

Healing Pathways Survivor Consultation Forum Outcomes.

**Empowering survivors of sexual, domestic and family
violence to recover, rebuild and re-connect.**



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Full Stop Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and emerging, and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island histories, cultures and knowledge.

On Thursday 13 October 2022, Full Stop Australia held a Survivor Consultation Forum as part of the Healing Pathways project. Healing Pathways has been inspired by our decades of listening to, and supporting people with lived experience of sexual, domestic and family violence. What we know is that survivors of violence and abuse don't just need crisis support, they need support to recover, re-build, and re-engage. This support is strongest when it is led by those with lived experience, and when it involves opportunities for connection and community.

With the support of The Pinnacle Charitable Foundation, we were joined by 8 survivors online, and 8 survivors in person, as well as our corporate partners Commonwealth Bank, Insurance Australia Group, Thriving Community Partnership, Chief Executive Women, and Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, to discuss key gaps in violence and abuse recovery, and peer support. Those engaged with the National Survivor Advocate Program, who were unable to attend due to limited numbers, were invited to fill out a survey as an alternative means of sharing their experiences and feedback.

What are they key gaps in violence and abuse recovery?

To begin the forum, the group engaged in an open discussion around what the key gaps are in violence and abuse recovery. Knowledge of where to go to access trauma-informed support was identified as a common challenge, then followed by barriers that prevent the use of those resources, for example financial hardship and limited capacity of services.



Additionally, there was an acknowledgment that the process of accessing, understanding, and using resources is made significantly more challenging for those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. They may also face the difficulties of abuse being a taboo topic or normalised in their communities.

The lack of appropriately trained workers in the service delivery system and first responders has made it difficult for people to navigate systems safely, and often results in victim-blaming and re-traumatisation. This may include police, lawyers, Centrelink workers, and banks. This is amplified for people engaged in sex work, who lack safe referral pathways.

"I wish people did not need to provide evidence to access support, and that there was a focus on avoiding repeated disclosures."

Those systems also enable continued abuse by perpetrators of domestic violence post-separation through custody and contact arrangements. Filling the gap of trauma-informed workers in these spaces has the potential to limit that continued abuse.

Students also face significant challenges in maintaining grades and achieving qualifications and would benefit from the options of having fails removed from their academic records if sexual, domestic or family violence had impacted their studies.

“Universities need to extend special circumstances provisions beyond a 12-month time frame to recognise the ongoing impact of trauma.”

Housing support, particularly in regional areas where hotel accommodation may not be available, is a key gap in the immediate safety of people experiencing violence. There is a need for more appropriate housing to be built to aid at each stage of recovery, from immediate crisis support, transition housing, and longer-term options.

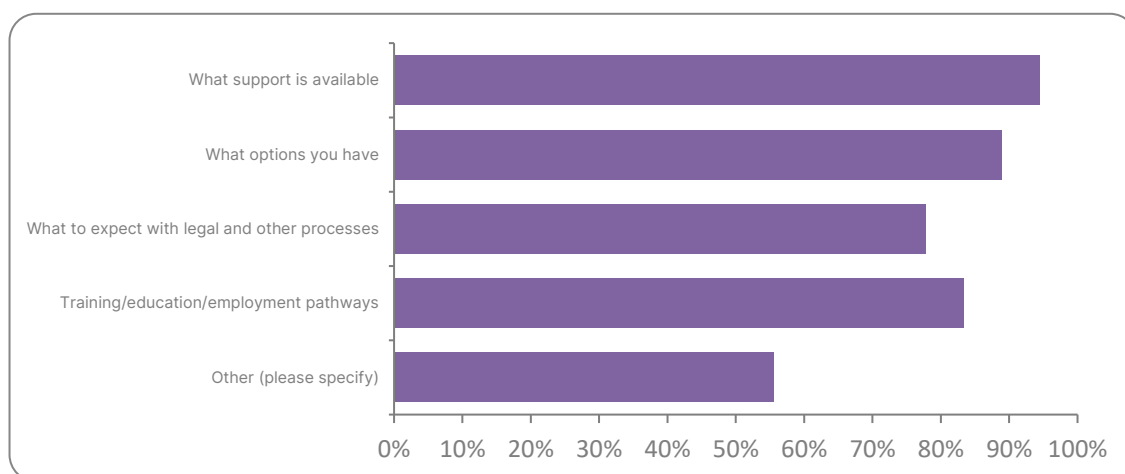
It was also identified that there needs to be support in “moving on” after experiencing violence, not solely focused on the trauma itself, to enable survivors to re-engage, reconnect, and rebuild. Mentors and peer support programs, particularly for middle-aged women, could assist in that reintegration.

“We need support to go from surviving to thriving.”

What services, information and resources should be accessible through the website?

There are a range of resources needed along the journey of recovery, from educational pieces around what is sexual, domestic and family violence, how to recognise if you are a victim, to resources intended to assist people who may be contemplating leaving an abusive relationship, information around the process of reporting crimes, and then support in how to rebuild your life and reconnect in meaningful ways.

