

### Episode 3, samsn's STRONGER: Lean On Me / Supporters

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When someone trusts you with the knowledge of their abuse, how you react can have profound consequences and implications for their recovery. What are some helpful ways to respond to a disclosure?

A survivor's recovery journey can be greatly assisted by the care they receive from family, friends and other supporters... but this can be challenging at times for those close to a survivor.

It's important to get the balance right in understanding and supporting a survivor, and attending to your own needs. In this episode we hear from partners and daughters about their journey with survivors on their path to recovery.

**Featuring (in order of appearance):** Janet, Missy, Tracy, Louise, Matthew O, Sheridan, Raelene Boxwell (SAMSN, Counsellor).

#### Resources for supporters:

<https://www.samsn.org.au/resources-for-supporters/>

**Music:** Licensed via Audiio.com

OPENING / JANET - Matthew L. Fisher: *The Hand Of A Child (Instrumental)*

TRACY & MATTHEW - Kevin Bean: *Light Beneath Us*

JANET & MISSY - Nova: *Glowing Lights (Instrumental)*

JANET - Ambient Endeavors: *Ten Thirty One (Instrumental)*

SPEAKER	CONTENT
Rob Carlton	Welcome to SAMSN's 'Stronger', a podcast series featuring stories of resilience from male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and their allies. In some parts it <i>is</i> heavy going, so if you're not in the space to listen right now, switch to something lighter. But do come back. We learn a great deal about surviving and growing stronger than your past from survivors.
Felicity Blake	If what you hear stirs up strong feelings, know that you can contact SAMSN at <a href="http://samsn.org.au">samsn.org.au</a> , or on 1800 472 676, or give Lifeline a call on 13 11 14.
Janet	My name is Janet. And when I was a 16-year-old little school girl, I fell head over heels in love with a gorgeous young medical student that I met. And the following year, we became closer friends, I was only 17. And one day, we were talking about our life stories and he disclosed to me that he had been sexually assaulted by men who'd been paid to care for him when he was a child, a very young child. And I was horrified. I didn't... I was so naive. I didn't even know that those kinds of things happened to little boys, because that was way back in the '70s, when you didn't even talk about it at all. And he was surprised that I was surprised. So he just kind of palmed it off and said, "Oh, no, it's just what happened to me. It doesn't affect me now." And so then off we went into a long relationship. It ended up that we were married when I was 20. And we were married for 37 and a half years.

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	<p>He was my husband, and my best friend. And it was, I have to say, a lot of the time a very tortuous journey. But there were many times when it was a wonderful journey. And he was a wonderful man.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>You're listening to STRONGER, a podcast from SAMSNN (the Survivors and Mates Support Network). We're your hosts; I'm Felicity Blake...</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>...and I'm Rob Carlton. This is episode three: 'Lean on Me', about what it's like to be the supporter of a man who has survived childhood sexual abuse.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>We just heard from Janet, who supported her husband Stuart for over 40 years. She knew about Stuart's story from the beginning. But men often don't disclose to their partners, families and friends until much later on, living with the burden of this secret for a very long time.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>However, the harm caused by the abuse <i>can</i> find its way to the surface. Many men block out their traumatic memories, in the hope that they'll go away. But they often return later in life...</p>
Louise	<p>Hi, I'm Louise and I am a supporter of a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. So when I first met [Redacted], he actually didn't have any idea about his childhood history. So it only came out... He had suppressed it, and it actually only came out... I think it's five years ago, pretty much, this summer. So we were a good, let's say, 12 years into our relationship when things went exceptionally wonky.</p> <p>And the journey of it coming out and learning about what happened to him has been immense. So it's changed the man that he is the, you know, the man that I fell in love with is not the same person anymore.</p>
Tracy	<p>I'm Tracy. About 15 years ago, we were having a bit of a stressful time in our lives, we were renovating a house and living with my parents. We had our own business and our children were quite young. And we were having some relationship problems. And I think all the stress of that time kind of collided. And my husband wrote me a letter, and told me that he wanted to tell me something that he hadn't told anybody else about. In the letter, he told me about the abuse, that he was abused by a close family friend who was his godfather and a priest, between the ages of eight and 15 years of age.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>When someone trusts you with the knowledge of their assault, how you react has a profound impact on them. Imagine a person you love coming to you to finally disclose their experience of childhood sexual abuse. How would <i>you</i> respond? Here's Tracy.</p>
Tracy	<p>It was a real shock to me, we'd been married for 10 years, and I didn't... I had no idea. And I remember thinking that I really just didn't know what to do, or what to say. It was a long letter, and my husband explained a lot of what he'd been going through and how difficult it had been for him. And I knew it would be</p>

