist service for victim/survivors of sexual abuse during childhood. Where the person who contacts us falls within the criteria defined (i.e. born female and continue to identify as female) in line with our charities commission registration we then offer 'membership' (which is a term we prefer to that of service user or client).

ABUSERS ARE SKILLED AT MANIPULATION

The following are extracts, with permission, from emails sent to us from Louise (who joined CIS'ters in 2016).

October 2024: Hi Gillian, I hope it is ok to send you this. Do you remember that letter from my abuser father we read (in May 2024 at the weekend workshop) where he wanted to send me some "birthday money, no strings attached". Well today is my birthday and there is zero money in the paypal account I gave him through a third party. Looks like there were strings attached after all and he was just saying anything to try and get me to have contact with him. When it hasn't led to me contacting him he hasn't bothered to send any money. The worst thing is that some of this money he has inherited was made from my abuse as I have memories with cameras and other men. Anyway I don't know why I am surprised. This has made me remember just how manipulative he is.

Later the same day in October 2024: Hi Gillian. thank you for your response. Since my earlier email £50 has appeared in my paypal account. This is almost worse as now he is using my sister as a go between to get her to ask me to confirm if I received it. Constant pushing of my boundaries. I didn't respond. He is still manipulative. I know by just how much my nervous system is triggered by my certainty that he is trying to get any form of contact he possibly can and he is using the measly £50 he sent me (he has just got an inheritance of at least £100,000 and owns his own house outright and has missed the last ten Birthdays and Christmases) to try and get responses from me. I am on high alert for his highly manipulative behaviour. He is also displaying his control over my sister who I know was also abused by him as she is in one of my memories. I may have to cut contact with her as she is making me feel unsafe and only contacts me to pass messages from my dad. On a lighter note I had a lovely friend really go above and beyond today to make sure I had a nice day - first time I have done something for my birthday since I turned 40.

Five days later, in October 2024: I had said to a friend that I was in a win/win situation as if he sends money I would have money and if he doesn't I would be validated. However, I later realised it was a lose/lose situation as no money upsets me and some money upsets me and even a lot of money would upset me. Nothing makes me less angry and everything makes me more angry. All the money in the world would not make me less angry.

3 days later, in October 2024: Hi Gillian, Sorry for taking a few days I have been very unwell following my birthday. I felt severely depressed in spite of actually doing something for my birthday which I don't usually. I was also pre-menstrual but this really affected my mental health. Yes, I am happy to go ahead with the newsletter. You can even add a fourth paragraph with what I have written here if you like I have not been that depressed in a long time. I was having suicidal thoughts but felt better once I came on my period. I can get PMT but not had it that bad and I know it's because of the contact from my abuser. I am ok now though. Thank you for your support it helped me to be able to email you during this time.

A message from Maria, *who joined in 2008*

Good afternoon to Gillian, Cathie, Kate and everybody at CIS'ters. I hope you are all ok, strong, safe and the weather is not too wet and you have some nice days.

I just wanted to send you this beautiful piece of writing for the next newsletter if it is not too late. I truly loved it and hope you will too.

'Life has tried to break me.

The wounds have not yet healed but I am not a victim.

Never have been and never will.

My heart was born a warrior each day I'm fighting still I am everything the darkness could not kill'.

By Native Red Cloud.

Things here at home are not good. My son (who is also my carer) has been very low. He hurt his foot quite bad and his autism isn't easy to navigate, I know because my autism is quite bad. I am not in a good place. I saw the pain clinic doctor last week and I might have arthritis in my thumb which is caused by psoriasis. I have some blood tests next week to see how bad it is. I recently went to see the dermatologist thinking I am to have UV light treatment because I had been told this would happen in October, but it turned out to be to see another dermatologist who told me that unfortunately there is a long waiting list for the UV box treatment. I have been given more cream and a follow up appointment for 2025. Sorry to go on but it is getting me down.

