



FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS:

**SUPPORTING VICTIM/SURVIVORS
OF INSTITUTIONAL AND OUT
OF HOME CARE**



ALLIANCE FOR
**FORGOTTEN
AUSTRALIANS**

Forgotten Australians: Supporting victim/ survivors of institutional and out of home care

This booklet is designed to inform and assist doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, dentists, social workers, counsellors and welfare workers.

It is an essential resource for service delivery organisations.

It aims to give health and other professionals the requisite background information to recognise, relate to and assist people experiencing long-term trauma because of a childhood spent in orphanages or children's homes – the Forgotten Australians.

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Who are the Forgotten Australians?

The people who identify as Forgotten Australians are now adults, some of them in their fifties, some very elderly. They are victim / survivors of institutions, the standard form of out-of-home care in Australia for most of the 20th century.

The 2004 Inquiry of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee estimated that more than 500,000 children (a figure that includes child migrants and Indigenous Australians) experienced care in an orphanage, children's home foster care, jail, training school, adult psychiatric hospital, or other form of out-of-home care during the last century in Australia.ⁱ

Children were placed in care for a myriad of reasons.

These included being orphaned or born to a single mother, family dislocation from domestic violence, divorce or separation, family poverty and parents' inability to cope with their children, often as a result of some form of crisis or hardship.



Supporting survivors of institutional and out of home care

Many children were made wards of the state after being charged with being uncontrollable, neglected or in moral danger, not because they had done anything wrong, but because circumstances in which they found themselves resulted in them being status offenders.

Others were placed in care through private arrangements usually involving payment to the children's home.

Irrespective of how children were placed in care, it was not their fault.

Given the estimated half a million Australians placed into institutional care during the last century, it is likely that many services and practices already have Forgotten Australians and their families among their clientele.

Inquiry, apologies, redress and Royal Commission

In 2003/04, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee held an inquiry known as ‘Children in Institutional Care’.

At its conclusion, two reports were tabled in the Senate:

- *Forgotten Australians – a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out of home care as children (the ‘Forgotten Australians Report’) 30 August 2004*
- *Protecting vulnerable children – a national challenge on the inquiry into children in institutional or out of home care 17 March 2005*

These reports raised significant social justice issues and revealed the litany of neglect, physical and sexual abuse and criminal assaults perpetrated on vulnerable children in care last century.

By way of response, a series of apologies were announced by national, state and territory parliaments, formally acknowledging the harm caused to children in institutional care. These apologies marked important steps toward truth, justice and healing.

Redress schemes of different forms were also established. While the AFA has consistently lobbied for a national redress scheme, the scheme announced in 2018 remains limited to those who experienced sexual abuse. AFA continues to advocate for expanded eligibility.

A Royal Commission was announced in November 2012.

National Apology (2009)

On 16 November 2009, the Australian Parliament formally acknowledged and apologised for the experiences of Forgotten Australians and child migrants, their harsh treatment and their ongoing trauma.ⁱⁱ

State and territory parliaments and leaders, before and after the National Apology, made formal acknowledgements and apologies to those who suffered in state care.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012 – 2017)

The Royal Commission enabled many people who had been children in the Australian institutional care system to tell their stories, often for the first time. While this opportunity was welcomed, such recollections caused great pain for many victim / survivors and their families.

National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (2018)

On 22 October 2018, the Australian Parliament formally acknowledged and apologised to victim/survivors and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ

Where will you meet Forgotten Australians?

As a result of trauma, many Forgotten Australians remain in the health and welfare system, seeking and receiving help for conditions such as mental illness or substance abuse. They may approach service delivery agencies because of specific issues, e.g. homelessness, family violence or unemployment.

They may come to the notice of child protection agencies or the criminal justice system; they may already be in prisons or in mental health facilities. They will almost certainly be among your existing clients, usually without mentioning their abuse.

That abuse is, however, often the root cause of their problems.

