

Age Old Problems: New Aged Care



A podcast by Helping Hand



Age Old Problems: New Aged Care

Episode 6: Understanding Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers



Helping Hand

00:00:00 Kate

Welcome to *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*, a podcast by Helping Hand that offers information and advice to help you find and access the right aged care services. This podcast was recorded on Kauria land.

00:00:22 Kate

Hello I'm your host, Kate Holland and we're diving into a sensitive subject area in this episode. We're talking about Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers and the importance of trauma aware care.

00:00:33 Kate

Please note that if you come from a background of trauma, this episode might touch on subject matter that triggers an emotional response. At the same time, we hope it reassures you that there has been a concerted push to help the industry better understand the impact of trauma on the people they care for. Joining me to discuss this topic is Chelsea Lewis, Manager Engagement and Partnerships at Helping Hand, who has been at the forefront of the organisation's work in this space.

00:00:57 Chelsea

Thank you.

00:00:58 Kate

And Jan Schaffarz, who has lived experience of trauma and has been integral to the success of Helping Hand's latest training offering.

00:01:05 Jan

Thank you.

00:01:06 Kate

Chelsea, can you start off by explaining who the terms Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers represents?

00:01:11 Chelsea

Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers are terms that refer to people who, in Australia, were placed into out of home care between the 1930s and the 1980s. There's an estimated 500,000 Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers, about 7000 were child migrants who were brought here from Britain, Ireland and Malta, about 50,000 indigenous children who are the Stolen Generations, and then 440,000 non-indigenous children. So the actual term Forgotten Australians was first coined in 2004 during the Senate inquiry into children in institutional care. And it's really important to acknowledge that not every people likes those terms, or uses them, or identifies with them. So if you do know people who've had this lived experience, it's important to ask them how they like to identify. Removing children and placing them in institutional care was government policy. And children were often placed in state and church run institutions.

00:02:08 Kate

So why is it important that Helping Hand and other aged care providers are aware of this cohort?

00:02:14 Chelsea

We need to know how to meet people's needs. We need to know what their fears and worries are. We need to know what their strengths and joys are. People who've experienced trauma are often very vulnerable for lots of different reasons. And coming into aged care is a hugely vulnerable transition to

make. A lot of people, particularly Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers as children experienced a lot of neglect and great harm. They have very little trust in authority. They had no control over their lives, and coming into aged care, you are surrendering control. So we need to understand how this has impacted people and how we can deliver appropriate care for them.

00:03:00 Chelsea

If I can share one story to paint a bit of a picture for you of children in these institutions in the last century. As an example, if they wet the bed, a common practise was for the staff to place the child in the centre of the dormitory with the wet sheets on their head and the other children were encouraged to humiliate and berate them. So if you imagine if you're getting older, you're coming into aged care, imagine your fear about becoming incontinent.

00:03:24 Kate

That's awful, just awful. So Helping Hand has been working to address the unique needs of Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers. And you've touched on how important and valuable and necessary that is. Please can you tell us about Real Care the Second Time Around, and the training that Helping Hand has developed as part of that?

00:03:40 Chelsea

I'll start with the name, so Real Care the Second Time Around. People with lived experience chose that name and it's because as children in care, they did not receive the care that they deserved. And so if they choose to engage with aged care services, they want to receive real care the second time around. So over the last few years we've worked with a range of partners and people with lived experience to develop a whole range of resources which are designed to support aged care organisations to learn how to support Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers. So there's booklets, there's training programmes. They're all on our website, they're all freely available, there's hard copies, there's soft copies, we send scorm packages to aged care organisations so they put these training programmes on their own learning management systems. So as many people as possible can receive this education.

00:04:29 Chelsea

The first online training programme really goes into who are Forgotten Australians, what the impact of trauma is, and then there's some really powerful videos. People with lived experience talking about how they would like to receive care in aged care and how they wouldn't like. So it provides some really good context for staff working in aged care. And I think some really interesting things that we've learned through this process. Well, this one isn't a surprise, but the overwhelming number of people who say they've never heard about Forgotten Australians, so they don't know about this part of the history of this country. So raising awareness about that has been a really great outcome of this work and the other is that a lot of people who do the training discover that either someone in their family or even themselves are Care Leavers and they didn't really make the association with some of the experiences that they had as children.

00:05:18 Kate

You mentioned that a lot of this training has happened in conjunction with people who have lived experience and that has been a really important part of this process. And Jan, thank you so much for joining us today. So you identify as a Forgotten Australian and you're the South Australian representative for AFA, which is the Alliance for Forgotten Australians. Are you able to tell us about your background and your involvement with Helping Hand on the training?

00:05:41 Jan

You used to get charged as a neglected child, so that wasn't a good start, and then made a ward of the state. I was in foster homes. I had 17 different homes up until about the age of five, then got a long term placement and that worked out really well for me and I'm still in contact with the family. I got married and had children. I went into nursing. So I've worked in aged care on the nursing side of things, also in emergency, and recently become involved with the Alliance for Forgotten Australians and trying to help and promote and get the word out there about who we are and what we need.

