

Journey to Healing:
Themes and Stages in Change
for Women Survivors of Abuse by Intimate Partners

by

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ABSTRACT

The experience of successfully ending a relationship with an abusive partner is seldom explored, although abuse has been experienced by 29% of married Canadian women (Johnson, 1996, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000). This study used a phenomenological design and a critical social science approach to explore the lived experience of women who ended a relationship with an abusive partner. Seven in-depth interviews were analyzed, and encounters with social support from the justice system, counselling agencies, and transition houses were examined.

A five-stage model to describe the change process emerged from the data. Metathemes illuminated important internal and external aspects of change during each stage. Childhood gender socialization influenced participants to stay in abusive relationships. Nevertheless, resistance to abuse was seen to have occurred from the beginning. Changing beliefs about gender roles and relationship expectations emerged as an important part of learning and influenced decision-making. Loss of hope and realization of harm led to a shift in decisional balance that culminated in determination to end the relationship. Simple goals evolved to become complex goals as change continued. Participants who attempted to understand their experiences reached a stage that included evolving and healing. Healing also involved a balanced lifestyle, in accordance with the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model.

The model's terminology describes a woman in the successive stages of change as a learner, an actor, an evaluator, a survivor, and a thriver. The model is compared with the Transtheoretical Model of Change, and surprising reports of very low self-efficacy at the point of ending the relationship are discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
Dedication	x
Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
Evolution: How I Came to Explore the Experience of Change	1
Woman Abuse: “The alarms ring softly”	4
Statement of the Problem	7
Definitions of Terms	8
Section 1 – Abusive Behaviour	8
Section 2 – Terms used in this Study	9
Delimitations of the Study	13
Assumptions	13
Summary	14
Chapter 2	
Literature Review	15
“The Cycle of Violence”, an Early Model Still Used Today	15
Herman’s Description of Trauma and Process of recovery	18
Activism	18
Herman’s Stage Theory	19
Drawbacks to Herman’s Theory and Medical Perspective	19
The Transtheoretical Model of Change	20
Research which applies the Transtheoretical Model to abuse issues	21
Summary	23
Chapter 3	
Methodology	25
The Qualitative Approach	25
The Critical Social Science Approach	26
Why I stand with the Critical Social Scientists	27
A Phenomenological Research Design	31
Benefits and Limitations of my Approach	32
Method of Obtaining Participants	34
Data Collecting	34
Conducting Interviews	35
Role of Interviewer	36
Ethical Considerations – Doing no Harm	38
Debriefing	39

Data Analysis	39
Transcribing Interviews	39
Beginning to Analyse	40
Finding Metathemes	42
Summary	44
 Chapter 4	
An Introduction to the Participants	45
Section One: Group Description	45
Section Two: Summary of the Experience of Each Participant	49
Barbara – “I’m not going to die like this”	49
Kara – “I wanted to take care of my own”	52
Trudy – Turning “the swamp into the lotus”	55
Josie – “You will get support”	59
Jeanette – “I’m here to learn, and I want to get it”	64
Claire – “A year of healing”	70
Lucy – “Doors will just start to open”	74
Summary	80
 Chapter 5	
Linking the Metathemes to a Holistic Stage Theory	81
Section One: Stages of Change and Importance of Terms	81
i. The Importance of Accurate Language	82
ii. Language Terms used for each Stage of Change	83
Section Two: The Metathemes That Occur in Each of the Five Stages	84
Stage One: The Slow Shift Toward Change	84
Stage Two: Action	85
Stage Three: Crisis	85
Stage Four: Survival	86
Stage Five: Evolving	86
i.) Evolving while Learning	87
ii.) Evolving while Healing	87
Section Three: The Tasks of Each Stage of Change	88
Section Four: Progressing over Time to Achieve Change	90
Josie: “In fog”	91
Barbara: “Action”	92
Claire: “Eager”	94
Kara: “Self-determined”	95
Lucy: “Living”	96
Trudy: “Happening”	97
Jeanette: “Wiser”	98
Table 1: Overview of Stages of Change	101
Summary of Chapter Five	102
 Chapter 6	
Metathemes	103

Section One	103
The Research Question	103
The Focus of Interview Questions	104
Issues in Data Collection	104
Section Two: The 20 Metathemes	105
Section Three: Changing Awareness of Gender Socialization	106
1. Beliefs Learned During Childhood	
a) Gender Socialization in Family of Origin	107
b) Gender Socialization in Society and Popular Culture	109
2. Learning Beliefs and Expectations From Abuse or Trauma	110
3. Making Realizations About Beliefs Gained During Childhood Gender Socialization	111
Table 2: Gender Socialization and Family of Origin	114
Table 3: Gender Socialization and Canadian Society	116
Section Four: Awareness of Dynamics of Abuse	118
Table 4: Increasing Awareness of Dynamics of Abuse	134
Section Five: Changing Beliefs and Expectations About Relationships	135
Section Six: Resistance	140
Section Seven: Leaving with the Resources They had at the Time	144
Section Eight: Imagine: Evolving Goals, Simple to Complex	147
Section Nine: Finding Support from Family and Friends	153
Section Ten: Seeking Formal/Societal Help	154
a.) Help from Transition House Staff	154
b.) Help during stay in Second Stage Housing	155
c.) Life Skills Programs	156
d.) Accessing Help from Counselling Agencies	156
e.) Accessing Help from the Justice System	159
Table 5: Seeking Formal/Societal Help	162
Section Eleven: Strong Emotions	163
Section Twelve: Relapse Prevention - What got them out, kept them out.	164
Section Thirteen: Achieving Balance	167
Section Fourteen: Acting for Social Change	170
Summary	170
 Chapter 7	
Discussion and Implications	171
Section One: Utility of the Findings for Helping Professionals	
Psychological (internal) and Social (external) Factors Interact	171
Education about Gender and Abuse	172
Testing Ideas and Continuing to Learn	176
Clients have Strengths Which have Been Demonstrated	176
Help the Client Remember her own Resistance to Abuse	177
Increasing Self-efficacy	179
Increasing Self-esteem	181
Help the Client Realize she Left using the Resources she had	182
A New Stage Model of Change	183

Using the New Stage Model in Practice	185
Healing, and the Bio-psycho-social-spiritual Model	186
Section Two: Contrasting the Transtheoretical Model to the new Model	188
The Process of Change Involves More than “Maintenance”	188
Section Three: Activism and Herman’s Stages of Healing	191
Activism Promotes Healing for Survivors	191
Activism as Resistance	192
Section Four: Future Directions for Research	193
Summary	198
References	199
Appendices:	
Appendix A: Participant Consent Form	203
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Notice	207
Appendix C: Interview Guide: Sample Questions	208
Appendix D: List of 20 Metathemes	209
Appendix E: Themes that Support the Metathemes	210
Appendix F: List of Women Victims of Spousal Homicide	214
Appendix G: Sharing the Wisdom – Excerpts from a Dialogue	215

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Overview of Stages of Change	101
Table 2: Gender Socialization and Family of Origin	114
Table 3: Gender Socialization and Canadian Society	116
Table 4: Increasing Awareness of Dynamics of Abuse	134
Table 5: Seeking Formal/Societal Help	162

LIST OF FIGURES

Participant Maps:

Figure 1	Barbara	51
Figure 3	Kara	54
Figure 3	Trudy	58
Figure 4	Josie	63
Figure 5	Jeanette	69
Figure 6	Claire	73
Figure 7	Lucy	79

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DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to all the strong women who inspire me with their lives. In particular, I remember at this time all friends and family who gave me emotional and practical support during the past twelve years as I changed my own life, and gained the opportunity to study how others have done the same. My very dear friend and cousin, Barbara McGibbon, I wish you could be here to see the research reach completion.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be allowed to touch the lives of the seven women who volunteered to participate in this study. They came, sometimes still grieving, sometimes joyful, sometimes full of trepidation and sometimes full of confidence. They were willing to risk exposing their vulnerability to a stranger in hope of creating change for other women in the future. They expressed so honestly and clearly the truths of their experiences; their words will remain in my heart forever.

Courageously, they had resolved to change their lives, and while doing so they changed themselves. They took the opportunity to learn from their experiences, to achieve personal growth in many ways, and to become capable of sharing their wisdom in diverse ways as they continue on their journey. Barbara, Kara, Trudy, Jeanette, Josie, Claire, and Lucy – I salute you!

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The risk of experiencing abuse in intimate partner relationships is high for women in Canada and the United States today (Morrow & Varcoe, 2000). One in four women have experienced at least one incident of physical abuse in long-term relationships. Almost three thousand women were admitted to women's transition houses across Canada on one day in April, 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2002). It is an unfortunate fact that many women experience violence and other forms of abuse during their lives. This study was an opportunity to explore the lived experience of women who have experienced abuse from their intimate partner and who are in the process of accomplishing positive change in their lives. I sought to discover what the women perceived as the most important internal and external aspects of their achievement of change, thus obtaining a holistic description.

In this opening chapter, I describe my process of becoming dedicated to helping women survivors achieve positive change. I provide statistics regarding the incidence of abuse and discuss how stereotypes interfere with our understanding of the problem. I provide a brief overview of the effects of intimate partner abuse in Canadian society. The research problem is discussed, followed by definitions of terms. The structure and delimitations of the study are provided, along with my assumptions, expectations of the research and of participants. The chapter ends with a brief summary.

Evolution: How I Came to Explore the Experience of Change

When I was a young woman living in a rural community, I first began to realise the need for social support for women. There were examples of physical and emotional abuse around me, yet no help existed. In the tiny community we lived in, it was thought that the men had the risky jobs. They worked underground in the mine, or ran heavy equipment, or handled toxic materials and dangerous equipment in the mill. Most women were forced to remain at home, for there were few jobs for women in this one-industry community. Women were supposedly protected and sheltered while confined in

the home by this traditional lifestyle. Why, then, were the rates for death by misadventure, overdose, or suicide so very high for women in this tiny community?

On separate occasions, two friends left abusive husbands and went to the city, only to return within a fortnight. I observed and wondered, but abuse was never discussed overtly. I noticed that they had been unable to take their children with them when they left. They had no economic means of support. They had no education. Neither one had parents who could help them.

There was little or no social support in the sixties and seventies for women leaving abusive partners: no women's centres, no safe houses or shelters. When called, police and other forms of security forces were unsympathetic, reluctant, or embarrassed to be involved. Police, nurses and doctors, and others who might be informed today and provide support or information, were unaware and uneducated about abuse issues in the past. Until January 1983 it was not legally possible for a man to be charged with raping or sexually assaulting his wife. Divorce laws were primitive in the era I am describing. Physical violence was not grounds for divorce until 1968 (MacLeod, 1987).

Courts of the time divided marital assets in ways that outraged anyone who cared about justice (e.g., the Murdoch case showed that after the break-up of a marriage of 25 years, a woman had no right to property). Whether married or in a common-law relationship, and despite how much she contributed to the family, a woman who left an abusive spouse was likely to lose her assets and equity in property. Alimony could be claimed on the grounds of "cruelty", if the woman could prove that the cruelty she experienced was "extreme" and "excessive" (MacLeod, 1987).

Think about those words in the Canadian divorce law before 1968. The cruelty was more extreme than "normal" cruelty? Was it more excessive than an "acceptable" amount of cruelty? Abuse of women was covertly condoned and perpetuated by Canada's social system. Abuse was seen as a "family issue". All intimate partner abuse of women was to be private, kept secret within the walls of the home.

Thirty years later, shelters and safe houses exist in many urban centres and some rural communities. I was happy to learn that there is now a safe house near the region where I once lived. Helpers in British Columbia communities are more informed than they once were. Laws have changed. Educational programs in high schools have been

created to prevent date rape and woman abuse. Women's situation is greatly improved; nevertheless, women remain a minority group, less economically or socially powerful than males in North American society. Even when the intimate partner abuse occurs in a lesbian couple's relationship, the factor exists in their lives that as women they are members of a marginalized group. Despite positive change, abuse of women in intimate partner relationships still flourishes in Canadian society today.

After coming to reside in a mid-sized city in the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s, I volunteered for three years in a transition house for women leaving abusive relationships, where I later was employed. I was given the opportunity to do a counselling practicum in a second stage program for women leaving abuse. I met women from every socio-economic level, and a wide variety of cultures. I saw many move on from the transition house to new homes, and often I was concerned. There was little social support for many of them at that point of transition, yet many really needed support.

The provincial government of British Columbia in the late 1990s was doing more for women than any other government had ever done. There was a Ministry for women, and there were hiring policies for non-traditional work for women. There was a "Stop the violence against women" policy, and supporting it were programs in schools and communities throughout the province. Shelters, women's centres, and programs to educate both men and women about abuse received funding. Under the "Stop the Violence against Women" policy, the laws in regard to spousal assault charges were changed. The government created new policies to be used by the Ministry of Children and Families (MCF) and the Ministry of the Attorney General. One semester, I made an analysis of the "Stop the Violence Against Women" policy. I saw that legally it had accomplished many positive changes, yet at the same time, the new policies to support women leaving abuse were being ignored by many MCF social workers. In retrospect it seems a honeymoon period. During the period of this study, under the current Liberal provincial government, the Ministry of Women was eliminated, and women's centres and many other programs have lost their funding.

Despite earlier governmental attempts to create positive social change, in the period from 1997 to May, 2001, thirteen women died at the hands of their husbands and partners in our city. The updated list of their names is read annually during Prevention

of Violence Against Women week, at a public ceremony. The list is attached as Appendix F. When I heard the dead women's names read aloud at a ceremony in 2001, it was both shocking and emotionally moving for myself and other listeners. Reading the names of the local women killed by their partners broke one of the barriers that persists in our society – the barrier of secrecy about women abuse. When I heard the list of deaths, it broke down the myths that say woman abuse is trivial, normal, and even desired by the woman.

During my time in the Master of Arts program at university, I began to consider conducting research regarding the topic of ending abusive relationships. While counselling women with partners with substance misuse issues, I saw similarities to the experiences of women leaving abusive partners. Later, I encountered the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TM), proposed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1982). It seemed to be applicable to the stages of change for women ending abusive relationships, as I had been perceiving them. I learned that the TM may apply in general to people who wish to make and maintain any sort of change. It is being used for a wide variety of issues. The TM is widely used for research and treatment in the substance misuse (or addiction) field, and for health-related changes.

I was counselling women who had recently left abusive partners and I was very concerned about how to best support them. If the TM is applied to that population, the period after leaving would be termed the “Maintenance” stage of change. I began to realize that the Maintenance stage is very important in the process of change, yet it is often overlooked. I realized that research that examines making successful change in the Maintenance stage would provide valuable information for people leaving abusive relationships and those who work to help them.

Woman Abuse: “The alarms ring softly”

Where do we begin to accomplish positive change for women in North American society? Because of my life experiences described above, I became aware that, as researchers and as helping professionals, we need to learn effective ways to support women who have chosen to leave abusive intimate partners. Change will not occur on a

broad scale until we, as a society, become aware of the high incidence of intimate partner abuse, and until we address the stereotypes that we often hold.

Many people, even in the counselling profession, may not have realized the high prevalence of the experience of abuse for women, or may not be aware that partner abuse occurs at all levels of society. Women are six times more likely than men to be assaulted by an intimate partner (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995, cited in Harrison & Esqueda, 1999). Between 1974 and 2002, there were nearly 2,600 spousal homicides in Canada. More than three-quarters of the victims were women. Shooting and stabbing were the most common causes of death for women killed by their partners (63%) but 32% died from beatings and strangulation (Statistics Canada, 2002, p. 5).

Harrison and Esqueda made an extensive review of research concerning the common myths and stereotypes of victims and batterers that continues to prevail in North American culture (1999). They noted that myths impede victims' access to needed social and legal resources, and that myths prevent positive social change. They included racial stereotypes in their research, in particular, stereotypes concerning black women and abuse. It is a common myth that abuse is mainly experienced by the poor and by other racial or cultural groups than the mainstream (able-bodied, heterosexual white English-speaking) women. Certainly, research has shown that less socially powerful populations (e.g., disabled women, elderly women, and women from cultural minority groups) have experienced high rates of abuse, sometimes higher than average (DAWN, 1989, Mosher, 1998, and Podnieks et al., 1990, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000). Minority women may also experience specific social problems that increase the likelihood of staying in the relationship. Homophobia and isolation make it difficult for lesbians to disclose abuse. Reluctance to expose their community to censure and racist attacks creates social pressure on women of colour to remain silent and endure abuse; and women living in poverty experience powerful economic and social barriers that impede them from gaining independence from an abusive intimate partner (Lambert & Firestone, 2000, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000).

Abuse is not restricted to the more vulnerable social groups in North America. American statistics show that abuse by intimate partners remains very prevalent; over three million females are battered by an intimate male partner each year, and one in four

wives is physically battered at some time during her marriage (Russo, Koss, & Goodman, 1995, cited in Harrison & Esqueda, 1999). Campbell (2002) reviewed Canadian and American literature and reports that the lifetime prevalence of experiencing physical assault by an intimate partner was between 25 and 30%. Campbell's literature review revealed that 40 to 60% of murdered women in North America were killed by intimate partners (2002).

In Canada, one of every two women older than 16 has been sexually or physically assaulted. Twenty-nine percent of Canadian women who have ever been married report having experienced physical or sexual assault from their husband, and in British Columbia, that percentage is 36%. In 1990, an average of two Canadian women per week were killed by their partners (Johnson, 1996, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000; Rodgers, 1994).

The statistics are so alarming that immediately one wants to doubt and disbelieve them. How can we be living amid such a huge social problem and yet be unaware of it? If two Canadian teenagers per week were killed by gangs, or if two First Nations people were murdered per week, week after week, by racists, we would all be concerned and seek change. As Biden (1993) wrote in the *American Psychologist*, if we opened the daily newspaper tomorrow and read of a new disease that was afflicting from 3 to 4 million people per year, few of us would fail to appreciate the seriousness of the matter. Yet, Biden said, when it comes to the 3 to 4 million women who are harmed by violence each year, *the alarms ring softly*.

There is a serious negative impact on women's health, on the social system, on Canadian society, and on future generations as a result of abusive intimate partner relationships. The effects on health are long term (Campbell, 2002). The violence, and the stress from non-physical forms of abuse (e.g., verbal and emotional abuse) increase the use of services and raise health care costs. As many as 60% of abused women experience post-traumatic stress syndrome; violence from intimate partners is a predisposing factor to HIV/AIDS and to long-term physical problems such as arthritis, chronic pain, and neurological damage (Koss & Heslet, 1992, Heise et al., 1994, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000). Campbell (2002) reviewed Canadian and American research conducted from 1985–1998 concerning physical or sexual assault by an intimate partner

and its effect on women's mental and physical health. She found it has been well documented by controlled research that there is an increase in injury, chronic pain, sexually transmitted diseases, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When intimate partner abuse occurs within a family, children are affected negatively in regard to their development; they cannot focus on their education, and they face increased risk of suffering abuse or perpetrating it in their own future relationships (Edelson, 1996, cited in Morrow & Varcoe, 2000; VFVPS, 2000; Jaffe et al., 1990). Child abuse is fifteen times more likely to occur in homes where domestic violence is already taking place (American Humane Association, 1994, cited in Friend, 2000). Another study found 47% of children from families experiencing domestic violence had experienced physical abuse, and found that the children were at high risk for externalized behavioural problems (O'Keefe, 1995). Knowledge which would improve survivors' chances of success in achieving positive change would benefit survivors, their children, and society as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I explored the following research question: What do women who have exited abusive relationships perceive as external and internal factors that enabled them to sustain living independently of the prior relationship? I sought to discover the lived experiences of women who are survivors of intimate partner abuse in a period that is not often investigated, the time after they end the relationship.

As the study progressed, it became evident that the narrative also needed to include the women's experiences while becoming able to make the decision to end the relationship with an abusive partner. Just as a botanist needs to examine the roots and stem and leaves, and not just the bud and blossom of a plant, so the participants could not speak solely about how, today, they "blossom" and omit from the narrative how they "grew". It was all one process. As a result, my question evolved to include more than the period after the participants ended their relationships. In my research, I sought to reveal the lived experience of achieving positive change for women who ended relationships with abusive intimate partners

There are parallels between addiction issues and abuse issues. With substance misuse resulting in addiction, relapse rates are as high as 80%. Similarly, an abuse survivor often returns to the relationship three to five times before successfully maintaining change; relapse is seen as an inevitable part of the process of changing behaviour (Brown, 1997). I encountered the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TM), created for addictions work (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982), and linked it with my own area of interest. In chapter seven, I compare metathemes and stages found in my study to the processes and constructs proposed in the TM.

As Kierkegaard said, “We live life forwards, but understand it backwards.” To discover what led to the successful achievement of change after ending a relationship will empower survivors to realize the strengths they have demonstrated in their lives. The wisdom obtained from the tales of their journey will be useful knowledge for other women who are setting out on that stage, for support workers and counsellors who work with them, and for researchers who are building and revising effective models of change.

Definitions of Terms

In Section One, I provide a comprehensive discussion of what constitutes ‘abusive behaviour’. Definitions of the other terms used in the study are provided in Section Two.

Section One: Abusive Behaviour

A person who uses anger, force, fear, manipulation and/or intimidation to gain power and control in a relationship is demonstrating abusive behaviour to another person (Sev’er, 1997; VFVPS, 2000). Some examples of partner abuse are: physical abuse (e.g., hitting, choking, use of a weapon, physical restraint, and threatening to hurt); emotional abuse (e.g., insults and derogatory comments when alone together or in front of others, withdrawal of affection, harassment at work, forbidding contact with family and friends, manipulation with lies, threats to hurt the victim or her children, extended family, and pets); economic abuse and property abuse (e.g., refusing to share money or to purchase necessities, smashing property, destroying heirlooms and keepsakes); and sexual abuse (e.g., sexual assault/rape, forcing undesired behaviours, calling derogatory sexual names, committing sadistic sexual acts) (Sev’er, 1997; Hill House Manual, 1999;

VFVPS, 2000). Abusive behaviour frequently does not end when the relationship ends; in fact, it often escalates. Separation increases the risk of violence (Sev'er, 1997).

What makes behaviour “abusive”? When there is doubt, one must ask whether the act causes harm, and whether the person committing the harmful act takes responsibility for his or her behaviour. All seven participants in the current study had resided in a committed relationship with an intimate partner whose behaviour was harmful and who refused to take responsibility either informally, (e.g., by admitting his behaviour was abusive and attempting to change it), or formally. Formal ways of taking responsibility for ex-partners in the study might have included attending long term counselling, attending a group program that addresses violent behaviour in relationships, attending an anger management program, regularly attending appointments with a psychologist, or even a psychiatrist (appropriate for at least two of the ex-partners of participants), taking any prescribed medications and following treatment.

Section Two – Terms used in this study

The following definitions are offered to ensure accurate interpretation of terminology as it is used in this study:

Cycle of Violence - A model commonly used in transition houses to educate women and helpers about the repetitive nature of abuse. The three stages, the Tension-building stage, the Battering stage, and the Honeymoon stage (period of attraction) are repeated, with escalating violence and a shorter Honeymoon period as time passes (Hill House Manual, 1999). It also attempts to explain why some women stay in or return to the relationship despite abuse (VFVPS, 2000).