Some may identify as Forgotten Australians, others by terms such as 'Care Leaver', 'State Ward' or 'Homie' but there is an array of terms that individuals self-identify with.^{iv}

Some will need your understanding and assistance to help them acknowledge and speak of their experiences.



What did they experience?

“ **The Senate Committee reported that they had:**

...received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in out-of-home care....their stories outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault....neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare.^v

There was a systemic failure by governments and providers to give children care and protection.

— Separation, abandonment and loss of family

These children suffered from deep and lasting feelings of separation and abandonment. The loss of family, usually including separation from siblings, caused grief, feelings of isolation, guilt, self-blame and confusion about their identity.

— Deception

Many children were told (untruthfully) that their parents were dead or did not care about them. Parents were told that their children had been moved or had misbehaved and could not be visited.

— Neglect and exploitation

The Senate report also revealed a history of neglect and cruelty by institutional staff and management, of abandonment and exploitation that have left the victims physically and psychologically scarred. Physical deprivation was common. Children were cold and hungry. Hard physical labour was part of their daily lives. Particularly demeaning and difficult tasks were given as punishments.



— Sustained brutality

Punishments for small offences or perceived disobedience could be harsh and cruel, e.g. physical attacks and beatings, or children were locked in solitary confinement or made to stand for hours in one position. Bed-wetting was punished with beatings, cold showers and humiliations. Some children were subjected to genital shocks with electrical diodes.

— Sexual assault

Many children experienced sexual abuse and assault. This came most commonly from the so-called carers, but also from visitors to the orphanage and from other children.

— Poor health care, including denial of dental care

The Senate Inquiry heard many stories “...of minimal medical attention [and] often lack of or late treatment of injury or illness for which many care leavers have suffered long-term complications. Dental health was also poor.” Some children also suffered long-term physical consequences of ill-treatment or abuse.^{vi}

— Spiritual abuse

Spiritual abuse involves the exploitation of religious or spiritual power to manipulate, dominate or control others, leading to harm. This type of mistreatment is often ongoing and takes place within religious settings, amounting to emotional and psychological abuse. It happens when those with religious authority use their influence to exert control and manipulation - often claiming it's justified by divine will. Ultimately, this results in a significant loss of personal freedom and causes emotional pain.

— Denial of educational opportunity

Many children in institutions received an inadequate education. Many did domestic work, some were put to work earning income for the institution (children as young as eight worked on farms or laundries). Abused or neglected children, with untreated health problems, enduring constant taunts of stupidity and worthlessness, find it difficult to concentrate in a learning environment.

— Removal/loss of identity

Children's names were often changed to suit the institution and personal records are generally sparse. Many were falsely told their parents were dead or had abandoned them. Children were told they were bad, worthless and in need of reshaping; it was easier to change behaviour and suppress their own personalities than to risk the punishments that came to 'bad' children.

— Indigenous Forgotten Australians

Many Indigenous children were among the Forgotten Australians, losing their connection with their culture and land.

— Drug testing

In some institutions, new drugs were tested on children, sometimes for prolonged periods.

— Lack of post-care support

At around 15, most young people left institutions with few resources or life skills, often with functional difficulties resulting from their experiences. The transition period proved daunting and led to many adopting criminal habits to survive.

The long-term impacts



Being separated from their families as children, most Forgotten Australians grew up deprived of love, support and individual attention. Many also suffered physical deprivation and abuse.

As a result of trauma, many Forgotten Australians have complex and specialised needs which are often not being met. It must be emphasised that the lasting impacts outlined below by no means apply to all adults who were in institutions as children; however, the Senate report concluded that:

... the outcomes for those who have left care have, in the main, often been significantly negative and destructive.^{vii}

Forgotten Australians are victim/survivors. Many have great strengths. Others retain childhood coping strategies that can make dealing with other adults difficult. Among the lasting effects are:

— A lack of trust and security

Feeling abandoned by parents, often separated from siblings and suffering maltreatment at the hands of socially respected authority figures, many Forgotten Australians learned to trust no-one and to live with the stigma of not having a family.

