



Surviving

At our conference in June, **Aqualma Murray** spoke with passion and humour about resilience and surviving childhood sexual abuse. We have pleasure in presenting an edited but still lively transcript for those who were unable to attend

My background is in social work. I've been in social work for some 30 years. I've worked with most client groups in England and in New Zealand and my speciality is children's mental health, children with disabilities, children who've experienced abuse. My journey to social work came from my experiences as a child and I want to talk about that and children's wellbeing and what allows them to survive the most horrendous experiences that life throws at them. In other words, to link theory and practice with the personal experience.

I've worked in places where professionals have referred to survivors of sexual abuse as 'damaged goods'. On the other hand, I also remember working in probation, running a workshop for adult women offenders who were survivors of sexual abuse – and *there* the staff were excited. They said: 'You want to disclose to these women that you are a survivor, and you want a colleague who can say in all honesty I've *not* experienced abuse, so we can hold these women, knowing that some people are abused and some people are not.' And we did that. It was amazing what happened in that group.

For illustration purposes, posed by model

But in the break we still had colleagues who would say about a woman: 'There's no helping her, is there? After all, she's damaged goods.'

I want to tell you that survivors of abuse are extremely resilient and resourceful. And I want to talk about that journey. How we can be in a place where we can receive help and become professionals.

So who am I?

I'm a young lady who grew up in London, with family from Jamaica. Back in the Fifties, people would migrate from the Caribbean Islands and often live in one house because it was hard to find a room – there was lots of racism – and families would join families until they could get on their own feet and find somewhere to live. My dad came over first and then my mum with my oldest brothers and then I was born and then my other brothers. And then my mother's so-called cousin came over. And she said he could stay with us. That's what we do – help people out. He came into my life when I was about six to nine months old. He then decided he would take advantage of this family that had supported him – grooming we call it. When we think of grooming, we often think of the victim being groomed, somehow tantalised or made to feel scared and then abused. What actually happens is that for someone to successfully abuse children, they need to groom the people *around* the victim.

So this person – let's call him Tommy – came into my family and he was a nice person, a person people loved, fixing things, playing the banjo, helping in all sorts of ways – 'I'll give the children lunch', 'I'll play with the boys' etc. Everybody adored him. Except for my dad, because Tommy flirted with my mother. And when my dad was thinking about that, his eye was off the ball and he couldn't see what was happening to the kids. Tommy would tell my mum she had to clean the house, as aunts were visiting and talking about how they preferred a clean house, so now my mum was upset with all these other people who *could* have helped her protect the children. See how Tommy isolated people? And then he'd play rough and tumble with the boys but not with me because I was a girl – so I felt there was a division between my brothers and me. However, he did allow me to come into his bedroom and listen to the banjo, and in the bedroom was a bowl of sweets. My brothers were jealous because I had access to the sweets. So everyone was removed from seeing what was going on with the little girl. And the abuse took place from a very young age, approximately two years old, feet too little to touch the ground, and afraid – and the interesting thing was he always left the door ajar so that he could say: 'Nothing's going on.' And he always made sure, when I got old enough, that I went to ask my mother if I could come into his room to play the banjo. And I'd pray she'd say no, but she always said: 'What a good girl, so polite, always asks, never just goes off.'

On one occasion, my mother had a dream – they're powerful things. 'I dreamt,' she said, 'that you had all these leeches in your hair, Aqualma, and I couldn't get them out and I went to Uncle Tommy and he helped me.' I must have been about six years old and I'm thinking, don't you know what's going on? Doesn't that tell you who the leech really is?

I knew she knew on some level something wasn't right. In our culture we place great stock on dreams. Why didn't she see what it meant? They tell us things, warn us. So as a child, I had to find some way of surviving by myself.

Not all victims of abuse actually survive. Some end up getting mentally ill, committing suicide, self-harming, offending, behaving destructively. What we know about abuse is that one in three girls, by the time she is 18, will have experienced some type of sexual abuse. Boys, one in four. I think we've got the stats wrong with the boys. They haven't been able to speak as openly as girls and therefore we don't hear about the type of abuse that boys experience. In particular, from female relatives. I had a case recently where a mother would beat the naked boy. She was naked and would beat the boy while she was naked. That to me is sexual abuse. That child is now very distressed, acting out sexually and in a place of absolute confusion. So let's not narrow ourselves to the offenders being male and the victims girls.