Gender socialization/gender construction - According to the gender perspective, sex and gender differences between females and males are not the product of biology. They are the result of ongoing multilevel social construction and reconstruction processes (Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 77-79). Gender is socially constructed and reconstructed in a dynamic process that takes place on the socio-cultural, institutional, interactional, and individual levels. Each society, culture, and institution (e.g., the economy, the family, political group, and religion), has values and beliefs that affect men and women

differently, and each belief and value has different consequences for each gender. Individuals interacting with a child attempt to teach her or him a set of beliefs and expectations based on his or her gender; this is early gender socialization on the interactional level. Societal and institutional needs and associated beliefs are not static but change as time passes (e.g., during wartime, the image of woman as homemaker changed to the image of “Rosie the Riveter” constructing armaments, a traditionally male occupation. When North America was flooded with returning military personnel who needed jobs and wanted to raise families, societal and institutional needs required a home-making female once again). Individuals continually negotiate boundaries concerning what society views as gender-appropriate behaviour, and seek meaning in their own actions. They continually reconstruct their own gender during their lifetime.

Gender stereotypes - “The structured set of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and men” are gender stereotypes (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979, p. 222, cited in Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 17). Stereotypes are descriptive of what it is assumed men and women are, and prescriptive of what they should be. They provide predictive guidelines that help people navigate a social world. At the same time, the expectations inherent in gender stereotypes powerfully constrain the behaviours of men and women, who are pressured to conform. Gender stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies, denying individuality (Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 20) and preventing free choice. Behaviour that departs from the expectations inherent in the stereotype is judged to be deviant and is labelled “un-masculine” or “un-feminine” in an attempt to force modification of the “deviant” behaviour (Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 21).

Healthy relationship - Although it is not the sole requirement for a healthy relationship, for the purposes of this study the term ‘healthy relationship’ refers to a relationship that is free from abusive behaviour.

Internal and external factors: Internal factors in the process of change include psychological and cognitive things such as beliefs, self-efficacy, emotions, and shifts in decisional balance. External factors include informal social support such as help from friends and family, and formal social support from institutions such as counselling agencies, the police, legal aid, and transition houses.

Intimate partner relationship/committed relationship - a relationship that includes sexual intimacy and intended long-term commitment between a woman or man and another adult.

Life skills program - A life skills program may be a component of an employment program that provides training and skills for women who left an abusive partner. The life skills component includes information about the cycle of abuse. A typical program advertises itself as being designed to increase clients' level of self-reliance, confidence and self-esteem, and includes assertiveness training. It includes personal support and counselling by staff (Bridges for Women Society, 2003).

Second stage programs - provide support for women who have left abusive relationships. Such a program may provide individual counselling and support groups for survivors, counselling for children who have witnessed violence, or provide subsidized housing for a limited time (VFVPS, 2000). A second stage program is an external factor that can help survivors maintain change.

'Survivor', 'Victim', and 'Thrivers' - are becoming common terms among counsellors, support workers and some researchers. Each is used to describe a woman in progressively more active and more empowered developmental aspects of change. I use them in this study as follows:

(i) *Survivor* - In this study, 'survivor' means women who have experienced abuse in the past from an intimate partner.

(ii) *Victim* - In this study, 'victim' refers to women who are being abused by an intimate partner. They are likely resisting abuse (Wade, 1997) but have not yet ended the abuse in the relationship, which is frequently but not always accomplished by leaving (Burke, 2001).

(iii) *Thrivers* - A person who has progressed from victim of abuse to survivor of abuse can optimally progress to a stage in which she is termed a 'thrivers'. They are doing more than surviving; they are thriving because of the changes that they have chosen and continue to work to achieve.

Relapse - A commonly-used term in substance misuse counselling, meaning a return to a problematic behaviour (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998).

Self-efficacy – Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) is an important part of the process of change as described in the Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). It is an internal factor influencing change. Self-efficacy can be operationalized as an individual's confidence in his or her ability to do something, (Burke, 2001), such as make a change.

Transition house - a safe place for women to obtain emergency shelter and take stock when exiting, temporarily or permanently, from abusive relationships. Information about resources as well as support for women and children are provided (VFVPS, 2000). 91% of Canadian transition houses provide individual short term counselling, and over 80% provide advocacy services and housing referrals (Statistics Canada, 1999, cited in Grasley, Richardson & Harris, 2000, p. 6).

Transtheoretical Model of Change (TM): A stage theory that describes change as involving 10 cognitive and behavioural processes, self-efficacy, and decisional balance. The model describes stages of change: Pre-contemplative, Contemplative, Preparation for Action, Action, and Maintenance. The Maintenance stage occurs after a desired change has been made (e.g., to stop smoking), when it must be continued. The TM was developed in 1982 and has been widely used in addiction counselling. It has been applied to a broad range of health concerns (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska et al., 1994; DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998).

Trauma - Many survivors of abuse by intimate partners have experienced trauma. It is psychological injury which has been inflicted by means of the abusive behaviour of their partners. Trauma can result in cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes (e.g., dissociation; emotional numbness; flashbacks; inability to trust; and hyper-vigilance) that can affect survivors indefinitely after leaving the relationship (Herman, 1997). From a medical perspective, the changes caused by trauma are negative, but from a survivor's point of view, the same changes may have been positive. They may have been coping mechanisms, or a means of resistance to oppression, or even a means of survival. Once a survivor has left the abuser, the changes (or "symptoms") may become problematic as she attempts to trust once again and form social connections. Trauma can result in the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Trigger - The term 'trigger' describes places, people, events, or other stimuli or factors in the environment that bring about thoughts or emotions that lead to urges to return to the relationship with the abusive partner. It can be a noun or a verb. The term is derived from substance misuse counselling (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998).

Delimitations of the Study

The study was limited to seven women over the age of 19 years, who reside in the Pacific Northwest. All are women who have ended a relationship where they have been abused by an intimate partner. All are women who have lived separately from the former partner for a period of at least eighteen months. The study was limited to data collected from September 1, 2003, to January 31, 2004. Because of the qualitative approach and phenomenological design, I cannot test an hypothesis and use the findings in a predictive way. Nevertheless, the findings will add to existing theoretical understanding of the change experience for women ending relationships with abusive intimate partners, and will be of practical value for helping professionals who work with women who are contemplating change, undertaking change, experiencing it, or reflecting back on it.

Assumptions

My own assumptions that underlie the research study are based on my anti-oppressive philosophy. First, I value all people having the opportunity to live in healthy, respectful, and non-oppressive relationships. As well, I believe that valuable research is empowering to participants and to the group being studied. It seeks to critique existing social systems (discovering their strengths and lacks or weaknesses), and has the potential to create positive social change. I explain how my assumptions affected the method of this study in Chapter 3.

It is assumed and expected that participants provided honest accounts of their experience of change, and that they described their experiences to the best of their ability.

Summary of Chapter 1

I have now described how I arrived at the focus of my study, and came to realize the importance of research that supports women of all cultures and classes in an era when violence and abuse remains prevalent in North American society. I hoped to learn how survivors have successfully achieved the positive change that they chose, what internal and external factors supported them, and what the lived experience of the change process was like for them. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature concerning dynamics of abuse and stages of change.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to review literature that explores the dynamics of abusive relationships and the process of change. The section begins with a review of an early model, the Cycle of Violence model (Walker, 1979, cited in VFVPS, 2000). Then Judith Herman's (1997) stage theory of healing from trauma is reviewed. I describe the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982), which has been applied to a broad range of client issues by clinicians and researchers. Finally, I review applications of the Transtheoretical Model to women ending abusive intimate partner relationships. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature regarding processes and stages in change for survivors.

Research concerning women's experience of abuse and the process of change has been scarce for political reasons such as lack of interest and lack of research funding. Investigation and knowledge about this topic was once scarce because of social myths and deceptive concepts (e.g., abuse is shameful for the victim; intimate partner abuse is to be kept secret because abuse is a private, family matter). It has also been difficult for researchers to investigate the dynamics of abuse and process of change with women in shelters and houses because of confidentiality issues and other ethical concerns. They could risk doing harm to a vulnerable person in a crisis situation, who may be at a decision-making point in her life. My literature review confirmed that research concerning woman abuse is scarce, and the majority of what exists is recent. I found no recent studies that were conducted according to a phenomenological perspective.

"The Cycle of Violence": An early model still used today

Abuse in intimate partner relationships has been noticed to occur in a repetitive cycle. The Cycle of Violence model (Walker, 1979, cited in VFVPS, 2000) is still used today by support workers in transition houses for educational purposes. It describes the three stages in the cycle of violence as follows.

In the Tension-building stage, verbal assault, put-downs, controlling and interrogating behaviours may occur. The woman may try to calm her partner or to anticipate the abuser's next move. She becomes increasingly passive, while the abuser becomes more aggressive. She may blame herself for not being able to control the situation. Eventually, the tension becomes unbearable.

There is a Battering stage (a violent episode). According to the model, the incident is usually triggered by an external or internal factor in the man's life, but nevertheless, no *situation* causes the anger. It is emphasized that it is the man's *perception* of the situation that causes a violent episode. According to the model, "only the abuser can end this phase" (VFPVPS, 2000, p. 10) and "the woman's only option is to find a safe place to hide" (Hill House Manual, 1999, np). During this stage, the woman is most likely to be injured; suicidal or homicidal incidents may occur (Hill House Manual, 1999, np; VFPVPS, 2000, p. 10).

The Battering stage is followed by the Honeymoon stage, which the Cycle of Violence model calls a period of attraction (Hill House Manual, 1999, np). It is a period of "mutual denial" and "intense emotions" (VFPVPS, 2000, p. 10). The couple enters an unusual period of calm. The abuser may feel shame and guilt and the woman feels guilt and relief. The abuser may seek forgiveness, and may become extremely loving, kind and contrite. His behaviour may include giving gifts. The behaviour is a factor in the process of denial. According to the model, it is why the woman stays in the relationship, telling herself he loves her and is capable of changing. He seems to be the person she wanted him to be. According to the model, at this point a cloak of silence exists and the abusive incident is not discussed with each other or with others.

The three stages continue to be repeated, with escalating violence and a shorter Honeymoon period over time. The most likely time for a woman to leave the relationship is immediately after the Battering stage (Hill House Manual, 1999, np).

Benefits of this model are that it is simple and easy for non-professionals to understand. It contributes to our understanding of the repetitive nature of abuse. It raises abuse victims' conscious awareness of what is occurring in their lives during each stage. Women realize they are not alone, but are part of a group; they realize that the abuse experience has happened to others.

There are drawbacks to the Cycle of Violence model. The first is its language. It was created a number of years ago, and it is now realized that there are other forms of abuse than violence. When it is called the Cycle of Violence, it makes other forms such as psychological and emotional abuse seem less valid as being types of abuse. In some cases, people who use it have renamed the Cycle of Abuse and Violence (VFVPS, 2000, p. 10). Further, its language portrays all relationships in the model as heterosexual.

Second, the model is superficial. It does not address the stages in making a change in much depth, or address what the change experience is usually like for women. Its purpose is limited to demonstrating the dynamics of abuse within a relationship. Therefore, it does not provide knowledge that helps women or their helpers understand change.

Third, the model does not validate the woman's experience as unjust or harmful, and it does not address the fact that victims of abuse have demonstrated resistance. Abused people always resist the abuse to the greatest extent that it is safely possible (Wade, 1997). Because of this lack, the model comes across as judgmental of the abused woman. She is portrayed in the first stage as passive and trying to second-guess the abuser, then portrayed as a victim, and then as feeling guilt or relief, forgiving, experiencing denial and becoming convinced once again that the abusive partner really loves her. There are many aspects to the phrasing in this model that subtly or not so subtly shift blame onto the battered woman, e.g., "Chances are that the batterer will not seek counselling if the woman stays with him" (Hill House Manual, 1999, np).

Fourth, the model describes the woman as entering a state of denial, after which she is "convinced" "that he really loves her ... or that he is capable of change". It is a very superficial exploration of denial. It is valid in my experience that there is indeed a process of denial, but I do not believe that an abused woman is really "convinced" by the denial. Why does denial occur? First, frequently when a woman has been hurt by abuse, she considers leaving the relationship, but she may be traumatized and that makes her vulnerable. After an abusive incident she may be at home, at a friend's house, or in a transition house. She is evaluating the social resources available for her (and her children, if any) should she leave the relationship. As a transition house support worker, and drawing from personal experience as well, I have seen that denial occurs when a

woman has evaluated her situation and has made the decision that leaving the relationship does not seem like a viable option at that time. *Denial enables her to remain in the relationship.* Denial is a solution, a choice.

Why might leaving not seem to be a viable option? Frequently, women, particularly those who are mothers, know that it is likely that she and any children will suffer economic hardship upon leaving the home. It can take two years to obtain low cost housing. Day care costs can be devastating. The children may lose the opportunity to take part in special programs or sports involvement if the family breaks up. A woman evaluates these social costs when considering ending the relationship. As well, many women have internalized myths common to mainstream and other cultures that they cannot parent children properly as a single mother, or that divorce is harmful or sinful. It is my experience that women want to do their best for their children and they struggle with the terrible paradox that leaving an abuser deprives the children of being raised by both a mother and father. The Cycle of Violence model does not explore these ideas.

Herman's Description of Trauma and Recovery

Although research concerning women's experience of abuse and the process of change has been scarce, one groundbreaking work has been a resource for counsellors since 1992. It is *Trauma and Recovery*, by Judith Herman, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Director of Training at the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Hospital. Herman has been an inspiration to me. Two important points from her work have a bearing on my own research: her activism, and her use of a stage theory.

Activism

In regard to activism, Herman desires to change societal perspectives and to expose social illusions and myths. She takes a feminist perspective. She helped researchers and the public to discern that whether trauma is experienced by incest victims, political prisoners, war veterans, women in intimate partner relationships, or witnesses to traumatic events, its effects are the same. She emphasises strongly that all trauma victims are equally important and worthy, and equally victimized by the

perpetrator and by society. By this action, Herman counteracts and negates the societal judgment that exists for certain categories of trauma victims who are “devalued”, such as women and children (p. 8) and does not exist for others. Today, the “idealized and valued members of society” such as war veterans are judged less harshly for suffering from PTSD (p. 8), but in the past, trauma’s effects on “shell shocked” World War One veterans was judged to be malingering and cowardly behaviour.

Herman does not fit the stereotype of an activist. As a respected psychiatrist, professor and researcher, Herman writes in reasoned language, citing research evidence to support her points. In *Trauma and Recovery*, she writes about the horrific stories that she says no one really wants to hear, and is fully aware that by doing so and by challenging established diagnostic concepts, her book would be controversial. She tried to write according to “dispassionate, reasoned traditions...about the passionate claims of people who have been violated and outraged” (Herman, 1997, p. 4). Throughout *Trauma and Recovery*, by means of her choice of concepts, themes, and language, Herman acts as an activist, for women and for all trauma victims and survivors.

Herman’s Stage Theory

Secondly, Herman sets forth a stage theory. In her 1992 work she demonstrated that recovery takes a similar path for diverse categories of survivors. Herman’s model sets out the stages of recovery as follows: A Healing Relationship; Safety; Remembrance and Mourning; Reconnection; and finally Commonality, which can include group work and activism (Herman, 1997). Her descriptions of what occurs for survivors during each stage are rich with illustrative examples, and she teaches counsellors how they can best help the clients progress through each stage. This information increases counsellors’ understanding of change for trauma survivors. Herman provides references to research which supports her theory, including her own research conducted with Van der Kolk, a renowned researcher in the field of trauma.

Drawbacks to Herman’s stage theory and the medical perspective

There are those who critique theory that is based on a medical perspective, as is *Trauma and Recovery* (Wade, personal communication, April 17, 2005). Although

Herman is a feminist and her goal was to increase understanding, decrease stigma, and create social change, she did not free herself from the medical perspective. She is a professor of psychiatry, trained according to a medical model. In that model there are experts and there are patients. Patients have ‘illnesses’, ‘disorders’ or ‘deficits’. Therefore, the results of trauma are viewed in a negative light. In contrast, Alan Wade is a researcher and therapist who uses an anti-oppressive perspective and uncovers acts of resistance to oppression in his work with trauma survivors. He and others have pointed out that effects of trauma that seem to medical practitioners to be deficits, such as an ability to dissociate, or the tendency toward hyper-vigilance, were part of a client’s healthy response to abuse. Jessica Ball, psychologist, has noted that hyper-vigilance is viewed negatively by medical professionals, yet during the period of trauma, hyper-vigilance may have been developed to save one’s life (Ball, personal communication, October, 1997). Wade proposes such “deficits” are actually resistance behaviour. They are, in fact, not deficits but strengths that help an abused person to survive and resist and maintain her dignity (Wade, personal communication, April, 2005).

Herman’s stage theory is broad in order to encompass several types of trauma survivors. Therefore, she cannot focus in great detail on the process of change and achievement of healing for one specific population. The stage theory also lacks the operationalized constructs of a model such as the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TM), which I review next.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change

The Transtheoretical Model of Change, created in 1982 and revised in 1994, contributed the concept of specific stages of change ((Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska et al., 1994; DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998). I find the stages clear and easy to use in psycho-educational work. Listeners appear to understand them quickly. The stages include: Precontemplative, Contemplative, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance. Decisional balance and self-efficacy are important factors in change, as are the 10 processes that occur in varying proportions during each stage. Examples of cognitive processes are consciousness-raising, and environment re-evaluation. A behavioural example is stimulus control.

Because the TM has been widely used in substance misuse counselling for two decades, its reliability and validity has been tested and supported. Morera (1998) found that the TM has desirable psychometric properties in regard to stability and reliability. Several of the important constructs in the TM have already been supported in research literature, such as self-efficacy. A meta-analysis of 47 studies by Rosen (2000), comparing effect sizes across studies and within studies, was intended to consider one original contribution of the TM, the concept that different cognitive and behavioural strategies facilitate progress during different stages of change. Rosen found that use of change processes did vary across stages. His study did not support the idea that particular processes of change are used in specific stages for all the varied health behaviours considered in the meta-analysis.

Research Which Applies the Transtheoretical Model to Abuse Issues

Learning about the TM's successes in the field of addictions, I wanted to discover whether it would accurately describe successful change regarding choosing to end abusive relationships. This work has been begun by Brown (1997), Levesque et al., (2000), and Burke et al. (2001).

The TM is known by a majority of counsellors in the field of substance misuse and is now being tested with a variety of health risk behaviours (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998), yet it has not yet been comprehensively tested in regard to counselling abuse survivors. In the following part of this chapter, I will describe existing research studies, their contributions to knowledge, and their benefits and limitations. Several researchers have suggested that the Transtheoretical model may be a promising model to guide the future development of programs that incorporate stage-tailored interventions for abuse issues (Brown, 1997; Campbell et al., 1998, cited in Burke et al., 2001).

In a recent study concerning the process of ending abuse, Burke et al. (2001) examined whether the Transtheoretical model is a useful conceptual framework for understanding how women end abuse in relationships. The Action stage of the TM, when applied to the issue of abuse, involves the process of recognizing abuse and deciding to do something about it. The researchers interviewed 78 women, many of whom were from marginalized groups in society. The women discussed all the stages of their process

of change. Results of this qualitative study supported the Transtheoretical model. The model was consistent with how the women described ending their abusive situations. This study gave a voice to the survivors, who had demonstrated their resilience despite adversity in their lives.

The study by Burke et al was “not originally designed to explore the application of the TM”, so the researchers “did not probe or ask questions that would have allowed us to explore the processes of change” (2001). They conducted a brief twenty-minute qualitative interview, followed by a sixty-minute quantitative interview. In the interviews, the five researchers were trying to elicit information specific to their established areas of research interest. The interviews were transcribed and then read to identify thematic codes relevant to the researchers’ original study aims. During that process, the researchers suddenly realized that themes related to the Transtheoretical model were emerging. They began to code and analyze the transcribed interviews in relation to the TM. As a result, their findings seemed somewhat vague or unfocused, compared to what could have been hoped for had the questions been designed to test the TM. The researchers themselves state that, “the processes of change were not specifically explored”. It is a further limitation that Burke et al. conducted twenty-minute interviews, which they describe as “in-depth” interviews.

As well, half of the women interviewed were HIV positive, a major factor in anyone’s life. That factor may have been an important influence in some manner, influencing the process of ending abuse; the researchers state that it “remains an open question” (Burke et al., 2001).

Koraleski and Larsen (1997) tested the Transtheoretical model in therapy with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The researchers were seeking knowledge about participants’ use of behavioural and experiential processes in each stage. Questionnaires were used. The pattern of change lent some support to the applicability of the TM in therapy with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Koraleski and Larsen assessed the clients’ relative use of the ten different processes in each of the stages of change. They researched within a different population than the one in which I am interested. Some limitations of their study include a small population, and that the participants were clients who volunteered. The researchers themselves noted that clients

who volunteered may have differed from those who chose not to participate. They found it difficult to compare the results of current studies with results from earlier studies because the names of processes of change have not been consistent across publications.

In her article, “Working toward freedom from violence: The process of change in battered women”, after reviewing early research into domestic violence, Brown (1997) notes the lack of research concerning the steps or stages which survivors pass through as they accomplish changes in their lives. Brown critiques outcome measures used in research because they often measure the quantity and type of abuse which victims experience and measure the behaviour of the abuser. They do not measure the survivor’s behavioural and cognitive change (such as determination to accomplish change for herself). Brown explores the utility of the Transtheoretical Model for understanding and measuring how battered women overcome abuse. She explicates the central constructs of the model, and reviews supporting research. She finds the TM very useful, and she explores areas where future research could strengthen the use of the TM. She noted that the social and demographic context of the survivors needs to be considered in future research. It could also be useful to explore what helped the women redefine their situation, coming to perceive it as something they could no longer tolerate. She cites a study which explored the catalysts of change that helped women to stop rationalizing and to begin to define the problematic behaviour of their partner as abuse (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, cited in Brown, 1997).

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed existing models concerning stages of abuse and how to create change. I came to see that people in helping relationships would benefit from concrete information about how to help survivors who are in the process of accomplishing positive change, information that could be tested and supported by research. I began to realize the value in research that would reveal in greater detail the process of change for women ending abusive relationships.

I hoped to learn whether the TM’s concepts such as decisional balance and the importance of self-efficacy would apply to survivors of abusive relationships. I examined the literature regarding previous research (e.g., Burke et al., 2001) and saw that

I could conduct a study designed to explore the lived experience of achieving positive change for women who ended relationships with abusive former partners. The study would be designed to meet the goals of critical social science. It would seek to uncover societal and structural factors that influenced the women's experience both positively and negatively as they sought to accomplish positive change. It would meet a need that is largely unaddressed: how to support women in the process of ending abuse by discovering the external and internal factors that lead to success for them in accomplishing positive change. Knowledge gained from this study could be very useful for support workers, counsellors, and other helping professionals.

