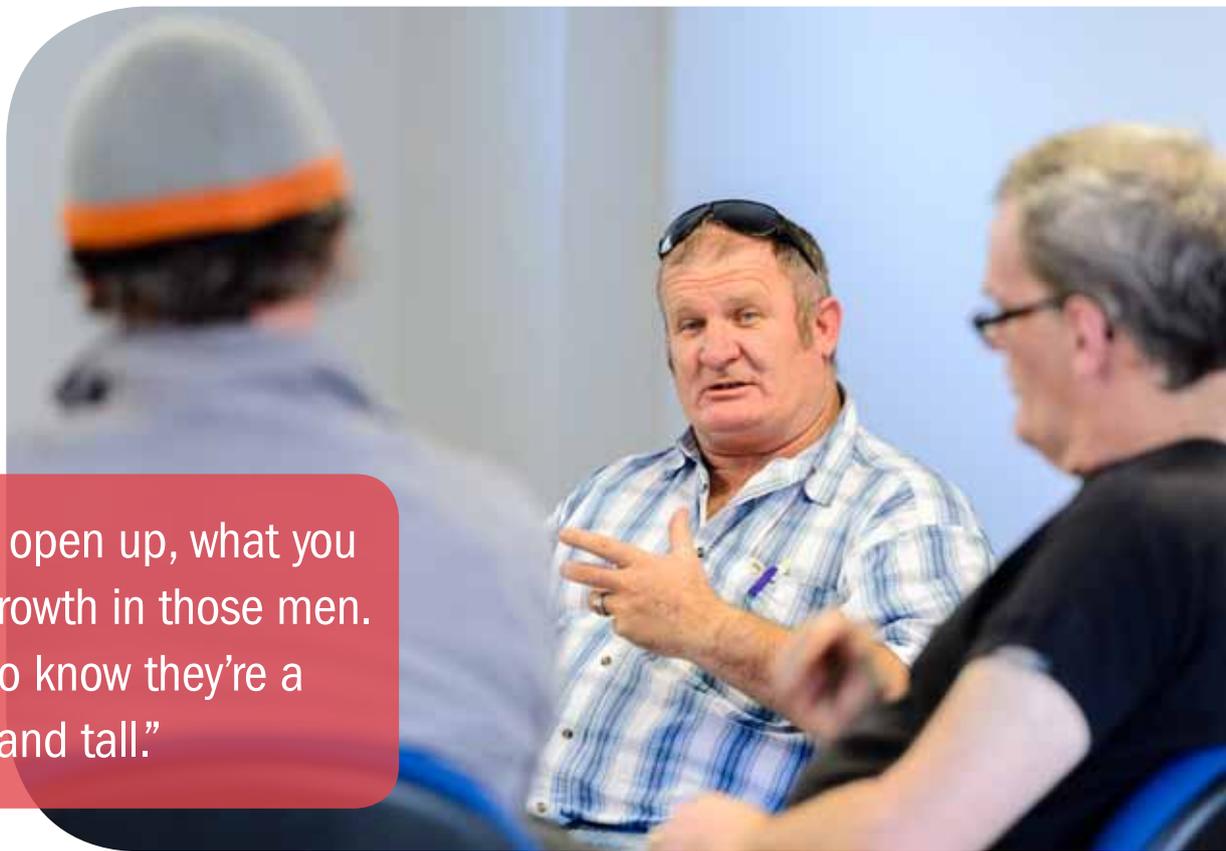




Ken Clearwater, *National Manager*

Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse Trust (MSSAT)



“When they open up, what you see is the growth in those men. They need to know they’re a hero and stand tall.”

We have a huge problem in this country with men and boys who have been sexually violated. The issue of isolation is huge for men. They lock themselves away carrying the shame and guilt of what happened to them, because men are supposed to be tough and not show emotion. And so our prisons and our mental health system are full of tough, staunch men.

Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse was started in 1997 by survivors who wanted support from other survivors, and we’ve never moved away from that. Our peer support group remains a place where a man can sit with other men who understand what he’s been through.

We teach them it’s not their shame, that the shame and guilt belongs to the perpetrators. I think any male who comes forward and discloses is a hero. They deserve our support. When they open up, what you see is the growth in those men. They need to know they’re a hero and stand tall.

No one has to talk about what happened to them. You can, but everyone knows something happened to you. It’s about how your week’s going, and what you’re going through. You don’t even have to speak, when it’s your turn, though

since I’ve been involved I’ve not yet had a man who hasn’t spoken. Once they’re in, they feel safe. And because it’s an ongoing group, even if you come in as a totally new person, you’re with men who have been there for years, at all different points in their healing.