“We need to know where to go to access information that will help us recognise what has happened.”



What information should be included on the website?

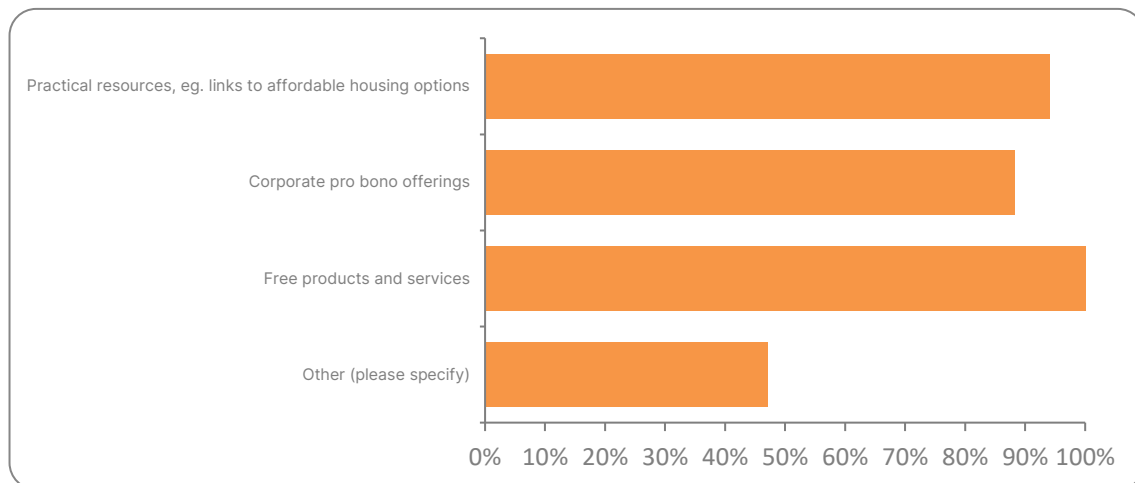
“We need to know the green flags for respectful relationships as well as the red flags for dangerous ones.”

It was acknowledged that everyone is at a different stage of recovery, and resources need to be available to assist at all stages from immediate crisis to the years following. These resources need to be centralised, regularly updated, and would benefit from victim-survivors having the capability to provide feedback on. This information should be presented in uncomplicated and easily digestible formats, including infographics, visual imagery, and step-by-step advice.

“We need step-by-step resources and checklists to work out what to access and where.”

“Knowing what to expect when reporting violence and abuse would have made a huge difference.”

In addition to these resources being simplified where possible, it was emphasised that they must be accessible for all. This may include multiple versions in different languages for people who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and kid and teen-friendly versions. The entire website must be compatible with text-to-speech devices for those with disability and include visual representations for various ability levels. It must also be considered that within these groups, there may be specific needs for additional resources; for example, resources for people who are culturally and linguistically diverse who may have been misidentified as the perpetrator.



What resources should be included on the website?

It would be beneficial to have resources around practical skill development that would again be tailored depending on the stage of recovery the victim-survivor was at. At immediate crisis, this could include information and referrals to discrete locksmiths and IT systems security, and along the journey of recovery could refer to affordable courses to explore new hobbies, and employment/internship opportunities. These resources could also include mental health and mindfulness practices.

“When thinking about going from surviving to thriving, for me, it was about reclaiming myself and finding my power. This involved learning financial skills, reconnecting... finding some stability and support, and mentors.”

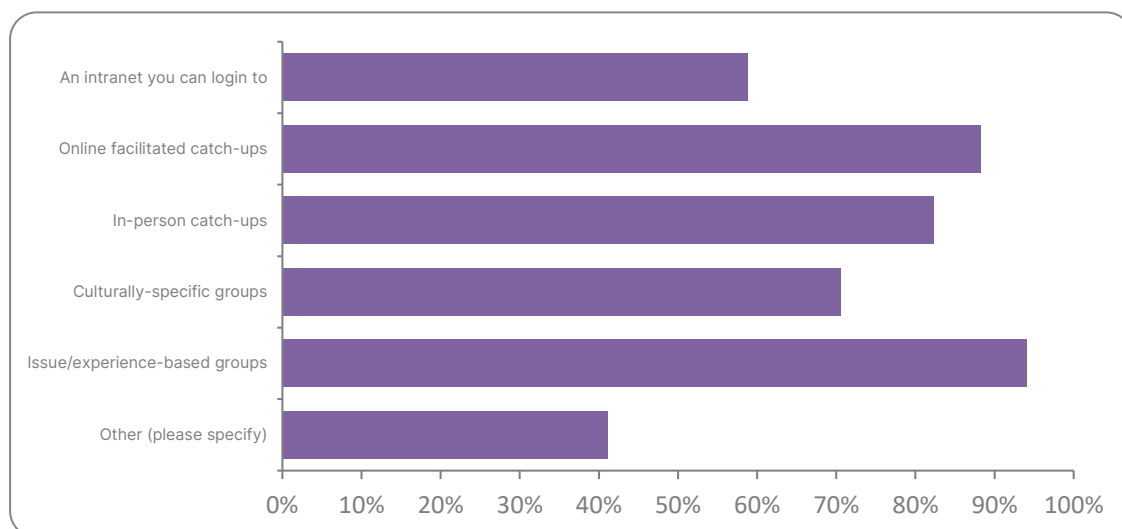
Reconnecting to community was a consistent theme throughout the forum and the survey responses and building resources around this concept would be useful and applicable to many. This could include how to resume employment or education, how to make new friends, how to resume dating, how to build secure relationships, and how to have an enjoyable sex life. Additionally, there needs to be resources for families, friends, and supporters of loved ones, both around how to best provide support and to repair relationships that may have been impacted by the trauma experienced.