In Chapter 3, I will explain my method. I will discuss the qualitative and critical social science approaches that I used to design a study to discover how female survivors of intimate partner abuse accomplished positive change in their lives.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

For my research study, I chose a paradigm whose continuum falls between positive social science and interpretive social science. The paradigm would be situated closer to interpretive social science. In this chapter, I will outline the qualitative approach and the critical social science approach and why I have chosen them. I describe my design, which was phenomenological, and then set out the benefits and limitations of my approach, and ethical considerations. I describe the participants in my study, the instrumentation and method of data collection, and the steps in the procedure for data analysis. A summary concludes Chapter 3.

The Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research explores phenomena in its natural setting, and draws from a variety of possible methods to interpret, understand, explain, and draw meaning from the topic or area which is under investigation (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). It examines lived experience, which is appropriate for my research question. In qualitative research, the principal data collection instrument is the researcher, whereas in quantitative research, data collection tools are developed and tested (e.g., an IQ test). Using qualitative research allows me to continually ask myself, “What does this phenomena look like to the participant?” and to try to understand her meaning of it, while simultaneously remaining aware that I, myself, have a perspective, knowledge, experience, and theory regarding the participant’s social reality (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; Mason, 1997).

Qualitative methods are less restrictive than quantitative methods, which must limit factors and variables that influence the independent variable. Therefore, qualitative methods are capable of providing opportunity for surprising and unexpected information to emerge. Being open to surprises is quite useful; the excitement of discovery ought to be a hallmark of qualitative research (Ely et al., 1997). If the research questions are too narrow, we cannot see anything but the answers that we expected. When we leave room to permit the data to surprise us, we learn, and we are able to improve our theory (Lave

and Kvale, 1995, cited in Ely et al., 1997). By choosing a qualitative approach, I was able to search for meaning regarding abstract things (e.g., processes, self-efficacy) and draw out themes that were important in the participants' experiences. The qualitative approach allowed my research to be more in-depth than a quantitative approach would have been.

My findings cannot be generalized to apply to external populations, and I cannot statistically analyze my data to find statistical significance or effect size. It remains for future researchers to find quantitative ways to test the themes that emerge from qualitative studies.

The Critical Social Science Approach

The paradigm underlying my research is the philosophy of critical social science (CSS). In the view of Neuman (1994), critical social science is an alternative to positivism and interpretive social science. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994) the four most commonly accepted paradigms are positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and related ideologies, and constructivism. The critical approach shares many attributes with the interpretive approach, which views the world as being made up of created meanings but is less subjective and relativistic than the critical approach. Yet, unlike the positivist approach, which assumes there are incontestable neutral facts, CSS is able to deal with intangibles, such as the meanings and emotions of people, and it takes into account the social context (Neuman, 1994).

Critical social science is concerned with social change. Critical social scientists believe that by examining "what is" and attempting to hold no values, positivism assumes an unchanging order and ultimately defends the status quo. Positivism does not have an intrinsic goal of working toward social change. Similarly, interpretive social science often takes a passive view. If one holds that all points of view are equal, then one cannot take a value position or help people perceive illusions that are around them so they can begin to improve their lives, as a critical researcher would desire (Neuman, 1994).

The three approaches differ concerning the nature of reality. Critical social science views reality as constantly evolving over time, misleading on its surface, and having multiple layers (Neuman, 1994, p. 67-68). CSS agrees with interpretive social

science that change is always happening and that reality is subject to socially created meanings. Nevertheless, although CSS agrees that subjective meaning is important, there are real, objective structures and relations that underlie social relations. For example, many abuse survivors, particularly if they are parents, face overwhelming economic hardship after ending the relationship. Economic hardship is a factor in society's structure that pressures survivors to return to the abusive partner. CSS defines social science as a "critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world" that account for social relations, for the purpose of helping people "change conditions and build a better world for themselves" (Neuman, 1994, p. 67). The roots of CSS are tracable to Freud, Marx and other social thinkers. Examples of CSS include conflict theory, feminist analysis, and radical psychotherapy (Neuman, 1994, p. 66).

A critical researcher views human beings as being creative, adaptive, and having much unrealized potential. Despite this, people can become trapped in social meanings and relationships. Isolated, and mired in delusion (e.g., social myths) and oppressive conditions, they may lose hope that change is possible, and may lose sight of their potential for independence, freedom, and control over their lives. CSS views this as commonly occurring when marginalized people feel isolated and are not connected with others in similar situations (Neuman, 1994). Part of critical social science's philosophy is that people can join together and work to change the social world. For example, historically Canadian women lobbied British Parliament to become "persons" in Canada in 1929. Later, Canadian aboriginal women joined together and took a case to the United Nations. They regained rights previously lost upon marriage to white men. A current example is that in this decade, disabled persons are joining together to fight the same battle that women have fought, for access to jobs. Critical social science goes beyond describing social phenomena; it critiques social conditions and suggests a plan for change (Neuman, 1994, p. 70).

Why I Stand with the Critical Social Scientists

It is very tempting to try to remain as value-neutral as possible and to take a strictly interpretive approach. Critical social science shares much with the interpretive

approach, but CSS incorporates values and promotes advocacy and activism for social change. There are values underlying many aspects of the topic I am researching, and values underlie the models being used today to view the topic. Values also underlie why I am choosing to research this topic, and social change is an ultimate goal for the findings of my research. In this part of Chapter 3, I describe how I came to perceive myself as a critical social science researcher.

Empowerment is a goal of critical social science. Research is conducted in order to empower people, particularly less powerful persons and marginalized groups. That research goal is the same goal that I have in my counselling work. Marginalized groups such as women, disabled persons, people living in poverty, survivors of abuse, aboriginal people and immigrants are the people I am most interested in working with, in counselling or in research. In this study, I hoped to obtain findings that would be used to help empower women survivors to achieve and maintain positive change in their lives.

Critical social scientists sometimes speak of “false consciousness”, the illusion that underlies some social relationships and may deceive people. Because it means there is a reality that exists, this term does not fit into the paradigm of interpretive social science. The term made me uncomfortable at first, because of its association with extremely radical groups. However, false consciousness does exist. It has been my experience that marginalized groups sometimes adopt the views and the social myths of their oppressors. For example, there are people living in poverty who internalize their oppression, believing that they or their group are “no good” and “lazy”, and who call others in their own group “welfare bums”. Historically, there were women who advocated that women should not have equal access to the social opportunities men have had, such as education, equal access to employment, or the right to vote.

The thoughts of individuals are not solely intra-psychic; thoughts and behaviour occur in a context, a larger, social environment. False consciousness may connect to factors that kept women in abusive intimate relationships (e.g., their beliefs about gender roles in relationships). I wondered whether in my study I might discover that changing beliefs might prove to be a factor that empowers women to choose to live free of abusive relationships.

In general, positivism is based on determinism, while interpretive social science assumes that people have free will to make social meanings (Neuman, 1994). Critical social science once again falls between the two extremes, and again I must choose it. It has been my own experience that we human beings are influenced by the environment, by social meanings, but do not have to be locked into it. People are capable of free will, and we can create beliefs and social meanings that are different than what social forces may be imposing on us by means of economic structures, and cultural and historical conditions. The social oppression of minority groups does not have to be inevitable. Neither the marginalized nor the powerful in society have to be locked into our socially imposed roles.

The critical approach has an activist orientation, and sees social research as a moral and political, socially responsible activity. Although I am an advocate for minority groups and an activist, at first I wanted to follow a value-free approach, which views everyone's reality as equal. My university education provided the belief that these two camps are the only valid ones, and that approaches that involve values are tainted. However, I have learned to "think outside the box" that I was provided with, because values are saturating every type of study, whether or not a researcher wants to admit it.

Neuman compares the three approaches in regard to values and moral choices. He states that critical social science rejects the interpretive philosophy that everything is relative, nothing is absolute, and all constructed meanings are of equal value. If one follows the interpretive philosophy, then the reality of a racist and the reality of the racist's victim would be of equal value. Worse, the racist's viewpoint would be considered true, for those who believe in it (Neuman, 1994, p. 71). Being objective in this way is not really being value-free.

CSS also rejects the positivist attempt to achieve a value-neutral stance, which is ultimately not possible. Neuman proposes that to even say that a researcher has no point of view is in fact a point of view (1994, p. 71). He adds that to say that science is a tool, or that science can ignore questions of social or moral responsibility, is a point of view. Both the positivist and interpretive approaches attempt to be detached from the world. But there are values and moral choices involved in what a researcher chooses to study, how they study it, and what happens to the results.

Knowledge has real effects on people's lives. Who will use that knowledge? Will the people being studied be helped by the findings, or manipulated? Because of these questions, I worked through the process of examining my beliefs, and in the end I had to stand with the critical social science approach.

Traditional forms of conducting research, for quantitative research in particular, have been criticized for exploitative relationships between researchers and participants, and for contributing to oppression of social minorities (Mason, 1997). Scientific dominance by powerful, distant, neutral researchers results in the researchers' perspectives remaining unquestioned. It reinforces traditional (hierarchical) class and gender relationships in society. When traditional research involves or supposedly benefits women, it has been critiqued for sexist research designs, for using findings from all-male samples to describe women, or for maintaining the status quo in which women are less powerful, a minority group. There are feminist researchers who go so far as to propose that female researchers who use traditional methods that emphasize separation, distance, control, power and dominance are in effect consenting to oppression of themselves, as women (Mies, 1982, cited in Mason, 1997, p. 23).

As a critical social scientist and feminist, I sought to create a design that is empowering and beneficial to minority groups (in this case, women/trauma survivors/a low-income population/a stigmatized group), that gives them a voice, and that treats them with respect. Researchers who want to overcome the faults of traditional research can choose to do research "for" women, rather than "on" women (Mason, 1997, p. 11). They consider women's needs, interests and experiences. Women's experiences are seen as having the potential of being a resource for researchers. The research has the goals of being meaningful and relevant to women, and bringing about change that can improve women's lives in some way; the goals make the research political (Mason, 1997). I could never choose any other perspective on research.

Researchers can aim to reconceptualize power, eliminating the distance between participant and researcher by attempting to put the researcher in the same "plane" as the subject (Harding, 1987, cited in Mason, 1997, p. 22). There are many ways that researchers can attempt to equalize power in the relationship: by asking participants to provide input into research questions; by making it clear that the participant is an expert

in the area being studied; and by treating the participant as a self-determining free agent with the power to negotiate a fair research bargain with the researcher (Mason, 1997). Although there may be limits to the extent to which equalizing power can be achieved in research studies, nevertheless I made the best effort possible to create ways to do so, always conceptualizing and treating the participants as experts on their personal experience with achieving change.

The critical social science approach can be seen in my thesis from abstract to concrete levels, and from the general to the particular. One goal of CSS is to uncover external factors in the social context that influence the participants' experience. Using the CSS approach allowed me to include the social context, rather than limiting exploration to strictly intra-psychic processes involved in change. The approach is visible in the way I approached my research topic, my purpose for doing research, and the questions I created for interviews with participants. When the researcher gives up the "view from above", the hierarchical traditional relationship that perpetuates social inequities, then subjects can become researchers (Mason, 1997). Responding to open questions, they can take the lead in deciding what is important to describe in their experiences. Using a critical social science approach in this study, I allowed participants to help in research. They were free, during our interview dialogues, to decide what was most important to examine in their experience of change. In my study, seven women who had the desire to help and to empower others shared their personal experiences of accomplishing change.

A Phenomenological Research Design

My research design was phenomenological. That choice allowed me to study the inner realm of human experience and to illuminate and describe the survivor's lived experiences. Phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl, who believed to understand human phenomena we must set aside our existing, established assumptions - what we think we know about a subject - and learn to perceive and understand things as they present themselves in our experiences (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

Phenomenology is more concerned with subjective understanding of the topic under consideration than it is with objective fact-finding. It takes the approach that social reality is constructed. Phenomenology uses an inter-subjective approach, requiring a

dialogic relationship to understand the phenomenon. Such an approach validates what is being described; it also requires retrospective reflection - considering the experience after it has occurred (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

Benefits and Limitations of my Approach

A phenomenological design was an approach that allowed me to study a process, and to examine abstract things. It allowed me to attempt to understand the participants' experiences. It permitted me to uncover societal and structural factors as well as individual strategies and behaviours that influence successful maintenance of change. I was able to study a process and to include the context at the same time. To include the context allowed me to provide a holistic picture of what has occurred (Neuman, 1994).

Using a phenomenological design and interviews allowed a seldom-heard group to have a "voice" and to be heard in society. Events, relationships, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values, perceptions, and experiences were explored, as they were perceived by the women who experienced them.

How would I test findings in a critical science approach, using a qualitative method and a phenomenological design? The value of a positivist, quantitative approach is that when an hypothesis has been deduced, it can be tested. This is a limitation for qualitative approaches such as mine. There is no testable hypothesis, but there are findings that I hope will be a resource to increase understanding for survivors and for those who work to empower them to accomplish and maintain change. Neuman (1994) writes that to test theories derived by means of critical science we must observe whether we can use what we learned in the study to change people's lives. Have we accurately described conditions generated by underlying structures, and will the knowledge gained in the study help us to change social relations? Testing is done by putting theories into practice. A theory grows as it is tested, modified, and reformulated on the basis of its use in the world, but the world is constantly changing, and so critical science's theories are not static, but dynamic and evolving in an ongoing process.

Researchers and helping professionals have no reason to assume that a trauma survivor's narrative will, or should be, entirely consistent over time. Survivors may experience significant gaps in memory and their narratives may change as they recover

missing pieces (Herman, 1992, cited in Riessman, 1993). Traditional notions of reliability simply cannot be applied to studies of narratives, and therefore validity is the critical issue, and trustworthiness is worth more than “truth” (Riessman, 1993).

Yet phenomenological research has no external validity, and generalizes only to the given research situation. How can one make it trustworthy? Validity in phenomenology is supported by whether one has actually investigated what one set out to investigate. We must be sure of whose voice is represented in the final product (Riessman, 1993). And, as researchers seek to interpret a narrative that represents a participant’s interpretation of events, we must remember that factors cannot be quantitatively controlled in a phenomenological study; instead, the overarching goal is for enlargement of understanding (Riessman, 1993).

Phenomenological studies do provide an opportunity for internal validity, which is established by rigorous record keeping and tracking of the researcher’s activities, thought processes, and means and steps of analysis. A reader should be able to follow how the findings were derived from the data. To support validity, I clearly describe the steps I took. I kept a journal of important realizations, barriers, and surprising findings during data gathering and the steps of analysis.

In the journal, as well as in preparation for research, I engaged in critical self-reflection regarding my own biases and assumptions regarding the data that arose or I expected to arise during the investigation. This is “bracketing”, which is one of the essential activities required for achieving validity (Kvale, 1996). Bracketing provided me with the opportunity to step back from my own assumptions, whether derived from education, scientific foreknowledge, common sense, or even my own experiences. To consciously be aware of my assumptions and “put them into parentheses” allowed me to approach the essence of the data (Kvale, 1996). Bracketing allowed me to test the validity of my interpretations against what is bracketed, and to remain open to new and unfamiliar interpretations when they arose from the data. The participants’ descriptions of their experiences were not always what I expected or assumed they would be. When data that was discordant with my previous assumptions emerged, I was able to bracket my assumptions and examine the new data in an accepting way, attempting to understand what it meant in the participant’s change process, rather than dismissing it. In this way,

there was an opportunity for understanding and interpreting the data in more depth than would have occurred without bracketing.

Method of Obtaining Participants

I sought to find women who could answer my questions, and who could speak about the experience of change when ending a relationship with an abusive partner. It was not possible to obtain participants by random sampling. I designed a set of criteria: participants were to be women over 19 years of age, who had experienced abuse by their intimate partner, and who had been out of the abusive relationship for at least eighteen months. I recruited seven participants with the help of professionals who work in a variety of counselling and social programs. Participants contacted me after reading a poster in a community agency or after helping professionals informed them of the study.

Participants were informally evaluated by the helping professional who referred them, and by myself in the introductory stage of the interview, to be mentally and emotionally healthy and stable enough to participate in the study without being harmed by the process. The women needed to be capable of understanding the purpose of the study, capable of providing descriptions of their lived experience, and able to give informed consent.

Data Collecting

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) state that in qualitative research, the principal data collection instrument is the researcher. The researcher becomes a receptive vessel for the data. I have explored the benefits of that situation in the phenomenological design section above.

The means of data collection in this study is the interview, which is the most typical method of data collection for phenomenological researchers (Moustakas, 1994). My interview was based on an Interview Guide (Riesman, 1993; Moustakas, 1994). It consisted of a standard set of broad questions and probes to facilitate the obtaining of rich, full descriptions (Riesman, 1993). Sample questions from the Guide are attached as Appendix C. I created a set of alternative wordings for each question to clarify meaning for the participant, if required.

As Anderson and Arsenault (1998) advise, I needed to create questions that met my research goals – in this case, to draw out description of internal and external things that supported positive change. As Moustakas (1994) suggests is useful for phenomenological research, I created open-ended questions to allow a broad range of information to emerge in the responses. They are an attempt to put few restrictions on how participants may respond (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Open questions allowed an opportunity for unexpected information to emerge.

The format of the interview was not rigid and formal. I created as relaxed an environment as possible, and tried to build trust while asking each participant the prepared questions. I provided the option to vary or even not to use some of the questions, as the participant shared the full story of her experiences. This is an accepted way of doing phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were interactive, and I used my abilities to help draw out the participant's narrative. I used the same broad, general questions with all participants. However, participants had the freedom to discuss topic areas that they believed were most important in their experience of change, whether or not other participants had discussed the same areas.

Drawbacks included: Open questions can make it difficult to control the interview or keep it on the topic areas the researcher is interested in exploring. As well, each interview was a one-time event; if important information was missed, there was no opportunity to obtain it later.

Conducting interviews

The participants met me individually at a mutually agreed upon private location. Participants had already received information about the study from posters and/or referral sources. I checked that they each met the sampling criteria described above. Following ethical procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994), I provided information concerning the purpose of the study and confidentiality, and I offered to answer questions at the beginning as well as at the end of the interview.

Together we discussed the purpose of the study. We discussed confidentiality, including the information that the data would be kept in a locked room. I checked that

the participant understood, and if she met the criteria, understood the process and the goals, then she was asked to sign a consent form.

I conducted a taped interview which took between one and two hours. I asked predetermined questions that helped the participant to provide a narrative exploring and describing her experience when she chose, accomplished and maintained positive change for herself when leaving a relationship with an abusive intimate partner. Questions were generally broad and open ended, e.g., “Can you tell me about what the time after you first left was like for you?”

Equipment used. A “Harris Lanier Dictaphone” (Model P-129, Serial no. 573185, 120 volts, 60 hertz 0.3 Amps) was used to record interviews on cassette tapes, and to play back recordings in order to transcribe interviews.

Role of Interviewer

In any qualitative research study, the interviewer has an important role. He or she is a tool of analysis. In qualitative research, “instrument validity and reliability ride largely on the skills of the researcher” (Miles & Huberman, 1984). An interviewer will be a valid and reliable information-gathering instrument if she has familiarity with the phenomenon under study; strong conceptual interests; a multi-disciplinary approach, rather than a narrow grounding in a single theoretical approach or discipline, and effective investigative skills such as the ability to encourage participants to tell of their experiences in rich detail (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Further, in a study that investigates events that may involve memory of strong emotions or trauma, the interviewer needs to create an environment of trust. There is also an ethical obligation to ensure that the participant is not harmed by the process.

I have familiarity and strong conceptual interests in the phenomenon of transitions for women leaving abusive intimate partners: how they come to choose and maintain positive change. I have taken every available opportunity to obtain academic education and practical experience in this area. For several years I have worked with women who are contemplating leaving abusive relationships, women who are in transition, and women who have left. I worked in a variety of capacities, including: volunteer, practicum student, community counsellor, and transition house support worker.

While working in diverse roles, I learned to carry out a helping relationship using a multidisciplinary approach. The knowledge and training required for the role of community counsellor drew primarily on my counselling education, with occasional opportunities for advocacy, while the skills and knowledge for work as a support worker drew primarily on principles that derive from social work education, advocacy training, and some use of my counselling and psychology education. Work as community counsellor focuses on the internal, psychological issues, with occasional focus on society and the environment. In contrast, employment as a support worker focuses more heavily on the external issues (access to resources, forming supportive social networks), with some opportunities for counselling on internal, psychological issues (e.g., healthy relationships, boundary formation, communication skills, assertiveness, and self esteem).

In both situations, counsellor and support worker, no matter how desperate the client's situation is, I view the client as an expert on her own situation, capable of choosing her own goals, and as having strengths that she has demonstrated in the past. I take the stance of a learner, who will hear her story and assist her to realize her strengths and to make positive choices. Past experience with taking the role of a learner proved valuable when I used that role with participants in my research study.

My own life experience with ending an abusive relationship was just as valuable in this study as my work experience and education. First, the learning from personal experiences enabled me to use empathy while helping participants. My experience helped me to build trust which allowed participants to describe their experiences without fearing judgment. Because I validated their experiences, valued their progress, and respected them for their courage in revisiting the experience in order to benefit other women, the risk of harm to participants by revisiting their experience was reduced. The participants responded by openly expressing their experience, at a detailed level. They provided a rich supply of data for understanding the experiences of women leaving abusive intimate relationships. Second, I believe that during data analysis the learning from my work experiences and personal experiences enhanced and clarified my understanding of the issues in the experiences brought forward by the women.

Ethical considerations – doing no harm

To preserve the confidentiality of the participants' identities was an important ethical consideration. Each participant chose a pseudonym at the start of the interview. Further measures to preserve confidentiality are described in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Questions concerning negative experiences such as encountering triggers and experiencing an urge to return to the relationship were phrased so as to normalize the occurrence and show it as a learning process. For example, urges to return were explored with specific questions (Appendix C). My goals that were underlying how questions were framed were as follows.

I purposefully created open questions to research my topic, in order to meet my goals of empowerment, doing no harm, and collection of data. It was a goal to obtain the narrative of the woman's experience of successfully accomplishing positive change. The open questions encouraged her to provide as full a description as possible.

It is a goal of the critical social science approach to uncover structural and social factors in society that contributed to the problem being studied. Structural factors could include severe financial hardship, systemic barriers such as lack of daycare, gender-related social barriers such as minimum wage employment, and lack of education. Social factors could include social myths such as that a single woman cannot be a good parent, and other oppressive beliefs related to gender, poverty or other factors. The interview questions allowed opportunity for social and structural aspects of the participants' experiences to emerge in the participants' narratives.

When exploring negative experiences, I framed questions in a way that helped a participant to realize her strengths, learning, and accomplishments. That method accomplished my goals of empowerment and prevention of harm. I wanted each participant to realize that her knowledge and strengths were respected and that the questions provided her with an opportunity to help other women. At times, I offered participants the opportunity to take a break and reminded them that they had the power to end the interview at any time. I checked on how they were doing emotionally from time to time, and checked on their comfort level with the interview process.