	<p>important to let my husband know that I was there for him. And that I received the letter and, and was grateful to him for telling me about it. But also, I didn't know what to say beyond that. So it was good to know, to get that letter. And I guess that was our starting point of the long journey that we've been on now for probably about 15 years. The day that I got the letter, I phoned my husband and said, you know, thank you for telling me, and that I was so sorry, that he'd been through that, and that it didn't change anything between us. That I wanted to be there with him to, to go through that with him. And I suggested that we catch up for a walk when he came home from work. So we did that. And we didn't really talk much in that walk. I think I just reiterated again, how grateful I was that he told me and that I was there for him. And that maybe it'd be a good idea if he could talk to someone about his experiences and what had happened.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>This is Tracy's husband, Matthew.</p>
<p>Matthew O</p>	<p>The response from my wife was, was extremely, extremely supportive. And it has been right throughout this whole period of time. I think one of the things that's really critical when when someone tells you this sort of... discloses this sort of thing, I think, the the really good experiences that I've had things like where people without a shadow of a doubt, they believe you 100% so if anyone said... disclosed to me, there would not be one cell in my entire body that that, that disbelieves what that person is saying, and gives them the acknowledgement that I really understand what you're talking about, and I completely accept what you're saying is the truth. And there's some really good experiences that I've had with people that have done that.</p>
<p>Sheridan</p>	<p>My name is Sheridan. I'm a supporter of my dad, I have a beautiful partner, friends and family who support me.</p> <p>When people first disclose, it can be really, really overwhelming, really distressing. It can be a lot of emotion or no emotion at all, like it's really different for everyone. But the way that you respond to survivors, and when they disclose to you really shapes the way that they're going to get help or if they want to get help. And if they can, you know, look to you for support. So I've heard a lot that when somebody discloses, often a response is, have you reported it? And or why haven't you reported it. You don't need to do that. You don't need to ask that. Because I mean, that's just going to, it's going to make them feel bad. And that's really not up to you, it's up to them. That's their story. And the way that they deal with it is completely up to them. You need to support their decisions. And you need to tell them that, that whatever you choose to do, I support your decision, you don't need to interrogate them about why they haven't reported or why it took so long for them to report or anything like that.</p> <p>You should tell them that you believe them and it's not their fault. There is, unfortunately, a lot of shame that comes with being a survivor. And it's not their shame to carry. It's the perpetrators'. It's not theirs.</p>

	<p>Thank you for trusting me enough to share this with me. It means a great deal. You can ask them, when they disclose to you ask them. What can I do to support you right now? How can I be there for you? And that's going to look like different things for different people again. Like how can I make this better for you? What can I do? What can I say, to fix this for you right now? But I mean, you can't fix it. It's not just a quick fixer upper. The best thing that you can do is to sit and listen, let them talk. Don't interrupt them. Just sit there and listen. Listen with the intent to understand, don't listen with the intent to reply. Don't get up in your head and think, "How am I going to respond to what they're saying to me right now? What is the best thing for me to say that's not going to get them upset?" You know what? It's a really upsetting conversation to have. It's okay if they get upset. But you just need to remember that you being there listening is enough. You hearing them is enough.</p>
<p>Rob Carlton</p>	<p>For survivors and their families, living with the effects of child sex abuse on mental health and family relationships can be a tough journey. This is Janet and Stuart's daughter, Missy.</p>
<p>Missy</p>	<p>My name is Missy. I can always remember my dad having some different sorts of mental health issues. As I grew older, I discovered more about why he'd had different difficulties through his life, and about his child abuse history. Life was always different for our family because of that. And for most of that time, it didn't seem like there was anyone that understood or had been in a similar situation other than our family.</p> <p>When I think back to when I was really young, I always remember that there was something different about my dad. And for a lot of that time, I never thought of it as a negative thing. It was incredible to have such a sensitive, loving father who was very different to a lot of men. Dad was very gentle, he played piano beautifully. And was interested in poetry. He would read stories out loud to us. Appreciated things like flowers and music, and was just different to a lot of the typical masculine men.</p> <p>It was always, it was always important to dad that he, he was true to himself in that way. And he never pretended, or tried to be interested in cars or sports. Not that I can remember anyway. But that was something really beautiful. That was very different to a lot of my friends' dads, and even other family members. That, to me, it was amazing. Because he was a wonderful father, as well as a very tortured one. And so as we got older, they sort of shared more information about Dad's... his mental health struggles, and then eventually about the the child sexual abuse that he'd endured when he was younger. Which to some extent explained some of his behaviors, but also was really hard as a child to hear those, those things about him and to know that that (a) he was in a lot of pain and difficulty mentally, but (b) that those things that happened to him. So yeah, he was always different. In my experience as his daughter, there was always that beautiful, gentle dad underneath all of the rubbish that was going on, as well.</p>