“We also need support to reengage with study. I was an HD student and dropped out after I had fails on my transcript.”

What would safe and accessible peer support look like?

Peer support was identified as a key gap in violence and abuse recovery, and an important element of the online hub. It would be used a way to reconnect, and support not only victim-survivors, but also their loved ones. A combination of self-directed and supported navigation would be most beneficial for different needs and stages of recovery. It is also something that would be applicable not only online, but for in-person scenarios as well, for example onsite support for victim-survivors in court.

“We need peer support – it’s so different being supported by someone who has a shared experience, a shared understanding.”



What would safe and accessible peer support look like on/through the platform?

Specific support for community groups including culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, people in the LGBTQIA+ community, people living with disability, and people in the sex working community, would be appropriate and necessary given the unique challenges and experiences faced by these groups in all

stages of recovery. It is important for victim-survivors that they are able to identify with their peers and support networks.

"We all feel some sort of loneliness... this is amplified for migrant victims who don't have any established support network."

"We must also recognise the cultural diversity of victim-survivors and try to match the diversity in support networks as far as practicable."

The unpredictability at which people require support was discussed, with after-hours support options agreed upon as an important element. Procedures would also be needed around peer support workers taking the onus off the victim-survivor to always reach out and may include checking in if no contact is received for a specified period of time.

"When someone is reaching out it is usually at a time they are ready for support. If they don't have immediate support at that time, they may not get the nerve or strength to do it again."

It was also raised as important to the victim-survivors that there were a range of methods to communicate in that peer support setting, whether via a forum, telephone, online chat, or in-person. It was acknowledged that everyone is at a different stage of recovery and have different preferences and comfortabilities in engaging. This was also reinforced from a safety perspective, that depending on the circumstances of the victim-survivor, certain means of communication may be necessary.

"Recovery and healing is lonely. A chat function enables a sense of connection and support."

As victim-survivors navigate their recovery journey they may reach a stage where they are ready and willing to provide that support to others as well. Included in the peer support aspect of Healing Pathways could be an opportunity for training, and ultimately remuneration in this space. This would ensure that survivors continue to be at the centre of this project.

An important discussion around trauma-informed models was raised, including guaranteed safety around anonymity and pseudonyms. It was highlighted that some peer-support spaces are not safe in this regard, and Full Stop Australia would consider the option having professional and consistent moderation to ensure best practice. This moderation would also assist in avoiding triggering and re-traumatisation in an online space where people may share personal stories. The focus of the support group needs to be empowering and uplifting, to avoid getting "stuck" in the victim mentality.

"Avenues which are safe for survivors to speak is essential."

What are the common themes and priorities?

Overall, the correlation between trauma and loss of identity was a major theme throughout the event, and in the survey responses. A service like Healing Pathways is

imperative to connect victim-survivors to community, mentors, the broader system, and ultimately, reconnect them to themselves.

It was also emphasised in all discussions the need for this to be an inclusive and representative space. Diversity of stories and experiences is important in building a supportive framework for all.

“There is nothing more powerful than lived experience. The more we are represented, the better for all.”

Finally, success stories should be an integral part of the online hub to encourage victim-survivors and provide reassurance that the journey from surviving to thriving is possible and achievable with support. There should be a focus on carving out an identity outside of trauma, fostering new passions and hobbies, and rebuilding. Ultimately, people looking for resources, information, and peer support, are also searching for hope.



A feedback survey was provided to all participants following the event, gauging satisfaction level, and seeking both highlights and improvement areas for future consultations.

“Thank you for making this a safe space.”

“I would find it useful if we took stock on diversity/lack of diversity... an introduction of the diversity in the space today and also an acknowledgment of the voices that are not represented.”

“I felt heard, seen and taken seriously.”

"I like when there is a balance between acknowledging that sexual assault and family violence is inherently a heavy and depressing topic and making space for that, whilst also creating a non-depressing working environment that holds out hope."

"The only thing I could say is that it felt like we all would have loved more time to speak and share our ideas, tips and valuable information."

"There was so much great discussion and work done."

"Loved meeting everyone and knowing I am not alone in my journey."

For more information on Healing Pathways, contact Hayley Foster, CEO of Full Stop Australia, at info@fullstop.org.au or on (02) 8585 0333.