Debriefing. When each interview ended, we debriefed the experience. I made sure to discuss self-care for the evening, and provided information about support that she could access if necessary (e.g., her friends; her counsellor; a crisis line, name of a counselling agency). I checked as to whether the participant had current contact with counsellors whom she could easily access if needed. I was sure to thank the participant for her assistance and for her courage in telling the story despite the risk of negative emotions and memories of trauma that could arise from telling her story. I thanked her for her contribution to research knowledge, which will benefit other women.

Data Analysis

Transcribing interviews

The taped interviews were transcribed by myself. To preserve confidentiality, I asked participants to choose pseudonyms. As well, I altered or omitted identifying information in transcripts (e.g., city name, place of employment, partner's name). Brief pauses were denoted with three dots and lengthy pauses, laughter and sighs were noted in parentheses. Any word derived from the context, that was inserted into a quotation to make the sentence more understandable was indicated in square brackets. For example, the transcript says:

Participant: "And so immediately I ..." (Pause. Cries.).
 (Interviewer: "You left?")
 Participant: "Yes."

When quoted in the thesis, the above excerpt will be as follows:

Participant: "And so immediately I [left]." (Pause. Cries.)

A backup copy of the text was kept on computer disk and a printed copy was kept as well, until analysis was complete. Transcribed records have been kept confidential, in a locked room, during analysis and will be kept there until it is determined that the data will no longer be required for the purposes of this study. At that point I will destroy the tapes and transcripts and erase files from computer software and discs.

Beginning to analyse

Analysis actually began with the first narrative provided by the first participant. It is impossible to do otherwise, because as thinking beings we cannot stop ourselves from analyzing (Ely et al., 1997). We classify information and connect it to abstractions at the very same time as we are taking in and making sense of perceptions. Analysis cannot be left to the last phase of the research process; it occurs concurrently with data collection (Tesch, 1990, cited in Ely et al., 1997). Therefore it was valuable to journal, tracking my insights and realizations during the days after each interview.

The journal was helpful for tracking my process of analysis at every stage of the analysis. I was combining organization and categorization with realizations and learning as I went along. Ely et al emphasize strongly the need for reflection that results in analytical notes that guide the process (1997). Insights into the meaning of the data were derived from the journalling process, in a reliable and comprehensive way. The use of journalling made it possible to track the emergence of insights during data gathering and afterward, and to make sure that momentary realizations were kept to be weighed, compared, and evaluated later.

I conducted the seven interviews during a five-month period, and my understanding of the issues was growing as I worked with each transcript immediately after each interview. Initially, I had wanted participants to spend only a brief time explaining the period before leaving, spending most of our time on the period after leaving. I kept guiding them toward speaking about the period after leaving their former partner. Participants kept returning to the earlier time, and soon I saw that the process of coming to make the decision for positive change was important in understanding the maintenance of change that would follow.

It was evident with the third participant's narrative that what eventually got her out of the relationship *kept* her out. Therefore, during the interviews I began to allow participants time to say what they wanted to tell me, which was the process of their slow shift toward choosing to leave their abusive partner. At this point, my research question evolved, as I have noted in Chapter 1. Rather than focussing solely on the time after ending the relationship, I now looked at the whole process of change. I sought to reveal

the lived experience of achieving positive change for participants who ended relationships with abusive intimate partners.

In my research, I sought to learn about the individual women's experiences and then to discover which experiences were common within the group. I worked first on the individual level, and later looked at the data across the group. After I interviewed each participant, I created a profile describing her experience and then I began to transcribe her words. I began to discern the details that stood out in her story. I was transcribing each interview immediately after it occurred, recording insights in the analysis journal. I was beginning the process of immersing myself in the data.

The process of qualitative, phenomenological analysis that I used has been described by Moustakas (1994) and in greater depth by Ely et al. (1997) and Riessman (1993). It is suitable for a study with a small number of participants who are sharing and exploring their lived experience of a phenomenon. After transcribing, I began horizontalizing the data, which means regarding every statement (or "horizon") as being of equal value (Moustakas, 1994). I was breaking the sentences in each transcript into meaning units and creating a new document for each participant. Simultaneously, I was noting points and making margin notes on the pages during and after creating each meaning units document. The next step in this method of analysis is to group the meaning units into categories, themes and metathemes. Themes are higher in level and more abstract than the categories from which they are derived, and metathemes are more abstract than themes. The end goal is to find a way to create "some sort of higher level synthesis" of the data (Tesch, 1990, cited in Ely et al., 1997).

When each statement was broken into meaning units, the meaning units were coded (e.g., gathering similar meaning units under the heading of "beliefs about gender roles") and categorized. I reflected on the meaning of the data in order to realize that categories existed among several meaning units, and to then sort the meaning units into the categories.

I began coding, assigning labels to the segments of data. The codes were not set in stone; I could change the label. The codes were tools to think with; they could be "expanded, changed, or scrapped altogether" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, cited in Ely et al., 1997). Maintaining openness to adaptability allowed me to remain open to surprising

information and unexpected realizations. In this stage of analysis, categories were tentative in the beginning. They should remain flexible (Tesch, 1990, cited in Ely et al., 1997). Tesch proposes that in qualitative research, the main intellectual tool is comparison (1990, cited in Ely et al., 1997). Reflection and cross-comparison among the narratives helped me to reach an understanding of the essence of meaning of the categories. I was looking for important “patterns, themes, issues that seem to reach to the heart of those meanings” (Ely et al., 1997). I cut and pasted the statements to form categories for each participant, creating a new document.

I did not begin the stage of formally finding themes and listing them until all seven interviews had been completed and transcribed, all transcripts had been broken down into meaning units, and the meaning units had been categorized.

The themes that emerged from categories in each participant’s story were compared in order to create a comprehensive picture of what occurred during their experiences of change. I began to create documents that listed themes, with transcript excerpts from each participant that demonstrated her experience of that theme. At this point, I began to see that the themes fell into five areas or time periods during the women’s experience of achieving change.

At this point, I began to unite supportive quotations from several participants under one theme heading, thus uniting the individual data. Some themes were common to a majority of participants, and some were unique but important for understanding the process of achieving positive change.

Finding Metathemes

I began to look for metathemes among the many themes that had emerged from the categories. Metathemes contain over-arching ideas, and link the analysis back to the original search for knowledge, the purpose of the study. At this point in research, it is time to look at the outcomes as a whole, connecting them to the research question and the theory being examined in the study (Ely et al., 1997).

It was challenging to discern metathemes from the dozens of themes. At first they each seemed important enough to be a metatheme. Reissman (1993) proposes that writing a core narrative is useful for finding common elements in the stories of

individuals who share a common life event. I created a core narrative for each participant at this point, and I compared them. I saw that my understanding had gained more depth than when I had written a profile for each woman, immediately after each interview. The core narrative showed important aspects of each woman's process of change.

At this point in analysis, I created a document from the responses of the women to the question, "What would you tell another woman *whose situation was very similar to yours*, who is at the point of leaving and is worried about it?" I created this question to uncover what each woman had learned during her own experience, and I called the document "Women Sharing the Wisdom". Their responses had struck me as so meaningful that perhaps I could have analyzed solely the responses to that question and answered my research question. This document also helped me to discern what was most important in each woman's process of change.

I was now able to return to the themes and discern metathemes. Some metathemes had several supporting themes and some had fewer, but all metathemes were the most important factors in the women's process of coming to choose a positive change for themselves, acting on the change, maintaining change, and letting the change evolve over time into more complex goals for herself.

The metathemes included aspects of change that were external, or social, and internal, or psychological and individual. Qualitative research is holistic, and no interpretation or analysis is meaningful if the cultural context is omitted (Ely et al., 1997). The interview questions that I used gathered data that included information about social and cultural aspects of the environments in which the participants had resided over time – the environments in which participants had grown up, lived with their partners, left their partners, and sought resources to build a new life for themselves. Data included information about internal resources which were influenced by the environment (e.g., the women's self-efficacy, their beliefs about gender roles, religious beliefs about families) and external resources (e.g., support from family, social assistance, the legal system).

Some of the metathemes presented the women's experiences as social beings, who are part of the connections and networks in a society. Those social experiences involved external aspects of creating change, while other metathemes spoke of internal

experiences (e.g., “Grief”). Thus, I was able to obtain a holistic picture of the women’s experience of achieving change.

Each time period during the process of change had its own important metathemes. Some were unique to one time period and some appeared in several.

During data analysis, I began to look at metathemes that appeared in more than one time period to see how change had occurred. Often participants had made changes in beliefs, perceptions, or goals. Sometimes they abandoned a previous belief and replaced it with a new one. Sometimes they elaborated on a previous belief or goal as time passed. For example, often, a participant’s beliefs about what an intimate partner relationship should be like had changed during the passage of time. Another example of change over time is that their goals became more complex as time passed. I created documents containing transcript excerpts that show changes that occurred over time, in order to track and examine changes that occurred.

Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter, I have described my approach, which combines qualitative research methods with critical social science, and I have described the value of choosing an interpretive rather than a positivist approach. I have described the phenomenological design and then addressed the benefits and limitations of my approach. The participants who examined their personal processes and experiences of change for this study have been described, as well as the instrumentation and method of data collection, and the procedure for data analysis. It is my deepest hope that the work of the participants and myself will add to existing knowledge and theory about change, and that it will genuinely enhance the lives of survivors and benefit counsellors, support workers, and all who work with women.

CHAPTER 4

An Introduction to the Participants

This chapter introduces early discoveries about the process of change. Without drawing any conclusions, I provide an introduction to the seven women and their lived experience during a period when they achieved change in their lives. The first section provides a summary of the group's characteristics. It is followed by a second section which contains an overview of the participants' own description of their process of change. Each overview begins with a sentence that describes some social characteristics of the participant. Overviews are based solely on the interview transcripts and do not include interpretation or discussion. Each overview concludes with the strongest metathemes from each participant's experience of change. To add a visual perspective, rather than relying on completely verbal ways of exploring the data, a condensed drawing (Participant Map) has been provided. The maps show each participant's unique experience of change after making the decision to end the relationship.

Appendix G, "Sharing the Wisdom" contains information that supplements the current chapter. "Sharing the Wisdom" presents a dialogue that occurred in the closing moments of each interview. Each woman consciously focuses on what she has learned and expresses the wisdom she would like to pass on to others who are leaving abusive partners.

It is my hope that after this chapter's introduction to the participants, a reader will perceive them as a cross-section of North American women, seven unique and quite diverse human beings who have shared a common experience of choosing and achieving positive change.

Section One: Group Description

This section provides a group description of the seven participants, who were referred by several counsellors and social workers from diverse community agencies. It includes group characteristics, similarities and differences.

The participants were seven adult women between the ages of twenty-seven and fifty-five. All had ended relationships with intimate partners who were clearly abusive.

They had resided with their former partner for periods ranging from one and one-half to twenty years. They remembered and spoke of experiences that involved emotional pain, trauma, guilt, shame, or fear. I viewed them as altruistic for making such a choice. Sometimes their stories caused them to have tears or shaking hands. For at least one, it was the first time she had ever talked about it. It was the first time any of the participants had spent from one to two hours speaking about the experience in great depth. I was deeply moved while hearing of their journey to achieve a changed life. The women told me they were glad to take an opportunity to help other women.

The participants may have varied according to certain social factors or experiences which shall be described in this section, but they had one experience in common. All of the participants had resided in a committed relationship with an intimate partner whose behaviour was defined by the participant as 'abusive' and who did not take responsibility for his harmful behaviour either informally, (e.g., by admitting his behaviour was abusive and attempting to change it), or formally (e.g., by attending an individual or group counselling program that addresses abusive behaviour in relationships, or attending an anger management program, or regularly attending appointments with a psychologist or psychiatrist and taking prescribed medications or following treatment).

All seven participants were Caucasian and were from Canadian or European ancestry. Two participants had a French Canadian background and were born and raised in Quebec. The others had English-speaking parents and grew up in a variety of regions of Canada.

None had a disability; all seven have been or are employed.

During interviews, three participants spoke about experiencing physical or emotional abuse in their family of origin. One participant spoke of a father who was sexually abusive, and three participants spoke of an alcoholic parent.

One of the women resided with her former partner in a rural area, and six resided in cities. Two of the seven women resided in an area where transitions houses or women's shelters did not exist.

Four participants were parents during the relationship. Two of them stayed at home full time to parent their children for most of the time they were with their former

partner. Three of the participants had children who were also physically, verbally or emotionally abused by the former partner; in all cases, the children kept the family secret of their abuse from the public. The four women who were parents became single parents after leaving their former partner. Each had from two to five children for whom they were responsible. Three of the participants who were parents, and two who were not, reported that their financial situation was significantly affected in a negative way after leaving their former partner.

Three women were childless. Two of the childless women said that they realized they did not want to raise a child with the abusive partner in a traumatic environment. One woman made the choice not to become a parent during the relationship with the abusive partner, and terminated her pregnancy. Such realizations were a contributing factor that led to leaving the abusive relationship.

Six of the women spoke of undergoing a process of learning, realizations, and value changes, ending with a final event that led to the decision to act by ending the relationship. For one woman, the precipitating event was a crisis (and threatened loss of her children) that led to ending the relationship before her natural process of reaching that decision had time to finish taking place.

Four of the women did not access institutional forms of social support: the three single women and one who was a parent. The three women who accessed institutional social support were all parents. Three used transition houses at the time of exiting the relationship. Two used second stage housing and other second stage services such as budgeting help. One enrolled her children in the Children Who Witnessed Abuse counselling program. One accessed regular, ongoing counselling in second stage housing, and the other declined counselling while there. One moved into subsidized housing that was not second stage.

Three of the seven women spoke of accessing the justice system, either by contacting the police to lay a charge, and/or getting a Restraining Order when exiting the relationship. Four women, all those who were parents, went to court to settle custody, visitation, maintenance, and/or division of assets.

Two of the seven women found one or more family members to be very supportive in some way, e.g., emotionally or financially, after they left their partners.

Five of the women had friends who were supportive after they left their partners, while two reported handling the emotions and problems alone during and after leaving their former partner.

Two of the women used other types of support for women leaving abuse, such as a life skills program. Two women used a program that provides furniture for women leaving abusive relationships. Two of the women used social assistance for financial support when they first left their former partner.

All of the women described themselves as struggling financially in small or large ways during the first year after they left the relationship. Two of the single women were students, with very low income. Three of the women lost a home that they had owned with their partner. For at least one, it was a home that was paid for. Two of them received a settlement for their equity in the home and one did not.

For some participants, life after leaving was a desperate struggle to find a place to live and a means of paying for it. They needed household furnishings, and those who were parents required clothing for the children, and groceries. One woman told of lacking even the dishes to cook and serve the children's food. They had to struggle to obtain basic necessities. It was common to hear repeatedly in their stories, "I had nothing ... *nothing!*"

Despite poverty, for many of the women the financial situation improved after break-up because finances became stable. Opportunities for entering life skills programs that included pre-employment training became available for two participants when they became categorized as 'single parents who had left abusive former partners'.

Several participants stated that they did not have healthy relationships until they took time to work on their issues, heal, develop skills such as assertiveness, and 'grow' psychologically and socially. Two participants spoke of having had three consecutive abusive relationships with only brief periods or no time between them. Both said that their later relationships improved after they had spent time working on understanding their experiences, and learning about dynamics of healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

Four of seven participants accessed counselling and of these, three had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Two entered life skills programs. Of the three other participants, one had minimal counselling for a brief period but declined counselling after

leaving the transition house; the other two participants said they had not accessed any counselling since the time of the break-up.

Although my recruitment posters were distributed in agencies in the general community, all who responded were educated to some extent at a college or university level. The region in which they reside is near a university and several colleges. Of those with degrees, all but two had set the goal to achieve the degree after leaving the abusive relationship. Two women had college certification or diplomas to work in a specialized field; one was working on a Bachelor of Social Work degree, three had Bachelors degrees, and one participant was completing her Masters degree.

It is surprising, even intriguing, that six of the women are very active today in paid work and/or volunteer work that supports women and other minority groups, such as disabled people and the elderly. They are helpers, and even activists. The seventh, though not currently volunteering, has done some volunteering in the past and advocates it as a way of healing, and of forming a supportive social network.

Section Two: Summary of the Experience of Each Participant

Each profile provides an overview of the participants and their experience of change. All statements are based on data from interview transcripts. Names, locations, and places of employment have been altered to protect confidentiality. Each profile concludes with the strongest metathemes found in the participant's interview.

Barbara: "I'm not going to die like this"

Barbara is a woman in her mid-fifties. She has no children. She described herself as a professional with some university education. Her family of origin was mainstream and middle-class, with professional, university-educated parents. She remembers being "talked over" at the dinner table by her brothers, without parental intervention. Her mother entered a period of substance misuse around age fifty, which ended in her death within only a few years. The event is still a traumatic memory and an ongoing family issue for Barbara and her family today.

Barbara ended an abusive relationship five years ago. Her partner was controlling and emotionally abusive. He forbade her to tell anyone they were living together. When

problematic situations occurred, Barbara described herself as unable to properly communicate with him because she would become emotional. She believes that he manipulated her emotionality to achieve his own ends. Barbara told her partner to leave after he admitted having an ongoing relationship with another woman.

Barbara experienced an emotional crisis period for about a month, during which she refused to leave her bedroom. With her father's intervention and support, that period ended. Although college training enabled her to perform well-paid work, Barbara's economic status worsened after the break-up of the relationship. She did not have regular employment during the following year.

During and after the break-up of the relationship, Barbara did not use a transition house, second stage housing, or any form of counselling. She did not use the assistance of police or the justice system. She did not attend a life skills program.

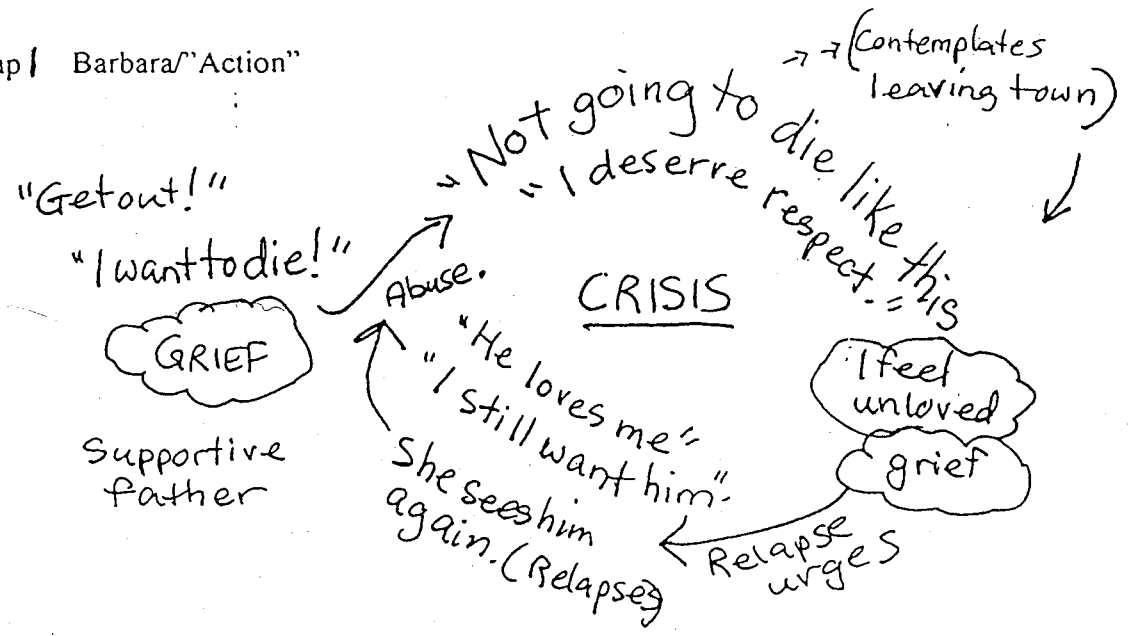
Barbara is being treated for depression by her doctor. She has spent the last five years hoping her former partner will return to a relationship with her, while at the same time she has been wanting a respectful relationship. She has kept contact with him. She has not formed a new relationship, and has not sought counselling in order to work on the issues from her experience. She said that she has changed in a negative way, and is not the person she once was. She "stews" about her worries, and no longer knows how to enjoy herself. Barbara is not currently a volunteer, although she believes in the power of helping others in order to raise one's spirits and form helpful social networks.

When I interviewed her, Barbara was considering leaving the area in order to start over in another city. She chose the word "Action" to describe herself today.

Important metathemes: Changes in relationship beliefs, The last straw/the sinking ship, Leaving with the resources they had at the time, Finding support from family and friends, Relapse prevention, Evaluation, Strong emotions.

Map | Barbara/"Action"

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Participant Map 1: Barbara/"Action"

Kara: "I wanted to take care of my own"

Kara is a university student in her late twenties, being trained in a helping profession. Her childhood background is mainstream middle class, from a rural community. She recalls experiencing verbal abuse from a parent while she was growing up. At the same time, she respected her parents' happy relationship. She thought a relationship that lasted was life's "success."

When she was with her former partner, Kara was an undergraduate student, dependent on student loans and financial help from her parents. She was with her former partner for two years, and left four years ago. She was childless.

During the relationship, Kara experienced emotional, verbal and physical abuse. The partner was manipulative, and not emotionally supportive. He did not contribute financially and could not maintain employment. The partner's infidelity and the loss of two of her close friends during the relationship were landmark events.

Her partner began to threaten to end the relationship, followed by comforting and caring behaviour, characteristic behaviours described in the Cycle of Violence model (Walker, 1979, cited in Hill House Manual, 1999). Kara began to feel a large amount of grief and emotional pain, which was alleviated by spending time with her partner. She said that if she considered leaving him, she anticipated great emotional pain. She felt it was like addiction, and fearing withdrawal.

Coming to end the relationship was a gradual process. Kara found herself beginning to return the abuse, and she began also to abuse herself. These behaviours shocked her. As well, drug use became part of the interaction between them. She began to realize that she was "hitting bottom."

Kara obtained employment, and made new friends at work. She began to view the relationship from the point of view of an outsider, and felt embarrassed about the abusive relationship and her lifestyle. She began to think, "I'm worth more than this." She was considering leaving.

Kara learned to improve her communication skills in university courses while contemplating leaving the relationship. She tried the new skills with her friends and family, with success. She found that healthy communication methods were of no use with her partner. She saw that the skills did not work if only one person was willing to

use them. Behaviour is abusive when the person who has hurt someone does not take responsibility for his or her actions.

Kara began to realize that she was taking the whole responsibility for the relationship working out. She saw that she was not meeting her own needs or living up to things she believed in. She said, "The change was in me." She left the relationship, giving the former partner one month to find a place to live, and providing him with furniture. After the break-up, Kara described her financial situation as slightly improved.

When ending the relationship and afterward, Kara did not use any societal institutions such as transition house, second stage housing, the police, or justice system. She obtained therapy from psychologists and counsellors after leaving the relationship.

