

Episode 8, samsn's STRONGER: I Can See Clearly Now / Ingenious Survival

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Male survivors often try to forget or bury their experiences of abuse and use a range of strategies to block out the memories and feelings. These can look like drug and alcohol use, gambling, workaholicism, and sex addictions... but frequently, they don't make the link between what happened to them as children or young guys, and their current ways of managing their life.

The tactics that abusers use mean that survivors often carry heavy legacies, like being made to feel complicit and responsible for aspects of the abuse, and being forced to keep the abuse secret in order to protect others. This often results in feelings of powerlessness, anger, shame and self-blame.

Managing these burdens requires - in the words of psychologists Sophie Reid and Jace Cannon Brookes - "ingenious survival". The survivors in this episode share some of their survival strategies.

Featuring (in order of appearance): Shane Greentree (SAMSN), Adam S, Matthew O, Ryan C, Lindsay G, Clinical Psychologists Jace Cannon-Brooks & Sophie Reid (Birchtree Centre), Phillip S, Jarad G, Janet, Les S, Martin W, Craig Hughes-Cashmore (SAMSN, MD/CEO), Raelene Boxwell (SAMSN, Counsellor), Brett Pickard (SAMSN, Eight-week Support Group facilitator), Pete R.

Resources for survivors:

<https://www.samsn.org.au/recovery-and-healing/resources-for-survivors/>

Thanks to:

All our wonderful interviewees!

[Rob Carlton](#) and [Felicity Blake](#)

Jace Cannon-Brooks & Sophie Reid, [Birchtree Centre](#)

Peter Bolam

Ric Herbert for our ad

And [The National Redress Scheme](#)

Music: Licensed via Audiio.com

SHANE - Sebastian Kauderer: Stay With Me (Instrumental)

ADAM, MATTHEW, RYAN - Matthew Wright: Theme

JANET - Richard Smithson: Sometimes I Don't Know Who I Am

MARTIN - The Future Reality: Iridescent

MARTIN - Marshall Usinger: Everything We Hoped For

AD / RIC HERBERT - Sebastian Kauderer: Two Big Reasons

LINDSAY, ADAM, LES, RYAN, PHIL (CLOSING) - Kevin Bean: Willow

CLOSING CREDITS - Seth Öphengon: A Safe Place (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 samsn.org.au , or on 1800 472 676, or give Lifeline a call on 13 11 14.

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Shane G	<p>So at SAMSAN we hear lots of stories about how guys have coped. And that's how we really frame people's behaviours. And sometimes we talk about them as impacts of the abuse, or strategies that might be unhelpful now and causing problems... but, but really respecting that it's kept these guys alive, and it's got them this far. So it's about them moving on from that, and hoping to find some more helpful strategies for coping.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>You're listening to STRONGER, a podcast from SAMSAN (Survivors and Mates Support Network). In this series we're asking male survivors of childhood sexual abuse -- and their supporters -- what it takes to grow stronger than your past. We're your hosts; I'm Felicity Blake...</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>...and I'm Rob Carlton. This is episode eight, titled "I Can See Clearly Now", exploring the "ingenious survival" of boys who experienced childhood sexual abuse.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>Throughout the series, we've heard a lot about the effects of abuse across men's lifespans. Our final episode honours the resilience that has helped men move beyond the aftermath of abuse and reclaim their identity.</p>
Adam	<p>Yeah, it's been part of my whole journey, just to find out who I am and what I'm about. The first thing I chose to do was to stop drugs and alcohol and yeah, get to the root cause of why I was the way I was, and find who I was, and do a bit of soul-searching and identify what I was here to do, and what I'm here to achieve. So that was... that was a turning point.</p>
Matthew O	<p>One of the things that lies behind that is this whole feeling of being unworthy, being damaged. And so the coping mechanism was to really drive myself quite extraordinarily hard.</p>
Ryan C	<p>What happened was towards the very end of my drinking and drugging, my past was my reality. And so I didn't know that I was utilising those coping mechanisms to overcome my thoughts, which were my flashbacks, my inability to deal with my feelings, and also the train wreck of my life that had passed, leading up into that point.</p>
Rob Carlton	<p>Many male survivors try to forget or bury their experiences of abuse.</p> <p>They use a range of strategies to block out the memories and feelings. They can look like drug and alcohol use, gambling, workaholism, sex addictions, and things like that.</p> <p>But they often don't make the link between what happened to them as children or young guys, and their current ways of managing their life.</p> <p>The tactics that abusers use mean that survivors often carry heavy legacies, like being made to feel complicit and responsible for aspects of the abuse, and being forced to keep the abuse secret in order to protect others. This often results in feelings of powerlessness, shame and self-blame.</p>