During the early years, when I went away, the group would have to pause. I thought that was selfish, so I tried to bring in a counsellor to run the group. But when I came back the guys said, “Oh look, we really like so-and-so, but he’s a counsellor, and he ran the group like a counselling session. We don’t want a counselling session. We have our counsellor for that.” Even though the group is therapeutic, they don’t want to see it in a clinical therapeutic model.

In the past, if you were in a drug or rehab centre, or even in prison, you weren’t allowed to talk about what happened to you as a kid. You were



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told, “Don’t use that as an excuse. Yes, we know what happened to you, but now you’ve got to grow up.” That shuts people down. It doesn’t acknowledge what’s been done to them. As a society we concentrate on people’s behaviour, but what we don’t realise is that their behaviour is saying, “I’ve got a problem. Can you please ask me about my problem?” We’re scared to ask, because we’re afraid you might say you were sexually abused as a kid.

We have a lot of men coming through who have spent their lives in and out of the prison system, and state homes. Society doesn’t want to ask what they’ve been through, but it’s happy to say, “You’ve been out of prison for five years. Do you have a job yet?” Well, for some of our men the answer is no. “Will you ever have a job?” Probably not. “What’s the goal then?” The goal is to be out of prison, which costs \$74,000-\$95,000 a year, and isn’t helping.

These men are still struggling on a daily basis, but when they struggle they can ring us, and that’s keeping them afloat. As a society we’re not good at understanding that some people come from a world that is completely different from the norm. All they know is how to survive, which means stealing, and the benefit. But our society has done that to them. We need to give them back what they lost, which is their education.

When men come to us, they’re normally at rock-bottom. They don’t have goals – most of them don’t even think about tomorrow. We already know they’re survivors, carrying those issues everyone carries: relationships, anger, drugs, alcohol. We explain who we are, what we do, why we do it, and then we look at where they’re at individually.

This isn’t what happens when they go into the mental health system: there they are contained, medicated, and thrown out when they’re OK.



With us, once you make the connection it’s there for life. Same with the support group: it doesn’t matter if you go once a week or once a year. Your healing is a lifetime thing.

When it’s possible, it’s our goal to train our guys to become facilitators of the groups. I no longer run the peer support group here – that’s been taken over by Paul, who I started with one-on-one before he entered the group, started work as a prison guard, and decided this is what he wants to do with his life. Now he gives the other guys turns at facilitating. It’s paramount to us that every group is run by a survivor.

To our knowledge, no one, anywhere in New Zealand, is specifically trained in this field. No psychologists, no psychiatrists – no universities give training specifically on male victims of child sexual abuse.

But the government has always wanted trained therapists. It’s taken 17 years for them to want to work with us, because we don’t fit anything, and we’ve never been willing to change the way we do things to get funding. But we’re finally at the government table. They’ve admitted there’s a problem and they don’t know what to do with it. We have been recognised as the only agency in the



country that does this kind of work. Now we have an independent assessor sitting with us, looking at what we do, what ACC legislation is, and how do we come together without changing what we do.

We also work a lot with the people surrounding survivors: partners, care-givers, parents. It's not uncommon for a woman to contact us after her husband discloses a history of sexual abuse, for example. We help them understand that they're not responsible, and that they also don't have to tolerate poor behaviour because of it. We help parents understand that the ways their children might be behaving are normal for male survivors, and we work with them.

We've also done a lot of education work, from trainings with Vision College to Child, Youth, and Family. But too often these aren't ongoing things, and that's something we'd love the government to help us with.

There has been no research done on peer support groups in New Zealand, but while most countries in the world are in the same position, there's been a huge amount of international interest in our work. At home, meanwhile, it's still not common knowledge that we're here. Every time the latest abuse scandal hits the news people say, "Well, there's nothing available for males." Which is frustrating for us, because we've been here since 1997. Originally men only came to us by word of mouth – for ten years no counsellor would refer someone to us – but now we get referrals from everyone: government agencies, counsellors, social workers.

And there's no way I could do anything else. I'd only have to pick up the paper to lose the plot. There are days I absolutely want to walk away from it, because it's madness, but then I think about the guys that turn up here. I've probably worked with close to two thousand men around the world, and I know I've made a difference somewhere. That keeps me going. ■



Glen *Survivor*

I've been with MSSAT for three and half years. We work in our group by throwing out a few questions and letting men think and talk about them. You don't have to talk if you don't want to. I was a victim of systematic abuse in the past. I was very young going through prison life and decided to change my life for my children. I started working with guys at MSSAT who were going through the same thing. It took me 23 years to come out and talk to people and that's why it's important that there are groups like MSSAT that can help men, because there's a lack of support for us men out there. This is the first group I've managed to find. I've distrusted a lot of people up until now and now it's time to let those guards down. MSSAT helps me to have a better relationship with my family and other people.