Do I want to live?

So at the age of six, I had to ask myself some serious questions. One, do I want to live? And if so, how? And I remember thinking: *No I don't really want to live*. But there was a fear about not living. What's death? And will I be free from abuse if I die? You see, I came from a spiritual family who believed very much in the afterlife, and I had this fear that suicide wouldn't free me. So I couldn't really go down that road. However, at 15, I decided to consider it again, because make no mistake, being abused is painful.

We know about the physical harm, of course, about the infections and pain, but *psychologically*, what's the impact on children? What does it do to a child to be holding a secret about something they can't talk about in relation to a person everyone adores? That's often the case. Abuse happens more frequently *in* the home than outside with a stranger. Incidentally, I don't think we can hold the view that if you're abused by a father it's worse than if you're abused by an uncle or a stranger. Many training courses try to put this view. But it depends on who you are and how you manage adversity – *that's* how abuse impacts on you. Depending on their make-up and their ability to be resilient, someone will survive or not. And I want to talk about what makes some of us survive.

Surviving

So what allows me to be here today? To think about this, I needed to go back to being a child and find that bit of me that said: 'You know what? I'm gonna survive this.' Because every survivor has to make that decision: am I going to be hurt forever or try to stop hurting at some point, not knowing how to do it? That is the quest.

My abuse went on from two to six years of age. Nothing was dearer to me than the prospect of going to school. Schools are amazing places and they're safe havens for children. In school you have children in distress and who sleep in school. They can't sleep at home because they don't know what is going to happen. They have half an ear and eye open. They know they will be able to sleep in school without being disturbed. And here's a tip: one thing that's so simple and so effective for children is to take a sheet and wrap themselves

“ Every survivor has to make that decision: am I going to be hurt forever or try to stop hurting at some point, not knowing how to do it? That is the quest ”

in it, tuck it under their feet and around their head, so if anybody comes in, they have to disturb the sheet before they disturb the child. It gives them an extra skin of safety. But the day my mother said I was to go to school, I thought: *Freedom – out of the house, away from Tommy!* But on the first day, Tommy offered to take me. When we got there he said: 'You know you're not to talk to anybody about what we do, don't you? Your mum would be so upset and embarrassed if anybody at school knew. And she'll blame you because you should not have let that happen.' I knew that. I was just glad to get out of the house.

So I did not tell anybody about the abuse. Not verbally, anyway. That's the important point. My actions all the time said something's not right here. For instance, I would do cartwheels with no knickers on. What's that about? No one said: 'Stop it you naughty girl!'

The abuse stopped. I got to teenage years, and some time later the abuser had passed away, but I was still trying to say something about the abuse. We had a lovely tenant now, and this man (he was about 24) was gorgeous and I'd do the strangest things like open doors when he was in the bathroom, walk in half naked, and this man said to me: 'What are you doing, Aqualma? I could hurt you, you're putting yourself at risk here. You do it again and I tell your dad.' Well, Dad was a very serious man and I didn't want him to know. But I thought, wow this tenant didn't take advantage of me. And I learnt that not everyone was like Uncle Tommy. Some people wouldn't hurt me, some would. And I remember thinking through a lot of my life: *Who might hurt me?* Remember, I'm a black young lady in London. I figured white men wouldn't hurt me, because I'd been around white men – teachers, the milkman, workmen etc – and not one of them had hurt me. So when this young man of 24 who was black didn't hurt me, I thought: *Oh there are black men who don't hurt me too*. I was exploring and learning.

...and filling the void

So what allowed me to be able to explore these things? Most children tell me they experience an overwhelming feeling in their stomach as if they're going to explode. As if they're totally dirty, and need to get some stuff out. I felt it too – but what allowed me *not* to succumb to it? I think I filled the void by taking bits from other people. Bits of food, bits of knowledge, bits of time, and it allowed me to feel I could just be. And I started surviving.