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Felicity Blake	<p>Managing these burdens requires -- in the words of psychologists Sophie Reid and Jace Cannon Brookes - "ingenious survival".</p> <p>The survivors in this episode share some of their survival strategies. Here's Lindsay:</p>
Lindsay G	<p>I realised, as my life was developing, that I was building an alcohol dependence. I realised this because there wasn't a day where I either wasn't drinking alcohol, where I <i>wasn't</i> drinking alcohol, or a day where I wasn't <i>thinking</i> about it. So most days of the week, I was drinking. And when the weekend came, it was, in my mind, my entitlement to go and drink as much as I wanted to.</p> <p>Now, the impacts of that were that it just destroyed the relationships around me. My children were not connected, they were angry with me. And all I saw was this sort of... person who was escaping responsibility.</p> <p>The gambling fitted into it as part of the drinking culture, if you like. Here I am at the club, I'll drink alcohol and play poker machines and avoid dealing with life. That was the whole goal: to avoid dealing with life's experiences. So when I was prepared to go and seek help for my childhood abuse issues, I also went and sought help for alcohol. My alcohol addiction. And I went to AA and I talked to counsellors, and I got sober. And I've been sober for 13 years now.</p> <p>The cathartic experience of saying "Things are not right with me, I need help" was very influential in me getting help with other issues that were, if you like, the comorbidity of having abuse issues. Those alcohol, and that the gambling stuff, and my poor relationships with my family were all improved when I went to seek help.</p>
Felicity Blake	This is Matthew:
Matthew OH	<p>One of the coping mechanisms that I had, is that I believed that I was quite a damaged sort of person. And that I always needed 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. One of the things that was also a coping mechanism was my drive, I suppose, to be the best in my industry. And so the coping mechanism was to really drive myself quite extraordinarily hard.</p> <p>Gee, it, it takes a huge amount of energy to portray this whole image that nothing's wrong, that everything's okay, that I'm okay. And I look back on all that. And I think well, you know, that I had some extraordinary strength to be able to do that.</p>
Jace and Sophie	<p>I'm Sophie.</p> <p>I'm Jace.</p>

	<p>And we're psychologists. And we both work in the area of complex trauma.</p>
<p>Sophie Reid</p>	<p>One of the impacts of trauma is the disconnection from other people and a sense of something inside that's bad and wrong, that keeps you apart from other people and makes you feel like you're the "other" and everybody else has got their shit together, and everybody else is doing fine. And, you know, often we can compare our insides to other people's outsides. And so the value of getting together in a supportive space where people can be vulnerable is where you can actually see other people's insides as well as their outsides, and vice versa, and actually share some of the struggles that you have and learn that actually, you're <i>not other</i>. Many, many people have experienced trauma. And in fact, it doesn't make you an "other", it just makes you an ingenious survivor.</p> <p>Some of the ingenious survival mechanisms might be like, sometimes people actually even talk about shame as an ingenious survival mechanism. So shame is an emotion that we have, which encourages us to hide and become invisible. Now, if you are at risk of sexual abuse by a perpetrator, and your shame kicks in, and that makes you hide and become invisible, so they can't connect with you. Well, that's a fantastic survival strategy. Do we need it now in adulthood? Not so much. But, you know, it makes so much sense that that was there trying to protect and really look after you in your childhood.</p>
<p>Rob Carlton</p>	<p>Some survival strategies are in the interests of protecting whole families or communities. Here's Phillip, with a First Nations perspective on shame.</p>
<p>Phillip Saunders</p>	<p>So for me, the more I talk about it, the more... the less it becomes a secret. And that's the approach that I take: is to suck the energy out of the secret, and it just becomes a story.</p> <p>You know, shame is like...you know, when you talk about these types of things, our family ties go way back. And that's very different to a lot of Anglo Saxon, Anglo European families. My ancestry when I trace it back, I go back five or six generations. And they're strong bonds. And so when you talk about issues like this, I don't want to bring shame on my mum, you know, and her relationships. You know, my mum's been passed away 20... nearly 20 years ago. And so that's the, that's the thing. And that's why it's a hard thing to get past, around shame. Around... because I don't want to disrespect my mother's memory. And her relationships of her aunts or uncles or her grandparents. And that's the thing, because it's not just... I'm not talking about just one generation. Here, I'm not talking about one person that did it to me, that one person, or that two people; they are part of the family architecture, in my family structure and my community. And so I don't want to disrespect them, I don't wanna disrespect my relationship that my mother has with their family. And that's the big hurdle at times.</p>