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	<p>It was hard for Mum and Dad to not, I guess, to get the right level of how much they shared and how much they didn't share with us. And I know there were times that Dad wanted to share more than Mum wanted to. And that was, that was hard.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>Children learn so much from parents, consciously and unconsciously. In response to their parents' ways of dealing with the effects of childhood trauma, sometimes children of survivors develop characteristics and habits which mirror or react to a parent's behaviour.</p>
Missy	<p>I was finding myself attracted to people that needed rescuing, and had their own mental health issues and ending up trying to support them and fix their problems. And that was when I probably started to look back a bit at my childhood and back at my past relationships, and I'd sort of heard about the term 'vicarious trauma' and like 'intergenerational trauma', and around the time that Dad started, sort of got in contact with SAMSN I was getting older, and realizing that there was more to my, my past.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>The terms 'vicarious trauma' and 'vicarious resilience' refer to the ways that trauma and resilience can be passed on to those who engage with trauma survivors, like family members and workers. Vicarious trauma can have negative effects, like anxiety, or overwhelming concerns for children's safety. On the flipside, vicarious resilience can have positive effects, like the deep satisfaction of bearing witness to a survivor's recovery journey.</p> <p>'Intergenerational trauma' is a similar term that refers to the way adverse experiences and their resulting trauma can be passed on to the next generations.</p>
Missy	<p>And so as much as there's been a lot of a lot of negative come out of a childhood of having a parent who's been through child sexual assault, there's also a lot of positives. And I feel that, that ability to be able to, to support others, or share, I guess, share my knowledge with others, to be understanding towards others who have similar family history... I feel like that's really important to me: to, to share what we've learned, and it's hard to describe, but that feeling of just knowing and being able to listen to someone and some of the behaviors that they describe. It's like, Yes, I know what you mean. They don't have to try and explain themselves.</p> <p>And have experienced vicarious trauma but also vicarious resilience and how to get through some pretty horrible stuff and come out the other side, learning from it, and with positive advice or positive experiences to share with others. So that's pretty amazing.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>Here's Sheridan.</p>

Sheridan	<p>Being a supporter is pretty difficult, to be honest. It's difficult, it's challenging, it's overwhelming. But at the same time, it's so important.</p> <p>I can't remember a time where I first knew that my dad was a survivor of child sexual abuse. I think he told me bits and pieces as I was growing up, and then into adulthood, and I never really knew the severity of it, until I helped him write his Royal Commission letter. And before that, I kind of just knew snippets of physical abuse and emotional abuse, it wasn't really the sexual abuse until, until maybe, like 18, or 19. And, you know, there wasn't a time where he sat me down and said, Sheridan, you know, this is what's happened to me from start to finish. Because he wouldn't have been able to do that. It wasn't an isolated incident. And it was ongoing and repeated abuse.</p> <p>It's difficult being a supporter sometimes, because you're having some really hard conversations, and conversations that are really wrapped up in like feelings of guilt, and shame and embarrassment. And sometimes it can be really hard to sit and listen to such horrendous things that are inflicted upon somebody that you love so much, and especially things that happened when they were just a kid.</p> <p>So I mean, it makes me... it makes me sad and angry to think that, of no fault of my dad's, that the actions of another person - he was meant to be able to trust, as well - caused so much pain and suffering and anguish. And it was... honestly it was really heartbreaking to read and to talk about some of the things. But it helped him so much. Since that time, I've seen such a massive difference and improvement in his, you know, growth and self development. It's been amazing.</p> <p>He did talk about the impact that the abuse had on his life a lot. And, I mean, the trauma just had such profound effects on so many things in his life. Especially the way that influenced his identity. The way he manages his emotions, handles conflict, maintains his relationships and even the things that have happened throughout his life.</p> <p>My dad was adopted. And for a long time, he didn't know who his biological parents were. And it's something he found out later in life. And along with that, he found out that he is Aboriginal.</p> <p>But some of the struggles that he's had to go through and the issues that have come up for him... You have to wonder whether that was, you know, a result of the abuse that occurred and whether the problem would even exist if the abuse never happened.</p> <p>But sometimes it's hard to say whether his trauma is associated with my own experiences, or if it's shaped my experiences. And I guess, the good, the good thing about being a supporter is that, you know, that they're able to trust you with their story. They have somebody like you, who can help them. And you know that they're not alone.</p>
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Raelene Boxwell	<p>My name is Raelene Boxwell, and I'm a social worker and work as a counselor at Survivors and Mates Support Network, SAMSN.</p> <p>So part of my work in SAMSN is to provide support and counseling to supporters of men who've been sexually assaulted as children. And I often have conversations with partners, with children, and with parents, who, who are trying to do the best by the men in their lives who have either come to them recently, or have come to them in the past and talk to them about their history of child abuse.</p> <p>Some of the emotions that are expressed by survivors and others are emotions such as anger, and anger is an emotion that in our culture isn't particularly well understood. It's an emotion, which is almost taboo in some ways. And the expression of anger is certainly challenging. People don't know really how to deal with it when they're on the end, receiving end, of somebody who's angry. And a lot of the supporters that I also speak to talk about this real challenge about wanting to respect and wanting to understand and wanting to support their partner in their anger or support their their family member in their anger, but also acknowledging that sometimes that anger can be really harmful and hurtful. And one of the ways that I talk about anger, particularly with survivors is that, you know, anger is a is a really useful emotion, because it tells us something about our ethics and our, our values. And it tells us that, you know, there's something that has crossed that that boundary for us personally, and therefore we get angry about that. We're kind of, it's a protest, it's an act of protest in many ways. And I think if anger is expressed in that way, and is, is verbalized and vocalized in a way that allows that expression, then that's really useful. And most supporters who I've spoken to will say yes, you know, that's really important. But where it becomes really challenging is when it becomes directed at them. And we know that in many ways, and many relationships that we all have that often, the people who we're closest to are the people who we probably express our ugliest emotions with as well. And I guess one of the conversations that I have with supporters who are kind of trying to walk this rocky road, along the people who they care about, is, when does anger, when does a protest become harmful?</p>
Rob Carlton	The legacies of abuse include a range of mental health impacts, including depression, flashbacks and feeling suicidal, as Stuart and Janet experienced...
Janet	<p>We'd have these patches where, early on, I just didn't understand what was going on with Stuart. And we really ought to have had counseling way back then.</p> <p>There wasn't much help available that we could see. And he was certainly very open to it right from the very beginning of our relationship when we were very young.</p>

