

Do you ever use visual aids with the model?

People are using it in different ways. One worker who runs a domestic violence group for young women told me they use the metaphor visually: they cut out bars and put them up around the room, and women write what those bars might represent in terms of their rights. They also do cut-outs of sharks and write some of the signs of shark-like behaviours on them. Then they have fish cut-outs and choose one for themselves, writing down their positive qualities, and other fish cut-outs on which they might list some desired respectful male behaviours and qualities. I thought that was a great idea—something the women can stand back and look at as a joint collective piece of work—that could be really powerful. I've also seen photos of young women in a group run by Doncare who have actually built a shark cage and are in it!

Do you think it's important that those in women's services get the time to write up our practice models?

I wish we had more time for organising forums, writing articles and doing research. But we don't and sometimes it feels we're just hidden away in a corner, seeing all these women filing in the door. But I think we use very diverse and complex therapeutic frameworks and it would be so beneficial if we were given funding to share our collective practice wisdom.

Students sometimes ask if I can recommend a really good book about how to do sexual assault and domestic violence counselling—and I wrack my brains. There's lots of theory, but little on-the-ground practical stuff.

What training or resources do you provide to support the Shark Cage framework?

We have a 'clue sheet', 'Warning Signs that a Partner May be Abusive'—available at West CASA by email.

I have developed a training package on the framework, and I provide training through WestCASA and through my private practice. We have recently provided training in Fiji for the women's crisis service there.

We also run groups at West CASA called Strength to Strength, which is based on the Shark Cage model.

Traditionally in group work, separate groups have been offered for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. The Strength to Strength group acknowledges the overlap between experiences of sexual assault and domestic violence, and experiences of re-victimisation. The group draws on the Shark Cage concept and addresses re-victimisation in a non-blaming way.

Ursula Benstead is a psychologist with 20 years experience working in the community and private sectors as a counsellor, trainer and clinical supervisor. Ursula currently splits her time between working as a counsellor/advocate with the Western Region Centre Against Sexual Assault (WestCASA) and her private consulting practice.

*Ursula will be running a Shark Cage Framework training day in the first half of 2013 in Melbourne.
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For WestCASA training please call the intake worker on 9687 8637.

Mandy McKenzie is DVRCV's publications officer.

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Mandy McKenzie

strengthening the shark cage

a model to address re-victimisation

Research shows that women who have experienced abuse in their early years are more likely to be re-victimised in later life. Melbourne-based psychologist Ursula Benstead has developed the 'Shark Cage' framework as a tool for counsellors to help explain and address re-victimisation. In an interview with *DVRCV Quarterly*, Ursula Benstead discusses how the model helps women understand their experiences and rebuild a sense of their rights.

Why did you develop the Shark Cage concept?

I probably started talking about it in the 1990s, while running the 'New Beginnings' domestic violence support group in the City of Yarra.

A theme that I kept seeing with women I worked with was just how much abuse there was in their lives. If I asked women who were in a current abusive relationship about their early history, many had experienced family violence or childhood sexual assault.

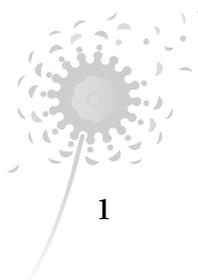
Women in the support group often commented, 'It must be me, because this is the fourth abusive relationship I've been in', or 'obviously there's something wrong with me'. What I saw was that early experiences of violence seem to make women more vulnerable. The research supports this, finding that early victimisation in a woman's life increases the likelihood of victimisation in the future. Findings from the Australian section of the International Violence Against Women Survey indicate that 72 per cent of women who experienced either physical or sexual abuse as a child also experienced violence in adulthood compared to 43 per cent of women who did not experience childhood abuse (Mouzous & Makkai 2004, see also Classen et al 2005, Lamont 2010). That's what started me thinking about it. We know from all the statistics that violence against women is

