

Meeting Needs and Facing the Complexities of Sexual Abuse through Restorative Justice

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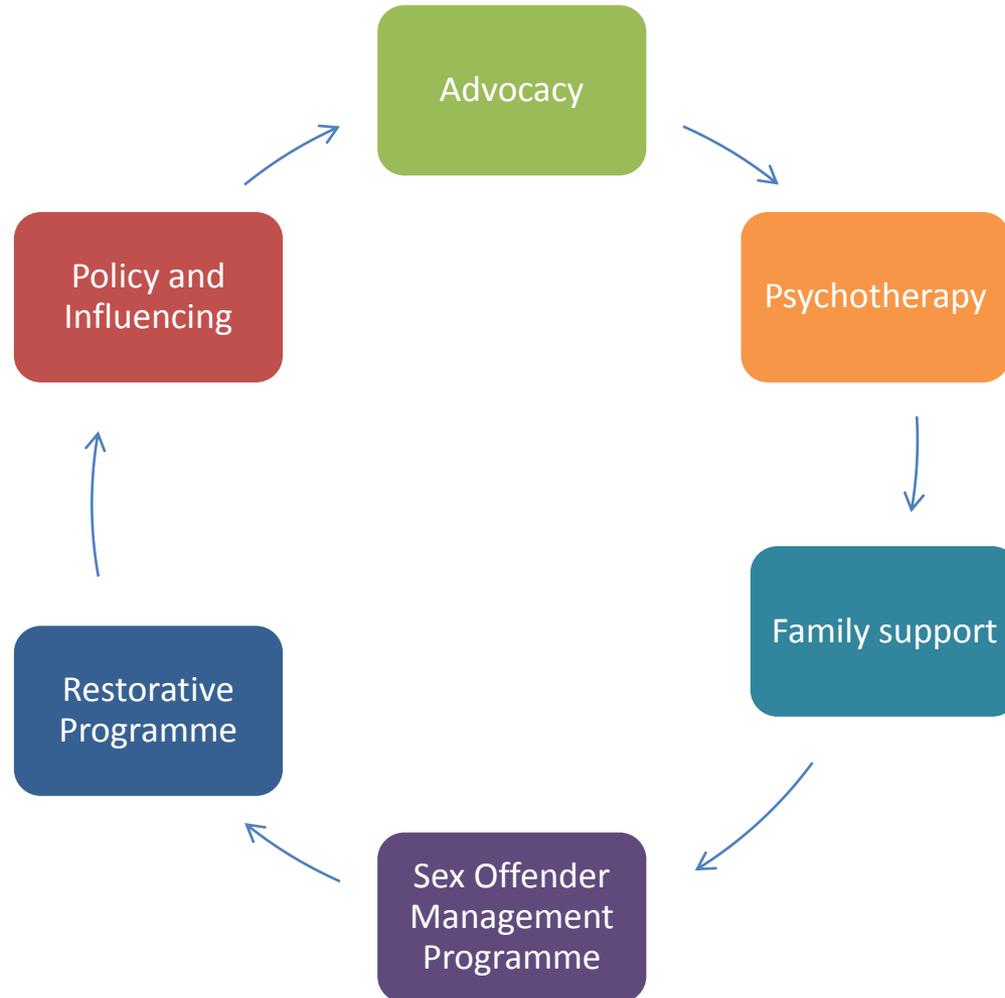


One in Four is an Irish NGO providing professional services to men and women who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood.



- We recognise child sexual abuse is not an isolated act but occurs in a context.
- If an individual is to recover then all the elements of that context need to be addressed.
- We therefore provide individual and group therapy family support and a sex offender therapeutic intervention programme.

One in Four: Intervening in the Cycle of Sexual Abuse



Restorative Programme

Since 2012 we also offered restorative services to clients who either want to meet face to face with those who have harmed them, or, more often, to bring other family members and friends into the healing process.

Restorative Programme

- The survivor will determine if they wish to meet his or her abuser
- Sometimes the offender is not willing or able to sincerely accept the terrible consequences of what they have done.
- **This underlines how crucial it is that RJ facilitators working with sexual violence have wide experience of working in the field and a deep understanding of the intricate dynamics that exist between abuser and abused**

The Model

- What happened?

It can be incredibly important for the harmed person to set the context in describing their experience of the abuse.

- What were you thinking at the time and since?
- What impact has this had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What can be done to make things right?

Two staff members work together, one taking the lead in asking the questions and another supporting and observing. They begin by meeting with family members individually.