	<p>You know, and so for me, shame reduction, like... and what I mean by that sort of stuff is I've got to get this stuff out. Because I don't want it to destroy me. I'm doing it for my own salvation, and I'm doing it for my children. You know what I mean? And breaking the cycle (as much of a cliché as it is) is that it stops with me.</p>
Jace Cannon-Brooks	<p>I think that the more you do of this work, the more you realise the inherent wisdom that our bodies have in terms of survival, where they have adapted, you know... all of who we are, adapts the best way it can to survive whatever is put before us. And so, every, I have never seen someone where the adaptation that person has picked does not make perfect sense, the more you understand this story. So the more you lean in, and you go, "Oh, that makes sense why..." you know, maybe they've got a really strong fight part. But that may have served them - it might not serve them now with their boss or with, you know - but it may have served them <i>extremely</i> well, possibly kind of growing up in various different reasons. It may have been what actually kept them safe, it may have helped them protect siblings.</p>
Sophie Reid	<p>They may have a really strong flight part.</p>
Jace Cannon-Brooks	<p>Flight part! Exactly. Which would make perfect sense.</p>
Felicity Blake	<p>Children may also have other "ingenious survival" strategies, like hyperactivity, which keeps them busy and alert, avoiding the opportunity for the offender to isolate them and get them on their own. Some children have physical symptoms like stomach pain, which mean they can avoid being in the presence of their perpetrator, and signal a need for help. Some children develop a driven focus on a particular activity, like excelling in sport. Another strategy is to literally run away. These survival strategies can continue into adulthood...</p>
Lindsay G	<p>So in my work life, when I was having issues, it was because I would perceive that people don't like me; they don't like me because I'm not doing a good job. It's all because of something I've done, and they're gonna hate me. And I'll just have to leave and move and move away. I didn't see that there was... that I should problem-solve and work through the issues and see them as work-related. I saw them more as my personal shortcomings, my vulnerability, my inability to relate and deal with emotional contact or emotional issues.</p> <p>Those things, for me, were a loss of perspective. I moved from this perspective of being work-oriented to being person-oriented, "It's all my fault". I was regressing back into being 'all my fault' person again: things have gone bad, it's all my fault. I'm the one to blame for this, I'll have to leave, I'll have to move away.</p>

	<p>And it was almost like I was repeating a cycle, I was repeating a cycle of I would work really well, things would go well, there would be a crisis, I would withdraw, and go and seek some other new situation. Then I'd do well, there'd be a crisis, I would withdraw, and off we go again. So I was perpetuating this flight-and-fight response every time stress came along.</p> <p>I do regress. And there were times when I do slip back down into other quadrants. And they're usually being triggered by events that I find distressing or difficult, or remind me of the past. And I sometimes get into that flight and fight response and want to run away. But most of the time, I am much better than where I was. I now seek help, I now talk to people. I now share, I now try and understand what's happening to me, and do something about it.</p>
<p>Sophie Reid</p>	<p>And then in adulthood, the desire to run away can then be translated into more adult strategies, which, you know, are some of what present like symptoms. So that's, you know, maybe I'm going to drink to get away from my emotions. Or maybe I'm going to actually physically move regularly, to get away from difficult interactions with people rather than try and stay in the space and resolve it. And so, that's a great survival strategy... but what we want to do in therapy is to really say, because the trauma's not happening right now, those survival strategies have kind of got a life of their own, and are really, sometimes derailing the way in which you want to run your life. So can we see if we can find other ways rather than moving. Can we work on interpersonal effectiveness and excellent communication skills, so you don't feel like you have to leave your job or leave your neighbourhood just because you've had conflict with that person in a position of power, or because there's a difficulty in that relationship.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>The journey is different for every survivor. In Jarad's case, it was after seeking justice through the legal system that his recovery really began.</p>
<p>Jarad G</p>	<p>I didn't really actually start dealing with the abuse until I'd had my day in court. And for some reason, in that legal framework, I don't know, I don't know what it is... I coped with talking about it. It was like I could separate it from myself, even though I knew I was talking about myself. And then I did that in the courtroom, and I was able to face down the lawyer from his defence.</p> <p>I can imagine if I'd been 13 and someone had talked about it – someone accessible, not just a news story – I might actually have spoken up before I got blind drunk and tried to kill myself at 17. I might have spoken up, and then I would have dealt with it, I would have crossed so many boxes off in my teenage years, not in my 20s. And so I think that's why I'm so passionate, I'm just so passionate about the conversation. I think the conversation is critical and talking about it is critical. You know, there is no way that you can deal with this on your own.</p>

	<p>Up to that point it was like this ocean, that was it was raging inside of me that I couldn't control and would come out in unpredictable ways. And the emotion of it would destroy relationships and all my coping mechanisms were super-unhealthy. But when I went through that three years following the court case, and I kind of put the cap on it, it wasn't that the coping mechanisms stopped straightaway, but I was able to actually go "Ugh!" and put this cap on things and know what things were, and know how to deal with emotion. And all of a sudden, that's what they were: they were not a coping mechanism anymore. They were habit. They were habitual behaviours that kept happening, because I was in the habit of it. But actually, I started to be able to go, Oh, hang on a second. I don't need to do this to cope with x, y, and z. I can just do <i>that</i> instead. And so I was able to then develop healthy coping mechanisms rather than unhealthy ones. Yeah, it changed everything.</p>
<p>Jace Cannon-Brooks</p>	<p>I think there's, you know, other survival strategies. I mean, dissociation is definitely one that you can frame as a very ingenious survival strategy. I mean, Frank Putnam talks about how dissociation kicks in for children. It's the escape when there is no other escape, it is the only other option. And it's actually really helpful because to be in a situation that you've been overwhelmed would shut down your whole system, whereas dissociation actually allows you to step out.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>Dissociation is a change in consciousness that occurs along a continuum, from simple daydreaming at one end, right through to a serious fragmentation of your sense of self and identity. Children don't have a lot in their toolbox to help them cope with a situation as overwhelming and dangerous as sexual abuse, so dissociation can be a useful strategy when danger is present.</p> <p>It's much more nuanced and complex than Hollywood movie stereotypes would have you believe...</p>
<p>Sophie Reid</p>	<p>To dissociate. So dissociation can be like a flight part. And so when we say flight, we mean kind of like leave the situation in your mind and go somewhere else. Great strategy, if you can't physically escape that traumatic experience in that moment.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>Janet Kidd's late husband Stuart was a survivor. Janet played an important part of his recovery journey throughout their marriage, for 37 and a half years.</p>
<p>Janet Kidd</p>	<p>So just thinking back as to how I knew that his abuse history had really affected him. I always knew they had some funny little ways; in a sense, even right from the very early days, I never quite knew what I was going to get one day to the next or even one hour to the next. It took many, many years for me to understand that that was because he was dissociative, as is</p>

