How safe do Forgotten Australians feel here?

Understanding what safety means for Vic

Be understanding.
Listen to my concerns.
Talk to me about options.

WATTLE PLACE | Relationships AUSTRALIA · NSW

Wattle Place, by Relationships Australia NSW, provides free, trauma-informed support for people who have been adversely affected by institutional or foster care, forced adoption or institutional child sexual abuse.

Learn more at wattleplace.org.au

UTS | This project was supported by the UTS Shopfront Community Coursework Program at the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion and a Visual Communication design team from the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney, Studio Hive, supervised by Livia Lima.

Why This Matters

The childhood trauma inflicted on Forgotten Australians can have significant influence over their interactions with systems and authorities.

We understand that it isn't often practical to hear a person's back story. As well as time and opportunity constraints, many people who experienced childhood trauma do not want to disclose those experiences.

However, even without knowing a person's life history, certain behaviours, such as those described in Vic's story, may indicate that a person is displaying a trauma response.

If it is safe to do so, proceeding with the assumption that it is a trauma response, and responding to that, has the potential to make a positive difference for both the customer and staff.

Vic is a Forgotten Australian

Vic was one of around 450,000 children placed in Australian institutions (children's homes and orphanages) or foster homes before 1990. Under child welfare legislation 'Forgotten Australians' is the official term, but others are used including Care Leavers and former State Wards.

At four years old, Vic was sent to a children's home where he experienced years of physical and emotional abuse. Vic was forced to work to earn his board and keep and could not attend school.

As an adult, Vic lives with complex trauma and depression. His stress response is quickly activated, and his limited education has made employment extremely difficult.

To protect the anonymity of Forgotten Australians, Vic's persona has been adapted from lived experiences.



Vic's Services Australia Experience

Vic, now 67, relies on JobSeeker payments. He doesn't understand a letter he has received about his payments. Worried, he decides to go to a Services Australia centre for help.

The wait time is long and by the time he speaks with a staff member, Vic is feeling distressed and agitated. This presents outwardly as anger.

He is directed toward a computer to fill out an online form. Vic explains that he can't use computers. The worker warns Vic that his payments will be delayed if he fails to complete this and suggests that he asks a friend or family member for help.

Vic is isolated and doesn't have anyone he trusts with his personal information. He becomes visibly upset. His behaviour is interpreted as aggressive and security ask him to leave.

The Impact of His Past

Vic's lack of education and a lifelong experience of depression have made it difficult to find and sustain work, resulting in ongoing reliance on JobSeeker.

His childhood trauma, limited literacy, financial vulnerability, and fear of authority, create heightened distress in service environments.

Receiving a letter he cannot read triggers shame and fear about losing his income, activating Vic's threat response. By the time he arrives at the centre, he is already overwhelmed. His anxiety increases as he waits.

Feeling ashamed that he cannot use the computer, and without timely support to resolve the issue, Vic's sense of powerlessness deepens and his emotional state escalates. What appears aggressive is a trauma response to fear and helplessness.

Vic's perceived level of safety:



What Would Safety Look Like for Vic?

Creating choice, control and validation wherever possible can help improve feelings of safety.

For Vic, this could include:

+ Explaining the contents of the letter
+ Ensuring he understands what he needs to do, and why
+ Checking if he can use a computer
+ Asking if he has someone that he trusts who can help
+ Offering assistance in centre, and non-digital options.

How this would increase Vic's perception of safety:



Safety for Those With Trauma

Creating safety for a person who has experienced trauma could look like:

+ **Listening** and recognising that unresponsive or avoidant behaviours may be a trauma response
+ **Acknowledging** the patient's reluctance without judgement
+ **Explaining** what will happen and why before acting
+ **Asking** permission before each step
+ **Offering** choices whenever possible.