Having employment and supportive friends were some of the things that helped when Kara left the relationship. As well, she describes learning to value and nurture herself. As time passed, she continued to learn and make realizations about relationships and to explore herself and what she cared about in life. She continued her education.

Kara worked on issues in order to process the experience, learn, and change. She explored her part in the relationship. She realizes that societal role models and values instilled in her by her parents may have contributed to beliefs that kept her in the relationship for two years.

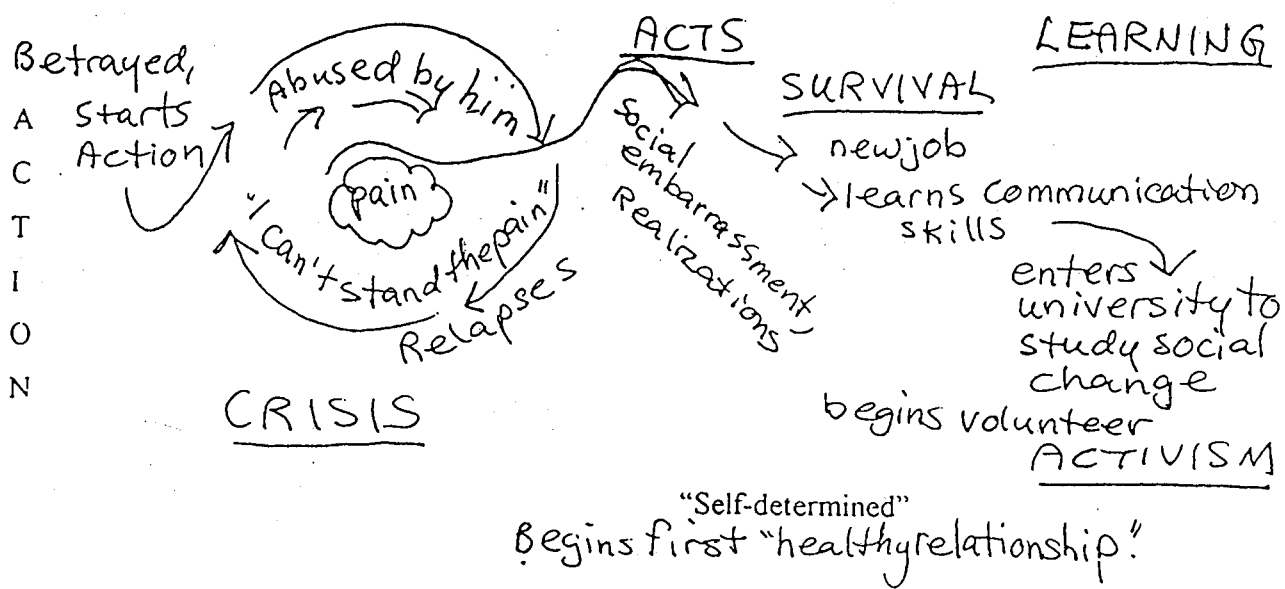
Today, Kara describes herself as a confident person, with healthy boundaries. In one word, she describes herself today as being "self-determined". She now believes that she is the one responsible to meet her own needs. She describes her committed relationship with her current partner as being a healthy relationship and can support that with examples of her own behaviour in the relationship.

Kara is definitely an activist. She is currently a trained volunteer, working to assist women (and their children) leaving abusive relationships. Kara has chosen academic education where she is being trained to work in a field where she can assist minority groups and create social change.

Important metathemes: Relapse prevention, Strong emotions, Changes in relationship beliefs, Shift in decisional balance, Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse, Finding support from family and friends, Imagine – evolving goals, Self-discovery, Resistance, Wisdom – understanding the past, Acting for social change.

Map 2 Kara

"I wanted to take care of my own."



Participant Map 2: Kara

"I wanted to take care of my own."

Trudy: Turning “the swamp into the lotus”

Trudy is a professional woman in her mid-fifties, who ended a relationship that had lasted over sixteen years. Her partner was a very violent, controlling, and verbally abusive man, who was employed in a career which allowed daily opportunities for him to be violent and abusive at work. Trudy had three children.

Trudy spoke of the isolation caused by her upbringing in a military family, and of having difficulty forming and keeping friendships as a child in a family that was always relocating. She also said she grew up believing that women were a burden, and not as intelligent or as worthy as men.

With the birth of her first child, Trudy wanted to be a good mother, so she prayed for a father for her son and a husband to help prevent her from relapsing into the drug use of her early years. She found one. She said that his control made him like a “mega prison guard” over her. She was kept isolated, and felt emotionally and spiritually crushed.

During the relationship, Trudy bore two more children. Although he had a good income, her partner kept the family living in poverty.

Trudy sought to be a good mother, taking care of the children’s physical needs and providing love for them. At the same time, her partner was emotionally and physically abusing the children in the name of “discipline”. He told the family that they were “the best” because the children were “not spoiled”. The children kept the secret of the abuse. At one point they ran to a neighbour’s house, and at another point bruises were seen by school staff and reported to social services. Nevertheless, the children were never removed from the family.

Trudy believed that she would relapse into addiction if she were not in a controlled environment. She also believed that a “broken home” would harm the children. She stayed in the relationship for almost two decades. Her partner insisted that she would be a poor mother without him, and she believed it.

As time passed, however, Trudy’s beliefs about women began to change. She describes passing through three waves of feminism, and really coming to believe that any sort of oppression, including gender oppression, was wrong. Her beliefs about family relationships were also changing. She perceived that her abusive partner’s behaviour

towards her was giving the children terrible messages about the relations between men and women, messages that she wanted to stop. She began to think about leaving.

From around the age of twenty, Trudy had been exploring spirituality. As a young woman, she had used spirituality to help herself stop drug use. Later, she used spiritual meditation to help her cope with emotions arising from her partner's abuse. She felt that at times she used meditation to the point of addiction. Near the end of the relationship, a guru came to the house to teach Trudy about meditation. He looked at Trudy and her husband, and he said to her, "Get clear." She took this brief statement to mean, "See what is *real*, and not just what you want to see." In the same period of their marriage, Trudy had had a horrifying vision of the death of her soul. These events were part of the final shift toward making a decision to leave.

By the time she left, Trudy says that she felt that she wanted to give up on being a human; she wanted to lose herself in the light of spirituality. She said that she had given up her children. She left to save her spirit from falling into a state of drowning, drowning, unending dying. It took all the inner resources she had, just to leave.

At the point of leaving the marriage, Trudy went for six months of marriage counselling. It was her goal was to ease the transition, and to help her to break the news to her partner in front of a witness.

When Trudy left the relationship she was employed, but her socio-economic status worsened. Although she had left her teenaged children in the custody of her ex-partner, the youngest son, age fourteen, came to live with Trudy within a short time after she left. He had been taking the brunt of the physical abuse after she left the home.

Trudy did not use social resources such as a transition house or their support staff. She did not use second stage housing or subsidized housing. The justice system was involved in order to obtain division of assets and a financial settlement, and to resolve custody issues.

Trudy did not seek counselling specifically regarding the abusive relationship after she left. In fact, she has never had counselling for the abuse issues involved in her relationship. It is not known whether she suffered from PTSD as a result of long-term abuse. She has worked on her issues in the context of addiction, and sees herself as having had an "addictive personality". She has found twelve step programs to be very

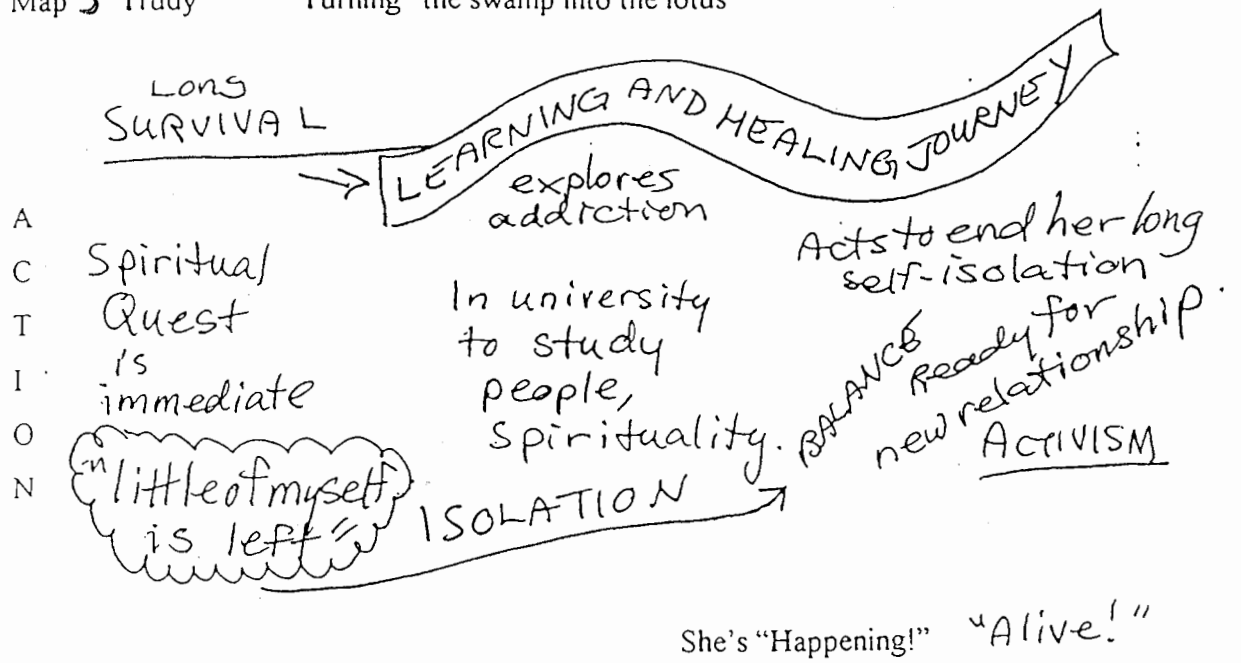
effective and a good support. In childhood and during her marriage, Trudy had been involuntarily isolated. After leaving, she kept herself isolated for a very long time, except for contact with her family. In recent years, she found that she enjoys the sense of connection to the other women in her twelve-step group. She had at last found a way to begin to end her lifelong isolation from the rest of humanity.

University education was an important part of Trudy's life in the years that followed leaving her former partner. She set the goal to get her Master's degree. She is currently employed in work where she carries out a helping relationship, supporting positive change for individuals from two different populations in the community.

More than a decade after she left her partner, Trudy has begun a new relationship. She felt some anxiety about this new step, and has taken it very slowly and cautiously. She chose the word "Happening" to describe herself today.

Important Metathemes: Changing awareness of gender socialization, changes in relationship beliefs, Resistance, Strong emotions, Shift in decisional balance, Realization of risk, Leaving with resources they had at the time, Self-discovery, Imagine – evolving goals, Wisdom – understanding the past, Achieving balance, Acting for social change.

Map 3 Trudy Turning "the swamp into the lotus"



Participant Map 3: Trudy Turning "the swamp into the lotus"

Josie: "You will get support"

Josie is a former teacher, aged around fifty. She had obtained her Bachelor of Education degree and was working when she met her partner and settled down to raise a family. When she left him two and a half years before her interview, they had been together twenty years.

During Josie's childhood in the 1950s, she was raised by a mother who was French Canadian Catholic. Her father was Protestant and previously divorced. Her parents were middle class. Josie remembers that her mother was ostracized from the family for religious reasons. Therefore, when Josie's father proved to be both an alcoholic and abusive to his daughters, Josie's mother had no family support when she left him. They lost the house and car, and Josie's mother went to work. There was not much social support for a single parent family in the Fifties. Josie and her mother began a period of poverty. Josie knew she did not want to live with an abusive, alcoholic parent. Nevertheless, for cultural reasons and reasons based on her childhood experiences, Josie formed a tragic view of the outcome of divorce.

Josie married a French Canadian man and together they had a large family. She believed she was "married for life." From the beginning, Josie's partner was emotionally and verbally abusive, as well as manipulative. He was very controlling. Josie tried to be understanding and accepting, and made excuses to others and to herself.

Despite his two degrees, her partner's employment was sporadic and family income was unstable. The family focussed attention primarily on him, his mood swings, his bad temper, and his poor health. Josie soon found she and the children were following unspoken rules. She learned, carefully, how to respond, and her role was to try to keep the peace.

Josie had to try to keep her partner's behaviour a secret in the neighbourhood, which was "a very WASPy area." It was socially and culturally embarrassing. She became somewhat isolated, because if they went out to social functions, she feared that "if he was in a bad mood, he wouldn't hide it."

Josie worked long hours so that she could pay for their home. She saw this as her contribution so that later she could stay home full time to home school the children. While home schooling, she budgeted their unstable and sometimes very low income, so

that there were opportunities for courses to enhance the various talents of the children. Her partner's problematic behaviour was being attributed to health issues, and she spent much time trying to find ways to help him with his illness and depression.

Eventually, after years of her partner being the centre of attention in a very negative way, Josie came to see that he was sabotaging his treatments. She realized he was not taking responsibility for his actions, whether or not they were caused by poor health and depression.

Josie's partner began to have huge fights with one of his sons, and Josie feared that someone would be badly hurt or even die. The situation had become unbearable. After a series of realizations, Josie was contemplating ending the relationship. Then her husband was hospitalized after a suicide attempt, and finally began to receive psychiatric treatment. Josie became hopeful for his "cure" once again.

Josie's partner continued his pattern of sabotaging his treatments, and stopped going to the psychiatrist. When he came home from the hospital, his attitude toward Josie was much worse. He no longer loved or cared for her. She discovered he had put them deeply into debt. Josie began to realize the situation was becoming unbearable, despite her belief that marriage should last a lifetime. She began to see the reality of her situation. Josie had gone back to work around this time. She began to save some of the money.

Josie remembers that at this point she began to have frightening episodes where she would react physically when her partner "badgered" her. She would see "black coming in from the sides of (her) eyes" and would start blacking out. She was becoming ready to end her heroic twenty-year effort to hold the family together.

Finally, there was a crisis wherein one son threatened to kill Josie. Her partner's psychiatrist confirmed to Josie that her husband had manipulated the son to "do the things he would have liked to do, and wouldn't, and couldn't." He had turned two of her sons against her. There was a second, very serious, threat. That was "the last straw", Josie said, and she used her small savings for gas money to take the other children and get as far away as possible.

When she arrived in her current area of residence, Josie stayed with a friend briefly, and then was able to go into a transition house with her children. She again

encountered the justice system. She noticed that the police responded quickly to her husband's call reporting her for abduction, yet when she had called for help during her son's attack on her, they had taken an hour and a half to respond. "It's amazing, eh?" she noted. "How they hop! How they hop for a male." Yet despite her experiences, Josie has not become bitter.

Josie found the transition house staff to be supportive during a time of many emotions, including grief concerning her many losses, and shame at having to tell strangers about her situation in order to get resources for her family. She struggled with accepting that she actually did fit the criteria of a woman leaving an abusive relationship.

She had to find housing and financial support. She had to find work in a new province. She had challenging experiences with legal aid lawyers. Eventually she moved into second stage housing and began to work at several part time or on-call jobs.

During residence in second stage housing, Josie occasionally accessed the support of staff, and found it to be helpful. She did not enter group or individual counselling, or put her children into second stage counselling programs for children.

Their socio-economic status worsened after the break-up, because the total income decreased, and Josie lost her share in a house. However, depending on her own earnings, Josie's income became more reliable. As well, the period with subsidized rent provided an opportunity to save some of her earnings for a down payment for a home.

The disintegration of her twenty-year marriage has been difficult for Josie. There were many losses. She feels strong emotions concerning her older sons who stayed behind, and she is concerned about her mother, no longer nearby.

Two and a half years after leaving, Josie has been able to get a mortgage and obtain a family home. She then sent for the children's pet, which they were unable to have in the subsidized housing complex. The children have entered the public school system. There have been visits from the older sons.

Hard work in several employment situations provides Josie with a form of freedom from being tied down, as she once was. It provides a variety and stimulation that she finds she now needs and has to have.

Josie has not yet become ready to have formal counselling regarding her experiences. Sometimes she finds informal support, but in general she relies on work to

be an escape from worries about the future and memories of the past. Working out at a gym has been one way to alleviate stress. Although she is not certain she is emotionally ready, Josie has started to form friendships. She is not ready to consider intimate relationships. Although she has not been ready for formal counselling help, Josie did take part in training for volunteer work with women and children leaving abuse. The training involved education about abuse dynamics and many related issues.

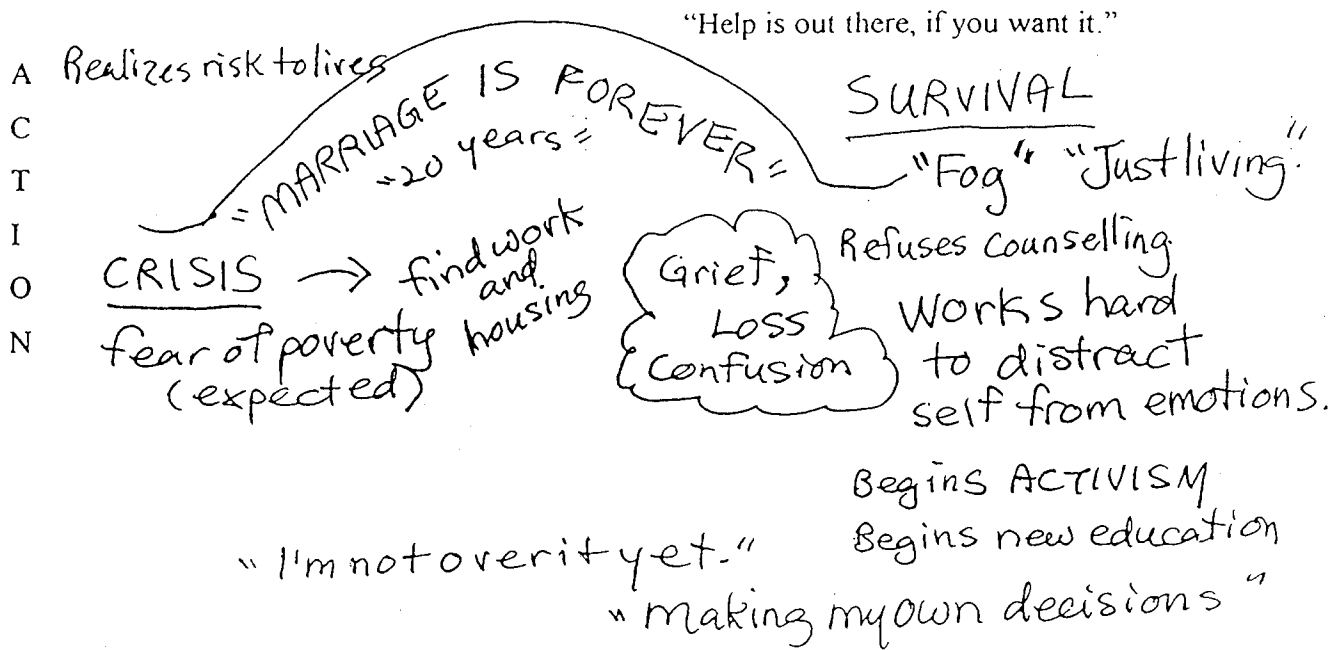
Josie struggled to find a word to describe herself at present, and then very honestly responded that she felt she was “in fog”, and still finding her way out of it. She said, “I’m not over it yet.” Sometimes it seems people expect her to be over the twenty-year experience, and to be happy, when she has only been out of the relationship for two and a half years. In the worst moments, when she is feeling depressed, she knows she just has “to survive.”

Currently, Josie is a trained volunteer working with women leaving abusive relationships. Some of the women have found her strength inspiring. She was led to this activist role because when she was a transition house resident herself, women were drawn to her and began to tell her of their experiences and concerns. She really liked that involvement, and also wished to give something back in return for the help she received.

Josie’s employment involves a helping relationship with another social minority group, and her educational interests include training in the field of addictions.

Important Metathemes: Shift in decisional balance, The last straw/The sinking ship, Resistance, Realization of risk, Seeking formal/societal help, Relapse prevention, Evaluation, Strong emotions, Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse, Trust, Parenting challenges after break-up, Acting for social change.

Map 4: Josie/"In Fog"



Participant Map 4: Josie/"In Fog"

Jeanette: "I'm here to learn and I want to get it"

Jeanette is a woman in her early forties, and mother of two children. She has had four years of university education and has academic certification for the career in which she has worked for many years. She described her background as working class, and it was not mainstream. She grew up on a farm in a very large French Canadian family. She was raised in a Catholic background, and French is her first language. She still strongly values her French Canadian culture. She described herself as being "raised feminist".

Jeanette was raised to believe that marriage was supposed to last "forever, and families should be together". She describes herself as innocently and naively believing that nobody really wanted to hurt anyone, and as being unaware of what boundaries were or that people might need boundaries. She also described herself as not knowing how to deal with angry people.

Jeanette was with her former partner for more than a decade and toward the end of that time they purchased a house together. They had two school-aged children when the relationship ended, seven years ago. Jeanette had begun to be unhappy in the relationship with her partner. He was controlling. He would verbally abuse her in hour-long rants. His work and financial contributions were unstable. She realized he had trouble managing their young son when left with him, but until a crisis occurred she was not aware that he was physically abusing both children. During the time before the break-up, Jeanette went to a marriage counsellor, by herself.

At the time of the crisis, Jeanette's husband assaulted one of the children in public. The incident was observed by school staff members, who called the police and the Ministry of Children and Families.

Jeanette realized that she would lose custody of her children if she did not take immediate action, and she saw also that her career, which involved working with children, would also be jeopardized if she continued to live with a person who had criminal charges for assaulting a child.

"Inside me, the ice was broken and I was ready to protect my kids." Jeanette saw that she would have to choose between her husband and her children. She said that the choice was clear. She went on the wait list at a transition house, and waited at home for a very tense two weeks. Her husband declined the option to receive psychological help.

Finally she was able to take the children to an available room at the transition house, initially telling them it was a “vacation to a place that was for women and children” in an attempt to reframe their stay there, making it less shameful or tragic for the children.

In the transition house, seeking safety, Jeanette was next to a room in which a mother was daily behaving violently toward her children. Jeanette’s children were upset and frightened, and asked, “Why are we here?” Jeanette saw the irony in the situation of a safe house that was unsafe. She was proactive and spoke with the staff upstairs each time she heard the children in the next room being thrown against the wall and yelled at. One day, the family was gone; Jeanette believes staff upstairs had finally seen or heard evidence of the abuse and called the Ministry of Children and Families.

Despite hearing traumatic sounds from the next room, Jeanette and the children stayed at the transition house. They used the staff’s counselling support, and made helpful social connections (e.g., going on a wait list for second stage housing).

Jeanette describes the transition house stay as a time of crisis and strong emotions such as grief. She grieved for the loss of her marriage, the loss of her house, the loss of the ability to fulfil her cultural values concerning marriage, and the loss of her dreams. The crisis of public physical abuse of their child by her partner had precipitated a break-up before Jeanette had fully come to realize that it would be necessary.