	<p>But he had the first of a series of breakdowns and sunk into a very deep depression. And we found a psychiatrist, that was of limited help to us, and his first psych hospital admission was at that time. But unfortunately, nobody was kind of putting the pieces together back then. So Stuart had the diagnosis of clinical depression. And then he had another diagnosis. And then he had another diagnosis. And there was just this very clinical approach to putting into boxes, what his struggles were, how they were manifesting in his life, and this very deep state of depression that he'd sunk into. So no-one was looking at where's that coming from? And so there was a series of those breakdowns. Through our years of marriage.</p> <p>There was one time that I remember was a very profound conversation that Stuart and I had, when he was an inpatient at a psych hospital. This was about the third or fourth one that he'd been in. And he said, I've just been looking around at the others here and talking to the other patients. And so many of them have all these different diagnoses of what's wrong with them. There were anorexia patients there, there were, you know, others that had just clinical depression or, you know, bipolar, or all these other labels. He said, "As I've been talking to them, we were all abused as children." And so he and I started to sort of go, "You know what? Yes! Lightbulb, hello! Why the heck isn't anybody acknowledging that, that it's actually abuse that's behind alcoholism, drug dependency, sexual addictions, bulimia and anorexia, you know, so many of the things in our society." Over the years, as I learned about the shame that goes with abuse and issues like that, I realized that that's what was going on.</p> <p>We didn't have a normal relationship, and that I had to bend, to, to go with all of the ways that his abuse had affected him. And it was in every aspect of our relationship, you know, even intimacy, sometimes he would be, you know, very much, the hot blooded male, that we had a great relationship. And other times, suddenly he would, you know, be completely turned off by the thought of being held or kissed or touched. All the way through, he was a terrible sleeper. And so many times in the night, if I just rolled over and bumped him accidentally, he'd jump with fright. And then he'd be really restless.</p>
Raelene Boxwell	<p>Another way that the relationship can be impacted is the sexual intimacy. And certainly I had a conversation with somebody this morning, who he rang, and was talking about how it was really hard for him to be sexually intimate with his partner, although he desperately wanted to be sexually intimate with her. But he was completely triggered throughout that encounter. I had a discussion with him about how he can have conversations with his partner about sexual intimacy.</p> <p>Likewise, I've also had conversations with supporters who feel like they can't ask for things that they would like, because they don't want to trigger their partner. And they don't, they're trying to be incredibly respectful and gentle. But it also feels like in some ways, their needs aren't being met in a sexual way, but that also can flow onto emotional needs.</p>

<p>Tracy</p>	<p>Before my husband disclosed, we had been married for 10 years, and we had two small children. And life from the outside probably looked very normal and very good. We had our own business, which was going very well. We had friends and family, and we were settled. And there was a lot of love in the house.</p> <p>There were a lot of times when my husband was very distant; hard to reach. Where he wasn't participating fully in what was happening. He wasn't sort of emotional about what was happening or really kind of living it. I think there was times when it was... it was like we couldn't reach him. And that would sort of play out in different ways. A business with work, or a preoccupation with, with different hobbies. Or just maybe a reluctance to talk about our feelings or difficult things that had happened.</p>
<p>Matthew O</p>	<p>One of the coping mechanisms that I had, is that I believed that I was a damaged, I was quite a damaged sort of person. And that I always needed to, to excel at everything I did. But deep down, hiding behind all of that was, I'm not, I'm not worthy. I'm not not really worthy of doing, of being where I am in my profession. And one of the things that after going through the SAMSUN process , one of the things that that was also a coping mechanism was my drive, I suppose to be the best in my industry. One of the things that lies behind that is this whole feeling of being unworthy, being damaged. And the coping mechanism was to really drive myself quite extraordinarily hard.</p> <p>I got to the top of part of my, one of my industry associations, which took an extraordinary amount of time, out of my own personal life and my family's life and my company's life. I had, you know, I, I, I got my, I spent an extraordinary amount of time as well getting my pilot's license for no other reason than my abuser had his pilot's license, and he failed to continue going with it.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>Janet noticed the same near-obsessive drive in Stuart.</p>
<p>Janet</p>	<p>He had to do what he had to do. So he had to be a doctor, and he had to be a musician and he and he had to serve other people and he had to be a dutiful son, to his parents and a dutiful father to his kids. And so often, I came last. In other ways, and in other times, I very much came first and he loved me dearly, but: that exhaustion of having to be driven, that he had to do what he had to do left him just tired. Just physically, emotionally mostly, and psychologically exhausted, so there wasn't much left. And so I learned early on that there was just so many times when he didn't want to talk, he didn't want to do anything, just didn't have any energy left. And, and that was perhaps a very tricky part of our relationship was that if I was away from him, the little boy inside him would often feel abandoned.</p>
<p>Raelene Boxwell</p>	<p>Some of the things that I often talk about with supporters is the impact that the abuse has had on relationships, and whether that be intimate relationships or family relationships. And I've also, you know, we often also speak about some of</p>