Anyways Gillian, Cathie, Kate and everybody at CIS'ters I am sending you good wishes for the rest of the week and also sending you all good vibes for peace of mind and spirit. My son also sends his best wishes. We have another session of family counselling soon. Best wishes to you all, Love, Maria

A message from Alex, *who became a Member in 2023*

Alex has let us know that she uses AI (artificial intelligence) to create poetry to help her articulate her feelings and emotions and suggested that others might like to try this method:

ChatGPT prompt: Can you write me a poem based on this that will make me feel better?: "There is no upside to comparing yourself to others, only the downside of watching your confidence disappear. I AM EQUAL Never compare yourself to someone else. When you play the comparison game, your faults don't lie in the things you see as missing or lacking about you. Your only true fault was comparing yourself to someone else in the first place."

In the quiet of your mind, let comparisons cease,	For the beauty you hold lies deep within.
In the dance of your soul, find your own unique peace.	Embrace your own path, let your confidence rise,
No shadows of others can dim your bright light,	In the reflection of self, see the truth in your eyes.
Your worth isn't hidden, it's always in sight.	For the magic you seek is already there,
When you see yourself through the eyes of the world,	In the love that you give and the kindness you share.
Remember your story is uniquely unfurled.	You are your own measure, unique and complete,
No measure can capture the essence of you,	In the rhythm of life, find your own beat.
For your spirit is boundless, your heart ever true.	So, stand tall and proud, let your spirit be free,
You're not made to mirror the lives that you see,	For there's no one like you, and there's no one like me
Your journey is special, just let yourself be.	
In the game of comparisons, no one can win,	

A NEW NATIONAL CAMPAIGN, LED BY POLICE, LAUNCHED OCT 2024

As key partners and stakeholders, we were notified (on 15th October 2024) that a new national campaign being led by the police was been launched on 21st October 2024.

You may have already, by the time you receive this newsletter, become aware of the initiative which has a title of **'When You Are Ready'** - a co-produced, nationally coordinated campaign with the aim of encouraging adult victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation to reach out for support and ensure they feel seen, heard, and supported.

The campaign message they are sending out is: **If you've been abused or exploited as a child, we are here, when you are ready. We understand. We believe. We care.**

Background

As part of the work of the national [Child Sexual Exploitation \(CSE\) Taskforce](#), which was established by Government in April 2023 to enhance the policing response to child sexual exploitation and abuse, the communications team (comprising of Hydrant, TOEX and VKPP colleagues) set up sessions with the Marie Collins Foundation's Lived-Experience Group late 2023 to collaborate directly with victims and survivors to ensure any work developed and delivered put their voices at the heart of this work and the policing response to child abuse and exploitation.

Following these sessions, the requirement was clear - there was a real need for a nationally coordinated campaign, which would seek to encourage further adult victims and survivors to reach out for support (not just from law enforcement) and ensure they feel seen and heard. It was also crucial that any work would be fully informed by those with lived experience from start to finish.

The CSE Taskforce commissioned [Stand](#) (a marketing agency) to deliver on this work and the project team has since been working closely with those with lived experience on every aspect of this campaign, including an extensive research and insights phase and one-to-one interviews, which have created the central hard-hitting campaign film.

The three-minute film features the voices of victims and survivors who have experienced child sexual abuse and exploitation – this includes both contact and online offences. The film does not discuss the abuse experienced but details the experience each victim and survivor had in making the decision to disclose their abuse to a loved one, support organisation and/or the police, and the impact it had on their life thereafter.

The CSE Taskforce hope that the film and associated campaign assets resonates with further victims and survivors highlighting that they are not alone, and this is happening to other people, like them, who are living and thriving.

They also want to encourage further victims and survivors to reach out for support, if that's the right thing to do for them - whether it's telling a friend, or contacting a support organisation, we want them to feel empowered to take a step. The aim is normalise these conversations. For more people to feel able to talk about their experiences with no shame.