Sexual abuse is all about abuse of power, distortion of reality, secrecy and shaming and there is a high propensity for sex offenders to subtly manipulate any meeting with their victims to recreate the original undercurrents, with consequent re-traumatisation of the survivor.

Skills

- RJ facilitators need to comprehend the complex relationships that exist in families where children have been sexually abused.
- Our adult clients often yearn for their experience to be acknowledged by their families of origin.
- Sadly it is more likely that when they disclose, they will be disbelieved and ostracised than that they will be believed and supported.

Case study

Joan has five brothers and sisters. She was sexually abused by her brother Jim from ages 11 – 16. When she left school she became deeply depressed, was drinking heavily and was hospitalised for a time. She had stopped visiting her parents because Jim lived nearby and would hang about and intimidate her.

She came to One in Four at age 21 and disclosed the abuse for the first time. We made a child protection notification re Jim so Joan felt she had to tell her parents. We facilitated a family meeting to support her in this. At first her parents were supportive though very shocked. They promised that they would not allow Jim in the house when Joan visited. Very quickly this broke down and Joan stopped visiting again. She asked that we organise an RP process for her and her parents.

Case study

We had a long series of preparatory meetings with her parents and with Joan separately. Joan continued in psychotherapy during this time. It became clear that her parents thought Joan was exaggerating the harm done and was manipulating the family. Her mother in particular was very angry, and was very torn in her allegiance between Jim and Joan. However, they wanted Joan to become part of the family again. Joan wanted her parents to accept how badly she had been hurt and an assurance that they would protect her from Jim.

After nine months we felt all parties were ready to meet and arranged a conference. Joan described the nature of her abuse, what she felt about it and what she wanted to happen now. Despite all the preparation, her parents' response was unexpected. They minimised the nature of the abuse and informed Joan that they would not choose between her and Jim. The conference ended with Joan stating that she would have to break all contact with her parents.

Outcome

- Joan was devastated by the outcome. But gradually in therapy came to see that her parents' behaviour simply confirmed what she had always known but could not face: that her parents had never protected her and that she would have to deny her own truth and play a family game if she wanted contact.
- Recently another brother and sister have been in contact wishing to engage in a similar process and indicating that they want to support Joan. The process continues.

The Process

- Challenging and usually requires a great deal of time.
- The questions bring in new information and perspectives`.
- They challenge people to think about their experience and often bring new issues to the fore.
- At each step, people may find they need more to time to work through their experience in their own therapy.

Case Study No 2

Andrew contacted us about his brother who had offended against another sibling. He wanted to meet with his brother John to try and understand what had happened, address the harm it had caused within the family in an effort to repair their relationship.

In the process of preparing for them to meet we became aware there were many other complex issues that had existed in the family, domestic violence, neglect and financial dependency. We were always conscious these family dynamics were likely to affect and influence how the RJ process worked.

Andrew and his brother John eventually came together to meet, while some progress was made John identified deeper issues he needed to address if he was truly to understand his actions and take responsibility. This support was then provided by our therapeutic intervention programme. It was hoped they would both come together again in the future.

Case Study No 2

About a year later the sibling John had offended against indicated she would like to engage in the restorative process with her brother. Ann had been sexually abused by John between the ages of 12 and 14 years old. She had told her mother at the time but she did not believe her. Ann also hoped her mother would become involved in the process as she wanted to address the harm her mother's response had caused.

- As we further explored the restorative questions with the different family members the need for individual therapeutic support became central.
- While the sexual abuse was the presenting issue each participant had also been affected by other significant experiences in the family. We felt the family dynamics and the complexity of their relationships would not be helpful in the restorative process.

Since 2012 we have facilitated 12 cases involving sexual abuse and we have learned a lot in the process.

- That participants need to be carefully selected. Not all survivors are suitable for RP processes and their expectations of what is possible need to be carefully explored. Likewise, family members and sex offenders need to be able to recognise the harm caused and their part in it.
- Ideally survivors should have completed psychotherapy and be managing in the world before engaging in an RP process, and additional psychotherapy support be available during the process.
- That RP facilitators need very regular supervision of their work. They are dealing with dark, painful and confusing dynamics and need support in recognising and containing them
- That thorough preparatory work is undertaken and that sufficient time is allowed for this. We realise now that with some cases this can take up to two years.



Finally, RJ facilitation with sexual violence is challenging and skilful work.

While the outcomes are not always happy, our clients generally are very satisfied with the result.

We are currently reviewing the programme and our way of working will undoubtedly evolve in the coming years

Thank you