

Older victims finally break silence



JOHN FEDER

Karen Synnott waited decades to seek professional help for sexual abuse she suffered as a child

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It took almost four decades and an emotional breakdown resulting in hospitalisation for NSW grandmother Karen Synnott to acknowledge the effect of childhood sexual abuse and seek help.

Abused by a close family member from the ages of eight to 13, Ms Synnott is typical of a generation who felt ashamed, powerless and unworthy of help, believing the best way of dealing with the trauma was to repress their secret.

That attitude is slowly changing, partly as a result of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Research released today to coincide with Adults Surviving Child Abuse's annual Blue Knot Day — aimed at raising awareness of the tangled knot woven by abuse for an estimated five million adult Australian survivors —

shows that in the past year, there has been a significant increase in the average age of the more than 500 callers to its 1300 support line.

In the year to September, 70 per cent of callers were aged 40-69, with 27 per cent 50-59. In the year to September last year, 30 per cent of callers were aged 40-49. This year that fell by 7 per cent, while the number of callers aged 50-59 increased 10 per cent.

The royal commission's interim report established that it takes an average of 22 years for survivors of abuse to disclose it.

ASCA's data revealed it often takes longer to seek help, with 19 per cent of victims aged 60-69 and six per cent in the 70-79 group calling the professional support line for the first time.

Ms Synnott was 47, with three children approaching adulthood, when she finally sought help, having disclosed the fact of her abuse, but little detail, to her husband

and very close friends. The former school principal said a breakdown that saw her "shatter like a dropped vase" and being diagnosed with severe major clinical depression with psychotic features prompted her to seek professional help.

Now 58, Ms Synnott said it was shame, guilt and fear of being judged that led to her keeping her abuse secret for so many years.

"I had a belief and I carried a mantra that worse things happen to other people," she said.

"I believed I wasn't worthy of complaint. I believed I was bad and dirty and somehow deserved (the abuse), because as a child that's how I felt.

"As an eight-year-old child, I also literally had no words to describe what was being done to me. There was no sex education, no child protection, no mandatory reporting. I actually did not know the words, and even if I had,

who would I have spoken to?"

With the help of family, friends, professionals and medication, Ms Synnott said she had slowly worked hard to rebuild her life, and acknowledgment of her abuse had been integral to that.

ASCA president Cathy Kezelman said the increase in the average age of callers was largely because of the inquiry. "We're seeing a lot of cases of historical abuse going back to the 50s, 60s and 70s. People who've held these secrets for decades finally feel they're being given permission to speak about them," she said.

The study also showed 74 per cent of callers were women.

The number of older callers highlighted the need for governments to commit to a national redress scheme before it is too late.

Support is available from the ASCA professional support line on 1300 657 380, 9am-5pm daily.