

The Case For Counsellors In Youth Refuges

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Victorian youth refuges are full of young people fleeing family violence. With the now well-researched consequences of the trauma this violence leaves in its wake, therapeutic responses are more important than ever. Counselling programs to assist young people to recover from their experiences can go a long way to assisting them into safe and secure housing and escape the cycle of homelessness. Hope Street is funded for just such a program, and I am lucky enough to be in that role.

I am the Youth Reconciliation Program (YRP) Practitioner, which is predominantly a supportive role for young people and their children living in the Hope Street refuge. As young people often don't respond well to the word 'counsellor', Hope Street refers to me as a specialist practitioner and I introduce myself to residents as a person they can chat to at any time about anything. The program has an emphasis on early intervention, and this is supported by a literature review from Barker, Humphries and McArthur.¹ The review concludes that the earlier services are able to intervene, the more likely they are to assist in ameliorating the causes of homelessness for young people.

Residents of the refuge can access the Youth Reconciliation Program at any time during their stay and ex-refuge clients can remain with the program for three months after they leave the service. The principal function of the Youth Reconciliation Program is to provide one-to-one counselling support for clients, both in the refuge and in an outreach capacity. An important component is to obtain feedback and evaluate the amenity of the refuge stay from the client's perspective. It is during the counselling sessions that clients open

up about how they are feeling, particularly about their stay in the refuge, as the environment is often unfamiliar and sometimes unnerving for any young person. Thus, advocacy plays a significant part of the mantle of the Youth Reconciliation Program, in that clients will request mediation between themselves and their families or peers, other residents and sometimes even their workers. I concentrate on helping residents hone their communication skills, which assists them to problem solve and function successfully in a communal environment.

In my role, I use a solution-focused therapy with residents, which emphasizes strengths and solutions, rather than problems or perceived deficits.² I try to assist young people to become what De Shazer describes as customers in the helping relationship, as opposed to complainants or visitors, thereby guiding them towards solutions to their homelessness. I also employ the miracle question to help them focus on what life could be like if their current circumstances were miraculously different.³ This assists them to concentrate on the solutions at hand and develop achievable goals. Refuge residents can present with multiple concerns, as a result of the trauma experienced from having to flee family violence and reside in crisis accommodation. They are sensitive to the refuge organisational structures and practices, particularly the relationships that they build with workers. These connections can have a critical impact on the young person's perceptions of homeless services and the level of trust they place in them.

The research that underpins the need for trauma support for homeless youth focuses mainly on the efficacy

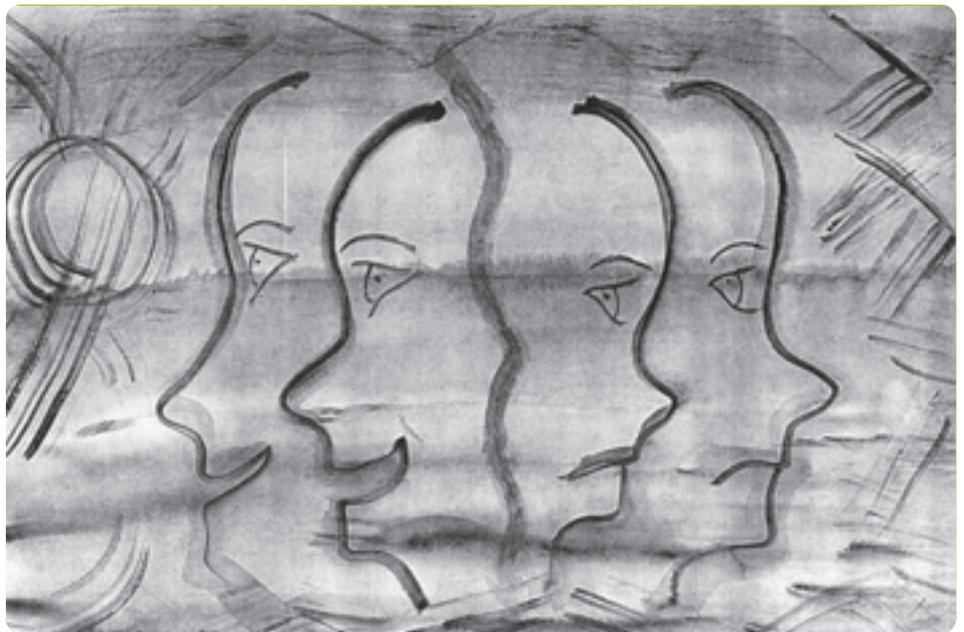
of services. The majority of the literature is based in the United States and Canada, with some more recent findings from Australia, but little of it is refuge specific. What is apparent, however, is that the existing research suggests that trust and agency are of paramount importance when working with traumatised young people. The recommendations that come from the literature revolve mainly around the need for flexible environments that provide safety and security for clients and therefore aid in their recovery from trauma. Another finding is that flexible program structures have the most benefit for clients. A consistent recommendation is that programs should strike a balance between the concern for rules or adherence to guidelines, and the development of therapeutic and individualised responses to offer succour. Having a counsellor at Hope Street provides young people with just such assistance. It also illustrates that advocacy for young people can ameliorate any sense of power imbalance from which they may have escaped, while building on their current strengths and skills.