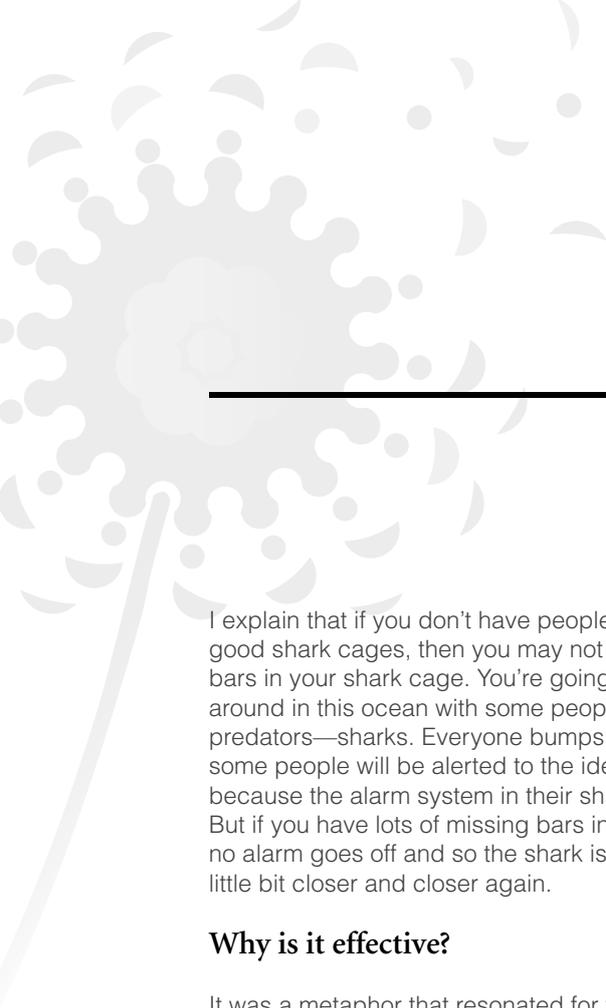
connected to gender-based power inequalities, and that it's obviously not a woman's fault if she's assaulted. However it seemed taboo for a 'good feminist' to explore patterns of repeated abuse in individual women's lives. When I was in counselling and supervision forums, the issue often felt like the elephant in the room. I thought—there's got to be a way of conceptualising re-victimisation in a way that doesn't blame the victim and can help women and the counsellors who support them to play an active role in reducing further victimisation.

Can you explain the Shark Cage concept?

The Shark Cage is a metaphor that describes how we develop our sense of our personal boundaries and rights.

It's about saying to women, the fact that you have been re-victimised is nothing intrinsically about you, but it's about the luck of the draw, and the context you're born into. We aren't born with shark cages—our caregivers and the people around us help us to develop them. If those around us are committed to helping us grow up with a sense of our human rights, then we build a strong shark cage. If we are taught, for example, that it is not acceptable for people to hit us, or to touch us in ways that make us uncomfortable, that puts those particular bars in our shark cage.





I explain that if you don't have people around you with good shark cages, then you may not develop many bars in your shark cage. You're going to be swimming around in this ocean with some people who are predators—sharks. Everyone bumps into them, but some people will be alerted to the identity of a shark because the alarm system in their shark cage goes off. But if you have lots of missing bars in your shark cage, no alarm goes off and so the shark is able to get that little bit closer and closer again.

Why is it effective?

It was a metaphor that resonated for women; it made sense to them and it was visual and accessible. It also involves a bit of humour.

What I like about the Shark Cage metaphor is that there's something women can do—they can take an active role in examining and shaping what's going on in their lives. Attachment models present a similar message about how our early life shapes our sense of self, others and relationships in a different way, but these models are not necessarily accessible to clients. With reworking childhood attachment, you need the luxury of a long-term therapeutic relationship. In today's climate, people often don't have access to that sort of service.

The Shark Cage framework

1. Presenting the Shark Cage metaphor
2. Renovating the Shark Cage
3. Installing the alarm system
4. Learning how to defend potential breaches of the shark cage
5. Identifying the early warning signs of potential sharks

What are the five steps in the Shark Cage framework?

The first step is presenting the Shark Cage metaphor to women.

The second stage is doing renovations—working together to identify what bars are already in the cage, whether there are bars there that need strengthening, or whether some bars are missing. Each of the bars in the cage represents a human right. I look at physical, sexual, emotional, financial and spiritual rights. For example, I might ask: do you have a sense of those rights? Did your mother have a sense of those rights? Do your daughters? Who do you know that does? How do you know?

Human rights concepts are useful and seem to work with women from different cultural communities, who often feel uncomfortable with overtly 'feminist' frameworks. I've found that women from most communities can relate to a human rights framework.