	<p>the dynamics of childhood sexual abuse, and how that may be playing out in the person who they care about, playing out in their life.</p>
Tracy	<p>And we could see, then, the impact, more fully that it had on on us as a couple and us as a family.</p> <p>It was a lonely time. And for a long time, I didn't feel like I could share what was happening with family or friends because it's very private. And you don't want to, you don't want to break the trust of the person who has confided in you, particularly when they're still embarking on that journey and, and learning how to sort of keep going with that process.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>One of the tactics used by child abusers is secrecy. The child may be coached into feeling that they're complicit, or to blame in some way, and that telling someone would only bring harm to themselves, the offender or their loved ones.</p>
Raelene Boxwell	<p>Secrecy is a part of the abuse that has been experienced by a child. And they are given the task to keep what has happened to them a secret. How that impacts upon relationships includes things like not knowing who they can trust, feeling like they are to blame for what occurred, and feeling like they, because they didn't haven't disclosed for such a long period of time, feeling some immense shame around that.</p> <p>Their person who they care about, has either said, "Please don't share this with anybody else", or in respect, out of respect for the person who they're caring for, they don't share some of the struggles that they may be facing in the support of the person whom they care about.</p> <p>One of the barriers for many supporters coming forward is that they feel like they might be betraying the trust of the person that they're supporting. Or they feel like, that the service is actually just for the survivor. And I guess what I would say is, please pick up the phone, we don't need necessarily to know your name, we don't really necessarily need to know your number. But we're here to listen, and we're here to support.</p> <p>At SAMSN, we are trying to get supporters together, so that they can have a shared story as well. And they can talk about and share some of the struggles that they have experienced. And some of the highs they've experienced in sharing this road with the people whom they love.</p> <p>And it's just amazing to see some of the connections that are formed in that space, because they're able to kind of go, "Ah! You're dealing with this too! Actually, what he's talking, what he's dealing with, I'm dealing with too!" And so it really takes away that kind of sense of aloneness. It builds a sense of community that builds a sense of, you know - there is somewhere I can turn to when it's hard. And there also is somewhere where I can turn to to celebrate some of the beautiful aspects of the relationship, as well. And so out of those supporters workshops, certainly, there's been some beautiful relationships that</p>

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	<p>have formed, because they know that the other person that they're talking to knows exactly what they're going through.</p> <p>Research has demonstrated over and over again, the importance of community, particularly... Or meeting with people who have had similar experiences to you.</p>
Sheridan	<p>I don't need to, you know, stay strong in front of my dad... well, I feel like I do. A lot of the time, I do need to stay strong for him. But this was a space where I didn't have to do that. I could, you know, I let all my emotions out. And it was fine. And it was great.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>As well as the eight week peer-support groups that SAMSN runs for male survivors, they also host one-day workshops that bring together supporters and survivors to share experiences and find connection. Here's SAMSN CEO Craig Hughes-Cashmore.</p>
Craig H-C	<p>Early on, we became aware very quickly that we were hearing from supporters... in particular, partners, wives of survivors. And it surprised me. I look back now and it shouldn't have, but I would say half the calls we were getting, and it's probably still the case, was from supporters from family members. And I came to quickly realize that they needed the same sort of information, essentially, that we make available to the survivors that are coming to us for support, and there's even <i>less</i> support for our supporters.</p>
Raelene Boxwell	<p>One of the things that SAMSN has done and is committed to doing is running supporters' workshops. And we're certainly wanting to expand this kind of space for SAMSN, where other supporters have the opportunity to meet other supporters. And why that's so important is because many supporters don't have a place to go and speak to others about what's happening for them.</p>
Sheridan	<p>SAMSN's played a massive part in my dad's recovery. I still remember the first workshop that we went to together. I remember seeing the workshop advertised a couple of years ago in our local area. And I read about the service. And I thought, I really want to go to that. But I'd really love it if my dad came with me so he could get some more information and know that he's not alone. Because, I mean, I feel like sometimes he did feel quite alone. So I rang him and I said, "Oh... will you come to this workshop with me?" I told him what it was about. And he goes, I remember him saying, Do I have to talk? And I said, No, you don't need to talk. It's a workshop. You know, you don't need to talk; it's all right. You don't need to talk about anything you don't feel comfortable with. I just think it would be you know, really awesome if we went together and learned more about it, and to see... you know, the support out there and he agreed to come and he was very nervous on, on going at first. And when we got there, he goes, "Sheridan, I can't sit up the front, I can't sit up the front". And yeah, there was no seats left, so we had to sit up the front! So we ended up sitting up the front, just the exact opposite of what he wanted to do. And I can't remember how long the workshop went for, if it was a couple of hours, and my dad pretty much cried the entire time, even when they weren't even, you know, talking about anything that needed a really emotional response.</p>