When we think of mental health, we think of the ability to socialise and function, and be able to eat and sleep well. It's very hard to feel on top of our mental health all the time. It's a moving feast. Some days we can feel low, depressed, confused; some days we don't feel supported, valued or wanted. Other days we feel on top of the world. Mental health isn't static. Some days I would be so depressed as a young lady that I would curl up in bed and cry. But my mother adored me. Hear that? My mother adored me. She wanted a daughter. This, I think, was my saving grace. She saw the boys as belonging to Dad, for him to look after. And the little girl was her protégé, she said. So I was being abused in the daytime while Mum was cooking in the kitchen and singing, while the door was ajar, my brothers were angry with me and this person was hurting me. So I have this thought: *I'm being hurt but I'm adored*. What a confusion.

And I also had these brothers who somehow believed I would be OK. They always told me I was going to be fine and rich and OK – they said it all the time. And I thought: *I'm not OK. I'm petrified. I'm attempting suicide at 15*. And I'm thinking: *How can I get this electrical wire into the bath, how can I cut my wrists?* And then I tried the Panadol and vodka – maybe death would be better after all. But when we're born, we have a sense of wanting to survive and the fear is that we're going to be annihilated. Babies expect that you will keep them alive and they help you on that journey – crying,

reaching out, smiling, grabbing. Without you they will not survive. Without love children will not survive. They are born geared up to attract that love and without it they will close down. I took the overdose, but in those last moments when I realised my life was at risk, I decided I didn't want to die. My mum worked at the hospital as an orderly. I rang the ambulance and said: 'Can you come quietly (I was very drunk and dizzy)? Don't wake up my mum because she works in the hospital but come and get me because I've taken all these tablets.' I kept repeating to *not* tell my mum – desperately wanting someone to tell her! But they just dropped me home without disclosing. However, my brother took me in his arms and said: 'Now sis, you know there's some rules in this family don't you? And you've just broken one of them. One of the rules is you never take your life ('don't go sideways') – you can kill other people if you've got a good reason, but you can't take your life. And the other rule is, you can't go mad.' I think those rules kept me safe because I couldn't break them. So I had to find another way, not suicide.

Holding the hope

When I work with young people, I hold hope for them, like my brothers did for me. I say to them very clearly: 'I need you here and alive for us to make a change. If you're not here, we can do nothing whatsoever.' I have contracts with my young people: 'If you decide to take an overdose and take your life, the rules are you phone me first. And when you phone me, you know what I'm going to do, don't you? I'm going to inform someone, who will hopefully try and save your life.' Because I'm conscious I tried to speak in other ways than just saying it, and nobody heard me. So I'm giving them an opportunity to be heard. And people *have* rung me. I'll give you an example.

A young lady I worked with said she was raped by a school friend. She put it on Facebook and everyone gave her a hard time. Some agreed he was a bastard, but others said: 'You're a liar.' She was very distressed. She texted me one day to say she felt like killing herself. I know she'd already survived abuse and now been raped. I thought: *OMG what do I do?* I wanted to phone her, but no! The thing to do is text back. I texted her: 'On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you want to kill yourself?' 'Seven.' 'OK. Anyone you want to kill more than yourself?' 'Him. 12.' Good – that meant she wanted to be alive because you've got to be alive to kill someone! I said: 'Great. Stay with me. I'm going to phone you at what time?' 'I'm at college now. Phone me at 6.' You see, we need to work where young people are at. And if someone communicates with me via texting, I need to trust that's how they wish to communicate. And remember, we're all struggling with this moving feast of mental health. One day she's fine. Next day she's suicidal. We write nobody off. We hold hope. We give them an expectation that they *can* survive.

Mental health is the ability to interact and sustain mutually satisfying relationships. I couldn't. But as a young person, I became skilled at pretending to be OK. Pretending was hard. I'd go to parties with a book and sit on the stairs and read, because there were people around me and I didn't know who to trust or interact with but I had to be in a space with them. Then I'd have a party and I'd keep myself so busy I 'wasn't

“ We must be honest and congruent when we're holding hope for youngsters. We can't lie to them. We find the positives and we give that positive back ”

there'. There were lots of times when I 'wasn't there'. But someone held hope for me. Someone held me in a place of value when I couldn't hold myself in that place. When they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, my options were three things: a prostitute (but although I knew all about sex, I'm choosy), a thief (lots of offenders around but I wasn't brave enough to steal), or a midwife. That would take me seven years, the careers person said. So I asked what I could do instead! Residential care, she said. And that's how I came into social work. And I was able to believe I had a future because there were people who thought I was going to be OK.