	<p>common in situations like my husband's. So, you know, he'd just be changeable and moody and easily irritated. And I remember one of the early times that I was really quite shocked was that - he was a musician and he played a particular piece of music for me on the piano when he was about 18, 19. And played it for an audience. And it was one of, what I said was one of my favourite pieces that he played. And it was only about a year later that when I described that piece of music, it had a link to the place where he'd been abused. And he had spoken of that place when playing that piece of music as "Oh, you know, this reminds me of, you know, this wonderful childhood in this wonderful place". And it was only about a year later that he said, "What?", when I asked him to play that piece, he said, "I don't know that piece. What's that?", and I was really confused at the time, because I was so young, and, you know, little things like that, were always there. And that sort of made me, you know, gradually realise that, "Oh, goodness yes, there's, you know, all kinds of weird stuff going on here, that he's actually hugely affected by his abuse history, but he's not aware of it".</p> <p>But finally, a lightbulb went on, and I thought, "Oh! he's dissociative!". And that was amazing for my understanding as to how to support my husband, was for me to realise "That's why he sometimes forgets things. That's why!". We had different names that, as a couple, we would call him. So at times, he would be Ice Man, where he would just emotionally freeze and just get the job done, whatever he had to do, he'd just be shut down emotionally. And then there were other times that he was Little Stuart, that he sometimes was terrified and scared. Or sometimes he was, you know, a bit of a crazy teenager. And that was fun. He was fun. And there were other times that he was this doting son that had just compulsively had to do everything right for his family. And there were other times that he was, you know, just other different sort of personas.</p>
<p>Jace Cannon-Brooks</p>	<p>I think that some of the other sort of strategies as well, that you tend to see very much are often the sort of ways of managing relationships, and the 'black and white thinking' is another one that sort of is very ingenious, for trauma survivors, because there is... If you're in a situation where there's neither an escape, nor resistance is possible, there are two options: I'm safe or I'm not safe. You know, this is a good night for Dad, this is a bad night for Dad. This person is going to hurt me, they're going to help me. There's nothing in between, there's no grey with trauma. And that works really well because it's going to help you to stay safe. The difficulty, again, comes that some of these strategies, it's kind of like... I often say to people I'm working with that the iPhone's had many updates since then. But we haven't, we just need to do a few more updates. You know, it's like the kind of basic package is there. But there's been sort of changes, and we need to kind of do the updates internally to the system that will help bring us up to the current day, because there's kind of bugs and glitches now that weren't there back then. And it worked really well back then, but currently, if we try and run off tanhe iPhone 2, it's not going to work so well for us today, in the adulthood.</p>

<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>Recognizing your own ingenious survival helps build the confidence to find your own pathways to recovery and healing. Here are some of the ways that have worked for men. This is Les.</p>
<p>Les S</p>	<p>Although I'm in a powerful state now, it's taken me a long time to get here. And what I've done throughout the years, I wanted to improve myself, like I went to university when I was 50 years old. I obtained my degree within three years, and I worked really hard to get that and I achieved an average of distinctions. That's because I really wanted to prove to myself that I could do this. Because when I was younger, going to university just wasn't in my vocabulary, it just wasn't even in my mindframe because I just wasn't strong enough to do it. But as I grew, and I started to... started on this nebulous path of healing, I always wanted to look for things better to do like, at work, I would actually say, yes, I will do that, I will actually do that presentation. Even though I was... lived in fear, I did it because I wanted to get better, I just wanted to be a better person.</p> <p>Going to university was a big achievement for me. And, and that just gave me that confidence to take a few more steps forward in my healing journey.</p> <p>And when I had confidence that's when I made the decision to go and seek professional help because I wanted to understand my triggers: why I got upset about certain things. And even though I still slip up occasionally, I have a really good understanding of what triggers me and how I can maintain an equilibrium.</p>
<p>Martin W</p>	<p>I'm a survivor of child sexual abuse. I'm 76 years old. And I first was able to speak my truth about my child sexual abuse when I was 72.</p> <p>In my journey of recovery, I have hit quite a lot of obstacles. I am an alcoholic. And I drank for 40, 46 years to self-medicate. I didn't know why I was doing that. But I did. I found my way into a 12-step program, which was enormously helpful.</p> <p>So, yes, historically, when anything came up that I didn't want to address, or I couldn't address, it was too enormous, I would use a substance to block it out. So in my case, it was alcohol. When I put the alcohol down, I experienced the rawness of my reality.</p> <p>When I was 43, I had a midlife crisis. And I went to see a psychiatrist. And he treated me for three years. And then after that, I seemed to stabilise. And then some years later, when I was in my 50s, I sort of relapsed. And currently, I'm with a therapist who specialises in child sexual abuse and trauma. And she was able to identify exactly what my problem was: I hadn't been aware - right the way through the therapy that I'd gone through - I wasn't aware of exactly what was wrong with me.</p>