00:06:25 Kate

Yes the needs are significant and it's important that people understand. And so the latest program of training that has come out from Helping Hand is very much around that intake process for when people want to investigate and potentially access aged care, and you're part of that training and part of the really powerful videos that are embedded in that training. Are you able to talk us through some of the points that you made and what what is really important to you, as part of that intake process?

00:06:49 Jan

The feeling of us going into another residential care facility is pretty horrifying. Some Forgotten Australians have not even had a permanent home. One lady I know of at 65 finally got her own place that she could call home, so to wait that long for a secure, safe environment and then maybe having to be moved from there. It's pretty terrifying. So yeah, we've got a little reservation about going into a, well, another institution is how we'd see it.

00:07:26 Kate

So from watching those videos myself, a few of the really strong or key takeaways for me was that, you know, it's really important that people are not judged. That the approach from an aged care worker to each person is personalised, cause your experience is very unique, but also one of the very core things that sort of stuck with me was that building trust takes time. I know Chelsea, you've talked about this, that people who are working in aged care are very nervous about when they should ask people how they should ask people from your perspective. Jan, is that process going to differ for every person?

00:07:57 Jan

It probably will, and you'll probably only get bits of information at a time, so it takes us a long time to trust someone, and probably certain people we may not trust. It really is a matter of time. And then sharing bits of our story when we feel safe enough to do so. And then when we found that we can trust that person, they've handled the information well and then we can build on that when we want to. So we might form a closer relationship over time, with a particular person.

00:08:35 Kate

Thank you, Jen. That's really important information. So I guess aged care workers who are listening to this, they don't need to feel like they have the answers straight away. They just need to try and learn and to be OK with the slow process to let you lead and other people in your situation lead the process a bit themselves.

00:08:52 Jan

Yes, that's right. So just build the relationship over time and we'll share during that time. Bits and pieces probably and then then you'll end up getting the full picture eventually. Some may not want to discuss it at all. So that will be a bit harder for workers. Hopefully in that case you would find out what some triggers are by just during the daily activities of care. So yeah, it's just a time process and it's not all going to be sorted out in the first few weeks. It's going to take time.

00:09:24 Kate

And when you mentioned triggers – so triggers are the sorts of things that might create an emotional response in somebody who's in care, aren't they, which may be deemed as behaviour outside of the normal scope. So it's important for aged care workers to understand what those triggers might be and adjust their behaviour accordingly, is that what you're suggesting?

00:09:42 Jan

Yes, that's right. Some triggers may seem to the worker that it's a normal thing that happens, so you know, like washing your hair. I mean that's a normal thing, but that might trigger, you know, a lot of children had heads shaved and kerosene washes and things like that. So the simple task of washing your hair could trigger. A lot of residential care places have a hairdresser area now, so that might be something even just to wash your hair, go down to the hairdresser because then it's not seen as a traumatic experience, it's probably better for the client. You know, a strange person, a strange worker, an agency worker – that could trigger something, and so while that agency person is working there, the Forgotten Australian might be hyper vigilant for that whole shift. Wondering what's this strange person going to do? Are they going to steal my stuff? We might not appreciate you saying, well, we're going to go and do a shower now, cause you're a strange person. So in that regard, just try and work with the person. Perhaps at handover you would mention, you know, the shower didn't happen, and when the regular person's back on maybe say, you know, just see if they want to shower later on. So just trying to work outside the square when things come up like that.

00:11:00 Kate

I mean, it's why this training is so important, isn't it, Chelsea? Because as you mentioned, a lot of people that you've come across haven't even heard the term Forgotten Australians or Care Leavers before. So if you delve into the training, you get an understanding of what people experienced, therefore you have a bit more of an insight into when a reaction occurs, why it may have occurred. And I was going to ask, you know, how has working on this project helped you to better understand things that aged care workers and really carers of anyone with a background of trauma for that matter, might need to consider?

00:11:31 Chelsea

So this work has completely changed my perspective in a lot of ways. It's helped me to understand the impacts of trauma more and in particular, complex trauma and to look at people in lots of different ways. So you think about war veterans, you think about people who've lived in a refugee camp, you think about survivors of violence, and then you think about Forgotten Australians. And I mentioned before about, you know, being a really vulnerable time in people's lives, coming into care. Aged care is a highly regulated sector for good reason. But sometimes the focus can slip a little bit to compliance, and that we need to comply with lots and lots and lots of different things. And yes that is important, but we need to come back to the individual always and we need to get better at that.

00:12:18 Chelsea

A large proportion of aged care workers were born overseas and that is only going to increase over time, so a lot of people don't know the history of this country, saying that a lot of people born in Australia don't know the history of this country, so their education is really important. And we've talked a little bit, we've used the language around behaviours and that's something that we encourage people to shift that language. To think about someone who might be reacting to something, or that they might be trying to communicate with a worker rather than calling things behaviours. We've been working with a whole range of organisations around the country over the last couple of years to embed this work in their organisations and that recognition of trauma has become very apparent, and the way that staff are working with people is changing. And that's amazing.

