

Phoenix Trauma Transformation Initiative



Phoenix
Support & Advocacy Service Inc

Key Learnings from Survivors and the Way Forward

About the Trauma Transformation Initiative

Phoenix Advocacy and Support Service has been delivering a series of interactive workshops to support parents, children, adult survivors and health professionals by raising awareness about child sexual abuse and the impacts of trauma, combined with prevention and education strategies.

This psycho-educational and experiential program is conducted in a safe environment and provides an opportunity for people with experiences that are both unique and shared to come together to feel supported and not alone in those experiences.

These interactive workshops have included a range of therapies that are evidence-based and embedded in trauma-informed practice while providing participants with the opportunity to experience different therapies such as mindfulness and relaxation techniques, and expressive therapies such as art and music and body therapies such as yoga.

Louise Lamont, Phoenix EO



About the Survivor Feedback

As part of the Trauma Transformation (TT) program, participants regularly shared: their experiences of the program; why these experiences matter; and what needs to happen for this kind of support to work well and provide benefits long term.

To deepen our shared learning and inform continued design, a focus group was held in December 2018 with 5 participants. The information below represents the key findings from the focus group and TT workshops so far.

Key Findings

1. **We are better together.** It makes a difference to be with a group of people who have been through a similar experience.
2. **Knowledge and information = empowerment.** Knowledge about things like the impact of trauma on brain development and self-regulation helps us help ourselves.
3. **Services need to be supportive and safe.** Every element of support needs to reflect and model safety of participants.
4. **Experts and professionals need the right training.** People providing support need practical experience and training in working with people who have experienced complex trauma like survivors of child sexual abuse. A university degree is not enough and does not teach empathy, partnership, and building a relationship. It is not all about 'solutions'.
5. **There is no quick fix.** Healing and recovery is a long-term journey and survivors need to be able to access long term support.
6. **Support needs to be multi-modal and integrated.** There is no one solution or strategy that will work alone. People need to learn about many ways to help themselves in an integrated support service where they have trust and relationships.
7. **Sharing our story over and over doesn't help.** Sometimes people don't even need to share what happened. It isn't always relevant to recovery.
8. **Having choices is important.** There are no choices too big or small when it comes to empowering survivors in their own care.
9. **The system adds to the trauma.** Because the elements listed above are most often absent or poor, the trauma is just repeated.
10. **There needs to be much more information about how to access support.** This information needs to come from health practitioners, other NGO's and even support groups. There needs to be more information about Phoenix and how to access our services.

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We are better together.

'The transformation group was very scary but at the same time it felt still very safe and it is sort of that instant group feeling between us all I think.'

'I had wanted to come years in the past but each time I suggested it to the counsellor they would say to me "But why do you want to go somewhere where this is the only thing, they are looking at is that issue?" To me it seems to make sense that you are with a group of people who have been through something that is very similar and that surely it would have made a difference to the pathway that I was following.'

'Counsellors suggested it would retraumatise me if I came back to somewhere that was specific around the trauma. Whereas I would think actually it would have the opposite effect because there's that shared experience and that sort of brings with it a sort of a bonding. I guess that you don't have with a lot of other people.'

'We share the same vulnerability and common limitations.'

'There is comfort in knowing you are not alone, an unspoken sense of validity and acceptance and caring towards each other. Being believed.'

'The sense of isolation diminishes. Knowing there is no one size fits all, all walks of life, I feel more connection and affinity with myself being in the company of other 'normal' women. It has erased whatever entrenched beliefs I had and about what abused women looked like.'

Knowledge and information = empowerment.

'Through Phoenix I learned about how my body operates. It's just like click, click, click and I can see the whole thing before me, and what I can do. This cycle of trauma.'

'It is really important knowledge, and that sort of equipped me to face the world and finally to say, 'this is you and you will be ok'.'

'But then what we found through the brain research is that those pathways through the first 3 years or the first 5 years are so deep that and I

used to say 'it's in my bones. I can't just let things go'. Maybe if I went back to those counsellors now, with the knowledge of the brain development, those ways of treating would be different.'

'I just had wished that someone then had given me some of the tiny bit of information I have had here, because it may have been enough.'

'It's like because the information that Phoenix has given me, I can marry the feelings, and you know the things that don't go together. You know where it came from so, I don't have to repeat it.'

'Since first learning about self-regulation and learning new tools I have learned to have more self-compassion. To pause and slow it down and listen to myself more when stressed or triggered and not be judging or self-rejecting.'

'What I learnt about self-regulation, I learnt to pause, reflect and calm what has been triggered, I discovered that art therapy is a great release for me.'

Services need to be supportive and safe.

'Safety is important but for me it impacted me hugely because I didn't realise how unsafe I had been in my life because that was normal. That's why it hits me now sometimes because the reality is still unfolding and you know without Phoenix I really didn't know where I would be today, to be honest.'

'It's about finding people who are willing listen and it must be an extremely difficult story to listen to but it's finding people who are willing to listen.'

'And with me, it was definitely trust and building relationships and without being able to build relationships then there is none. I mean, that is how you learn about yourself and others is through relationships with others but if you cannot do that because you have never had an opportunity to choose who you wanted to relate to or how you wanted to relate to people.'