I've learned that others who have similar experiences, a similar history, to me, specific to me, I've learned how they have applied themselves and persisted in their journey of recovery. I've met men who have a childhood history, and have pursued therapy for 15 years of their life to determine a finer way of living and a finer way of life. I've learned from those folks that you need to keep pressing on and not get overwhelmed. It's a deeply, deeply spiritual perspective that I've accessed, because I've been unburdened of the horrors of my experience as a child.

More importantly, it made me aware that other people are in the same position as me, and there was a definite relief in that.

The way I've been brought up in this world we all live in, in this dualistic world, I had to put on a face to be in the world we all live in. But the intimate aspects of my world were shut down, and it took some years for me to be brave enough to actually expose myself to others in a way where I dare connect at a level which is personal intimacy and connection. So if it were a connection where I might find it appropriate to touch another person, a male or a female, or touch them with words, or touch them with a look, it took a long while to be brave enough to reach out because of the history. History had told me that it wasn't safe to do that. But it *has* been safe, and it's actually part of the treasure of living for me to do that.

Vulnerability... I wasn't able to be vulnerable. That aspect of me had to be deeply covered up, and hidden deep down. Guarded. And it would be guarded by the alcohol abuse. It would be guarded by not letting people get too close. Guarded by being frightened of intimacy, because it was a treacherous journey going anywhere near being intimate, and it was safer to be angry and isolated. It was a safer place than to expose my inner feelings - my inner child feelings - to the world, or even to myself. And I hadn't got any experience of dealing with my emotions. So I was inexperienced, I was immature. Because I dampened down those emotions that... all the emotions. So I was blanked out. It took me time to accept the new emotions or the new experience of the emotions that I have.

The hardest ones were the beautiful emotions. Experiencing that emotion, for the first time, or deepening of the emotion was somewhat frightening. But slowly I'd begin to allow myself to get flooded with the creativity of the new emotion, and I let it take me. So the connection with other people, and the connection with the world at a different emotional level is extraordinary. Again, difficult to put into words. But just experiencing joy, and being able to cry over a joyous experience, and not to be frightened of those emotions, just experience them... is extraordinary. And of course that doesn't, and can't be done all at once. It takes time. And you have to feel secure in that.

So my therapist's recommendation that I participate in the SAMSNN course of recovery for a history of child sexual abuse was when I started... I started my

	<p>own journey of recovery from alcoholism and then into a therapeutic position with the therapist, and then the therapist said that you're able now to participate in the SAMSAN course that was offered.</p> <p>So a therapist, a significant other, can support that development. And that that's a wondrous, wondrous experience to break into. A wonderful, wondrous experience! It's the gold of the journey. And it's meeting... Or experience of that gold and that love that is underneath all that pain. Love is there and connection is there. It's underneath... and it's... it's there for the touching. It's there for everybody.</p>
<p>Rob Carlton</p>	<p>This is Craig Hughes-Cashmore, the co-founder and CEO of SAMSAN, who is a survivor himself. He participated in the first eight-week peer-support group that SAMSAN ever hosted. Male survivors can now attend these groups in person and online. Once they've been through the eight-week program, the men can join monthly meetings for ongoing support and connection.</p>
<p>Craig Hughes-Cashmore</p>	<p>So many guys have suffered from PTSD and depression and turned to alcohol or drugs to numb it, or workaholism, or sex addiction, or whatever, you name it! Eating disorders, all sorts. Some of those are more socially acceptable than others. But the validation and the identification is so incredibly powerful. And in a weird way it normalises the experiences and the coping mechanisms that people have used and often felt so guilty about, because some of those are really socially unacceptable. And so then you have shame on shame to deal with. And these groups break all of that down. And also deals with a range of subjects like grooming – and a lot of people understand what grooming is these days – but, as a survivor, until you really break it down and apply it to your own context, the notion of grooming and a deep understanding of that, I think, is one of the most pivotal moments for most survivors. And that's when they realise they're not a victim anymore. They <i>are</i> a survivor. But a survivor who's not to blame, because often, perpetrators make us feel complicit in some way. And men, obviously... well, I think men often think "Why didn't I do something to stop it?" But they're using their adult brain to try and assess a situation in which they were, like all children, vulnerable.</p> <p>I think the magic of the groups is the diversity of the men who attend. You know, you've got young guys, old guys, gay guys, straight, trans men, such a diverse group. And such a diverse range of experience. And I think... I think what happens is that the guys realise that it doesn't matter what the circumstances of their abuse was, it's about how it felt, how that betrayal was felt and dealt with, and all the similarities that we share around how we coped at the time and since.</p> <p>Obviously, it is incredibly challenging for guys to show up to one of our groups, whether it's online or in person. Most people haven't met another male survivor and they certainly haven't talked at depth about their experiences. But one of the things that has always amazed me and I love it,</p>