At work, Jeanette was feeling social embarrassment about the staff having witnessed the assault of their child by her partner. She was embarrassed and angry when her supervisor phoned her new contact number. The supervisor called just to check on where Jeanette was staying, curious to see whether it was a transition house.

The situation at work was tense because Jeanette saw that co-workers and her supervisor were not fully supportive of her during the stressful months that followed the break-up. She believes education about the dynamics of abuse for children and families who are breaking up because of abuse would be beneficial. Although they were concerned for her safety, she was aware that staff gossiped about her. The supervisor lost some trust in her ability to manage her work with children. A co-worker took advantage of what had occurred to gain advantage in competing for new job contracts.

Fortunately, when Jeanette spoke to an employment insurance worker, she was assigned to one who had experienced abuse herself and understood the dynamics for women when leaving. She received appropriate help and useful advice.

During the months that followed the ending of the relationship, Jeanette utilized the justice system. The Court was involved in order to divide assets, to settle custody, visitation and child support, and to provide an Order of Divorce. Because her former partner was stalking her, Jeanette obtained what she described as “a Restraining Order for life.” Jeanette had to be assertive and proactive in order to obtain the help she needed, even having to change lawyers to get a Restraining Order. She had to break the family rule of secrecy. Her children had begun to tell her about the physically abusive incidents that they previously had kept secret. She spoke of this in court, and also revealed intergenerational physical abuse: her former partner had been abused by his own father. Jeanette obtained custody of her children.

During this time, Jeanette stayed with friends after her time had run out at the transition house. It was a difficult time. Some friends were supportive, and some friends were not, feeling caught in the middle. Some friends tried to get her to reconcile with her partner, and encouraged him to come and bring roses. Perhaps they did not realize, as Jeanette did, that her children and career were both at stake. A friend with whom she was staying told her that she was inviting their community to the house for a cultural holiday celebration, including Jeanette’s former partner. The friend was adamant about inviting him, so Jeanette and the children had to find another place to stay.

Within a few months of leaving, Jeanette and her children moved into second stage housing. There were still many hardships. Several months had passed but Jeanette’s husband was not allowing the family to have the household possessions, so it was necessary to obtain dishes and other furnishings from wherever possible, including a program that provides second hand furniture to women leaving abusive situations.

As the time in second stage housing began, Jeanette was going through a period of strong grief for her many losses. During her time there, she greatly benefited from the counselling provided by staff, and her children entered the Children Who Witnessed Violence program. The second stage staff and the neighbours were a support system for Jeanette. She was able to stay there for a year and a half.

In the year following the break-up, Jeanette worked part time, receiving some assistance from unemployment insurance. Jeanette's socio-economic status worsened because she no longer was able to work full time, and because she lost whatever amount her former partner would have contributed financially. She deeply felt the loss of the home they had owned. Nevertheless, she says finances have improved in some ways. In the past, "I was making a lot of money but I was the one who paid everything. There was a lot of financial stress because he couldn't manage his money. And I'm better off by myself even if I don't make the same salary." After division of assets, Jeanette received a financial settlement that eased the financial hardship she and the children had endured.

Jeanette took the opportunities to obtain counselling at transition house, in second stage housing, and in other opportunities during the seven years since the break-up of her relationship. Taking an opportunity to enter a life skills program, Jeanette set the goal to learn skills regarding communication and boundary setting. In particular, she sought to learn how to deal with angry people. After the life skills program, Jeanette continued to obtain counselling privately for as long as possible.

Jeanette was diagnosed with depression, and with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as well. She has spent a long time working on her issues in order to process the experience, to learn and change. She also sought to learn about the dynamics for families after a break-up because of abuse. She was experiencing her own grief while parenting children who had been deeply affected by their past experiences. The children continued to experience problematic access visits from their non-custodial parent. Her son's behaviour includes angry acting out and hitting his mother. Parenting him requires specific skills and much patience from Jeanette, day after day, and year after year.

Jeanette finds that the contact with her former partner continues to be very problematic for the children and for herself. She emphasized repeatedly and with great grief and exhaustion that her former partner's attempts to control, manipulate, break boundaries (including the Restraining Order) and create disturbances "never end". She gave numerous examples.

The children have conflicted emotions, loving their father, wanting to be with him, and grieving as they came to realize that he is not safe and not a person with whom they could reside. Jeanette has times when she yearns to finally be out of his sphere of

influence. Although she is committed to creating a stable home for her children in one place, she occasionally wishes to “move to Japan!” She looks forward to the day when both children will be grown. At this point, one child has now left to attend university. Jeanette continues to work part time and care for the child still living at home.

Seven years have passed. Jeanette has spent much time working on her understanding of her experience and believes that in situations like hers, counselling must be long term. She said it was “good to have been hurt”, because she has learned valuable lessons from it. She regrets that she could not fulfill her cultural value of marriage that lasts; however, she realizes that it was better to leave, for the “survival” of herself and the children. She still feels worried about being hurt if she allows herself to be vulnerable, and believes “it’s good not to trust, in some ways.”

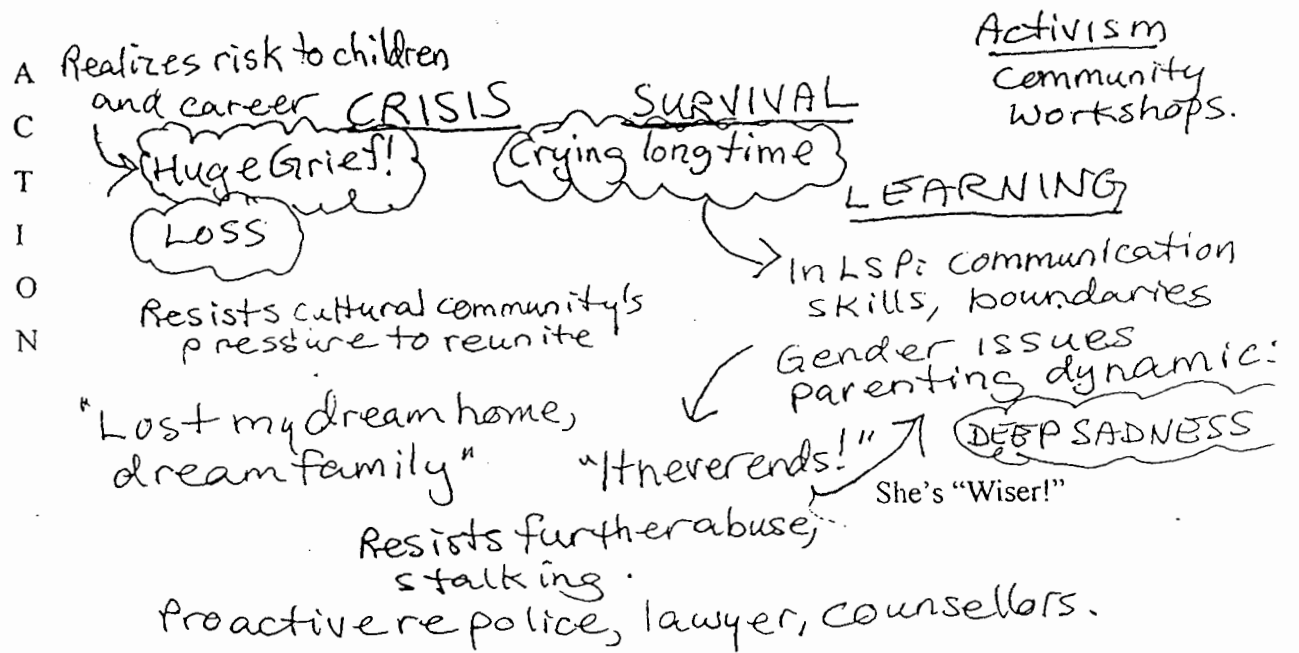
Jeanette said she is just starting to feel independent, despite the fact that seven years have passed. During that time, she explored her interests during four years in university. Jeanette is not in an intimate relationship, and is not looking for one at present. She learned during occasional dating that she can now quickly recognise controlling behaviour.

Jeanette’s word for herself, today, is “Wiser”. She believes her personal experience is an asset when she speaks publicly about the issues involved in family break-up due to abuse. She is an activist for social change, and has created workshops for single parents leaving abusive partners. She has given an educational presentation for teachers regarding family dynamics and the effects on children when families split up because of abuse, and she seeks opportunities to continue public education.

Important Metathemes: Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse, Realization of risk, Changes in relationship beliefs, Shift in decisional balance, The last straw/The sinking ship, Leaving with the resources they had at the time, Finding support from family and friends, Seeking formal/societal help, Relapse prevention, Evaluation, Strong emotions, Parenting challenges after break-up, Imagine – evolving goals, Self-discovery, Wisdom – understanding the past, Acting for social change.

Map 5: Jeanette

"I'm here to learn and I want to get it"



Participant Map 5: Jeanette

"I'm here to learn and I want to get it"

Claire: "A year of healing"

Claire has worked in a helping profession for a decade, after attaining her Bachelors degree. She is in her early fifties and all her children are now adults.

Claire described her background as mainstream. She attended a Protestant church. Her early childhood involved physical and sexual abuse. Despite physical abuse from her father and lack of emotional intimacy from both parents, she feels that they loved her and tried to show it in their own way.

Claire's father was controlling toward her mother and the family. He was physically abusive to her brother and herself, and she says that abuse was all she knew, at home and in society. There was abuse at church and in the school. She also received strong societal and family messages that a female needed to be in a relationship, whether it was good or bad. She married at age eighteen.

Claire had three abusive partners. The first was violent, and alcoholic. After three years, she left to save her own life. The second partner was a violent, controlling, and verbally abusive man, employed in a career which allowed daily opportunities for him to be violent. She discovered that he was also involved in organized crime. She was with him less than a year. Her partner used a knife to threaten Claire on several occasions, and beat her severely the day she took her child and left him.

After the first partner, Claire had decided alcohol was the problem, and found a partner who didn't drink. After the second partner, she was focussed on physical safety, and found a partner who was not physically violent. She went straight from the second relationship to the third, without time to work on the issues involved in her experience.

Much of the interview was focussed on the third partner, who was manipulative, and emotionally and financially abusive. They moved to a rural area. Claire was physically, and socially isolated. They had a child together, and the relationship lasted several years. Claire felt dependent on her partner at that time.

Claire eventually realized that her partner's chronic job loss, lack of emotional connection or intimacy, persistent manipulation, and financial abuse was creating a damaging situation for the children and herself. "The ship was going down, and I wasn't going to go down with the ship," she said. Their living conditions were not even meeting basic needs such as reliable heat, running water, and groceries.

Despite her sense that her partner may have had mental health issues, Claire realized that “he knew there was something wrong, but he wasn’t prepared to do anything about it.” Today, she says, “To me, that’s what an abusive person is; it is someone that causes problems but won’t take responsibility.”

Claire ended the relationship. Her family’s socio-economic status improved after the break-up. They continued to be on social assistance, but finances were now stable. Rather than experiencing the crisis period that several participants experienced, Claire felt relief that living on assistance in an apartment in town, they now had better living conditions. Their geographic and social isolation had also ended.

At one point after leaving the third partner, Claire used a transition house for a week. She was referred by the staff to mediation, which was successful.

Claire was proactive and managed to get permission to enter a life skills/career opportunities program recommended by a social assistance worker, despite not having met the criteria. She learned about boundaries, self-care, and assertiveness. She set out on a period of self-exploration. The life skills program resulted in her going to college, where she was surprised to discover that she loved learning. At this time, she embarked on a spiritual quest, which led to her discovery of a religion that suited her beliefs.

Claire did not receive the emotional support she needed from her mother. There were subtle messages that the family was incomplete without a man. She sent Claire gifts such as *four* place mats. To Claire’s chagrin, her mother told friends that Claire’s husband had left her “high and dry”. It was acceptable to be an abandoned wife but not to be a woman who had left an abusive husband. “I feel really proud about that, but she wanted to present me as a victim.” For getting divorced, Claire “was the black sheep of the family.” Claire, however, remained proud that she had left a harmful situation in order to make a better environment for herself and her children.

At this time, Claire was re-evaluating the values she had learned during childhood socialization. For example, she had been taught that all women needed to be in a relationship. On leaving her third partner, she had begun to think she could do better on her own. After leaving, she came to believe that “I don’t need to be in a relationship ... I’m okay on my own. And a relationship has to add to your life, not make it harder.”

During the years that followed, Claire set and continually reset the goal of staying out of relationships, in order to succeed at the life skills program, and then at college. She had a strong feeling that one more abusive relationship would finish her. Claire was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Claire had had a brief period of counselling near the end of the first relationship. After the third, she embarked on many years of counselling, working on the issues involved in the three abusive relationships. She began to realize patterns in her former partners' behaviour, and to understand the dynamics of abusive relationships and healthy relationships. It was well over a decade before Claire began a new relationship. During her period of self-exploration she had discovered that she is lesbian. At the time of the interview, Claire had begun a new relationship.

Claire made realizations that led to healing and growth while in the life skills program, counselling, and in university courses. She continued to set new goals for herself. Claire has created a balanced lifestyle for herself, which involves a daily routine of walking, good nutrition, and spiritual meditation. Once very isolated, she now enjoys a community of friends. All these things, together with a good sense of humour, and her artwork provide more than stress relief; they balance and enhance her life. She chose the word "Eager" to describe herself today.

In her employment, Claire supports women leaving abusive relationships. She trains others to do the same work, and she actively tries to improve the knowledge and the services provided.

Important metathemes: Realization of risk, Resistance, Shift in decisional balance, The last straw/The sinking ship, relapse prevention, Changing awareness of gender socialization, changes in relationship beliefs, increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse, Leaving with the resources they had at the time, Evaluation, Trust, Self-discovery, Imagine - Evolving goals, Achieving balance, Wisdom – understanding the past, Acting for social change.

Map 6 Claire

"A year of healing"

LEARNING AND HEALING JOURNEY

A Brief Survival

C
T
I
O
N

"Another bad relationship will be the end of me"

Isolates self.

Establishes home with basic needs

→ fights gender beliefs of mother

→ In university to study sociology people.

- Learns dynamics of abuse.
- boundaries.
- WISDOM

finds community, ends self-isolation

ACTIVISM

IN CAREER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

She's "Eager!" Finding Balance! DAILY practice, exercise, meditate, social community....

Participant Map 6: Claire "A year of healing"

Lucy: "Doors will just start to open"

Lucy is a young woman just into her thirties. She is childless. She has a Bachelor's degree and comes from a background that was mainstream and middle class.

Lucy remembers when she was a child being overwhelmed by new roles and responsibilities as a Brownie and Girl Guide. Her parents taught her, "once you start, you can't quit." She said, "it's part of my personality to be a pleaser ... since I was a little kid, and somewhat of a perfectionist, and I don't like to give up on a situation." As a child, she learned to "always try to do everything the right way" and would "go home ruminating over" why she had not done something in a better way.

Although her mother seemed a confident and independent professional, Lucy remembers that her mom had major self esteem issues, and that she "was always calling herself down; she was always setting herself up for failure with dieting. It was always in my face, issues about weight, issues about weight." Her mother gave Lucy Barbie dolls to play with. Lucy believes her mother was a "major factor in the self image thing", through role modelling. Lucy struggles with having low self-esteem, which has always been an issue, along with the challenge of having an eating disorder for most of her life.

Lucy's mother was always either at home or at work, lacking friends and a social network. From her, Lucy learned to isolate herself when in relationships. Lucy's father was an alcoholic who stopped drinking when Lucy was six, and her mother has unresolved issues about the period of his active alcoholism.

Lucy experienced three problematic relationships, and described the first two as abusive. The first partner was an alcoholic, "negligent" emotionally, and did not contribute financially. She had been with him for several years. After the first partner left, she did not take time to work the issues from her experience with him, but moved rapidly into the next relationship. The focus of the interview was on her experience with the second partner.

Lucy met her second partner around the time she had asked the first partner to leave. Lucy had her university degree and was working on academic courses that would prepare her for a specialized career. Lucy's relationship with the second partner quickly progressed to sexual intimacy. Lucy, a university student, was experiencing financial

problems without a roommate to share the rent. The problems were alleviated by moving into a shared housing situation with her new partner and his roommates.

Lucy was with the second partner for a period of one and one-half years. During this time, she was a student. Her partner worked and sold drugs as well, earning a good income. He did not contribute financially, other than to share the rent. Although he could be funny and even charismatic, he was a very angry person. He was verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive to Lucy throughout their relationship.

Lucy took the responsibility for improving their relationship. When her partner was verbally abusive, she did not confront the abusive behaviour. Instead, she would try to reason with him about the subject matter of the verbal abuse. Lucy remembers that her mother would say that Lucy was always taking on “renovation jobs”. She would take on the task of trying to change and save her partners. She sees herself as a perfectionist in that way, and as someone who would not give up.

When Lucy became pregnant, it was an awakening. She realized she simply could not bring a child into the traumatic environment she was in. There was not only lack of needed support, but even extreme emotional abuse from her former partner during and after the time that Lucy ended her pregnancy. There was a total lack of emotional support on the day of the termination of her pregnancy, followed by an argument that evening when her partner wanted to party. There was a horrific scene on the day after the abortion. Lucy drove off and sat by the ocean. “My God, I just didn’t know what to do,” she said. Her family lived at a distance. Without friends, and without sufficient financial resources to move out, she returned to the apartment.

“I didn’t reach out,” said Lucy. She had not sought support from any friends, but had isolated herself during the relationship. Like her mother, she was at work or at home. She was very focussed on the relationship and how to repair or save it. She also saw herself as keeping secrecy, but eventually she began to tell a friend about what was going on with her partner.

Eventually, further abusive events occurred with her partner that caused social embarrassment and put Lucy’s career in jeopardy. She made the decision to move out. She still hoped to keep her relationship with the partner while living separately. One day she put a deposit on an apartment, then returned home. A huge conflict occurred between

herself and the partner. She tried to make him stay and talk about their situation, and he became verbally, emotionally and physically abusive. “It escalated to something very violent”, she said. She left just before dawn, and ended up seeing a doctor.

Lucy gave up hope that they could be together after the crisis of the evening she moved out. When returning to remove her belongings, her friends accompanied and supported her. They prevented her from being drawn aside into a private conversation that her former partner wanted. “This is the abuse relationship,” she reflected. He seemed to be trying to draw her into the “honeymoon” stage of the Cycle of Violence.

Lucy continued to feel drawn to her former partner. She describes the attraction as being reduced to only the sexual level by this point. She saw him again two or three times, then finally concluded the relationship was over.

When Lucy wanted nothing more to do with her, her former partner decided he now wanted to get back together with her. He began to call her repeatedly, to the point of harassment, and stalked her for several months. “He was sort of ‘threatening-slash-I love you’, obsessively”, she said. At first, fear of his vengeance kept her from calling the police. She believed there would be major repercussions if she acted, because of his drug selling involvement. Lucy was supported by friends when she decided to press charges.

When she called the police and described the stalking and threats of violence, the first response was unsupportive and disbelieving: “You *better be pretty sure* that that is what he did.” At some point, she gave her former partner’s name. To her shock, the detachment sent a narcotics officer to her. The police were trying to use her vulnerability to meet their own goals. Her former partner’s name was known to them.

The officer asked Lucy to provide names and other information about her former partner’s drug connections. Instead of giving up, Lucy assertively insisted on appropriate police help. The narcotics officer left and they sent another officer. Lucy pressed charges for the violence of the night she had left.

After the break-up, Lucy’s socio-economic status worsened financially, because her rent was higher. However, her living conditions improved, becoming more stable. Lucy did not use a transition house. She finished her course and was employed in the year following the break-up.

Lucy sought counselling immediately after she ended the relationship, and continued with it for a year. She was beginning to say, “What just happened here, and how did I ever let this happen?”

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms were noted by a doctor, who referred her to Mental Health Outpatients. Lucy saw a social worker with some psychotherapy training. Both the doctor and social worker recommended medications. They agreed to supervise her health progress when she chose instead to use exercise to alleviate her symptoms. She worked out in a gym, cycled, and walked to work twice a day. She believes exercise greatly helped her recovery.

By this time, Lucy was in a third relationship. It was not abusive, but again there was no emotional intimacy or support. She began to see a pattern in her own behaviour, including isolating herself and putting her partner up ‘on a pedestal’.

Lucy’s mental health social worker chose to work with her on recognising types of emotions, and releasing anger. There was no work concerning gender issues, or dynamics of abusive versus healthy relationships, or education about boundaries. However, after moving to her current geographic location, Lucy accessed training to be a volunteer in a Safe House for women leaving abusive relationships. The training helped her understand the dynamics of abuse more fully than previously.

Four years have passed. Today, Lucy is in what she describes as her first healthy relationship. Much has changed, yet Lucy says she lives one day at a time, and that for her each day is like “clean time” for an addict. At this point, Lucy believes that, “You’re never completely over it, because you could always go back” to the old behaviour.

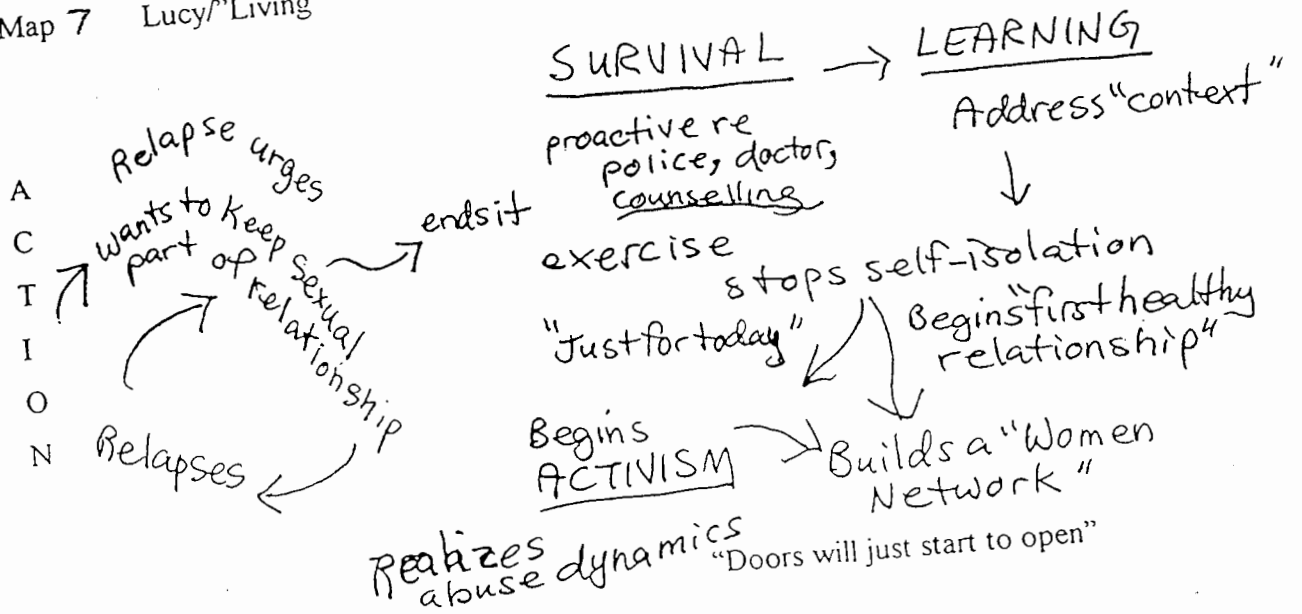
Lucy noted that her life has become balanced. Lucy makes sure to schedule time to keep up the connections in what she describes as a “women network” that she has created for herself. She allows herself time and freedom to pursue her interests, rather than isolating herself and focussing solely on her partner. She expects mutual respect and support. She chose the word “Living” to describe herself today.