When I work with young people, I *tell* them they're going to be OK. I had a therapist (Dorothy Jones) at one bad time in my life, and she said to me: 'You're going to make a wonderful probation officer and your history is not going to stop you.' And every time I come to a dilemma, I have Dorothy Jones – my counsellor – on my shoulder, telling me I'm going to be OK. But we must be honest and congruent when we're holding hope for youngsters. We can't lie to them. We find the positives and we give that positive back. They will see straight through lies. Children who have experienced abuse are skilled at reading people. They have to be, to fend for themselves when there's nobody helping them. So we need to be honest and genuine and congruent. When a young person tells me that this and that and the other happened and it was horrendous, I say: 'And you're sitting here now and that in itself is wonderful. It means something different might happen tomorrow.' I can say that honestly. They *can* survive, and you hold hope. If we do nothing else, hold hope. And we need to not freak out. Some of it is horrendous, but we need to be able to contain it. If we can't hear it, they can't manage it. We also need to reflect back their strengths. As we listen, we find strengths in the story ('That was awful but you managed to remember and talk to me about that now. That was really brave of you') and reflect the strengths back so they know they have been heard and have strengths.

And we must collaborate with colleagues and other professionals so as to work with the whole young person, making sure they have enough money or clothes etc. Or maybe helping them access a physical activity such as a music group.

And then there's reframing the negative experience. My son's play therapist said I needed to tell him about the abuse – that he wasn't distressed about my mother dying (he was four) but about something to do with me, that he was being protective. I couldn't tell him at four but I told him at six and he asked what we were going to do, could we beat him up? I told him: 'We can't do that, but what you need to do is keep yourself safe from this man,' and I taught him how to protect

himself. When he was 16, he said to me: 'If you can take that experience and help other people, wouldn't that be great?' He gave me a method of reframing my experience of abuse. And that is one of the greatest strengths I have. I reframe all bad experiences into How can I use them to my advantage and the advantage of others? And that becomes the saving grace. Otherwise it's just horrendous. And if I or they can help one person, then that horrific experience was not in vain.

There's also something about efficacy here. About the young person feeling they are effective. I remember a guy in a workshop saying that efficacy is when two cogs come together and one causes the other to move. When we're working with young people, we need to build efficacy – give that young person a purpose. My mum would ask my advice about lots of things: 'What colour shall we paint the wall?' I said paint it green – and I'd sit in this green room and know that I made that choice and everyone was enjoying it. That sort of thing gives us a purpose for being. We do it with children all the time. We say: 'Help lay the dinner table!' and they then see people using the forks and knives. They think: *I had a role to play there. I'm an important person in this world. I impact on others in a positive way.* We do it in school. They perform a school play and everyone benefits. We all need to feel we have a purpose and impact positively on others' lives, and that we're being appreciated. Building efficacy allows children to build resilience. And in this way we help them develop inner strengths.

One of mine was that I had a great imagination. I would daydream all the time. It allowed me to have a world outside of this reality. But one day I decided to step back in and make a difference. I got angry. Anger is good – a much better emotion than depression – and I said: 'This person is not going to conquer my life. I'm going to be in charge.' That journey is an 'every day' journey and impacts on every aspect of my life.

And finally, we must remember that attachment is crucially important. A comparison of the brains of an attached and a neglected child shows huge differences. The neglected child's brain is empty, void. The synapses do not develop, the brain closes down, and the child can appear to have learning difficulties, whereas they were not born that way. The attached child's is sparkling with colour. But there is a window of opportunity, because when they get to teenage years, they start another growing spurt and the brain starts to develop again and those synapses that did not develop can grow later on, so we need to not give up on anybody. We need to connect with these abused children and young people so they know they're not alone. ●

Aqualma Murray has worked for many years in the field of child protection and safeguarding within social work, the probation service, young offender institutions and counselling. In 2011, Aqualma completed the NSPCC Train the Trainer course in delivering child protection to professionals and community. She is also an ordained interfaith minister, who offers spiritual counselling to all from any religion and those with no religion.