	<p>to this day, is the mateship that can quickly develop and the humour that comes with that. And I think learning to find the humour and share that with other survivors is gold in terms of recovery, because I know it's... you need a certain amount of black humour, of course, to deal with... laugh at a subject like this, but when the guys can find that, and it comes naturally, and understand that it's okay, that's a really sacred space to have that shared experience of, of humour and laughter and it's incredibly healing.</p>
<p>Jace Cannon-Brooks</p>	<p>I think the other thing is that it's never, ever too late. That there is always a "one step at a time", whether it be through a more professional, you know, process like a therapy, or whether it be through connecting in a support group, or that it may be the first step is just picking up a couple of books and reading a little bit about it, or listening to this podcast would be a step. I think that's clear: that there are people who... There are other ingenious survivors, there's clinicians, there's a lot of people who can - if you let them - be there and accompany you along the journey.</p> <p>I think that, you know, there's that saying that "We can only travel with someone as far as we ourselves will travel". And it's that sense of, if I haven't gone to the dark places within myself, I am by nature going to pull out of going to them with you. It was once explained to me a little bit like going on this sort of journey with trauma is, you know, you can have someone who can read a book and sort of, you know, understand it theoretically, and maybe go to the conferences, but it's the difference between, I could read a book about India, I can tell you from the book what India is like, I can look at photos of India. But if I want to really be able to kind of relate to you about what it was <i>like</i>, you know, <i>in India</i>, if I've been there myself in some form, and I may have been to a different bit of India, it might not look the same, but the sights, the sounds, the smells, the chaos, and the beauty and the amaze... do you know what I mean? All of what goes with that. It sort of reminds me very much of that journey with trauma: the chaos and the sights, and it's overwhelming. And it's amazing. And it's got moments of kind of insight and moments of kind of despair. The resilience, is I think that that's part of if you can relate to that at that level. And I do think survivors go on to do amazing things.</p> <p>The value of peer support is, well, I think it's actually invaluable, you know, for a number of reasons. And I think SAMSNS in particular, there's an added reason, which is that when men get together with other men, they may not talk on a, you know, maybe such an emotionally intimate level as possibly a female might with female friends. And it's so important to... if we're going to have that community and connection with other survivors going through something similar, where you can have it mirrored (getting back to the mirroring) mirrored back of: That makes sense. And me too, and I get that, and oh my God, I'm not the only one. Wow, do you feel like that? I feel like that! Or even the penny is dropping when they hear someone speak and go, "Oh, my God, I never knew that I did that because of that. But when you say</p>

	<p>that, that makes sense.” And anything that helps, you know <i>yourself</i> make sense to you, and where you feel connected and held and supported, is going to be of huge value.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>We can now understand that adverse childhood experiences, including sexual abuse, can have a significant impact on our physical health as well as our mental health and emotional wellbeing. Ryan’s chronic pain is a legacy of his childhood trauma. While he was receiving physical therapy, he had a cathartic realisation...</p>
<p>Ryan C</p>	<p>And I had an incident, and it just comes to mind. I may as well share it with you.</p> <p>This is - phwoar - about two years ago, I was at the pain clinic as I was receiving support around my chronic pain and I was doing a Feldenkrais Method in the pool there. And it's slow movements in the water with the physio. And I started to get a sense of calm, and it was to release the pressure and the stress out of my body.</p> <p>This is where I'd like to tie this into the recovery process not being one point. This is where it's ongoing. And this is where resilience ties in.</p> <p>When the physio had his arms underneath my arms, he had to do some hand movements around my chin and my jaw. And for a split second, I had a flashback that I was being choked when I was nine years of age. And I'd never ever had that flashback before in my life, ever. It was only for a split second. I was startled, but I realised: One, I was safe. Two, I was okay in sharing that with the physio, because we had a great rapport. But Thirdly, and I've alluded to this a lot, is that the recovery process... there's never an end point.</p> <p>And the point of me saying that is: that resilience is not necessarily what I go through. It's how I overcome what I go through. It's my relationship with my adversity. It's how I engage with my chronic pain. It's how I engage with my peers. It's how I don't say something, when something is said. It's how I don't need to tell people that I'm experiencing pain or I feel unsettled. It's learning to interact. And that has been an ongoing process.</p>
<p>Sophie Reid</p>	<p>I think the most recent learning for us around working in trauma is the importance of caring for our nervous system and making sure our nervous system is settled and soothed and in a really good space, so that we can invite whomever works with us to also allow their nervous system to settle and soothe and to go into a good space. Our nervous systems, as humans, we <i>survived</i> by triggering each other's nervous systems, either into fight or flight or into social connection and safety. And so if we're a therapist sitting in a chair in fight or flight feeling scared and anxious, we're necessarily going to send a message to our client's nervous system that we're not okay, even if it's never spoken in words. If you think about, if someone yells at you, your</p>