Lucy is an activist, creating positive social change. She is currently a trained volunteer, working weekly to assist women (and their children) leaving abusive relationships. She enjoys helping, and the sense of connection to women. Her

employment involves working with another social minority group. She also volunteers by visiting a senior citizen to do Tai Chi once a week.

Important metathemes: Changing awareness of gender socialization, changes in relationship beliefs, Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse, Shift in decisional balance, The last straw/The sinking ship, Leaving with the resources they had at the time, Finding support from family and friends, Seeking formal/societal help, Trust, Self-discovery, Achieving balance, acting for social change.

Map 7 Lucy "Living"



Participant Map 7: Lucy "Doors will just start to open"

Conclusion

In the foregoing sections, seven women who volunteered to provide data for the study concerning their lived experiences of change were introduced. Supplementary information is contained in Appendix G, “Sharing the Wisdom”, in which the seven women responded to the question, “What would you tell another woman, very like you, who was about to end the relationship with an abusive partner?” Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the importance of appropriate language when writing about abuse in relationships. The stages and tasks of change will be presented, along with the important metathemes that emerged in each stage.

Chapter 5

Linking Metathemes to a Holistic Stage Theory

This chapter presents a model of stages of change that emerged from data analysis. The goal of the overview in this chapter is to create a clear, comprehensive view of the stages of change that occurred over time for the women in this study. Chapters Five and Six, which both present findings, are closely linked. For the sake of clarity, the stages of change are presented first. Metathemes involved in the stages of change and the tasks of each stage are introduced and placed into position. The way that metathemes emerged in participants' stories is discussed in Chapter 6.

The first section of Chapter 5 is an introduction to the stage theory, and the language it uses. In the second section, the metathemes that occurred in each of the five stages are presented. Next, the tasks of each stage are delineated. The theory is intended to be holistic, based on the data. The metathemes and tasks involved in each stage of change address the internal and external, the psychological, biological, social and spiritual aspects that are involved in achieving positive change. The fourth section provides each participant's own description of progressing over time to achieve change. The interview excerpts illustrate the metathemes and the five stages of change in a clear and visible way. The chapter concludes with a table that presents some important events that occur in each stage of change.

Section One: Stages of Change and Importance of Terms

During data analysis and organization of the metathemes, a stage model concerning change unexpectedly emerged. It became apparent during analysis of the data that the change process is not simple for women who live with abusive partners and who choose to change their lives. The change process is complex, and can be described more effectively as taking place during several stages.

Metathemes occurred in five unique time periods during the process of change. Some metathemes occurred in more than one time period. Participants had specific types of experiences and made specific realizations and accomplishments during each time period. It became apparent that the five time periods are actually stages of change.

The stages are not necessarily experienced in a linear manner. The Participant Maps in Chapter 4 clearly demonstrate that change was not linear for the seven women in the study. Although the time periods in the process of change seem consecutive, and imply a linear model, in actuality participants could and did at times regress or relapse into an earlier stage. For example, a participant might spiral back into grief and feelings of loss repeatedly, for a period of years, or a participant might end the relationship, and afterward not experience grief until a later date. A participant might accomplish part of one stage and begin to attempt the next without having completely finished the previous stage. Relapses, or returns to the abusive partner, caused one participant to cycle between two stages for a period of years.

The importance of accurate language

Language is vitally important in the description of abuse and abuse survivors. Language has been used to hide the truth, and to reframe events in a way that protects abusers, criminals, and perpetrators (Coates & Wade, 2004). When spousal abuse and violence is described in the media as a “fracas”, the word is used to trivialize what frequently is an assault by a large male person on a female. When spousal abuse and violence is called a “fight”, it also implies equal strength and motivation to do harm, which likely is not present. When the words “domestic violence” are examined, one realizes that even to call spousal abuse “domestic violence” implies that the violence is equal, and implies that it should be kept in the “domestic” arena, the privacy of the home. “Domestic” is a term that we usually encounter in phrases that are comfortable and homey, such as “domestic bliss”, and therefore the word can contribute to trivializing assault and violence.

Language can be used to conceal violence, to obscure or seemingly decrease offenders’ responsibility. It can be used to conceal resistance and to blame or pathologize victims. Alternatively, language can be used to expose violence, clarifying offenders’ responsibility for their actions. It can be used to make victims’ resistance clear, and to provide respect for such resistance (Coates & Wade, 2004). The language used in this study reframes how we perceive women who have been abused by their

intimate partners, women who have been stigmatized and stereotyped by the media, by theorists, and often by helping professionals in the past and present (Strong, 2002).

When I began the research, I knew accurate language was important. As the participants' strengths and abilities emerged, I saw that they could form the basis for language to describe persons during the process of change. The stage model's language is derived from strengths such as participants' ability to learn, make realizations, change beliefs, resist oppression, set goals, evaluate, grow, heal, and evolve. When helping professionals focus on what a client lacks, which in some cases might involve assertiveness, boundary-setting, knowledge of healthy relationships, or low self esteem, they are ignoring the fact that first, *no matter what the client was lacking, it will never justify abuse*. Secondly, despite 'lacks', abused people demonstrate resistance, strength and courage.

Further, the perceived 'lacks' are frequently the result of social injustice, in the form of abuse and oppression of women, which may have occurred not only during her relationship with an intimate partner, but in her childhood family of origin and gender socialization as well. For example, several participants stated they did not learn to be assertive in their family of origin. As children, several saw abuse occur and were abused. If society blames the women for having once had beliefs that contributed to staying in an abusive relationship, then again society is blaming the victim. Early gender socialization in the social environment and in the family of origin influenced the relationship beliefs and expectations of the women in this study, as was discussed in Chapter 5.

Language terms used for each stage of change

The use of positive terms such as "learner" and "thrivers" shows female survivors of partner abuse to be capable women with strengths and abilities. Terms such as 'learner' and 'evaluator' arose from the data. It became clear that during the time period before acting on a decision for change the women were making realizations, increasing their awareness, testing and sometimes changing their beliefs. They were learners. The current study demonstrated that in successive stages of change, women are not victims, or flawed people, but are 'learners', 'actors', 'evaluators', and 'survivors', and may progress to become 'thrivers'.

‘Learners’: The data in this study revealed that abused women are actually aware, resistant to abuse, capable, and learners. It demonstrates that they are in a continuous process of examining, testing, and revising previous beliefs and values.

‘Actors’: The data revealed that women at the point of ending a relationship with an abusive intimate partner are leaving not as victims, but as actors, capable people who are able to choose goals and act on them. They will use whatever internal and external resources they can find.

‘Evaluators’: The study showed that in the time of crisis, although feeling many emotions, women are still capable of evaluating their strengths and resources in a challenging situation.

‘Survivors’: The interviews revealed that in the time of maintaining a change, women are strong survivors, despite the obstacles they may face.

‘Thrivers’: Further, the interviews revealed that abuse survivors are capable of progressing beyond the maintenance of change. All participants achieved beliefs about what they wanted for themselves before ending the relationship, and those beliefs caused their goals (which were simple and met basic needs at the time of leaving) to evolve. The study showed that they can choose to evolve, and to work on complex goals such as self-exploration and a quest for spirituality; they can achieve a balanced life and fulfilling relationships; they can become thrivers.

Section Two: The Metathemes that Occur in Each of the Five Stages

As metathemes emerged from the interview data, they appeared in five time periods which provide an overview of the change experience. The five periods are: “Slow Shift toward Change”, “Action”, “Crisis Period”, “Survival”, and “Evolving”. The final section is divided into two parts: “Evolving while Learning”, and “Evolving while Healing”. Each metatheme appears in one or more part of the change experience.

Stage One, the “Slow Shift toward Change”

In the first stage, each participant was a “Learner”.

The metathemes in the first time period describe the women’s experiences while becoming able to make a decision for positive change. The majority of the themes

describe a slow shift in understanding. Participants were making realizations about their relationship as they tested and revised their previously held beliefs about gender roles and expectations of relationships. As participants learned, there was a slow shift in decisional balance, marked by landmark events and realizations, often culminating with a “Last Straw” event that precipitated a firm decision to act to end the relationship.

Metathemes: “Changing awareness of gender socialization”, “Changes in relationship beliefs”, “Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”, “Resistance”, “Leaving with the Resources they had at the time (Internal and External)”, “Realization of risk”, “Shift in Decisional Balance”, “The Last Straw/the sinking ship”, and “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”. (In Stage One, goals were simple).

Stage Two, “Action”

In the brief “Action” stage, each woman is an “Actor”. The metathemes in this section describe the women’s experience while actually ending the relationship.

Metathemes: “Leaving with the Resources they had at the time (Internal and External)”, “Finding support from family and friends”, “Seeking formal/societal help”, “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, and “Resistance”.

Stage Three, “Crisis”

In the third stage, each woman is an “Evaluator”, evaluating the situation, and seeking and evaluating resources to form a new environment for themselves and their children, if any. The metathemes in this section describe the women’s experiences immediately after ending the relationship. Evaluation may sometimes occur just after a decision to end a relationship has been made and before leaving. Metathemes showed that emotions such as grief, anxiety about the future, a sense of loss, were common, co-occurring with urges to return to the relationship, and efforts to withstand relapse urges.

Metathemes: “Strong emotions”, “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, “Seeking formal/societal help”, “Evaluation”, “What got them out/Relapse prevention”, “Realization of risk”, “Trust”, and “Resistance.”

Stage Four, "Survival"

The woman is learning to cope; she is a "Survivor". The metathemes in this section describe the women's experiences after the crisis time. They are setting out to create a new environment for themselves, and they are coping with external obstacles and internal thoughts and emotions. They are setting out to maintain the change they have chosen. For some survivors, the change process ends at this point.

Metathemes: "Seeking formal/societal help", "What got them out/Relapse prevention", "Parenting challenges after break-up", "Strong emotions", "Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex", "Resistance", and "Acting for social change". (If 'activists', they have chosen to actively contribute to improve social conditions for women or other social minority groups such as elderly or disabled people, by volunteer or paid work.)

Stage Five, "Evolving"

The fifth part contains two time periods in the process of change that can occur separately or simultaneously. They are linked under the description of "Evolving". The woman is described as a "Thrivers".

"Evolving" describes the experiences of those participants who progressed beyond the Crisis period and the Survival period. They have moved beyond coping and maintaining the simple goals of change they chose when ending the relationship and they have established a new environment that meets their needs. They have continued the change process in beneficial ways.

Participants who reached the evolving stage described choosing and achieving goals that fit their present beliefs and enhanced their experience of life. For example, they may have chosen to learn about the dynamics of abusive or of healthy relationships, or to learn about anger management and effective communication. The metathemes concerning the "Evolving" stage are divided into two areas. The data showed that some participants had evolved and learned without yet clearly experiencing healing. However, none had experienced healing without learning. Therefore, healing is an additional step.

i) *“Evolving while Learning”*

The metathemes in this section concern learning that occurred after participants left the abusive partner. Stage Five describes the women’s experiences as they learn, continue to personally change, or ‘evolve’, revise their beliefs, and set new goals that are more complex than the simple goals they had at the time of leaving. In Stage Five, complex goals include: to obtain university education, to discover meaningful spiritual practices, to form a healthy respectful relationship with a new partner.

In Stage Five, women continue to evaluate and revise previously held beliefs. For example, the participant who had accepted the belief that one had to always be in a relationship came to discard that belief and replace it. After many years living by the belief that “marriage is to last forever”, one participant did not discard the belief, but she set it aside as not applying to herself when she is in an abusive relationship.

Metathemes: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, “Changing awareness of gender socialization”, “Changes in relationship beliefs”, “Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”, “Parenting challenges after break-up”, “Resistance”, “Self discovery”, “Wisdom – understanding the past”, and “Acting for social change”.

ii) *“Evolving while Healing”*

The metathemes in this section describe various aspects of the experience of healing from the effects of an abusive relationship. The metathemes describe the strategies the women used while striving to become healthy and achieve balance in their lives. The metathemes showed that achieving “balance” required regular attention to the psychological, physical, social, and spiritual aspects of life. Metathemes describe the participants’ relationship expectations and experience in forming fulfilling, respectful relationships with new partners.

Metathemes: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, “Self discovery”, “Achieving balance”, “Resistance”, “Wisdom – understanding the past”, and “Acting for social change”.

Section Three: The Tasks of Each Stage of Change

Stage One

The tasks for the learner in stage one, “slow shift toward change”, include:

- Finding and trying ways to cope with partner’s abusive behaviour;
- Resisting partner’s abusive behaviour;
- Becoming aware (of gender socialization, of beliefs about relationships, of risk);
- Evaluating and revising beliefs and related expectations;
- Learning from experience and observations;
- Setting a goal or goals for positive change;
- Initially seeking resources to support future change, while change is being contemplated;
- Evaluating positive (e.g., love, societal acceptance) and negative aspects (e.g., risk of harm) of remaining in the relationship;
- Choosing to act to end the abuse; and,
- Seeking immediate, accessible resources to enable action to occur.

As understanding of abuse in relationships increases and as beliefs, expectations and goals change, there is a shift in decisional balance that culminates in a decision that the abuse must end.

In the current study, participants’ partners did not take responsibility for their actions either on their own or when explicitly asked. All refused to commit to seeking help in any form (e.g., psychological help, or entering a family violence program). Ending the relationship was the only way participants could find to end the abuse.

Stage Two

The tasks for the actor in the second stage, “Taking Action”, include:

- Finding immediate resources to support ending the relationship,
- Acting to achieve simple goals that meet basic needs such as safety or shelter,
- Taking action to end the relationship.

Stage Three

The tasks for the evaluator during the third stage, “Crisis, include”:

- Discover and access resources that help her begin to create safe, stable environment that supports the chosen change;
- Learn about resources that support safety, because the risk of harm is increased after ending the relationship, (e.g., find safe form of housing/change locks/consider moving away, access the legal system for Restraining Order, lay

charges if battering occurred, create safety plan with nearby friends, obtain cellular phone);
 Evaluate resources, in order to discern whether goals such as housing and economic support/employment can be accomplished outside the relationship;
 Evaluate resources in order to decide if ending the relationship can be safely accomplished (risk of harm escalates after ending the relationship);
 Evaluation of decision to end relationship;
 Manage strong emotions (e.g., grief, fear, anger), when they occur; and,
 Strategize to create and then use relapse prevention techniques to address urges to return to former partner.

As women make the above evaluations, if success seems unlikely in regard to social resources or safety, they may choose to return to an abusive partner. If they are able to trust that their unknown future holds a sufficient chance of success, they can resolve the crisis stage and progress onward.

Stage Four

The tasks of the survivor during the fourth stage, “Survival”, include:

Continue to establish a stable environment that supports the chosen change;
 Take action to increase safety, (e.g., find safe form of housing or move away; access the legal system for Restraining Order; lay charges if appropriate);
 Continue to manage strong emotions (e.g., grief, anger), when they occur;
 Use personal methods of relapse prevention techniques if needed, to handle urges to return to former partner;
 Meet the goals for basic needs that were chosen at the end of the “Slow Shift toward Change” stage;
 Take steps to handle emotional adjustment, and stress; and,
 Maintain the chosen change.

Stage Five

The survivor has become a thriver during the fifth stage, “Evolving”. Tasks of the fifth stage can involve learning, and healing. Goals evolve to a more complex level. Participants chose new goals for self that grew out of the beliefs formed during the “Slow Shift toward Change” stage, (e.g., Claire: “self exploration”, Lucy: freedom to grow, Trudy and Claire: quest for spirituality).

Evolving while Learning: Tasks.

Begin to learn the dynamics of abusive relationships;

Begin to learn the dynamics and skills required for respectful (“healthy”) relationships;
 Self exploration (in many ways, including for some participants to access further education); and,
 Begin to access counselling or find another effective way to begin to address the issues arising from the experience with the former partner.

Some of the tasks that participants chose also included:

Commitment to a set period of time away from relationships with intimate partners in order to work on personal growth and process past experiences; and,
 Access group work in life skills areas such as assertiveness training, effective communication, anger management, or accessing individual counselling.

Evolving while healing: Tasks.

Commitment to addressing the issues arising from the past abuse experience, usually in counselling;
 End isolation;
 Having learned the dynamics of respectful relationships, begin to form and maintain respectful, fulfilling relationships with friends and/or an intimate partner;
 Creating increased ‘balance’ in one’s daily life (attending to social, spiritual, psychological and physical aspects of life); and,
 Through activism in some form (e.g., in volunteer work or in career), connect to society and work for positive change for others in the same or another social minority group.

Section Four: Progressing Over Time to Achieve Change

In this section, I provide the participants’ own perceptions of their past and current progress in achieving positive change while learning from their experiences. One by one, as interviews occurred and data was analyzed, the participants’ descriptions, beginning with Josie’s “fog” and Barbara’s sense of “crisis”, and ending with Claire’s search for “balance” in life, helped me to realize that a stage theory would describe their experiences with change.

Each participant was asked to provide a one-word description of how she is at the current time. The description is given beside her name. The words chosen were very accurate and appropriate, and I was surprised to see that the one-word descriptions fit well with the stage the participant is in at present. The participants were good judges of where they were at present on the psychological journey of achieving change.

I conclude each description by noting the stage in which the participant was at the time of the interview, based on their words and the tasks of each stage.

Josie: "In Fog"

Josie was out of the twenty-year marriage for just two and a half years. She said, "It feels like a long time, because a lot has happened." She experienced the Crisis stage this way: "I was completely desperate. I didn't have any idea what to do." "You are so emotionally devastated. "I just basically cried, the first two years of this."

This is how Josie described herself at the time of the interview: "I often am hard on myself, thinking I really should be, emotionally, beyond where I am at the moment." "I'm not really even feeling emotionally good to make friends or make big decisions." "[Leaving is] scary, and it doesn't necessarily stop being scary right after you leave! So you've got to prepare to adapt to being scared for awhile."

Josie reads about spiritual beliefs and tries to "practice them in mind and body" in an informal way, "but it doesn't help you in the dark spots. It helps, but when I'm really in the black, it's like, *survival!*"

Josie said she works many hours because the family needs the income, but also to distract herself from worries, emotional pain and traumatic memories. "I don't make it financially with just (his child support payment), so I have to work quite a bit. I am working a lot. As usual. *Ninety per cent, ten percent!*" Josie refers to a belief that we both had encountered while growing up during the mid-nineteen-sixties. We were told that a woman should expect to contribute ninety per cent of the work in a relationship, and a man will contribute ten per cent. Later, the belief became part of feminist analyses of 1950s relationships.

Josie has not gone for counselling for her anxiety and emotional pain, or taken medications. "I work like mad, eh? I work as much as possible." "I overwork myself. Work is a real escape, right? I can put all of this on the shelf while I'm running around taking courses and going to work."

Because of her statements, I saw Josie as clearly being in the Survival stage. She settled down and made a family home, found work, and created a new and stable environment. She is maintaining the change that she chose; she is coping and surviving.

Although she has begun some of the learning that happens in the Evolving stage, she had not yet begun to work on her personal issues and the experiences of the past.

The following statements made her progress really clear. Josie was responding to a question about what words would describe her as she is today.

“‘I’m just living. I’m having life.’ She said this in an unenthusiastic, flat voice. ‘Because ... my first thought is, I’m just not over it yet. There’s still a lot of – you know? When you say, ‘Oh, you have Christmas in your new house!’ and that is what everyone said, and it’s true, but, *oh my God, I mean!*’”

“And I put up a good Christmas, and it was okay, and fun” - she spoke those words in a flat, unemotional voice - “and all that, but it’s, uh, *it’s still ... horrible.*”

“I’m not out ... but at least I’m living. At least I’m making my own decisions, and I’m trying hard. I’m working hard, and it’s like I’m finding my way out of a fog, still. Like, you know, the fog is still [there]. So, that’s why it’s hard. Everything’s hard.”

At the time of the interview, Josie still did not feel ready to begin seeing a counsellor about her experiences. After leaving the transition house, the only formal discussion of abuse issues that Josie had been part of occurred during a training course for volunteers. Josie is involved in advocacy work with women leaving abuse. Her contact with staff and her supportive interactions with women there have been her way of drawing her own wisdom from her experience, and sharing it.

Josie was in the Survival stage. Josie’s experience at the time of the interview was one of surviving, existing in a stable new environment and meeting daily challenges for herself and her children. Although cognitively ready to learn about change, Josie admitted distracting herself from working on her issues and from feeling her emotions. At the time of the interview, she was clearly in the Survival stage of change, a survivor.

Barbara: “Action”

Barbara experienced a time of crisis after she asked her partner to leave.

“I went straight to bed. And I laid down in bed for one month. And I would not get out of bed; I would not open the curtains. My father said to me, ‘Are you going to lie in here and die?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’”

“I could not get out of bed. I was depressed. I cried. I couldn’t eat; I couldn’t sleep; I couldn’t think. My whole life had collapsed. I felt unwanted and unloved.”

Although her father’s encouragement helped her to get out of bed and get a new job, there was little evidence in Barbara’s interview that she had “moved on”, left the relationship emotionally or in any other way. Four years have passed, yet, surprisingly, Barbara is still going back and forth from Crisis stage to Survival stage. She described it very well: “You go from “I want to get away” to “*I can’t stand being without you!*” to “I want to get away because I want to try again.” “I’m still angry. I still cry. I’m still frightened.”

Although she described herself in one word as “Action”, and as being ready to leave town and leave the ex-partner behind, Barbara was very ambivalent during the interview. She described making attempts to start a new life, without ongoing success. Barbara said, “I told him to get out. I didn’t say I was ending the relationship.” She stated that she still loves and wants her former partner, but wants to be treated with respect. Because she cannot have what she wants, she told me that now she wants to leave town and start fresh somewhere else. She continues to remind herself of her values and boundaries, and yet she has not yet been able to maintain being in the Survival stage.

“You know how you know it in your head, but not your heart? So, my heart was saying, “Oh yes, yes, he’ll come back to me”, but my head really knew,” she said. “And I’ll be honest with you, I am still madly in love with this man.” “The focus of my life had been trying to get this guy to come back to me.” “I would hope, and I would wish, secretly.” “*I have not let him go.*”

Barbara still has contact with her former partner regularly. Perhaps that contact helps to keep her emotionally “stuck”. She continues experiencing the Crisis stage and is frequently feeling the “relapse” urges (continually hoping to re-enter a relationship with her former partner). Barbara continues feeling strong grief and loss, saying many times, “I lost all my money! I lost my relationship! I’ve lost my career, my money, my self-esteem, my father. What more can happen?” The grief and feelings of loss do not end, because she has not gone to start a new life and create a new environment for herself, which happens in the Survival stage. The partner has formed a committed relationship with another woman. “He’s moved on; I’m not, and, why am I hurting me?” she asks.

