



Evaluation of +SHIFT

A healing program for women to explore family safety and viable alternatives to force in their intimate relationships

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The +SHIFT Program

The *Positive Support and Healing creates Innovative Forward Thinking* (+SHIFT) Program is a 16-session group work and case support program, which takes a therapeutic, gender-responsive, trauma-informed approach. Positive Shift addresses intersectional identities and promotes healing, while facilitating participants' engagement with viable alternatives to force in their intimate relationships. The safety of women is also a key focus, as the majority of participants have experienced violence or abuse in current or past adult relationships, or in their childhood.

The Evaluation

The University of Melbourne has been contracted by Baptcare to undertake an evaluation of the +SHIFT Program since its inception. The evaluation has collated demographic and performance data, administered a range of measures to evaluate change, conducted post-program interviews with a sample of participants, and interviewed managers and facilitators across the program cycles.

Findings summarized in this report include data from October 2018, when the program commenced, to June 2020. Pre- and post-program data has been collected from 43 of the 46 women who completed the program and attended the final session. Post-program interviews (11) were conducted with a sample of participants from each group.

Baptcare

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shift

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Findings to date

Performance - information about attrition rates and the effect of COVID-19

The table below shows the number referrals into the program, number of assessments conducted, and number of participants commencing and completing group across all cycles of the program to June 2020. Twenty-one women were also supported individually (without group participation) through March 2020 – August 2020 during the COVID-19 period.

Intervention Phase	No. of women
Total number of referrals	766
Total number of appropriate referrals/assessments	193
Total number of participants commencing groups	78
Total number of participants completing groups	46

With a third of initial referrals coming from police reports, many women were uncontactable at the point of first engagement. Both pre- and post-assessment, program staff reported attrition due to women's life circumstances, with competing priorities preventing them from committing to a group or leading to them dropping out of group. These included Child Protection expectations, stresses of family or children's court proceedings, mental health problems, opportunities for AOD treatment, childbirth and other life crises. For some women, group times were not suitable, due to childcare, employment or other responsibilities. In some instances, participants made the choice to disengage.

The impact of COVID-19 during 2020 was also felt through pressures on facilitator time, difficulties in safely establishing and participating in online groups, and other issues such as caring for children at home.

Participant Profile

The following demographic profile of the +SHIFT client group was obtained from pre-program data collected from 91 women. Not all these women started or completed the program, due to various

challenges in their own lives, but all were assessed as eligible.

Women's ages ranged from 18 to 65, with a mean of 35.5 years. While there was a broad range of educational attainment, from post-school education (42%) to "some school" (38%), more than a third were unemployed and over 60% reported an annual income of less than \$30,000. Over a third of the women did not have children. Of the women with children, Child Protection had been involved either at the time of assessment or in the past.

Most women were born in Australia, with 15% from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, and 11% born outside Australia.

The experiences of participants

As can be seen from the sample profile above, participants came from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances, and had different experiences in terms of using force in their relationships with other people. However, it was the experience of being a victim/survivor of violence that united the women experientially. The majority of +SHIFT participants reported experiences of violence or abuse in current or past adult relationships, or in their childhood. Their use of force should be seen in this context.

While a small proportion of women believed that they had been falsely identified as a perpetrator of violence, most described using force to defend themselves or their children (self-defence 55%), to prevent an assault, in an effort to assert their dignity because they had had enough of the abuse, or because of loss of temper (55%). Women found themselves in situations such as the following: 'He had me pinned to a wall. Being verbally abusive. I pushed my way out. He told me to hit him, so I did'.

Most women took full responsibility for the actions that had led to their referral to the program, and many also felt (wrongly) responsible for the unsafe situations in which they found themselves. Before and after the program, many articulated the limits to their sense of choice and responsibility when in unsafe environments or when at breaking point.

'I do have a choice, but it is impacted by my trauma and life experiences and so sometimes feels like I don't.'

Program effectiveness

The Buss-Perry Aggression Scale – Short Form measures change in women's anger and attitudes to aggressive behaviour over the course of the program. While no significant difference was found between pre-program and post-program mean scores for the period in question, significant conclusions cannot be drawn at this stage due to the small sample size. A contextual understanding of participants' actions, as outlined above, suggests that significant change may not be expected on this measure.

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) is a 6-item measure, which was used to assess any changes to women's self-reported, nonspecific psychological distress pre-program and post-program. Participants reported less psychological distress at the end of the program than they did at the beginning, and this was consistent across all sub-scales.

The Social Provisions Scale records women's support networks at pre-program and post-program. It is used to give an indication of the program's success in helping women develop social support networks with other women in the program, as well as to more fully develop existing and new social connections. Changes in most items in this scale indicate that participants found support and people to talk to within the +SHIFT Program. Items referring to support outside the group showed no change.

Women's perspectives on program effectiveness – *'The seeds of everything you need to heal'*

The +SHIFT Program helps women understand the nature of violence and abuse. Interviewees spoke of gaining an understanding of how their own histories (of trauma, of childhood abuse or ongoing violence or both) led them to patterns of behaviour, and reported that this understanding freed them to make choices about how they acted.

'It was a bit more about knowing yourself... you control yourself better and you just make better choices I think.'

Participants particularly valued the practical strategies they were offered that helped them develop healthier and more respectful relationships and negotiate conflict in ways which were more positive. All interviewees were able to cite examples of how their thinking and their behaviour had changed as a result of the insights they had gained from the program.

'I'm doing a lot of things that are more assertive and I'm doing a lot of things that I'm not looking at the problem so close-up. I'm actually stepping back and looking at things from a different perspective.'

The group process helps participants build stronger self-esteem through a non-judgemental approach which treats participants as the experts in their own lives. In addition, peer support and social connections were strengthened by the group process, as meeting women who shared similar experiences broke down the isolation of shame. Interviewees consistently spoke of the warm support and constructive challenges offered by other group members.

'...to see what other people are going through and know that you're not the only one that's feeling those things, not that you want anyone else to be in that place either, but you don't feel like such a loser when you're not the only one. There's probably some comfort in that.'

The women participants who were interviewed were at different stages in terms of their insight into their lives, but all reported learning strategies or gaining an understanding that they could build on as a step towards safe and healthy relationships.

Summary

The findings from the +SHIFT evaluation will be further strengthened by ongoing data collection and analysis, as the program continues through the end of 2020 and into 2021. The findings to date have emphasized the need to contextualise women's use of force and work beyond binary conceptualisations of victim and perpetrator, and to provide a healing space where participants are able to build self-esteem and connections as the foundation for making choices that reflect themselves as the people they want to be.

For further details about the +SHIFT evaluation

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