



Working Together to Engage Vulnerable Women: Dundee Women's Aid ASPEN Project



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Aim

Dundee Women's Aid (DWA) work with women who are repeatedly being made homeless, or facing threat of homelessness, due to a range of complex needs that the service struggles to support adequately. These include:

- Poor mental health
- Severe trauma responses
- Multiple forms of abuse over the lifespan
- Substance misuse
- Self harm and/or suicidality
- Prostitution or trafficking
- Offending behaviour
- Physical health issues



Methods

Staffed by 0.8wte Consultant Clinical Psychologist and supported by Dundee Violence Against Women Partner Agencies, ASPEN provides:

- Specialist psychological assessment, formulation, and treatment planning in a trauma-informed way
- Assertive, flexible engagement model
- Provision of Survive and Thrive³⁻⁵ to third sector partners
- Consultation to partner agencies to facilitate more effective support of clients
- Consultation and support of research to audit service performance and support ongoing development on women's-only services



Service Development

Conventional services find it difficult to respond to the complexity of the support required by women with such complex needs. Very often the women's stay in refuge was unsuccessful and women moved from one homeless hostel to another, trapped in a cycle of instability and unmet need. DWA, with support from Dundee Health and Social Care Partnership (DHSCP) sought funding from the Government¹ to employ a creative solution to this problem.



The funding enabled the development of the ASPEN project, the aims of which are:

- More timely access to mental health support for women with complex needs
- Improved mental health
- Improved confidence of staff working with women with complex needs
- Improved service provision and capacity

The majority of difficulties encountered by these women are understandable responses to repeated interpersonal trauma experienced across the lifespan. Figure 1 visualises the far-reaching impact of this type of trauma, and ASPEN works to embody the principles promoted in the Transforming Psychological Trauma Framework² in a number of ways.

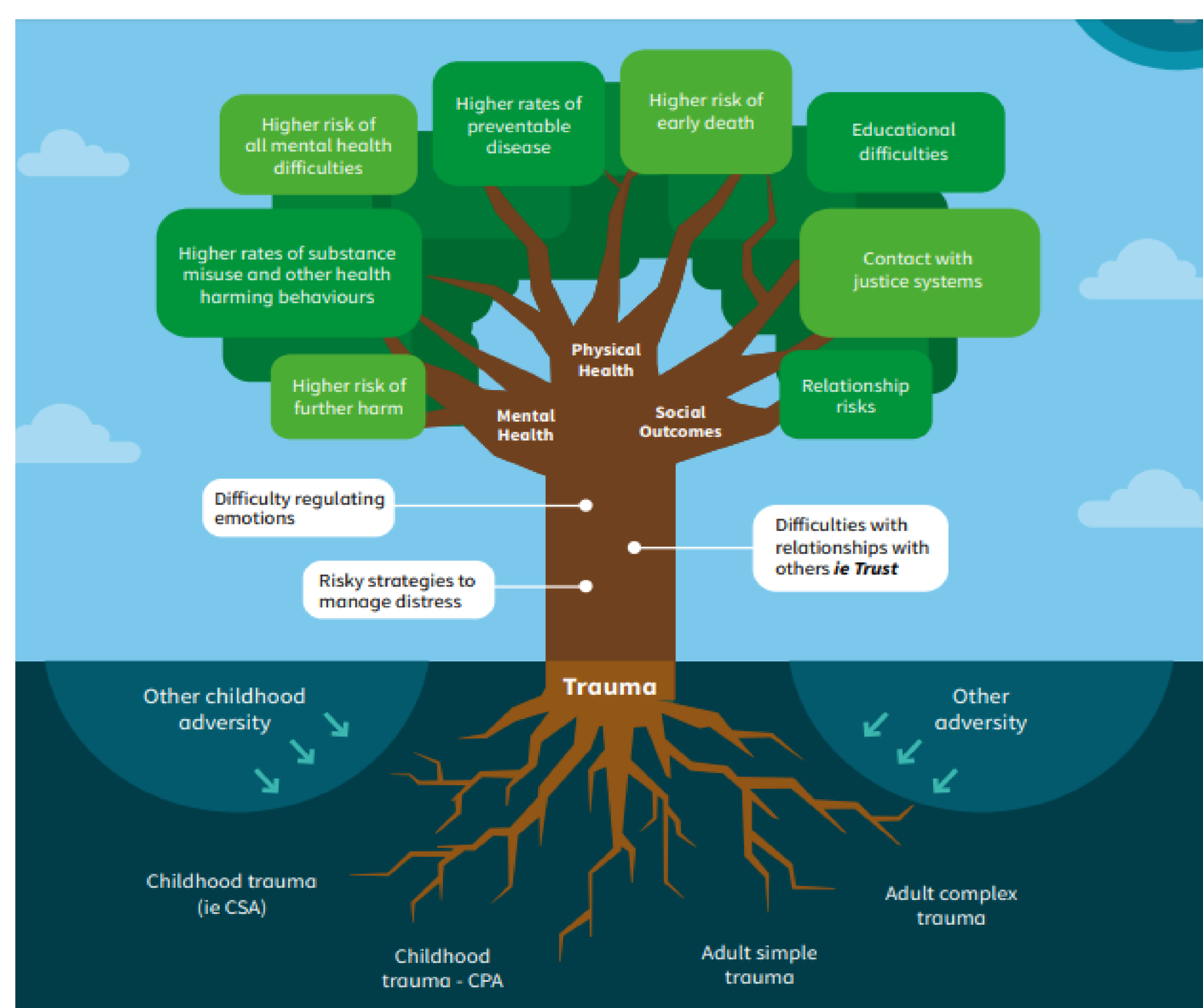


Figure 1. The Trauma Tree², which demonstrates how the roots of trauma can grow into long-term, pervasive difficulties across all aspects of health and everyday functioning.

Outcomes

ASPEN launched in October 2018. In the first six months of the project we have achieved:

- Engagement with partner organisations
- Development of referral processes and databases
- Delivered training on trauma and mental health
- 7 third-sector staff trained and supported to deliver Survive & Thrive
- 3 Survive and Thrive courses
- Offered support to 40 women
- Introduced screening for mental health and trauma symptoms to more accurately assess needs of women accessing DWA
- Made specialist psychological consultation accessible for third sector staff
- Developing a professional network for psychologists working with third sector organisations across Scotland

"People close to me have noticed a big change in my mood and how I'm handling issues that come up"

"The partnership between psychology and third sector/violence against women agenda is innovative and exciting"

"Having quick access to support and advice has been a real asset for us, with women accessing the support at the time and place they need it most"

Next Steps

The next six months will seek to build on the momentum already gathered by:

- Extending referral pathways
- Implementing the Lead Professional Model
- Establishing access to psychological assessment and interventions like Survive and Thrive as a routine part of services
- Auditing referral data
- Developing placement opportunities for psychological therapy trainees
- Sharing knowledge and understanding of trauma through implementing The Scottish Psychological Trauma and Adversity Training Plan⁶
- Leading on local research into the specific needs of women and how services could help make women feel safer by taking a gendered approach to services
- Aiding development of Violence Against Women Pathways in Dundee

Special thanks to all staff of DWA and partner organisations who continue to support this project through its rapid development.

References

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