



National Centre for Action
on Child Sexual Abuse

Webinar Snapshot

In Conversation - Healing and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse in Indigenous Communities

In a recent public conversation hosted by the National Centre, former CEO of the Healing Foundation and National Centre Board Member Fiona Cornforth spoke with Professor Helen Milroy and Dr Graham Gee about healing and recovery from trauma in Indigenous communities.

Amongst the rich insights shared, a strong message and a starting point for our conversation is that **child sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility**. We must dispel the myths and misunderstandings and acknowledge, as emphasised by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study¹, that child sexual abuse is a national and global human rights issue, endemic across Australia. It is not a part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and it is everyone's business to create and restore safety.



Aboriginal ways of healing from trauma

Despite the many challenges practitioners face in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and their communities, like how to ground their approach in community and working within a diagnosis and deficit driven system, there is experience and wisdom to learn from. A committed workforce including elders and community members have been tackling these issues for many years and there is much to learn from their experience.



I think many practitioners...have discovered quite quickly in their careers that First Nations Communities do uphold a different standard and they do have this depth of knowledge. Practitioners don't necessarily need to understand the depth of that knowledge of what happens out there [healing on Country], just that it works for our mob.

Fiona Cornforth

Western models and methods of healing and recovery are often time limited and focus on therapeutic approaches like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Therapeutic healing approaches must be done in partnership with cultural healing. Cultural healing acknowledges that healing is an individual journey, and responses need to be grounded at a local level, in local systems of knowledge, with local cultural values that prioritise the safety of children, adults and families, and involve a whole of community response.

The starting point for services is to put culture and cultural safety front and centre of the work, to move beyond cultural awareness training to develop more sophisticated culturally safe systems and services. **Healing needs to be at the pace of the person, not the pace of the service.**



There are many, many ways in which culture can and is being used, and it is incumbent on all of us working in the child sexual abuse space to learn about this. It is a powerful, powerful thing.

Dr Graham Gee

Indigenous ways of healing and recovery teach us to:

- do work on Country, not only in the formal clinical setting
- be in nature, which helps to reduce blood pressure, calm the nervous system and aid emotional regulation
- seek guidance from community Elders, champions and mentors
- work in partnership with Traditional Healers
- use storytelling to help people make sense of their experiences
- encourage body movement in Ceremony and gatherings.



Don't relegate culture to myth and legend. Connection, Ceremony, music, singing, dancing, art, creativity, imagination, nature play, all of the things we do – if you look at the science of wellbeing, Western science is only just catching up with everything we do.

Professor Helen Milroy

Importance of trust, compassion and time

Build trust

Child sexual abuse is a complex interpersonal trauma where victims and survivors feel alienated, marginalised and isolated. Service environments can be unsafe and triggering, and trust is not given just because someone has a professional title. **Aboriginal children, their family and community want to be able to trust a person, not a service.**

To create safe places for Aboriginal people, families and communities to disclose and heal from child sexual abuse, workers must understand and respect Indigenous peoples' belief systems, expertise, cultural knowledge and experiences. Aboriginal people need to be given choice and control over who they see and where.

Have compassion

A strengths-based approach to understand individual needs of victims and survivors sees us ask *What happened to you?, How can we help you?, How can we help you thrive?* rather than *What is wrong with you?, What services do you need?*

We need to create safe spaces for people, especially children, to be heard, where their identity and culture is protected and supported regardless of the service system they are navigating.

Doing this work is challenging and complex and can take a toll on people's physical, mental and emotional health. This can lead to secondary trauma (sometimes called vicarious trauma) and burnout. Self-compassion and compassion towards others is critical.

Allow time

We must proceed slowly. Workers need to weigh things up slowly and gradually, in communication and coordination with Aboriginal mentors to understand if the situation is safe for a disclosure to occur.

Taking time is a challenge as it often falls out of the system level response, but we need to slow things down, take the time and do cultural checks to ensure safe processes are in place, otherwise we can cause further harm.

What needs to be done?

While many workers and services make efforts to integrate Indigenous ways of healing and recovery into their work, there is more to be done, particularly at the systems level to:

- learn from Indigenous communities and practitioners, including those with lived and living experience, about what is and isn't working
 - commission more research into Indigenous ways of healing and recovery
 - advocate for system change, including time to respond, and prioritising safety in the legal and justice systems for Indigenous victims and survivors of child sexual abuse
 - enable collaboration between Indigenous communities, Aboriginal and mainstream services, police and Sexual Offences and Child-abuse Investigation Teams to connect services and supports
 - advocate to governments for adequate funding and support for organisations, including to prioritise the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.
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It's seeing the sparkle in the child's eye when they recover that will always make you want to work in this place and this space. And it is worth it. That is absolutely worth it.

Professor Helen Milroy

[Click here to access a recording of the In Conversation Webinar.](#)

¹Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Meinck F, Higgins DJ, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence DM, Haslam DM, Malacova E & Dunne MP. The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2023, 218(6), S13-18.