00:13:14 Chelsea

As an example, a woman in Queensland in the residential care home, every single night, she would scratch her arms until they would bleed and the staff wanted to understand more about why this was happening, and spoke with her family, and discovered that she's a Stolen Generation survivor who'd been taken and put on a mission when she was a small child and there were bed bugs. So now she's older. She's living with dementia. She's in a residential care home in a similar sort of institutional environment, and she was reverting back to that behaviour. So what the staff now do every single night with this woman is that they make her bed with fresh sheets and fresh bedding every single night. And she sleeps soundly and she doesn't scratch herself. So it's just that finding out that a little bit more, understanding why something's happening and then putting an appropriate response in place.

00:13:55 Kate

So what is Helping Hand's commitment to this kind of care and trauma aware care moving forward? Is there an ongoing plan?

00:14:01 Chelsea

Yes, absolutely. So Helping Hand is embedding this work across all of its residential care homes. And so all of this work has been funded through federal government funding and the focus has been on residential care. The intention of that is because that institutional setting is perceived as a bigger barrier for Forgotten Australians, so we will be then moving this work also into home care because all of the principles around trauma aware and healing informed care translate into home care. It's an ongoing slow process and we have discovered that through the work we've been doing around the country that this takes time. And at the moment, we've got a new Aged Care Act, Strengthened Standards, a whole lot of reform coming out of the Royal Commission, you know, being rolled out. It's a lot to ask of the sector to embrace something and it takes time. It's not a quick process but a lot of people are really committed to doing this work well.

00:14:52 Kate

And obviously the training that Helping Hand has created is available to anybody you know, individual member or somebody working in aged care. There is also a way that Helping Hand can help residential care homes that aren't part of Helping Hand get verification for trauma aware and healing informed care. Are you able to talk us through that?

00:15:10 Chelsea

The federal government a few years ago introduced a specialisation verification process for any aged care organisation to apply to say that they can give appropriate care to a range of diverse needs groups. So with Care Leavers, there's eight criteria, and organisations need to meet four of them to receive that verification. And one of the things that we've developed, and we launched in November last year, is an online website. It's a toolkit, it's called www.realcaretoolkit.com.au That's the website and it's a six month process with all the learning materials, all the education, all the examples of policy statements. All the things that an organisation would need to make the changes within their organisation to do this work well and that's available to everybody.

00:15:54 Kate

Jan, I want to come back to you and say thank you for coming on and explaining your experience and the importance of this work that's happening. Is there anything that you'd like to add or that you really wish people would think about and appreciate when it comes to Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers?

00:16:07 Jan

I might just talk about our possessions. They're very important to us. We would have had a lot of possessions taken away, including even clothing taken away and we were given work clothes or, you know, this is going back to the childhood. So if someone is taking our clothes away, we might think that we're not getting them back. So maybe a simple thing like showing us that they go to the laundry on site and they get laundered there and they don't leave and they come back to us. That might just help us to believe that, yes, our clothes are coming back.

00:16:44 Jan

We might have a preference for male or female workers. We might also have a preference for where the room is. Perhaps the room right at the end of the hallway is going to trigger something for us, because perhaps there was some physical abuse that happened in a similar room in an institution before. So yeah, it's important that we are always given a choice because we weren't given choices and also about being in control about what happens to us on a day to day basis. So anything that's out of the norm might trigger us because we don't feel in control as a child, things changed all the time and we didn't have any control. It's really important to have the choice of what's happening and for us to know early if there's going to be a change so we can get our head around that. So the sooner the better. If there's a difference to the routine, it's better to tell us early so we can sort of reprogram our day and get the control back.

00:17:46 Kate

Before we go, is there one last piece of advice or something that you'd really like people to take away from listening to this episode?

00:17:52 Chelsea

I think that talking to lots and lots of staff in aged care, they often say that they don't feel like they will know what to say if somebody does share something about their lived experience or aspects of their life. There's this level of fear of not knowing everything about everything. We can't expect people to know everything about the experience of being transgender or living in different cultures, or being indigenous. My piece of advice would be that we don't need to know every single thing about every aspect of diversity, difference, or trauma. We need to ask. How would you like to be cared for and what do I need to know that's important to you, irrespective of someone's life experience? I think staff need to remove that fear from learning aspects about people's lives and if they're building the trust and delivering person centred care, they will discover the things that they need to know.

00:18:41 Kate

And Jan, too. Obviously, Chelsea's given some very good last piece of advice that people should take away when they listen to this. Is there one particular thing you'd like to add as a takeaway?

00:18:50 Jan

The most important thing is that we are listened to and believed. And that you can give us the time to form the trust in sharing our stories again.

00:19:02 Kate

And I really highly recommend checking out this training and we'll have all the details for the training and the links and you can learn more about all the different things that need to be considered and see Jan featuring in these videos too, and thanks again for being a part of that Jan cause it was really important.

00:19:17 Jan

Thanks for having me.

00:19:18 Kate

And thank you Chelsea for coming and explaining this in great detail to us on the podcast. It's been really important work that you've been a big part of.

00:19:24 Chelsea

Thanks Kate.

00:19:28 Kate

For more information on Helping Hand and their services please head to www.helpinghand.org.au or call Helping Hand directly on 1300 653 600.