	<p>heart starts pounding, right, and maybe a bit of your own fight or flight goes off. And so the best sort of learning... you know, there's a there's a fantastic new theory called polyvagal theory, which really details the work of understanding your nervous system, understanding the different states of your nervous system, being social engagement and connection and safety at the top level, fight or flight at the sort of middle level, and at the bottom level, a sort of a "shutdown and hide" level.</p>
<p>Ryan C</p>	<p>And if I were to fast track now, I'd say my recovery process now is learning to be my own best friend, to have a laugh at myself, and to be around others who are in the same boat. I have always found myself, trying to emulate what other people are. And I never knew coming into the recovery process, that there are other people that are experiencing the same thing. That's where my sense of community, with my peers in the recovery process enabled me to share about that stuff. Because I held on to that, because I thought that's who I was. And that had a massive, massive turning point change for me when I saw it wasn't the case.</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>Connecting (or reconnecting) with community is a really important part of recovery from trauma. Whether it's peer support or joining a group of others who share your interests, we can all benefit from feeling less isolated. This is SAMSAN counsellor, Rae Boxwell:</p>
<p>Raylene Boxwell</p>	<p>And another example is a man who, yeah, he joined a football club. And he found friendship within that football club. And he found acceptance within that football club. And he was able to, during those moments, and during those times, was able to focus all his energy, and all his time on just being a player, and just being a part of that community. And he now describes the days that he plays football as "emotion free zones". And so other times of the week, he really might struggle with ideas of self doubt, and self-hatred in many ways. But on <i>that</i> day, he knows he's valued by others, and he values himself and he gives himself a break, consciously, from some of the other negative self-talk that might be going on in his head. So I guess that's part of the power that community can play, whether that's a football team, whether that's your work community, certainly others talk about religious communities as being helpful, other people find them harmful. But for some of the survivors we talk to, you know, having that kind of community around them can be really, really important.</p>
<p>Brett P</p>	<p>My name is Brett Pickard. I've been involved with SAMSAN since about 2012, I think it was in February the eight-week group started. And so I generally do two eight-week groups a year, and I do monthly groups where men who've finished the eight week groups can join.</p> <p>I guess it's possibly one of the most rewarding parts of my work, in terms of, I see men recover, they heal, and the camaraderie that transpires between them. And I guess that's why I've remained involved, because I see change.</p>

	<p>I guess what I've witnessed is that the men arrive, many of them in despair. By and large, men have, I think, have very few places where they can feel safe. And during the group, that's what we endeavour to do: to create safety. I came across this 15th-century word actually called 'respair', which is the opposite to 'despair'. And I think that that's what I see happening in the men: that they recolonise that space the perpetrator had taken from them. And they become the author of their story as the eight weeks unfold. But it's the group process, it's the sharing of the burden of shame, that brings about healing, where men can pursue that... You know, they suddenly experience belonging... when they've never felt that they belonged anywhere.</p> <p>The shame is based around the perpetrator giving the shame to the survivor, passing the shame to the survivor, often by the grooming process. But I think that, as men speak out their story, or talk about their story and begin to author their story and <i>own</i> their story, they start to find sort of a love and belonging and joy within the group.</p> <p>What's interesting is when they, these men, they come together, they sit side by side, and they connect. Despite the fact that socioeconomically, they're vastly different, and their coping strategies have been vastly different, but they come together.</p> <p>I think it's the sheer fact that loneliness has been broken, isolation has been broken. They are now in a group of men who've shared the same experience. And they start to realise, well, all these years, I've had these thoughts in my head that I've never spoken about. Maybe to a counsellor, but not in a group.</p> <p>Like I mentioned earlier, the men are generally wearing masks. They feel invisible. Suddenly, they can take the mask off, they can become visible, they belong within the group. And they can experience love and joy, I believe. You know, the love is about compassion, really.</p>
<p>Ric Herbert</p>	<p>[SAMSN PROMOTION]</p>
<p>Brett P</p>	<p>So I guess as the weeks transpire, the men gain greater resilience; they become more confident. I guess, they get given an identity again, where their identity had been taken away from them by the perpetrator. And I guess, you know, as they have been able to re-author their story, and start owning their story through the group process, they are affirmed. Then they become increasingly more resilient and more confident that they're going to be alright.</p> <p>I mean, I think what's really important is that by the men re-authoring their story, it's their story now, they are not going to be defined by the abuse.</p>