— A lack of social skills

Childhood abuse can hinder the development of normal, healthy life skills. Abused children miss out on learning how to express feelings appropriately, relate to others and develop trusting relationships.

“ ... In a very fundamental sense, children who have never been interacted with have no idea how to interact with others – and no idea that they are not actually doing so.”^{viii}

— Risk behaviours

Self-harming, substance abuse, seeking risky situations, sexual risk, suicidal thinking and actual suicide are not uncommon.

— Inability to form and maintain loving relationships

One profound impact of institutional life is the difficulty in initiating and maintaining stable, loving relationships. Many Forgotten Australians have broken marriages. Others have lived alone all their lives and some have chosen not to have children.

— Inability to parent effectively

Lack of loving role models and poor treatment from so-called carers have left many Forgotten Australians unable to love and care for their children. Abused themselves, many learned no other way of treating their own children; the intergenerational neglect and violence continues.

There might be notifications under the child protection system. They may even have had their children removed. Of course, many do not abuse their children but their capacity to be loving, appropriate parents might be limited because they have grown up without parental role models.

— Spiritual abuse

The effects of spiritual abuse are extensive and can influence psychological, spiritual, social and practical aspects of an individual's life. Individuals affected may experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders and pervasive self-doubt.

A significant impact involves spiritual harm; individuals may perceive their relationship with God as diminished or absent, prompting them to question personal faith, self-worth or their right to hold religious beliefs. Furthermore, reconciling personal convictions with doctrines imposed by an abuser often leads to profound internal conflict. This process can result in internalised shame and trigger a crisis of identity, in which individuals feel they have failed or are unworthy.

— Poor health

Physical injuries and untreated illnesses cause lifelong pain to many Forgotten Australians.

— Mental illness^{ix}

- Depression, often linked to PTSD, is the most common mental illness experienced by victim/survivors of childhood abuse. Anecdotal evidence suggests that suicide ideation and the suicide rate among this group is high.
- Many also suffer from symptoms of anxiety, including panic attacks, nausea or sweating. Fears that appear irrational may be related to painful childhood experiences.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder comprises distressing memory-experiences, in the form of flashbacks, along with symptoms of anxiety or depression.
- Dissociation also occurs, evidenced by such symptoms as an absence of awareness of external events, or the absence – or alteration – of a bodily sense over a period of time.
- Victim/survivors can experience psychosomatic illness, where physical symptoms of mental pain can include chronic pelvic pain, irritable bowel syndrome or severe headaches.
- Personality disorders – entrenched behaviour patterns based on the overuse of certain personality traits – and severe borderline personality disorder (characterised by self-harming behaviour and difficulty in maintaining long-term relationships) often reflect childhood abuse. Survival strategies learnt as children continue into adulthood, instead of developing the emotional and behavioural skills needed to cope with adult life.

Working with Forgotten Australians

— Developing trust and conveying belief

Children in institutions were generally told that they would not be believed if they disclosed their abuse. Many tried and found this to be true. As adults, they still feel reluctant to talk about their experiences to anyone who has no knowledge or understanding about their history. This can extend even to partners and children. They can even begin to doubt themselves:

“*A survivor whose abuse experience was not believed in childhood might continue to doubt their adult views and experiences.*”^x

Support organisations report many cases of people who have not, after many years of marriage or partnering, ever revealed their childhood experiences to any family members.

Forgotten Australians have tried to put the past behind them. Many find the revelations painful, limiting the capacity of health professionals to diagnose and treat Forgotten Australians' trauma – the deep-seated cause of their physical, emotional, sexual or mental health problems.

— Fear of authority – be aware of power issues

Insecurity translates to a fear of authority, extending to bureaucracies of any kind. Many react with anger or fear when they experience frustration or think they are being bullied.

It is important to understand that the feeling of helplessness in the face of power is deep and long-standing. Service delivery agencies can seem faceless and hostile to people who don't expect to be heard or treated fairly.