The third stage is installing the alarm system and identifying how you know when someone is pushing up against one of those bars. This helps women to reconnect with their body and their feelings—to notice if they feel uncomfortable when someone's making requests or demands of them or behaving towards them in a particular way.

I've also designed a worksheet about identifying and dealing with shark cage breaches. Women can take it home in the fortnight between counselling sessions, and write down when they notice situations where someone's pushing against one of the bars of their shark cage. They write about what they noticed in their body and feelings, which bar/right it was that was being threatened, what they did about it, and what would they have liked to have done about it. This is a work-in-progress and the first step is just noticing what's happening.

Often I'll use examples in the woman's life which might not directly relate to her intimate relationship—because there are probably other people exploiting her too, such as family members and friends. Women may find these relationships easier to look at and focus on. And if a woman develops a sense of her rights through those relationships, they will transfer to an alarm going off in her intimate relationship over time.

The fourth step is learning how to defend shark cage breaches—once you've identified that someone's attempting to breach a bar in your shark cage, what do you do about it? That really equates to assertiveness

strengthening the shark cage

training. I do lots of role plays with women. I find that once they step into the role play and they're acting out how they would say to their sister or ex-partner 'No, I can't do that Saturday, it just doesn't suit me'—full stop—it can feel real.

I explain to women that they might feel uncomfortable with expressing their wishes, and they may feel like they're being selfish. It's very hard to change the feelings and deep-seated beliefs we had when we were younger. I bring cognitive behavioural therapy into it—the approach that if we change our behaviour we can change our feelings. And after time, some women find that it does work.

The fifth step is identifying the early warning signs that someone may be abusive. Many women are terrified of abuse happening again and wonder how they can recognise if a guy is possibly a shark. In doing this work, we need to look at those really subtle signs, because our society doesn't help us understand our rights. For example, a guy wanting to spend all his time with you, calling you 50 times a day is viewed by society as passionate love, rather than as an early warning sign of disrespect and possessiveness.

I might get clients to look back at past abusive relationships and whether some of the warning signs were there. One sign might be how the person talked about his ex-girlfriends—and how he talked about problems in his life and who he held responsible for them. If someone believes he's never responsible for anything, it's always someone else's fault, that's a good warning sign.

We talk about more subtle things like that and how to open up these conversations before you get in too far. We talk about boundaries. Then I support them as they're out there practising.

Do you think women are socialised not to have strong shark cages?

Absolutely. Most women could do with some work on their shark cages. How the shark cage looks can change over time. I'll happily tell anyone that I had a really poor shark cage as an adolescent—I've done lots of work since then and I've got a much better one now!

I think traditionally, if a woman asserts her rights or looks after herself, she is quickly interpreted as being selfish. That's the biggest barrier to women embracing a sense of their own rights and the importance of caring for themselves. So I tackle that one head on.

How has the model been received?

When I first started using the metaphor, I felt a little bit apprehensive. I am a feminist practitioner, but there are different ways you can apply feminist ideas. I was apprehensive that someone could miss all the contextualising that I do—including the understanding that women with strong shark cages can still get raped or beaten; and that a woman shouldn't have to have a shark cage—we shouldn't have to deal with people who use shark-like behaviours. But that's going to take another few hundred years to change. What about the thousands of women we come into contact with in the meantime?

It is a complex idea and I worry that it will be communicated to women as 'Oh, you're in another violent relationship, you've really got to take on what I said about building your shark cage'. We have to contextualise it and think beyond a linear, victim-blaming model. It's also about being clear that if a woman misses the signs that someone's possessive and then gets sexually assaulted, that doesn't make it her fault. The perpetrator is the only person responsible for the assault or abuse.

We need to acknowledge women's courage and acts of resistance to abuse, and look at building on what's there already.

In general I've only had positive responses. I have had a couple of comments that describing men who use violent behaviour as sharks is violating their human rights. I think there's nothing useful about demonising men, and I'm all for them taking responsibility and changing their behaviour. But, as the VicHealth report (2004) shows, gender-based violence is the biggest contributor to death and ill-health in women aged 15–44 years of age. This fact is deadly serious and inescapable and more important than semantics over 'sharks' versus 'shark-like behaviours'.

It's not just about individual change. It's about social change and psychological education for everybody in society.