	<p>They're not going to be defined by sexual abuse, that their identity is larger than that.</p> <p>Suddenly they've got a voice. Suddenly, people are giving them space. They're inviting them to talk about how they were a victim. Very quickly, what I've noticed is that the men start using those terms: 'survivor' and talk about 'overcoming' things, which means that they are gaining some power and control over the story again, whereas previously, they may not have felt they had any power at all.</p> <p>But I think that they become more whole, I guess. That's what I see. The men become more resilient, more whole, more willing to take on challenges that they possibly wouldn't have done before.</p> <p>I think that as time goes on, and they share more about their story, and then they realise that they're not some person that has to hide anymore. They recognise too, that some of the things that life throws up, that they can overcome those problems and those challenges. And the abuse has been something that's been pretty much an anchor around their feet. But as they break free of it, I think they begin to realise that, you know, that maybe they can work. If they haven't worked in the past for many years because of the abuse, perhaps used alcohol and other drugs to cope with the shame, I think that they start to think, "Well, maybe I can work!" or, maybe I can engage in other activities, maybe I can be a decent partner, maybe I can have a relationship with someone.</p> <p>But they, you know, I think by the end of eight weeks, they're really interested in moving on. I think that that's what they want. I mean, it's interesting, some men even go as far as saying, "I don't really need to talk that much about this anymore."</p>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<p>SAMSN CEO, Craig Hughes-Cashmore:</p>
<p>Craig Hughes-Cashmore</p>	<p>Some guys finish an eight-week group and, and they go on their merry way. Other guys opt to come along to our monthly meetings, just to check in and stay in touch. I remember one guy who did an eight-week group and we didn't see him for about three years. And he suddenly popped back and showed up in a monthly meeting. And it was great to see him but I'll never forget him saying, "It's so good to be back". You know; talked about the boys as his brothers, and that he was a really proud SAMSN alumni. And just knowing that SAMSN was there, and that he could drop in, gave him a certain amount of strength.</p> <p>We have readings at each monthly meeting. So they're very focused on recovery, looking forward. You know, it's not so much about going over your story or anything like that. It's very much forward-focused, and it's sharing, as a group of men, how people are doing, but also looking at different parts</p>

	<p>of recovery, which, you know, sparks conversation about what works for people, what doesn't. You know, it's not about giving advice, it's literally just sharing your own experience. And what's great about that is, it just opens up people's thinking, to what might work for them. And they're incredibly inspiring, and I know, motivating, but also breaks the isolation that I think is the common denominator for all survivors, no matter what their current circumstances. If they're married, if I've got kids.</p> <p>All survivors talk to me about feeling isolated. And sadly, that's a terrible legacy of abuse, because that's what offenders do. They isolate children before they, before they start the actual abuse. So these groups fly in the face of all of that: you know, it's about connection, it's about mateship, sharing, having a laugh, maybe having a feed afterwards. They're really powerful meetings.</p>
Lindsay G	<p>That was Craig talking, as he always does, about... about "we can recover". But he had that mantra, "We can recover". And I picked my mantra up: it is "We can be better". We can be better, because I see it in people's lives. And it's the stories that people tell that make me feel as though we can be better. And that's my quest for social justice: that our lives can be better if we share our stories and our lives with each other.</p>
Adam	<p>My ultimate goal now, part of my daily ritual, is to move, touch and inspire every single person I meet. And that's not from ego. So every single person I meet, I do, I choose to move, touch, and inspire. I want them to walk away saying that, "What a great guy", you know what I mean? "He's had a look at himself, he's done a lot of work on himself, he's here to make a difference." And that's part of my personal legacy.</p>
Les S	<p>Throughout my years, I have been a LifeLine crisis support worker as well. And I chose to do that because I wanted to help people. Because I know what it's like to struggle through life. So I wanted to help other people as well.</p> <p>I believe that the abuse that I endured as a young child has given me the empathy to be able to listen to people, and my role within SAMSN - although I'm the General Manager - I also work within the Lived Experience team, and that gives me the ability to talk to guys, or guys can talk with me about their experience and I <i>listen</i> to them.</p>
Ryan C	<p>So the one thing that I've alluded to today is that resilience is something that I must overcome, adversity I need to overcome. And I'm not one that engages in going to church on Sunday. But I can tell you, I've fallen on my knees plenty of times, talking to thin air: "God help me." I've done it plenty of times. And I'm still here kicking.</p>
Phillip S	<p>And I think that would be my message that, you know, if you unpack this sort of stuff, it's freedom. And, you know, don't get me wrong, I still get scared,</p>

	<p>and I still get uncertain, and I still get all the sort of baggage that comes into play. But I know it's just an illusion. I know it's not true. I focus on my own mental health, my own wellbeing. I've taken up art as a process of, you know, dealing with trauma. Art therapy, if you wanna call it that. I am focusing on my children, being a dad to my girls, playing a meaningful role in their life. And learning the ropes around that. I'm learning how to be a dad, I didn't have a dad growing up.</p> <p>You know, I think at the end of the day, for my brothers out there who need help, or haven't disclosed, I would simply say, there are people, organisations like SAMSN, other people out there, who would be only too happy to provide a safe spot that is culturally appropriate, to disclose any secrets that are holding you back. And, my brothers out there: there is a better way of living. And because I'm sober, because I'm addressing my shit, I'm a dad, I'm growing and becoming the father that I never had. I'm living in the solution.</p>
Closing Credits	
<p>Rob Carlton</p>	<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: samsn.org.au (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>
<p>Felicity Blake</p>	<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>
ENDS	