

Monthly Message: Family Transition Place gives hope to survivors of sexual violence

Three simple yet powerful words ? we believe you ? are at the core of what the Lotus Centre at Family Transition Place (FTP) is about.

For 40 years, hope has always been behind the doors to FTP, and it is found behind the doors to the Lotus Centre, too. Originally established with a grant from the provincial government during the pandemic, FTP's Lotus Centre continues to provide enhanced support to those who have experienced sexual violence, as well as to the family and friends who support these victims.

Working from the premise that sexual violence is ?never your fault,? the staff and counselling team at FTP provide a safe place for survivors to flourish and bloom. It is a symbol of strength, resilience and rebirth ? of beauty without blemish. At the Lotus Centre, healing is possible, and together, the dedicated team helps clients to discover their inherent strengths and acknowledge their own power.

FTP was granted new annualized funding in 2021 through the Ministry of the Attorney General for Sexual Assault Programming in Dufferin County to enhance its existing sexual violence services. In consultation with partner agencies ? Headwaters Health Care Centre (HHCC) and Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS) ? FTP developed a model for this new centre to expand the collaborative services available in this community.

HHHC provides important emergency medical attention for any victim of sexual violence, and a dedicated nurse collects important forensic evidence.

DCAFS provides support and counselling for youth. FTP provides support and counselling for those 16 years of age and older. The creation of the Lotus Centre allowed FTP to build on the existing services by providing enhanced mobile crisis response; counselling support to survivors, their family members and friends; peer support and community outreach and education within schools and sports teams. This collaborative approach serves the community well, with each organization delivering services within this scope of practice and expertise.

All genders and identities are served at FTP's Lotus Centre by a team of dedicated experts committed to recognizing the trauma arising from sexual violence ? for survivors and their loved ones needing support. Holding credentials in social work, counselling and psychology, and with many years of experience behind them, the Lotus Centre crisis intake team and counsellors use a variety of strategies, including trauma-focused therapy, to support survivors. Anyone can call directly for help through FTP's 24-hour support line (519-941-4357 or 1-800-265-9178).

Counselling Supervisor Lauren Babcock comments, ?The work of healing trauma related to sexual violence has changed to now include providing support to partners, family members, or friends of someone who has been subjected to sexual violence. This is because the Lotus Centre recognizes the impact this can have on those supporting a survivor, and it can be helpful and beneficial to have a space to learn more about the impacts of trauma, how to respond, and how to take care of themselves and survivors through positive coping.?

What is Sexual Violence?

How do you know if the shame, fear of violence or judgement, or any of the many feelings you might be experiencing are because of sexual violence? The answer is simple: ?If something didn't feel ?right,' then it probably wasn't.?' Lauren explains, ?It's important to help clients understand and acknowledge that what they went through was indeed sexual violence and in no way their fault. Often, there are reasons why people dismiss or downplay their experiences, and it is helpful to explore that. Ultimately, we meet the clients where they are at.?

FTP is not the only agency to have replaced terms like 'sexual assault' with 'sexual violence' and 'victims' with 'survivors'. Empowered survivors who feel 'heard, understood and validated' don't think of themselves as victims any longer.

Sexual violence can be historic or recent, but at its core, sexual violence includes being subjected to an unwanted and non-consensual touch or sexual act, sexual abuse, sexual assault or rape, trafficking, stalking, sexual harassment or exploitation, or being exposed to language or behaviour or the non-consensual sharing of images. What matters most, however, is how you felt about what was experienced.

Lauren adds, 'We don't want to 'label' people's experience, especially if they don't want it labelled'we want to help people work through how something has impacted them.'

Beyond counselling and support, the Lotus Centre has a second and equally important component to its work and that is the important role that education plays in reducing sexual violence. Barb Mason, Sexual Violence Community Engagement Facilitator, shares that education is an essential aspect of the work the Lotus Centre will undertake in the community.

She said, 'To be able to provide excellent support to survivors of sexual violence and their loved ones is a priority but, how do we stop the cycle? How do we target the root cause of the issue? How do we get to a point where we actually see a shift in culture that translates into a reduction of sexual violence in the communities we serve? Education is the key to prevention.'

Since the centre's inception, we have connected with hundreds of individuals through community agencies, youth, school boards, sports organizations and even area businesses to ensure everyone knows about the Lotus Centre, how it can help, and that eliminating sexual violence is the responsibility of us all.

Sparking a sustained cultural change might seem daunting, but if anyone is up to the challenge, it's the team behind the Lotus Centre at FTP.

Here you will find a safe space, counsellors who understand trauma, who are 'respectful, gentle and kind,' and who will listen so that you feel 'heard, understood and validated.' Perhaps most importantly of all 'you will find people who believe you.

If you or someone you know needs support, compassionate staff are available to help 24/7. Call 1-800-265-9178.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Article by Brennan Solecky with excerpts from We Believe You, written by Sheralyn Roman and published in FTP's 2022 HOPE Magazine.