

Hidden scars

Mary Jane used pain to block out her terrible memories



Life is worth living again

Shuffling into the kitchen, I sat at the table. "Happy New Year!" my mum Mary, 40, said. I just stared at the table. "What's wrong?" Mum asked me.

Until that morning in January 1959, I'd been a happy little eight-year-old. The night before, my parents had thrown a party in our home town of Glasgow, Scotland.

I'd been in bed upstairs asleep. After midnight, I'd woken to find a man, one of the party guests, on my bed. He sexually abused me.

I knew it was wrong and plucked up the courage to tell Mum. She looked shocked at first, but then she doubted me.

"Maybe it was a bad dream?" she said gently. "It can't be true," my dad agreed.

I was so traumatised, I couldn't even cry.

Two weeks later, a paperclip pierced my finger. "Ouch," I winced.

As blood seeped from the cut, a feeling of calm washed over me.

Soon, the shame returned. In the bathroom at home, I picked up Dad's razor.

Gently, I scraped the razor along the soles of my feet, nicking the skin. It hurt but with the pain came relief.

"Why are you limping?" Mum asked later.

"I tripped," I lied. By 11, I'd taken to scraping a knife underneath my breasts. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't stop.

In June 1963, my family



Me at eight years old

and I moved to Australia. I felt so relieved to have a fresh start. But within weeks, I suffered flashbacks. "There's no escape," I wept to myself.

So I started self-harming again, using glass or razors to cut my thighs.

At 19, a friend offered to set me up on a blind date. I met Chris Bell, 24, at Blacktown RSL Club.

"You're special," he said. "Thanks," I smiled shyly. Maybe I can put my past behind me, I thought. One night, I told him

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about the abuse. "That's awful, I'm so sorry," he said, stunned. I was too ashamed to tell him I self-harmed.

We married in 1972 and moved to Westminster, WA, to be near his parents.

I was feeling happier but every New Year's Eve, I felt dread creep in. I'd secretly cut myself to release the pain. It became a way of life.



Me and Chris

Finally, in January 2000, I told Chris the truth.

We arranged to see a counsellor. I also looked for a support group. It was fruitless.

"I can't be the only person in this state who self-harms," I said to Chris.

Then I had an idea. "I'll start a self-harmers' support group myself," I said.

In October 2007, I put an ad in the paper. Two weeks on, I held the first meeting.

Sixteen people arrived. When everyone was seated, I told them my story.

"This group aims to provide a safe place for us all to discuss our issues so we can stop self-harming," I said.

As we took turns sharing our stories, I realised many group members were abuse victims. It was a relief knowing I wasn't alone.

We discussed ways to deal with our problems other than self-harming.

"I write a journal," one lady said.

At the end, we agreed to meet weekly.

Within months, that familiar urge to cut myself went away. If I felt upset, I'd think about what we'd discussed in the group. Life felt worth living and the others felt the same.

Even though years of self-harm have caused me so much damage - I now have to walk with

crutches - I have found ways to cope. Now when I feel bad I remember all my friends at the support group.

I'm no longer on a mission to self-destruct. Mary Jane Bell, 60, Westminster, WA.

Where to find help

To find support services in your state, visit www.livespage.com.au, www.livespageforeveryone.com.au, or <http://www.nachous.com>.

To contact SANE Australia, call 1800 18 SANE (7200) or visit www.sane.org.

If you suspect a child may be self-harming, call 1300 00 1300, or visit www.pcconline.com.au (NT and Qld only).

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