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Raelene Boxwell	<p>One of the really powerful aspects of joining together and sharing stories and sharing words about the impact that this has had upon their life is a reduction in shame, and a reduction in isolation, and a sense of hope, and a sense of being understood.</p> <p>Many of the men who I speak with one on one, really talk about the incredible shame that they've experienced, that this has happened to them. And they are able to articulate about... articulate the ways in which they were entrapped in the abuse. But it was really hard for them to shift at a very deep level, that this wasn't their fault, that they weren't responsible for what occurred to them, even if they know that in their minds. It's really hard to shift that. But it's amazing, the power of sitting in another room, with somebody talking about a similar experience, and being able to go, "You know what? That happened to me, too. And if it happened to somebody else, then maybe - just maybe - this wasn't my fault.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>A survivor's recovery and healing is linked closely to the level of support and help they have from family, friends, professionals and community.</p> <p>Many supporters are, themselves, survivors of past trauma.</p> <p>Supporters often feel the responsibility to take on the care of their loved one. But who supports the supporters? As supporters, what do we need to do to sustain ourselves?</p>
Raelene Boxwell	<p>So I've also, you know, it's quite common for some of the supporters that I speak to, to really put their own emotional needs on a back burner, because they're really wanting to support the person that they care about. And in some ways, they, you know, have said things like, "Well, I haven't gone through what he's gone through, I've not experienced the trauma that he's gone through, and his needs are more important than mine." And so we have conversations about how relationships are two-way streets, and how it's equally important for each party in a relationship to have their emotional needs met. And also that the communication... there needs to be a way to have some level of communication around some of those really tricky topics, which is safe, and which isn't triggering for each, for the male, or, and allows the supporter to express their needs as well.</p>
Louise	<p>I'm a little bit of a researcher. So I do whatever I can to find out what I can so that I can make it better for myself, and also to support him.</p> <p>It's the hardest thing to remember because you get so entrenched in making sure everything's right for everyone else. And then you find yourself almost rocking in the corner and you're like, well hang on a minute, I need to sort myself out.</p>
Sheridan	<p>You know what - a lot of people are talking about self care lately, and saying, you know, make sure you're taking, taking care of yourself.</p>

	<p>So for some people, it might just be taking 10 minutes out of their day to do something that they like, or meditate or go for a walk, walk the dog, pat their dog even.</p> <p>I mean, for me, it looks like going to the gym and spending time with my Dad and spending time with my Mum, spending time with my partner and my friends. Eating, eating stuff I want to eat and lying there and having no other thoughts other than watching this movie about nothing or show about nothing like <i>Seinfeld</i>. Everybody's just gonna have to find their own thing. But everyone has a thing, you just need to find it.</p> <p>Finally, you know, these people are there to help and it's not all on me. And I don't need to be responsible for it all. And they can help Dad and they can, you know, help him with his journey to recovery.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>An important aspect of self-care is knowing when and how to set a boundary. Boundaries are the limits that you're able to go to, or are prepared to go to, in this responsibility as a supporter, without compromising your own or others' wellbeing.</p>
<p>Louise</p>	<p>So, there was lots of battles and barriers to overcome, but pretty much it got to the stage where this time I think it was five years ago, he was just exceptionally ugly, and I'd had enough and I went, I'm done. And then I got myself into a position where I went, you know what, sometimes you're a real dick, (I won't use totally inappropriate words). Like, sometimes you're a real dick, and I need some help, and I need to be safe...</p> <p>I made a deal with myself that I would take the kids on a swag night and we would go at least once every six weeks, we would just go and explore. Fine, we'll go waterfall shopping, we would go waterfall hunting, and we went lighthouse hunting pretty much up and down the East Coast, sort of close to where we are, and then inland. My thing at the moment is waterfalls. I love camping and stuff, and I just try and do the best I can for myself and my girls. And otherwise, I've just found ways to protect myself and to pretty much try and keep my cup half full. So do things that are meaningful and are quality for me.</p>
<p>Janet</p>	<p>And then I also, you know, just as you mature, and you understand your own life journey better, I started to look at myself. It was a wonderful and vitally important realization, the day I fully learned you cannot fix somebody else. You can love them. You can stand alongside them, but you can't fix it. And I dropped that bundle and started to learn about myself.</p> <p>But I've strengthened up my boundaries, to fortress level in recent years. And I've, you know, learned to just recommend that people go elsewhere for support. I don't let them repeat the same story, I don't let them become dependent on me. If they try to cling on to my skirts too tightly, I'm quite good at telling them "Sorry, I'm not offering that". And so therefore, I feel as if I've now, as a mature woman, I'm now ready to, to help other people in their healing journey, which I don't have to have a formal title to do that. I don't have to be in a particular role</p>