'Sometimes I am a little nervous to expose my vulnerability or be in the limelight. However, I feel a natural permission in our group to be me. Safe, no judgement. Quite beautiful.'

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Experts and professionals need the right training.

'And I just figure when we have got these educated people who spend years at the university with all these degrees and whatnot, it's like they have this theory but when it comes to putting the theory to practice and apply it to human beings in every day, they don't have a clue. I know it's very complex, very very complex.'

'Ideally, it would be great to have counsellors that have had some experience although it could provide triggers for them as well.'

'This week's trauma transformation has been lifesaving, changing and has truly and quite simply put me back into the game of life. I have found myself again and have renewed my love for life.'

There is no quick fix.

'I am being seen and heard so that's how it felt when I first arrived here. A lot of validation and then I had to kind of put on the breaks because you sort of thing you do this yearly journey and then I will be done, I am done. I had to learn the rude lesson that no, it is going to take time and eventually I just had to settle with that and kind of make that an integrated part of life and now realising its ongoing'.

'The process of recovery can be a lifetime process and there needs to be a service like Phoenix replicated. So that people know that this is where I can go when things are getting overwhelming and when I need someone who can understand and that you can come back to a place like this.'

'Trauma is a journey you know, and I mean I can understand it's also an appreciation of your point you are making as well that if these persons tell you they can't cope with what you are telling them I have got to respect that. You know if they can't cope with that and they are telling you that you have got to listen to that instead of just thinking well it happened to me so I am allowed to say it, but if someone is telling you it's traumatising them then you have to listen to that, then I suppose I as a person have to respect that as well.'

Support needs to be multi-modal and integrated.

'To look at a person holistically. Just as an example. A teacher says to me 'this child has ADD'. Ok we go to see this doctor, get a referral to a specialist who is going to do a diagnosis. Ok that's all good. Get a diagnosis and go on tablets. As a parent, you are supposed to know what the next step is. But there is no one telling you what the next step is. You have just got to make it up yourself. You are going blind. It's the same with this. You go out there to professional thinking you are going to get heard, going to get help. You go to a doctor get a tablet, do a couple of courses, go to a counsellor but that doesn't pull it all together. It's all quite segmented.'

'The solution is not just one thing. It's not just the yoga, it's the how and where, with whom and how it's set up, so you can't just change one thing.'

Sharing our story over and over doesn't help.

'That's the other thing, you get tired of sharing the story over and over and it doesn't really change a lot. The nugget of what happened doesn't change a lot but just telling over and over can be frustrating.'

'I don't want to tell the story again.'

[What worked well was...] *'Shared experience without having to retell trauma stories'*

'It felt much safer and there is a feeling of being understood without explanation or defenses necessary'

Having choices is important.

'I had a choice - not only about every tiny single thing. And that's just like gets more choices - not only pleasant ones need to be made. But you know, even then it's like I get this warm feeling, like it doesn't matter if it's right or wrong and you hear this stuff, you hear around the world, but it doesn't get in there. And then one day the light bulb goes off and then it all comes from here and I don't know how - so I guess they give us choice.'

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'But it's a big process and I had this thing of choices offered to me and this huge suitcase because there are choices, I didn't know I had. I didn't know I had choices.'

'There is always choice [here]. It took me a while to realise, I had to be told actually.'

'I have many choices in life and there is time to choose and it is okay to do so. Healing doesn't have any order. I have been told that, but some things need to be heard in many different ways'

'I have a voice, I have much to give/say. I can be heard. I need to face my fears and come out and take my place in the world.'

The system adds to the trauma.

'And then having your trust in the medical profession damaged because they had you on medication for years for something that you don't even have. Then you are in the hospital getting off that medication because that's also creating a lot of anxiety because who actually knows? Who is in charge here? And then you have that sense of do you know what? No one is in charge. They are dangerous feelings hey.'

There needs to be much more information about how to access support.

'If I did not chase up trauma-sensitive counselling, I would have got nothing different.'

'Maybe it's something to do for the government to look at how we train people and made them all aware when people first come to you. I went through marriage counselling and my counsellor had this one to one session with me. And she said to me 'I think I need to refer you to Phoenix' and so I was lucky to be advised by the marriage counsellor to come here.'

'Doesn't matter how good my life looks, there is this constant backpack of trouble and trauma that I carry with me my whole life. Health professionals impact you hugely because we trust them. They are a doctor. They know they are the experts.'

'There have to be more Phoenixes because it scares me how little this place is but what huge work you do.'

'The help available I need and there is work ahead of me. Thank goodness for Phoenix. This has seriously been a life line. Really.'

Phoenix Trauma Transformation Workshops attended by Focus Group participants

- 1 x 8-week Trauma Transformation psycho-educational workshop series
- 1 x 1-day educational workshop for parents of child survivors
- 2 x 2-day condensed psycho-educational group for working women survivors
- 1 x 4-week advanced group program for participants that had completed the previous Trauma Transformation Workshops
- 1 x 1-day workshop for women survivors as pre-requisite for Trauma Sensitive Yoga
- 1 x 8-week Trauma Sensitive Yoga workshop series



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