Counselling victim/survivors of abuse demands sensitivity and patience. It is important to allow them to keep control, including over the pace of disclosure, and to build and maintain trust.

... Equality in the interactive process and a collaborative style with regard to advice and opinion help to counter the past power imbalance.^{xi}



— Consult and show respect

Involving Forgotten Australians and their families in the design of programs aimed at assisting them will show respect, reassure and not re-victimise them.

Identify the strengths of victim/survivors.

All victim/survivors have strengths and coping mechanisms. Work with them to help them recognise these and tailor them to develop effective and appropriate responses.

— Involve family / trusted people

When consent has been provided by a Forgotten Australian, you can include survivors' families and/or trusted significant people, as identified by the Forgotten Australian, in the healing process. They need to understand the Forgotten Australians' experiences and how they impact on the lives of all family members.

Proving identity can be challenging for Forgotten Australians; many institutions did not prioritise the preservation of records. Accessing records that do exist can be laborious, difficult and painful; the Find and Connect Services in each state and territory can provide assistance.

Access is compounded because names were frequently changed when children entered care. Many Forgotten Australians do not know whether they received the appropriate vaccinations or had certain childhood diseases.

Some Forgotten Australians changed names again when they left care. Some married and had children under their new name, despite it not always being legally registered.

— Literacy and numeracy issues

Because of a neglected education, many Forgotten Australians struggle with literacy and numeracy. The accompanying shame can prevent them from seeking treatment or assistance.

If possible, make information available in other than printed forms and respond quickly to signs of discomfort from someone asked to read something or to complete a form.

— Be aware of gender issues

Working effectively with a Forgotten Australian may be influenced by your own gender and their experience of abusers, especially in a counselling situation. It may be necessary to ask whether they would prefer a counsellor of a different gender.

— Fear of physical contact

In cases of sexual and/or physical abuse, there can be a lasting fear of physical contact. It can, for instance, be traumatic to go to a dentist or to be examined intimately by a doctor.

— Fear of institutionalisation

The fear being institutionalised again is all too real as Forgotten Australians age. A retirement home may seem pleasant but the memory of their helplessness in the face of ill treatment can provoke resistance and terror. Enabling Forgotten Australians to stay in their own homes for longer is preferable. When the moment comes to move to residential care the provider should involve them in decisions, work with family, remain aware of their history and be responsive to their needs.

— Group work

Group work can assist some victim/survivors to combat isolation and the feeling that their own truth is too painful and shameful to reveal. Others, of course, prefer one-to-one interaction with a person they trust.

— Care for health and welfare workers

Ongoing work with victim/survivors of abuse can be challenging and emotionally demanding for counsellors and health workers. Workers must be adequately supported so they can maintain their equilibrium and professionalism and continue to provide effective assistance.

Support groups



For information about the national network of Find and Connect Services for Forgotten Australians phone 1800 16 11 09.

Please visit AFA's website forgottenaustralians.org.au where information and services relevant to Forgotten Australians are updated regularly.

Endnotes

- ⁱ *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004.
- ⁱⁱ Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, 16 November 2009.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse, 22 October 2018.
- ^{iv} The Australian Senate called them 'Forgotten Australians'. Some people use other terms, such as 'care leavers', 'Homies', 'State Wards' and 'ex-residents'. Forgotten Australians is considered the least likely term to give offence.
- ^v aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/%20Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/b1exec
- ^{vi} *Forgotten Australians*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004 p111
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p145
- ^{viii} *Orphans of the Living: Growing up in 'care' in twentieth-century Australia*, Penglase, J., Curtin University Books, 2005, p307
- ^{ix} *After Abuse*, Mammen G., Melbourne ACER Press, 2006, pp82-96
- ^x *Ibid.*, p69
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p40



The Alliance for Forgotten Australians is a national coalition of support groups and individuals working to promote the interests of Forgotten Australians.

Please visit the AFA website where information and services relevant to Forgotten Australians are available, along with details about AFA's advocacy, media coverage, newsletters, governance, reports and resources:

forgottenaustralians.org.au