They are also signposting to the [bespoke campaign website](#) for links to support organisations.

The CSE Taskforce are hopeful that if someone is ready to take the next step in disclosing their experience, the film and comms products will direct them to a range of services and support organisations, as well as detail how to report to the police.

The CSE Taskforce updated support agencies and police forces well in advance of the campaign launch to ensure call handlers/investigators are aware in case of an increase in reporting by victims and survivors.

Within **CIS'ters** we have noticed in recent weeks that police forces are signposting more adult survivors to us that have recently reported being a victim of familial sexual abuse during childhood.

In Memory of Jo who joined in 2001

Many of our Members will remember with huge fondness Jo, and it was incredibly sad to receive this news.

In late October 2024 we received a phone message from Pete, the partner of Jo (member 477), letting us know that Jo had died last year, on 19th November 2023. He explained that her physical health had been in decline in recent years and her distrust of all health professionals (which she felt had let her down on a number of occasions and had also felt unsafe in many of these settings). Her growing reluctance to engage with health professionals was an added pressure for Jo's family as they witnessed her physical deterioration.

Pete and family begged Jo to get the help that they felt she clearly needed. Whilst the family felt overwhelmed by her decline, Jo remained adamant in her personal opinion that 'she was ok'. If and when help was summoned by the family Jo would more often than not refuse to engage with emergency health services. This included refusing to accept help from ambulance crews that turned up at her family home.



The week before her 60th birthday Jo had a further physical collapse and was admitted to the intensive care unit of her local hospital, and died 4 hours before her birthday. Peter and the children are still devastated by their loss. Jo had a number of progressive physical conditions, including heart disease.

She joined CIS'ters in 2001 and after accessing group sessions she progressed into a volunteer role and then a paid role within our small office.

Her family witnessed the impact of the physical and sexual abuse she had experienced. With emotional support as an adult, from family and friends, she made the decision to pursue a case against the Church which had argued that they were not responsible for the actions of the abusers. Jo was awesome in her determination to pursue those responsible for failing to protect her when in the care of the church and became a trailblazer when the court ruled for the first time, that a Catholic bishop could be legally responsible for abuse by his priests.

We have permission from Pete to include this article and have thanked him for providing the photo.

TRUST REMAINS A MAJOR ISSUE FOR MANY OF US AS SURVIVORS, AND THAT INCLUDES our faith in statutory and other services. The core message from Jo's family, and from within our cisters community, is please do not let that bar you from seeking help especially in an emergency – phone 999 or 111.

REMEMBER NATIONAL 24/7 HELPLINE <https://247sexualabusesupport.org.uk/>

Currently there is a government funded crisis line that is open 24/7 and is for anyone aged 16 and above who lives in England or Wales and who is a victim/survivor of rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment or any other form of sexual violence – at any point in their life. The line is also open to their friends, family or anyone else who is trying to support them.

If you don't have access to the internet, then you can still contact them via free number 0808 500 2222

VITALITY 10K SUNDAY 22ND SEPTEMBER 2024,

In prior newsletters you will have seen that we had been seeking participants to take up the places we had in the 10k event in London. We were so lucky that Neil Odin, the Chief Officer for Hampshire & IoW Fire and Rescue, accepted our plea for fund raisers. He was accompanied by Shantha Dickinson (his deputy) Rob MacDougall (Oxfordshire Chief Fire Officer) plus Mat, Eve, Jacob and Amelia.

Based on their timings Mat, Eve, Amelia and Neil ran as a group, supporting each other – whilst Jacob, Shantha, and Rob headed off individually. At the last count this group of amazing individuals have raised £1,657 (sum includes gift aid) for our small charity. The Give As You Live funding page is still open if you are in a position to help them, to help us <https://donate.giveasyoulive.com/campaign/supporting-cisters-vitality-london-10k-sept-2024>

In a time of compassion fatigue, we are in awe of both their willingness to participate in this physical event on our behalf and to have raised funds, especially as we know that charities for 'adult survivors' are not considered in the same 'donation giving league' as those that cater for child victims.