	<p>or position to do that. I do it in, I believe, every single conversation I have with anybody.</p>
Tracy	<p>For me, it was difficult. And there's a lot of emotions that I was feeling, and a lot of questions that I had when my husband first disclosed. But I was aware that first and foremost, this was his trauma, and that he would be ready to take the next step when he was ready for that. I knew that I couldn't push him into making an appointment, for example, with a psychologist to talk about the trauma that he'd been through. But I did know that that was going to be important for us - for him - in his recovery.</p> <p>I've always believed that Matt's got to be the one making the decisions and about... about which steps we take, and which we don't. I don't think it helps survivors, for us to be sort of crowding that decision.</p> <p>I was wary that this was Matt, my husband's, trauma, and that I was his support. And although it... what was happening between us was impacting on us it was really important for me to be able to sort of stand back, and that Matthew take the steps that he needed to when he wanted to.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>Some men are guided towards peer support by friends and family. Others, like Matthew, come to it on their own.</p>
Tracy	<p>I think that the real change came when he spoke to someone at SAMSNN on the phone. He said it was just so warm, that it was just such a warm and friendly conversation that he'd had. And so he did decide to go to the eight week program. And he was terribly nervous about that. Much more so than when he first started his counseling all those years ago. I think the group setting... it's confronting, but actually, that's what gives it its strength. You know, sitting there in that group of people. It's that shared common experience that's really powerful.</p> <p>And I could see by the end of it that he felt embraced. And he felt like there was a kinship at the group, that while these men were all very different, that it was so validating to be with a group of men who just got him. Who just knew what he was talking about; what he was going through.</p> <p>And certainly as the time went by, and we were able to open up to each other a bit more, you know, that's when I could really see that all those years of loneliness and hard times were really worth it, because it was really touching to see that my husband could recognize the impact that it had had on on me and on our family. And that was something that was really important for us to be able to keep going together and healing together.</p>
Matthew O	<p>It's had an extraordinary benefit to the relationship that I've had, that I have with my wife. Now, there has been some extraordinarily difficult times throughout that process. And, you know, over and above what a normal, you know, busy</p>

	<p>husband and wife relationship would be like, we, it's been really extremely beneficial to my kids and my relationship and how I can talk to them.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>Kids have good radar at picking up when something's wrong in the home, and they often blame themselves. That can sometimes be the incentive for survivors and supporters to explain the reasons behind the tensions and difficulties, and this may mean disclosing something of the abuse history to your kids. How do you know when it's the right time to do that?</p>
Tracy	<p>We decided to tell our children, when they were about perhaps seven or eight, maybe nine years of age.</p> <p>It was a particularly difficult time, so things at home were difficult. And we wanted to share that with the children so that they understood what was happening at home and why dad was sad or upset. So we were just having morning tea one day, we didn't want to make it a big discussion or a big deal with them. We just wanted to sort of start the conversation of what we knew would be many conversations with them over the years. So I think I might have said something like, "Dad's been really upset, he's feeling really sad lately because some terrible things happened to him when he was younger. And it's really hard for him. But he's talking to a really good counselor, and getting some really great help in understanding those feelings and trying to find some ways to help him process all of those feelings." And I think the kids probably asked a few questions like, "Well, what happened to him?" And we said, "Well, you know, how you've got... you know, there are parts of your body that are really private, and you don't let anyone look at them or touch them?"</p> <p>"Well, when Dad was younger, somebody did. And then, you know, it was really horrible for Dad, and it's been really hard for him in some ways since then. So he really wants to feel better about what happened and and try and get some help with all those really hard feelings."</p> <p>And I think that's pretty much all we said to them in the first instance and they didn't ask any more questions. I think little children only ask as much as they feel like they need to know.</p> <p>For us, it was a really good idea to talk to the children from a young age about what was happening, because it worked with little conversations over the years. It was never, it never had to be one big important conversation when we sat down around the table and had this really serious, big conversation, it was little snippets over the years that we would talk about, as much as the kids wanted to talk about. And generally, we found that they'd ask questions about whatever they wanted to know. And then they'd be happy to leave it. And we felt like that was a really good flag for us about how much to talk about with them.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>Sometimes disclosing to children is not planned. It's something that happens in the context of a difficult time, or even a crisis.</p>

