

Self-abuse – Survival of the fittest.

I began to hurt myself when I was 13. I started with scratching myself with my nails on parts of my body people could not see and then at school I was dared to burn myself with the top of a lighter, this left a burn mark of a 'smiley face'. I realised immediately that hurting myself this way was much more effective than scratching myself. It helped me cope with the awful feelings I had inside of me that I could not control. I felt that I needed to punish myself because I was such a horrible person, so many people would tell me this, at home, at school, in the street and other people who met me.

I was part of a family who hardly ever showed any form of affection or talked about feelings. My parents were both dual substance users and all 5 of us kids followed the same road, sooner or later. The only emotion we seemed to be allowed to show was anger towards each other. There was so much physical violence and emotional abuse it was hardly surprising that we turned out the way we did.

I was the youngest and my older siblings all used physical violence and played mind games with me, even my sister. It was survival of the fittest. We had all been taught by my parents role model of how to do this well. I was told over and over again how useless I was often in very hostile and rude ways, every other word was a swear word in our house – it all seemed very natural to speak this way until you were in public and people would look down on you and call you horrible names too. It was a no win situation.

We all managed to get expelled from school and work our way through the criminal justice system, then there were the diagnoses of a diverse range of mental health problems which changed according to which doctor we saw. My whole life was spiralling out of control and I did not know how to change what was happening, so I guess I held on for grim death and took the ride to hell and back.

At 16, I was lucky to get a magistrate who identified that what I was doing to myself was self-abuse and that I could change my life; it was in my hands to do this for myself. The magistrate knew of someone who had a program that was running to help people who hurt themselves. The magistrate gave me the option to do the program or basically get locked up! I did not like who I was one bit and my probation officer said I had nothing to lose trying the program. This was to be the first step in turning my whole life around.

Then I met Annie, well she did not beat about the bush or mince her words nor paint a pretty picture of being a fairy godmother with a wand that could cure me. Instead, she told me the real cold facts of how hard it could be to change, that it would probably be one of the hardest things I would do in my life and that only I could choose what I wanted for myself. I was told how the SAFE Central group would

support me through my choice to change because people like me do change and recover. This was all very new language to me – the whole idea that life didn't have to be how it was right now. A little overwhelming at first until I really thought about it all.

There were very clear rules and boundaries right from the start, something a bit alien to me. I knew that I was in for a bumpy ride but I decided to join the SAFE Central program which was the best decision I had ever made up to this point in my life and now realise that it saved my life! Seriously, I don't think that I would be here now if it wasn't for the SAFE program.

By this time, I had lost two of my older brothers to drug overdoses, my mother to suicide and a brother in jail for many years to come after doing an armed robbery and accidentally shooting someone. My father was cactus from the drugs and grog and my sister was in and out of psych wards and hurting herself in such destructive ways she had deformed parts of her body.

My life was so bloody frightening; the SAFE program couldn't make it any worse!

The program had orientation where people could meet casually before the weekly sessions began. It was good that we were not allowed to speak about what we did to ourselves, instead we were encouraged to talk about our feelings and emotions, for many of us we did not know how to do this, but the program taught us.

It was really hard for me at first because I had never known this. Who would want to know how I felt and who would care anyway? Annie and the group did.

We had to use mindful language to explain our self-abuse. This would be to say that we hurt ourselves and not how we did it. This was to stop others in the group being triggered by someone else's behaviour. This was extended to the support group and outside group sessions. The motto was "We trust you to be trustworthy." This included being confidential in that what was said in group, stayed in group.

I was not very good with my literacy skills, but the group and facilitators would all assist. We did lots of creative things too where we would use pictures, cut words out of magazines, sing, do video and many other ways to express ourselves. The activity sheets and home studies were easy to follow and do.

We learnt to problem solve without realising we were doing it and using new ways to soothe ourselves instead of self-abuse. The groups were fun and we all shared a common goal to reduce or cease our self-abuse. We were never expected to just stop because it's not that easy.

Each week, I would feel just that little bit more in control of things. It was often 1 step forward and two steps back, but the group supported you through this.

Practice does make perfect, because many of the tools used in the program start on paper but become part of your thinking and life. The work modules and activity sheets became my life bible that I still have and use it to this day because you never know when a trigger is going to rear its ugly head.

After 10 weeks in the group I was being told by so many people what a different person I was and I know I was. I got assistance to be referred to the local TAFE Access department to help me with my literacy issues because I was expelled from school in year 8 and a half. In week 20, I was now 17 and doing some volunteering at the local library and SAFE Central a half day a week, attending my SAFE group 1 day a week, attending my SAFE support group a couple of hours a week and practicing lots of self-soothing, sometimes with my sister most of the rest of the time.

I completed the SAFE program after 30 weeks and have been self-abuse free ever since – except for when my father passed over and I got on the grog and wiped myself out for one night – couldn't hack it so I have never done it again.

You know one of the best things to come out of this whole mess of a life I had lived was that I managed to survive long enough to get real help. My sister followed in my footsteps joining a later SAFE program. She did not manage to completely stop in the first group but did reduce her self-abuse behaviours, their frequency and their intensity. She did go back a second time which did the trick.

Thanks to the SAFE program, I am 29 with me and my sis both living healthy, happy, fulfilling and SAFE lives with our families as a family and visit our brother in jail together.

I am a survivor because I have ceased my self-abuse, I am able to manage my triggers and have control of my now happy and fulfilling life. There is no room for complacency!

You can stop, if you want to. It's not easy but it is sure better than existing. We all need some meaning to our life. Self-abuse destroys not only your life, but those of others around you. You will wear the scars for life, but you don't have to let them control it. There are always people who care, it's identifying them and being able to trust that's the hardest.

Scottie & Mary