& Shantha



& Yasmin

Our 8th participant was Yasmin, who took up the challenge as she personally knows someone who is accessing our service and therefore knows more directly about the work that we do within our small national charity to provide emotional support for adult female survivors of familial sexual abuse during childhood. She has sent us a message: *I had the privilege of participating in the Vitality 10,000 on Sunday 24th September. Over the last few years, I have completed several races, though I still don't class myself as a runner but I value the time and space moving outdoors allows me for the physical and psychological benefits.*

*The Vitality 10,000 has been the most inclusive and it therefore felt fitting to run in aid of **CIS**'ters. Running for a charity meant I was in the smiles for miles wave. This is another charity which values personal benefits over a set personal best time. A fitting ethos.*

*Through my professional capacity, I am only too aware of the physical and psychological impact of abuse as well as the associated stigma and ramifications on the individual, their families and friendships. These are often not acknowledged. Consequently, it is recognised all forms of abuse can impact on a person's physical and psychological wellbeing. I feel passionate about improving people's health in all aspects and the work and support **CIS**'ters provide is so appreciated. Being a small charity, every little helps and it therefore felt important to support the charity. I have got to know the work that **CIS**'ters does over the last few years and it has been a very helpful resource for people close to me.*

*Recognising my position of privilege, if I cannot help to open the conversation and reframe the negative feelings those affected already feel, I am reinforcing the stigma and preventing people from benefiting from resources. Often impacted from a young age, there is a judgement from the person and those around them which can be lifelong. Therefore, the work **CIS**'ters do is well received and valuable. I felt it was important to raise the profile, opening a dialogue which helps to break the barriers and I was proud to be part of the team.*

Preparation for the event was a little tricky balancing various commitments but as the charity is such a worthwhile cause this helped provide some much needed motivation. The day itself was lovely and it's always great to run the streets of central London with a great crowd without the usual hustle and bustle of traffic.

*I look forward to supporting **CIS**'ters in the future and am grateful for the work they do. From Yasmin.*

A message from Janie, *who became a Member in 2001*

Note from Newsletter Editor: When we asked if we could use extracts from her emails, her answer was > *Of course you may use anything I have said in my email; if it helps just one person, then my distress will have served a purpose*

Hi CIS'ters I have not been in a good place at all, which meant that writing about it was impossible. However - I think I now can without ending up a soggy mess, crying my eyes out. On 14th February 2023 (yes, some time go) my beloved husband Peter passed away. He had been ill with Parkinson's for a long while, but was only diagnosed in 2018, and that was the root cause of his passing.

Peter had been, for the previous 21 years, my best friend, lover, confidante, advisor, carer (we were actually each other's carers), and soulmate. I am totally lost without him. If I am honest, I would like nothing more than to go and join him; but you can't say that to the Powers That Be in the medical profession, as they throw up their hands in horror.

I did, at my Rheumatologist's behest (I broke down into the aforementioned soggy mess in her office) self-refer for bereavement counselling, which I then had to wait nine months for. I was offered 12 sessions. I'm afraid it was of limited help; I foolishly decided to be honest about how I felt, and I got back a lecture on how I stood to cause an awful lot of paperwork for the therapist, because no-one's supposed to off themselves during therapy!! I ended up giving her the answers she wanted to hear, rather than honest ones, as I wasn't in the right frame of mind to cope with lectures. Truthfully, I was glad when the 12 sessions were done.

On a purely practical note, even simple things like getting groceries or attending hospital appointments have become a nightmare, simply because Peter was the motive power for my wheelchair, and I have insufficient arm strength to self-propel on anything but a flat surface, and then not for many minutes. I did try getting groceries delivered, but found I couldn't cope with a strange man turning up on my doorstep at delivery time.