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Louise	<p>So our oldest daughter has been introduced to a school counselor who very much... I very much appreciate. She had an amazing way of explaining to her in simple terms, that she can understand how PTSD affects someone's brain. And our youngest daughter really doesn't have any idea why things are like they are. But she just believes that dad's got a few issues. And she kind of accepts it as the norm, which, I don't know if I think that's a good thing or not, because I'm really not into enabling behaviors. But it's definitely an evolving process.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>What's it like when your adult child is one of your primary supporters as you recover from childhood sexual abuse?</p>
Sheridan	<p>Being a child of a survivor and supporting my dad through this type of stuff, is sometimes really difficult. Just because of the dynamics that we have in our relationship, it can be really awkward for him to talk about it. I mean, even as a man because it usually is harder for men to disclose their abuse. You know, because of this assumption that talking about your feelings is emasculating or associated with weakness. There's really this unrealistic, internalized ideal of manhood that creates this belief that men aren't supposed to be victims or men aren't supposed to talk about their feelings. And I feel like that has definitely influenced the way that my dad talks about it, or the way that my dad chooses not to talk about it. But as his daughter, I know that it must, it must be really difficult for him to talk to me about it. And even though it is difficult, we, the relationship that we have is very unique. You know, we can have those open and honest conversations.</p> <p>I would describe my dad as very resilient. And I would also describe him as being very determined and very honest, as well. I know he wants to help people, he wants to help everyone all the time, especially people who he's met who have gone through similar trauma. He has a big heart and cares about everyone. And the way that he, the way that he's coped with what happened in the past may not have been, you know, the best type of coping mechanisms. But now in this present moment, after having talked about it, and receiving support, and being open, honest about what's going on for him. He's just thriving. He's doing really well.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>Attending the eight-week support group with other male survivors was also transformative for Matthew.</p>
Tracy	<p>And honestly, it was, it was the best thing that he ever did. The best thing for our family, not not just Matt, but for our family. It felt like we could... it felt like we could do it. You know, it wasn't like we were on our own anymore. It was like someone was walking beside us. And just... just got it. Just knew what it was like. And I, yeah, I can't tell you how powerful that is. Not just for Matt, but for me too. It felt for the first time like that was something that we could do to get through this. And I just encourage survivors to take that first step, because although it feels like you're alone, there are so many good people out there who are ready to help.</p>

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Felicity Blake	The journey alongside a survivor in recovery is a long one, but it doesn't have to be a solitary experience for survivors or supporters. Janet and Missy reflect on their journey with Stuart...
Missy	Until I remember when dad was really excited that he found this group called SAMSNS. And he was really feeling that he had some other people in common with him. And that was fantastic.
Janet	Stuart actually desperately wanted help and he told his story to so many people. And that was because he really wanted the help that he could get. He wanted to find help and healing, desperately wanted to find help and healing. And so it was just, you know, after many years of that struggle to find real help, that he eventually found appropriate help and was starting to understand trauma, and that that's what had happened to him was he'd been through such adverse childhood trauma that it had had a devastating effect on his life. And he started to learn about how important it was that he forgive himself, that he, you know, deal with the issues of shame and abandonment and the underlying root causes of his addiction.
Missy	In the last couple of months of Dad's life he was getting worse. And I knew that when I was... I knew that when I was a teenager, he'd had a serious suicide attempt. And I knew that he had been having suicidal thoughts. And Mum was concerned that he might attempt suicide again.
Janet	And for a lot of complicated reasons he passed away a few years ago. But he lived to the age of 60, which was amazing for someone who had been through what he had when he was a very tiny boy.
Missy	Can I just say there that you wouldn't wish what we've been through upon anyone. But I think having everyday people like us that don't have degrees in... or that don't have education in trauma and things like that. When we're just living our everyday lives, it's a great opportunity to be able to offer advice or support other people by sending them in the right direction. Because there's not many people out there that are just regular people that are open about their experience. And so many people have commented to us that it's amazing how open we are and how openly we share our journey. But I couldn't think of doing it any other way. Because if we could possibly help someone else, a minute amount through their own individual journey, then it's worth sharing what we've been through.
Janet	I speak openly about what I've learned. And if I hadn't been through all of the struggles that I had with my poor, traumatized little boy, that became a wonderful man, then I wouldn't have that wealth of understanding to share with other people, and I wouldn't have the ability to encourage others to speak out in a way that I can now.
Missy	You have to use what you go through. Otherwise, there's not a lot of point to it.

Janet	<p>Yes, and I think Stuart knew that we would speak out. So I don't regret our story. It was, yes, torturous, but it was also wonderful. And I know that along the way, we have encouraged a lot of other people. And I am determined that I will continue to encourage a lot of other people out of what we learned from our struggles.</p>
<b>Closing Credits</b>	
Rob Carlton	<p>SAMSN is the only specialist charity in Australia dedicated to helping all male survivors of child sexual abuse and their families.</p> <p>Each year, SAMSN provides free services to hundreds of male survivors and their supporters.</p> <p>SAMSN believes that male survivors of child sexual abuse can recover and thrive.</p> <p>Help him believe.</p> <p>Donate today. Visit: <a href="http://samsn.org.au">samsn.org.au</a> (that's s-a-m-s-n).org.au</p> <p>Remember to rate and share this online, because it helps others - especially survivors - to find it.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>STRONGER was created for Survivors and Mates Support Network entirely remotely during the pandemic of 2020 and 21. It was produced and directed by me, Felicity Blake of The Dove Media, with Julie Blyth of SAMSN. Our Executive Producer is Craig Hughes-Cashmore. Interview help from Les Spencer and Shane Greentree. Audio editing by Dion Brooks. Transcript assistance from Dr Anna Kamaralli and Melanie Teychenne-King. A big "thank you" to our co-host and SAMSN Ambassador, Rob Carlton.</p> <p>Very special thanks to all 32 of our participants; your insights make others STRONGER.</p>
<b>ENDS</b>	