

BEYOND BATTERING:
**A Snapshot of Domestic
Violence Survivor's Lives a
Decade After the Abuse**

Christine Hagion Rzepka, CHES, MPHc

The Ripple Effect

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Why Is This Study Pertinent to Public Health?

- Worldwide prevalence—1 in 3 women have experienced abuse within a committed intimate relationship at some point in time.
- Research on DV has been focused on the acute transitional stage, or only shortly thereafter.
- The few studies that have looked beyond the acute transitional stage have focused solely on psychopathology of former victims.

Purpose of the Study

1. This study hoped to discover whether a common process is shared by all survivors, or if the experience substantively differed from one person to the next.
2. To describe the long-term effects experienced by formerly battered women in the years following termination of the abusive relationship.

Study Design

- **Socio-ecological conceptual framework**—context-specific analysis (Hoff)
- **Qualitative research**—semi-structured Long Interview method (McCracken)
- **Naturalistic inquiry**—heuristic method (Moustakis), following principles of phenomenology, but honors the personal and professional experience of the researcher

Research Questions

1. What is the healing process of survivors of domestic violence?
2. What factors affect the process of healing from abusive relationships?
3. Are there other long-term effects of domestic violence that have not been identified?

Variables of Interest

- Religion
- Culture
- Disability
- Age
- Economic status
- Continued contact with abuser
- Court/ penal system involvement

Methodology

- Data were collected in long interviews, ranging from 1 hour to 8 hours.
- Interview was participant-directed rather than researcher-led.
- An interview questionnaire was used only as a guide.
- Interviews were audiotaped with the knowledge and consent of the participant.
- Interviews took place at a safe and private location chosen by the participant.
- Participants were pre-screened by phone to reduce risk of damaging emotional consequences of discussing the abuse and the decade following it.

Sample description

- Demographics

- All were professional women, ranging in age from mid 30's to 60's.
- 6 were college graduates; 2 were in graduate school at the time of the interview; all had at least some college.
- Diverse sample: 3 Caucasians; 2 African Americans; 1 Asian; 2 Mexican Americans; and 3 of Native American ancestry.

- Abuse histories

- 3 of the 11 had had no prior history of abuse.
- The length of time that participants had been out of the abusive relationship ranged from 10 years to 31 years.
- The participant's adult domestic violence relationships ranged in duration from several months to 20+ years.
- All suffered emotional and psychological abuse.

Findings

Five distinct stages emerged in the healing pathway:

Stage:

Primary Focus:

- Abuse - survival
- Beginning to Rebuild - first on physical & economic safety, then later shifted to emotional safety
- Healing Process - relational safety with others
- Moving On - relational healing with the self
- Transcendance & Mastery- spiritual healing

Tasks of Healing

- Going through the pain (shame, guilt, fear, anger)
- Letting go/acceptance
- Recognizing patterns in relationships
- Taking responsibility/asking forgiveness
- Forgiving self
- Finding/reclaiming one's own identity

The Healing Process: a Survivor's Perspective

“...people can't just jump through this process. Like a woman... who is battered and just barely getting out of the relationship, she has to go through her own process of healing. She has to go through her pain, through her guilt, through her shame, through her anger, ...through her hate, through all those feelings and emotions, they have to come out. You can't just go into 'oh I forgive,' because that's not how we are.”

--Sierra

Strengths of Survivors

During abuse

- Making a plan to escape / to keep safe
- Trying to make relationship work (persistence)
- Recognizing threats to safety
- Protecting children
- Endurance
- Seeking available resources

During the acute transitional stage, and when beginning to rebuild her life

- seeking/accessing available resources
- persistence
- resilience
- bravery

Throughout the healing process

- Persistence
- Resourcefulness
- Honesty
- Humility

In moving on

- Resilience
- Endurance
- Courage
- Adaptability

In transcending

- Compassion
- Service orientation
- Wisdom
- Giving back to others

Long-Term Effects of Abuse

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - Nightmares
 - Over-reaction to physical touch of any kind
 - Continual coping with triggers
- Inability to trust
 - Self
 - Others
 - God
- Hypervigilance
- Damaged relationships with family, children
- Effect on parenting, sexuality, employability
- Disability resulting from abuse
- Depression

Coping, then & now

- **During the abuse**

- Drugs, alcohol use/misuse
- Escape/suicide attempts
- Faith
- Denial
- Helping others
- Eating/smoking to comfort self

- **Throughout the healing process**

- Reading, shopping, sewing
- Music
- Exercise
- Practicing faith
- Creative endeavors
- Helping others
- Maintaining sobriety

A Survivor's Definition of Healing

“Healing ...to me, it’s an ability to look from the outside in, you know, and that means to be in touch with the meaning of your life. Recognizing that healing has taken place by the way in which you relate...to people, meaning greater compassion, greater sensitivity, you know, less reaction. Lots of different... things, but basically kindness, you know, givingness, you know, not hiding.”

--Christy

Implications

- Welfare-to-work programs incredibly short timelines should be lengthened;
- **Income maintenance and respite care programs for survivor's children should be developed to allow survivors to concentrate on the work of healing, rather than on trying to survive;**
- Mental health service delivery must be revamped to more adequately serve survivors' needs;
- **Safe, adequate, affordable and accessible childcare must be made available for survivors who are working or going to school;**
- Social norms must be changed to counteract the counterproductive belief that a “child needs his father”—even if he's abusive.

Limitations

- This sample was limited only to women
 - did not include lesbian survivors or male survivors of domestic violence
- Although the sample was very diverse, it is not inclusive of all ethnicities, cultures, or religions
 - nor do the ethnicities or cultural/religious backgrounds of the women in the sample necessarily represent others from that culture or religion.

Significance

“recognizing that it’s an eternal process...helps us to be able to say to a client, ‘healing is a process;’ you are not going to wake up tomorrow and suddenly go, ‘Oh, my gosh! I am whole and it’s all gone’.”

--Peggie

The Journey Down the Healing Pathway

“You have to go through your own pace and it all takes its own rate of time. Some people never get there. Some people get stuck, and they stay in a place--and that’s just where they are. I am not saying that it’s a good thing, or a bad thing; its just what happens. But if we are going to really, truly... move on, each phase has to be dealt with in the person’s life or they can’t [move on]. You just can’t, you can’t skip steps on this process.”

--Sierra

For more information

ph: (408) 225-2381

fax: (408) 629-4670

e-mail: chagion@aol.com

visit The Ripple Effect's web site at

www.the-ripple-effect.info