Emotionally I'm a wreck; night time is the worst - getting into that bed, with the empty space beside me is pure hell, and I find it extremely difficult to get any sleep at all. I have to force myself to eat at least one meal a day. I don't go out other than the supermarket or the hospital, and I can easily go weeks at a time without seeing or speaking to another human if I don't have any dog-sitting bookings (more on that in a bit). I am trying to pluck up the courage to attend a few things locally, but thus far, I have bottled out every time.

I now live alone, with no family (I'm estranged from the entire family, with good reason) or friends to help, and believe me, it's not easy. I have both rheumatoid and osteo arthritis, lupus, fibromyalgia, depression, generalised anxiety disorder, and IBS. I do, however, now have a proper PTSD diagnosis, which has made it easier to insist that I can't cope with speaking to a male GP, not even on the telephone (one time a male GP rang me, and I screamed and threw the phone away from me as though it was a poisonous spider, just as a natural reaction – god's only know what he thought of me!).

I have to believe it will get easier, gradually. I keep trying to think "What would Peter tell me?" That helps, a bit.

Continued on next page

(continued from prior page)

So now, as promised, "**One thing that has helped improve my resilience**" as suggested by Debs in the July 2024 newsletter.

In a word - **Dogs**. I do what the DWP used to call "therapeutic work" as a dog-minder with a home-from-home dog care company. Basically, they recruit (and carefully vet) people who love dogs, have the time to look after them and the appropriate knowledge, and a suitable property for them to stay in.

I am licenced for up to three dogs, but only have dogs from one household at any one time (I did have 3 one Christmas & NY). It's not just an online directory - the company has a 24/7 emergency helpline, for if anything goes wrong, they deal with insurance and the admin side of things, so all I have to do is look after the dogs.

The dogs give me something to get out of bed in the morning for; they are non-judgemental (no dog has ever told me to pull myself together) and the love they have to give is amazing.

Some of my regulars come running in the door when they arrive; they know they're going to have a great time, with as much play and fuss and they want, as much sniffing time on walks as they want, and I generally replicate their home routine to the best of my ability. If they sleep on the bed at home, they sleep on my bed while they're here, for instance.

Some of my guests have issues of their own, and I find myself able to understand them. The rescue from Ireland, Trigger, who was starved and abused, and thus has resource-guarding habits; the timid little lass, Saffy, who was never socialised as a puppy; little Stevie, the blind pug, who had to have one eye removed, and has no real sight in the remaining one, and many more - they all seem to respond well to me, and that gives me a reason to keep going.

As the saying goes, "If your dog thinks you're the best, don't seek a second opinion".

Re Mental Health Services: I admit that having been badly let down by local mental health services, I have trust issues with counsellors and anyone else trying to crawl into my head. In 2011, I was interrogated by two women from the MH service, heard nothing back for months, and thank goodness they eventually sent me a courtesy copy of the report they'd done on me, because it was a total work of fiction. E.g. my comment "I tried cannabis over a decade ago for pain relief" somehow morphed into "she has been using cannabis for over a decade". There were many more things wrong, but that one was a real doozy!

So there we go - sorry it's a bit of a long email.

A message from Caitlin, who joined in 2021

In response to Debs enquiry in the July 2024 Newsletter – the one thing that has helped my resilience has been EMDR therapy.

THE SURVIVORS TRUST CONFERENCE 18TH / 19TH September 2024



Gillian and Kate travelled to Stone, in Staffordshire, to attend a major event hosted by The Survivors Trust.

The title of the event was 'United against sexual violence and abuse in a changing landscape'.

There were over 100 delegates from a range of services and sectors with a wide range of topics to meet the needs of those attending.

The nominated photographer was Tracey Harlow who took amazing photos of delegates and presenters over the two days.

During the event Gillian was invited to give a short presentation to explain how TST was originally set up.