Research suggests that it is difficult to quantify rates of trauma within homeless youth populations, due to their transient nature and reluctance to seek help. This is compounded by an inherent distrust of service providers and a fear of victimisation^{4,5,6,7} What has been found, however, is that among homeless youth, the majority of reported trauma stems from physical and emotional abuse,⁸ and being homeless exacerbates their vulnerability to further distress.⁹ From their sample of 145 homeless youth, Bender et al¹⁰ found that the notion of trauma was linked to the physical and mental effects of the harmful events they had suffered and

that these were repeated throughout their episodes of homelessness. Coates and McKenzie-Mohr¹¹ used semi-structured interviews, along with an established trauma symptom inventory and trauma history questionnaires, to demonstrate the extent to which stressful events pervaded the lives of homeless youth. The effects of these experiences of trauma were repeated and ongoing, altering their perceptions and resulting in anger and anti-social behaviour.^{12, 13}

When considering efforts to improve the recovery experience of trauma, it is recognised that homeless youth require care and assistance from workers they can trust and who will restore their faith in themselves as valuable members of society.¹⁴ The growing knowledge and understanding of trauma informed care (TIC) over the last decade has increased the ability for homelessness services to more therapeutically respond to the needs of their clients. Focusing on safety is considered the first imperative when implementing TIC, followed closely by the establishment of positive relationships with staff. Professional therapists are not necessarily required to apply therapeutic practice, as long as a sense of connectedness is established between clients and workers.¹⁵ This not only reinforces a sense of safety but also one of empowerment, particularly if clients are able to participate in developing programs that are tailored to their needs.¹⁶ Programs that utilise strength-based approaches are considered best practice, supporting clients to manage their emotions, rather than responding with punitive methods.^{17, 18} Thus, an on-site counsellor at a refuge allows a young person the safety and security required to work through any negative emotions with which they may be struggling.

Working with traumatised youth who reside at Hope Street refuge has highlighted to me that they are looking for workers they can trust to be caring and compassionate and to assist without judgement. Thus, relationship building is the vital ingredient to engendering a sense of confidence in the place they are calling home, despite the length of their stay. This means that sometimes



the formal process of counselling is not always required but what is more important is someone for them to talk to and who will simply listen to their concerns. When working with clients, I refer to the basic tenets of counselling; unconditional positive regard, active listening, and empathy for their situation. Hope Street recognises that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy are appropriate as counselling tools. But what we also recognise is that young people who have survived trauma, respond well to knowing that their workers hold their care and holistic wellbeing as paramount. This is achieved via our multi-disciplinary team approach, utilising TIC and supported by my presence across all Hope Street sites. This approach is integral to my practice as the Youth Reconciliation practitioner.

* Kat has been the Youth Reconciliation Practitioner at Hope Street for two and a half years. Kat has a history of working with traumatised and marginalised young people in youth justice and education settings.

Endnotes

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