How TST began:

In 1999, representatives from six small charities in our sector came together and met on a regular basis, creating a peer support group for Managers. **CIS'ters** was one of those charities.

At that time the peer based emotional support sessions facilitated much needed energy and ideas, and created the resilience needed to push forward with a "we can do this" agenda when the mountain looked too high for each of our individual services.

The small group opened up soon after to other services in our sector and The Survivors Trust took off.

CIS'ters remains an organisational member of TST.

You can find out more about the TST 2024 event via <https://thesurvivorstrust.org/news/the-survivors-trust-conference-2024/>

A REMINDER ABOUT CLAIMING CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION

We know that there are, still, many victim/survivors of sexual abuse (during childhood) who are unaware that they can claim compensation via this government funded scheme. There is a requirement that the abuse must have been reported to the police. Again, some do not realise that you can still report being a victim of this type of crime even if the abuser is dead. It is not too late. No amount of compensation will truly recompense us for what happened, but it does mean that the name of the abuser is documented by the police and then by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) – and for many that is the outcome they have sought. That the name of the abuser is known to the authorities.

For crimes CICA does set a deadline for reporting, but do not let that put you off – as long as you can explain why there has been a delay in you reporting or submitting a claim. Usually justified by us being emotionally overwhelmed.

Additional note from Gillian: I was one of the individuals who previously could not apply due to the way the scheme had been set up i.e. claimants were barred if they were victims of abuse prior to 1st October 1979 and were living under the 'same roof' as their abuser. This ruling was eventually overturned (on 13th June 2019) following pressure from IICSA and the survivor community. By this time my abuser was dead and I thought I could no longer apply, but this was not the case. I could. For a number of complex reasons, it still took me a long time to apply.

Obviously the system does look for some of corroboration (either in medical records, earlier disclosures to others etc.). I hadn't realised that I would also need to report the crime to the police and again thought this impossible as the abuser was now dead, in fact some years ago.

The biggest barrier to thinking about doing this was that I felt that applying for money, and even accepting it were it to be offered, would reinforce my self-belief (still a nugget held internally) that I was prostituting myself. There were many sleepless nights as I fought with the 'should I, or not'.

Eventually I picked up the phone and contacted the specialist team in my local area that investigated sexual crimes.

I must admit that I was really surprised at how upset I became during the process. I was overwhelmed because I was finally doing it – in a formal session with the police, telling them what he had done to me.

The officer I spoke with was very sensitive and in many ways it reassured me of how far the police had come when responding to disclosures. If I had done this 30 or 40 years or more ago – I doubt they would have been as kind or appreciative of the impact of abuse, especially that committed within a family and the dynamics that silence us as victims.

Once I had the crime number from the police I was then able to apply to the compensation scheme and that took me time, again, as I was struggling with internal feelings. Finally, I did it and their response was to then ask for my medical records which were duly sent off. Eventually after a few requests for additional information from me, I was offered an amount, which was paid into my bank account.

It's such a personal point. What to do with the money – which is not a vast amount, it is tariff based with little ability to negotiate. For any of us, no amount, however large, would be sufficient to compensate for the damage caused. I decided that the money would be used for a specific purpose, to make a difference to my life (in the here and now) and so I used it to replace my car, with a newer model and one that has a boot large enough to eventually put an electric scooter into.

It concerns me that I am still meeting individuals who have not appreciated that this scheme is open for them to apply to. I was recently chatting to someone who had gone through a lengthy court case, after which her abuser was sentenced to prison (for a long time) and had not appreciated that she could apply for compensation. She thought she was time barred from applying – which was not true. Hopefully she will now apply. Or understand that she has the choice to apply.

Reporting, or not, is a personal choice and our reasons for reporting are as unique as we all are. Similarly, a decision to apply for compensation is a similar process. Will applying help me become more resilient emotionally or will it not?



Tolly's Tool Kit (a self-help resource written by Survivors)

Whilst other self-help products do exist elsewhere, none capture the reality of being a female-born victim/survivor of sexual abuse/rape/exploitation within a family environment.

The toolkit comprises 12 Sessions, and pilot stage will be completed by the end of March 2025.

Funding is required to complete that phase of the work (*hence our current fund raising initiative for this, and other stuff we do!*).

Feedback extract from participants in the Toolkit Pilot Phase:

"I was surprised at how much I do find helpful and didn't realise until I wrote it all down"

"Understanding my resilience and why I have struggled with this for so long has helped me to realise I need to be kinder to myself, as I didn't have anyone to show me or be a positive influence"

"This has been helpful to enable me to break down all my experiences into smaller sections rather than getting overwhelmed with too many memories and feelings"

"Window of Tolerance (WoT) was explained a lot better than mental health services did. It makes a lot of sense to help with stress"

"It's made me realise I need to do more mindfulness to help keep me in the WoT. When I fluctuate I think I need to give myself some breathing space"

"Easy to follow. Great session. Easy to understand"

"What surprised me is the realisation I don't care enough for myself/prioritise my own wellbeing"

"Getting better at noticing if I am in a child or adult state. Makes me feel hopeful that things are moving forward"



Peer Support – led by, and for

Feedback from survivors who make contact with us, including those that go on to become Members, explain that they value above everything else that our team members have lived experiences i.e. biological females who, as children, were sexually abused by a member of their immediate/extended family.

Consistently they assert that the greatest value in their contact with us, is that those they communicate with, within our frontline teams, are 'like them'.



24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 2000 247 (Freephone)

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/your-rights-and-options/>

UPSETTING TO READ:

Gisele Pelicot – worldwide society continues to be stunned by the multiple rapes that her husband subjected her to over at least one decade. Her husband, as with the majority of our own abusers (as children) were the last person that would be suspected of such crimes, and where individuals did suspect or discover his monstrous secret, they did nothing and therefore colluded with him until he was caught.

USA – more cases are being unearthed where famous celebrities have exploited their wealth and position to groom and exploit children and young people. Whilst the allegations against Sean (Diddy) Coombs have yet to be tested in full court process – we still reel from the revelations and conviction and 20 year sentencing in 2022/23 of the songwriter R Kelly for his sexual crimes against children and young women.

Archbishop of Canterbury – In November 2024 the Archbishop of Canterbury resigned after a report found the Church of England covered up sexual abuse by a barrister (John Smyth) and that Justin Welby, 68, "could and should" have reported John Smyth's abuse of boys and young men to police in 2013. Survivors continue to call for the immediate dismissal of Justin Welby because although he has resigned no actual date has been set. In addition, survivors are also seeking the dismissal of other officials within the church (& elsewhere) who also had knowledge of the abuse and failed to protect.



Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel is an independent panel commissioning reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. Their aim is to undertake or commission national and local reviews to focus on improving learning, professional practice and outcomes for children.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel>

A recent review focused on the experiences of 193 children who were sexually abused in the family environment. Sadly, for many of these children the abuse they experienced was not identified by professionals, or they did not get the support needed for their safety or recovery. In the report, the CSA Centre set out 10 national recommendations which could fundamentally transform the identification of abuse and the response that children and families receive. Gillian Finch, our Founder, was part of the Survivor (Lived Experience) Forum that took part in the review undertaken by the CSA Centre.

PLEASE DO NOT BE TOO DESPONDENT - although it might feel from these disclosures & the report above that there is a failure to progress, we need also to remind ourselves that in previous decades society would never have been made aware of such cases nor witnessed the call for resignations and convictions.

Yes, there are mountains still ahead of us all, individually and societally – but there have been improvements and a major one has been that CIS'ters was set up nearly 30 years ago, and we have found each other – and more victim/survivors are coming forward on a daily basis.





Breakdown

My time ran out when yesterday
Invaded my today
And my past and present found
themselves
With words they couldn't say.

The walls between my now and then
Had melted with the pain,
And I became incapable
Of building them again.

Yet, hidden in the bleakness of
The landscape that was me,
I found the answer to my need.
And my discovery,

Was that destruction sets the scene
Where creativity
Can find the freedom to become
What I was meant to be,

A blending of my now and then
With no walls in my soul,
The ultimate potential of
My being healed and whole.

By Brenda (214) – joined 1998 / died 2018

Masks – What one shall I wear today!

Check the weather, nice and sunny!

Oh Good! I'll wear a smiley mask today!

Raining! Still a smiley mask! Rain gives life to the beauty of our gardens, to our plants, our herbs, our healers!

Being a Survivor, I've had to wear many masks!

As a teenager, a rebellious, stropo one!

As a young woman, wife and mother, many masks were worn. I didn't want my husband or children to see the hurt/shame in me! But I didn't know why I was hurt or felt ashamed!

In my late '30's, a chance conversation with a cousin triggered flashbacks on several incidents of childhood sexual abuse that happened when I was a child!

Anger, hurt, shame, devastation!

Who could I turn to! Who could/would help?
Images forcing their way into my consciousness!

Then I found CIS'ters by chance!

CIS'ters, showed me that I was not to blame!

It wasn't me who caused the hurt and anger!

It took me to my '60's to go to the Police. They were extremely helpful, I felt believed. My inner child, sighed with relief!

No more masks?!!

But wearing masks goes on, depending on the situation, the event or even just what happens on a daily occurrence.

Now everyone wears masks! Not just for the trauma they experienced as a child, but also the worldwide circumstances we found ourselves in during the COVID 19 Pandemic!

But today, I'm wearing a smiley mask, my inner child is growing stronger and is confident enough not just to put a brave face on, but that's the way my inner child feels!

Brave!

By Cathie (143) – joined in 1997

THE REAL ME

I walked into a room full of pretty faces
and it saddened me.

For each of the pretty faces knew my pain,
had felt it themselves, they understood.

I never realised at that moment how much these
pretty faces would come to mean to me.

A bond developed, so like a band of close loving
sisters.

My fellow CIS'ters are now so close to me.

My fellow CIS'ters have helped to set me free.

I am not responsible for what my father did to me.

Now I am trying to find the person inside who has
lived a life with such intolerable memories.

Memories that shaped the person I was.

Now finding the person inside free

from all of the things that happened.

I am finding the real me.

BY ANON (written in Year 2012)

Hope!

Hope for the future

That

I might walk

Taller

In the knowledge that

I am a

Survivor

Full of

Courage

And wisdom

To know that

I have stretched

Myself

To achieve

Unbelievable

Steps forward

To be

What I am now

A thriver

Nurturing my gentle

Beginning

To a new world.

By Gillian Dec'95

Editorial Statement: We welcome letters from Survivors and from those who support them such as friends/allies/counsellors/social workers etc. While every effort will be made to keep contributions complete and unedited we reserve the right to make amendments when necessary, and will note it as 'edited'. Decisions about the inclusion & amendment of contributions are the responsibility of the Editorial Team, and are final. Contributions do not necessarily reflect the views & opinions of **CIS'ters**, members of the Trust Board, or the Editorial Team. Inclusion of any reference to an individual, book list, or organisation resource is not a recommendation.

The contents of this newsletter are for information and support purposes only.

This newsletter is not a substitute for individual therapy or professional supervision.

CIS'ters, PO Box 119, Eastleigh, Hants, SO50 9ZF Tel: 023 80 338080 www.cisters.org.uk

CIS'ters: an experience in learning, sharing, growing – individually and together
Copyright©1995 (**C.I.S.**'ters & logo combined). ALL RIGHTS RESERVED Registered Charity 1184857