Barbara is between the Crisis and Survival Stages. Barbara kept spiralling back and forth between these two stages for four years. She made the choice to continue seeing her former partner after the break-up. She continues to feel strong emotions of grief and feelings of loss. Despite the passage of years, she has not completed the task of the Survival stage in which one establishes a new environment for oneself.

Claire: "Eager"

Claire could speak about her past traumatic experiences while maintaining a calm and grounded state throughout most of the interview. That emotional stability is the result of a decade spent working on the issues from her three abusive relationships. Beginning in the first year after the break up of the third relationship, Claire set out to find out why these three abusive relationships had happened, and to discover what she really wanted her life to be like. She discerned patterns that she had not realized at the time. "I had been going from relationship to relationship with nothing in between"; "I didn't recognise there was a pattern there until after I got out of it. Then I realized, "Oh wow! ...he had thirty jobs, and how many times have I talked to him about not killing himself?" It kept me busy focussing on his problems, instead of what was really going on."

She set out to learn about healthy relationships, which for Claire involved testing her values from gender socialization in her childhood while learning feminist values. She decided that she didn't "need" a relationship for the sake of having one, or to "be a whole complete person", and that "a relationship has to add to your life, not make it harder". She developed her interpersonal skills such as "how to be assertive, how to set boundaries" and she got counselling. She began self-exploration and during that time she discovered that she had been forming relationships "with the wrong gender." This period of exploration also surprised her with the realization that she enjoyed learning, resulting in the choice to achieve a Bachelor of Arts degree. At the same time, Claire "went on a spiritual quest" that eventually aided healing and became part of a more balanced lifestyle than she had had in the past. She began to meditate, walk daily, and eat healthy food in order to look after the "mental, physical and spiritual parts" of herself.

Over the years, Claire has gained a clear understanding of the dynamics of abuse. When she said, “he knew there was something wrong, but he wouldn’t do anything about it. And to me, an abusive person is someone that causes problems but *won’t take responsibility*”, she was able to clarify for me what makes behaviour abusive despite the abuser’s reasons for the behaviour, such as family of origin issues, stress, or psychological problems.

Claire described herself, today, as being “eager.” She is the participant who was most clearly in a healing stage. She is not only well into healing, but in her employment situation Claire has opportunities to pass on the learning to other women in a way that is clearly thought out, and empowering to them.

Claire is in the Evolving/Healing stage. Claire’s experience of change had taken place during more than a decade, during which time she was extremely motivated to work on herself and her issues. At the time of the interview, Claire had achieved healing and had evolved in many ways as a person during her quests for spirituality and self-discovery. Claire was the participant who most clearly illustrated the importance of finding balance in biological, spiritual, psychological, and social aspects of life. She was first to show that it was possible to achieve the Evolving and Healing stage of change.

Kara: “Self Determined”

Kara described being in the Crisis stage. At that time, she was a “wounded soul”, “angry”, and was starting to be abusive of her new partner. Today, Kara’s self esteem has grown, and she is educating herself about communication and about relationships. “A lot of [my learning] is my own reading, my own exploring different things, and definitely the influence of counsellors, different books, and talking to my parents.” Kara is now entering the stage of Evolving.

She has begun to explore the concept of what a healthy, respectful relationship would involve: She is “putting responsibility on the other person for the success or failure of the relationship”, rather than taking the sole responsibility on herself as she did in the past. She is “giving myself responsibility to take care of my needs, and my likes and wants.” When she met her current partner, she found that “he wasn’t into just having meaningless sex.” “And he was a friend.” She proceeded cautiously: “We didn’t move

in together for almost a year, which is really [new behaviour]. There was a lot of timid reaching out, stepping back.”

Kara describes her current relationship as healthy and can provide examples, and yet a part of her is “still waiting for him to become abusive”. Her one word description of herself, today, is “self-determined.” She is studying to become a social worker, and already Kara does advocacy work with women leaving abusive relationships.

Kara is in the Evolving/Learning Stage. Kara has accomplished the task of establishing a stable environment for herself. She has begun educating herself as well as accessing counselling to work on the issues from her past abusive relationship. She has formed a new and healthy relationship and is very motivated toward goals that may soon bring her fully into the Evolving/Healing stage.

Lucy: “Living”

Lucy is making realizations about herself and her issues: “Low self esteem – I’ve always had it. I [don’t struggle with it] as much as in the past. I go through day by day, and make sure that I focus just on today.” “I’ve thought about [the experience with abusive partner] a lot, independently and through therapy”, said Lucy. “I still have things I’m thinking about from the last bad relationship.” She has realized that if a person is “walking or running away from this relationship, [then] they just have to trust that they are walking or running *toward* something else.”

Lucy’s values changed when she left the relationship and she has come to realize that there is mutual support and enjoyment in being part of a “women network”. She now ensures that she keeps up her relationships with a variety of diverse women. “I think one of the things that has been really instrumental in maintaining the change is really opening my eyes to women, and seeing, like, all the different, different, *different* women around, and really trying to embrace that.”

Lucy is leaving the Survival stage. She saw a counsellor soon after the relationship ended, and attended for a year. She is making connections. “I’ve read a lot of material from Narcotics Anonymous and I’m going, “Whoa! Just for today! And [making realizations about] trying to control others.”

Lucy's relationship with her new partner "is the first healthy relationship, *I know*, that I have ever had." In a healthy relationship, she said she would expect emotional support and to be able to enjoy friendships and try new experiences without being constrained by her partner. Lucy's one word description of herself, today, is "Living!" She does advocacy work by volunteering with women leaving abusive partners, and enjoys a sense of connection with women when helping there.

Lucy is in the Evolving/Learning Stage. At the time of the interview, Lucy had established a safe, stable environment and was just leaving the Survival Stage to enter a period of learning. She was more than a survivor. She was carrying out her new beliefs about women and about herself, and was ready and beginning to enter a new stage.

Trudy: "Happening"

Twelve years had passed since Trudy left her abusive partner, but she said, "It's like yesterday. This is the first time I've talked about it" in depth.

Trudy described the time immediately after leaving as a time of wanting "not to see people ever again", to "be incommunicado, a hermit." She wanted "to live in the light", "to be in a state of pure consciousness, though meditation" and "to give up on being a human." In the Crisis stage, she felt that "there is nothing left of me."

Trudy remembers that she counteracted "fleeting thoughts" about going back by "very specifically, very consciously" drawing on memories of "events that she never ever wanted to be in danger of again" such as the realization of harmful messages to her children, and the "clear vision of the death of my soul", and the realization that she had the support of her family.

Trudy described herself after ending the relationship as having spent many years in isolation, without opening up about the experience of abuse. She did not obtain counselling for survivors of intimate partner abuse. She said she viewed herself as more of an "addictive personality" than an abuse survivor. (Although she did not clarify that term, she had mentioned past substance misuse, and a somewhat addictive aspect existed to her meditation at some points in her life. She said she had used meditation in the way people use a drug, to escape life). She remained isolated, living without any meaningful outside relationships except for her family. She coped with finances, and

went to university to get her Masters degree, learning many useful interpersonal skills along the way. This period of coping and forming a new environment constitutes Trudy's Survival stage.

The next stage began perhaps a year ago with three events: first, her employment in a helping profession; second, the learning and healing and new goals that began when she joined a twelve step program; and third, meeting and starting a relationship with a new partner. Trudy described herself as having been isolated for the majority of her life, but today, she feels ready to experience close human relationships.

Trudy said, "So yeah, the next stage is happening. And it's not comfortable. But I know it's good. I think it is." She is aware that she is now in a new stage in her change experience, which is that of *Evolving/learning and healing*. At the time of the interview, she was entering a committed relationship with an intimate partner. She found that new experience to be "overwhelming" and anxiety provoking, despite proceeding cautiously.

Trudy's response to the question about a one-word description of herself, today, was: "Alive – I'm not sure that expresses it. *Happening!* ... I'm actually on the road. On the road of being human, and of being whole, spirit and soul." She has much counselling support and emotional support from people in her surroundings: "I am more resourced now than I have ever been."

Trudy's work in the community often involves advocacy for members of socially disadvantaged groups, including women in relationships with an abusive partner.

Trudy has begun the Evolving/Healing stage. Trudy spent a long time in the Survival stage after establishing a stable environment. She kept herself isolated. Yet she was educating herself and perhaps was entering the *Evolving/Learning* stage even then. Today, she is taking steps to end her social isolation and to find balance in her life. Although the steps are not comfortable, she is joyful that she is progressing from the learning stage to the stage of wholeness and healing.

Jeanette: "Wiser"

Jeanette left her former partner exactly seven years before the interview. Thinking of the anniversary date and reading the waiver, she said, "Reading the papers, I

find I was still being emotional, but I have a grip quite a bit better than before. I don't think it's depression; it's the fact of going through so many changes."

"The one month at the transition house was very traumatizing. I got some help ... but it was hard to live there." "I was so stressed," Jeanette said. This was the Crisis stage, and it was filled with feelings of grief and loss. "I knew I had to sell my dream house. I was losing all my dreams. I was broken hearted; my kids were all shocked." "It took me more than a year to put myself together."

Living in second stage housing, she had support of the staff during an emotional, challenging time. "I would say, "I can't stop crying. What's going on?" "I used to be a very independent, strong person. And I said, "It hurts so bad that my breath is burning, and I find that my blood is burning inside me, and I think I am going to lose it." "All I did was cry, cry, cry, and my kids were going to counselling for 'Children who have Witnessed Abuse', and I was hearing the kid's stories. Oh, I was on a guilt trip!" She set aside time to grieve and cry when her children were out. She chose to work on her issues rather than to take medication.

Jeanette had to find appropriate work, set goals, handle challenging legal issues, and create a new home for her children. She worked on accepting her many losses. Her son "went through a depressive period ... he felt responsible, and my daughter as well." The Survival period lasted for at least four years for Jeanette. "It was hard to guide my children and discipline them. I felt very powerless in those four years." Jeanette began "to realize some patterns" about her former partner's exploitation and abuse.

Jeanette sought out opportunities to learn, beginning with a program for women leaving abusive relationships, where she learned assertiveness, effective communication, and how to deal with angry people. She continued on to university. Her statements show that Jeanette has been in the Evolving/learning stage for some time.

Jeanette described herself today as "wiser with the years." "I learned from my mistakes." She has learned to assess what is a safe relationship. "I think I gained some wisdom, and I feel a bit more powerful with relationships." "I think it is more a growing experience. I felt wiser than before, now being able to pass on the information." "I think if you had asked me to talk about this experience three years ago, I would have cried

during the whole session.” She said, “What did it take to get there, to be independent? I think I’m just starting, and it has been seven years.”

She does not find her current existence to be an easy time. She repeatedly stressed that “it never ends, all those challenges” of raising children with difficult behaviour patterns, who have been affected by an abusive parent, and of having to occasionally interact with the other parent. She states that the former partner is manipulative and provokes problems when he telephones or sees the children (e.g., inappropriate behaviour such as discussing child support with young children; telling them “the government gives mommy lots of money” and that he should not have to pay). “You learn to be always on the edge; something will happen soon.”

Today, Jeanette says, “I’m just starting to feel strong in terms of career. And there are more important things for me. I’ve been starting to do workshops for single moms and parents who have difficulties with their children, especially with women who have left abusive relationships. The family dynamics are not easy after that.”

Jeanette is in the Evolving/Learning stage. It was Jeanette who showed clearly that there was a Crisis stage, and who elaborated on the feelings of grief and loss that can persist for a long time after a relationship ends. Jeanette has been highly motivated to address her issues through life skills training and counselling. I sensed deep sadness that saturated her tone of voice and her presence. In comparison, participants who have moved into a healing stage brought up remembered emotions during the interviews. Yet, while she continues to strongly grieve her losses, Jeanette is beginning to end her isolation, and has entered a stage of Evolving and Learning where she is able to share what she has learned with others, with the conscious goal of achieving social change.

Table 1: Overview of Stages of Change

Stage 1. SLOW SHIFT TOWARD CHANGE	Stage 2. ACTION	Stage 3. CRISIS	Stage 4. SURVIV- AL	Stage 5A. EVOLV- ING AND LEARN- ING	Stage 5B EVOLV- ING AND HEALING
The column below each stage lists some of the important points about the change process for that stage. Change is not necessarily a linear process.					
Realizations, revising values, awareness changes – A “Learner”	Ending the relationship – An “Actor”	Contemplate Possible Future – An “Evaluator”	Trying to establish safe, stable environment – A “Survivor”	Addressing Issues – A “Thrifer”	Searching for healing - A “Thrifer”
Resisting abuse; coping with abuse	Leaving with the resources they have	Managing emotions: grief, fear, anger	Grieving losses	Learning from examining the past	Goals evolve
Landmark events and turning points	Setting simple goals e.g., safety	Setting simple goals, e.g., shelter	Goals evolve	Goals evolve	Seeking physical, psychological, social and spiritual balance
“The Last Straw!” – Decisional balance shifts		Seeking social resources for safety, support	Maintaining change	Learning about healthy vs. abusive relationships	Seeking to establish respectful relationships
Preparation to act			Relapse prevention: What got them out, kept them out	Continuing to test and revise beliefs and values.	Acting to create social change

Summary

Metathemes have now been linked in Chapter 5 to the stages of change in which they occurred. Stages of change were described, the tasks of each stage were delineated, and examples from the data were provided. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the metathemes in detail, and demonstrate how the metathemes were influential in each participant's process of achieving change.

CHAPTER 6

Metathemes

After having provided an introduction to the participants, I presented an overview of the stage of change model that emerged from studying their change process. In section one of Chapter 6, I now reintroduce the study's questions. I describe the evolution of interview questions, and I discuss issues in data collection as well.

The second section presents the metathemes which were discovered during data analysis. The twenty metathemes describe the participants' experiences while choosing to live independently of the abusive relationship, acting on and sustaining the choice, and elaborating on their original goals. The data revealed that the change experience occurred in five time periods, which are: "Slow Shift toward Change", "Action", "Crisis", "Maintenance", and "Evolving". The final period, "Evolving", is divided into two sections: "Evolving while Learning", and "Evolving while Healing". Each metatheme appears in one or more of the five time periods of the change experience.

Sections three to fourteen present twelve of the metathemes, with excerpts that illustrate them. The final section of Chapter Six presents a summary in regard to metathemes that emerged from the data during analysis.

Section One

The research question

To explore the lived experiences of women who are survivors of intimate partner abuse, I used a semi-structured interview to address the research question: what do women who have exited abusive relationships perceive as external and internal factors that enabled them to sustain living independently of the prior relationship? As I have explained in Chapter 1, in order to create understanding of the period after deciding to end the relationship, participants had to describe the realizations and personal growth that led to the decision to change their lives. As a result, the research question evolved during the study to include the whole process of change. I sought to reveal the lived experience of achieving positive change for participants who ended relationships with abusive former partners.

The focus of interview questions

I followed a general list of open interview questions such as “did you think there would be obstacles when you left?” or “How capable of leaving did you feel at that time?” In general, the clients spoke about events and issues that were important to them in their memory of ending and staying out of a relationship with an abusive partner. Occasionally, I asked for clarification (e.g., “When you say ‘bad’, what do you mean by that?”) or used a probe, (e.g., “Can you tell me more about that?”)

The interview questions evolved as responses demonstrated that to understand the period after choosing to leave, it was necessary to understand the experience of coming to choose positive change. I realized the importance of understanding what occurred before the decision to leave when the third participant listed realizations that caused her to leave. The list was the same as her response to what kept her from returning to the abusive relationship. I was surprised by the realization that “What *got* them out, *kept* them out”. Changes that occurred before women left affected their process of change after they left.

How the participants came to see that they needed to change their lives, and how they eventually were able to gather the internal and external resources that were required to accomplish the change were integral parts of the whole process of change. I realized I could not learn about how they accomplished the change after ending the relationship without knowing about how they accomplished the change before and during the time of ending it. Participants themselves seemed unable to describe the later period without explaining how they reached that point. Rather than briefly exploring the period in which the participants began to form the decision to end the relationship with the abusive partner, I began to allow the participants time during interviews to speak about what they found important during that earlier time in the change experience, if they chose to do so.

Issues in data collection

One interview was difficult because the participant was speaking with an accent. I struggled to understand her words and follow her meaning. Her accent was not a problem while transcribing the interview, because I could rewind the tape repeatedly until I could discern what a particular word was.

Interviewing interactions are radically different and far more awkward than normal, everyday dialogues. The participant “Kara” frequently did not finish her sentences. People frequently speak that way in dialogues: we co-construct meaning. Her manner implied that she believed the meaning of the missing words was obvious. However, a researcher cannot analyze words that were not spoken. I could not use some information because sentences were incomplete. After transcribing Kara’s interview, I learned to use probes to encourage participants to finish their sentences. To do that is awkward in interpersonal interaction as it is not how people normally interact during a dialogue. Alternatively, I would first suggest the word a participant had implied when leaving a sentence unfinished, even though the word would seem obvious to a listener during an everyday dialogue. I would follow the suggested word with a check on whether that was the word she meant to use to complete the sentence. Checking provided me with data, but the interactions were somewhat awkward whenever checking occurred.

Section Two: The 20 Metathemes

During data analysis, following a method described by Moustakas (1994) and Ely (1997), I sorted the data into increasingly higher levels of abstraction. I grouped meaning units into categories, and categories into themes. Themes that were linked were organized into larger groupings at a higher level of abstraction, metathemes. Appendix D lists the twenty metathemes, and Appendix E reveals the themes which supported metathemes.

Metathemes highlight the most important aspects of the change experience. As metathemes emerged, they appeared in five time periods, which provide an overview of the change experience over time. The five time periods are discussed in Chapter 5.

In my research, I sought to discover what women who had ended relationships with abusive partners perceive as external and internal factors that enabled them to sustain living independently. I sought to reveal the lived experience of achieving positive change for participants. I wanted to uncover the internal (psychological) and external (social) factors that supported their process of change. Eighteen of twenty metathemes concerned internal or psychological aspects of the change process. They were:

- “changing awareness of gender socialization”,
- “changes in relationship beliefs”,
- “increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”,

“resistance”,
 “realization of risk”,
 “shift in decisional balance”,
 “The last straw/the sinking ship”,
 “leaving with the resources they had at the time (internal and external)”,
 “Imagine – evolving goals, simple to complex”,
 “trust”,
 “What got them out/relapse prevention”,
 “evaluation”,
 “strong emotions”
 “parenting challenges after break-up”,
 “self-discovery”,
 “wisdom – understanding the past”,
 “achieving balance”,
 “acting for social change”.

Two metathemes described primarily external or social aspects of change:

“finding support from family and friends”,
 “seeking formal/societal help”.

“Seeking formal/societal help” included the participants’ experiences with attempting to access counselling support, the support of the justice system, transition house support and second stage housing programs, the learning opportunity provided by life skills programs, and social means of financial support” (including unemployment insurance or social assistance). Participants’ experiences receiving help from social institutions during the change process are discussed in Section Ten.

Section Three: “Changing Awareness of Gender Socialization”

Section three presents the first of the metathemes to reveal important aspects in the process of change for participants who ended a relationship with an abusive intimate partner. The metatheme, “Changing awareness of Gender Socialization”, is similar to several of the other metathemes because it demonstrates perception changes as time passed (e.g., changes in awareness of the dynamics of an abusive relationship, awareness of gender socialization and of influence of family of origin role models, and changing beliefs and expectations about intimate partner relationships). Two tables are included at the end of Section Three. Table Two: “Gender Socialization and Family of Origin” and

Table Three: “Gender Socialization and Canadian Society”) present condensed examples from the data.

While telling of their experiences, participants reflected on how their original beliefs and expectations about relationships and women’s role in society were tested, and how they changed their beliefs as time passed. They spoke of their realizations about the gender-related beliefs that they were taught by role models in their family, and gender-related beliefs they learned socially (e.g., from peers, the educational system, religious institutions, and the media).

1. Beliefs learned during childhood

a) Gender socialization in family of origin

The participants were aware that they had once accepted beliefs and values learned in childhood. They could provide examples of beliefs that they had accepted as children and followed as young adults, entering a committed relationship.

Jeanette said that in childhood and before leaving her partner she accepted and strongly believed that, “being Catholic, marriage is [supposed to last] forever!” She had been taught that divorce was wrong, “And families should be together.” Similarly, Trudy said that “I had the belief that children are damaged by a broken home.” Her family was “just a traditional family, that nobody ever divorced from.”

For Kara, there was a strong influence of family of origin role models on gender socialization and relationship expectations. She said, “That’s what you did: You had a happy life; you got together.” “My parents, look how happy they are ... that’s what you did; that was ‘success’.” “My parents have told me that they have to work at it, so my belief was, okay, you work at it.” She and Lucy and other participants did not realize at first that there could be no success if they were the only one in the relationship working at it. Lucy also had been taught in childhood not to quit once you made a commitment. “My parents said, “You can’t quit, once you start.”

Kara, Claire, and other participants stayed with the unhappy relationship because of the belief that women needed to be in a relationship. Kara remembered that while with her partner, “A key note is I really wanted to make a two year mark.” “So, when I made a two year relationship, that was kind of ‘successful’.”

Kara reflects that while with her partner, “I was really more committed to the idea of having *the relationship* more than I was to him.”

Barbara, like Claire, learned the belief that women should be in a relationship. She said that she found herself thinking, “everybody’s had a relationship; I’m not married - you think there’s something wrong with you!”

Claire also spoke about strongly believing it was important to be in a relationship. She realizes that she formed beliefs about her gender role and expectations during childhood and adolescence.

Looking back, Claire said that: “I believe that the way I was raised and the culture I was brought up in taught me to believe that I had to be in a relationship, whether it was good or bad.” She emphasized that: “It was expected that I would be in a relationship; that’s what was *expected* of me.” “In high school, you needed to be engaged. You had to have a steady boyfriend. It was just something that was imprinted on you.” “That is what is expected of you. And that’s what I did. I married the guy next door.”

Trudy remembers that in her childhood, “I was brought up as: ‘Women are second class’; ‘women are not smart’; ‘women are not capable’; we are really ‘just a burden on men’. And certainly my husband loved that I had been brought up that way.”

The value that marriage was to last forever had also been instilled in Josie and Jeanette. “I felt like I was really married for life, eh?” said Josie. “I didn’t fiddle around with that.” Josie had experienced in childhood the damaging consequences of divorce. When her Catholic mother separated from her abusive, alcoholic husband, the family was not supportive, and Josie and her mother entered a life of poverty. She said that her mother “was pretty much excommunicated from everything, even from her family, to a point. It was really rough”. “So when my father was horrible, then she really had no one to turn to, at all!” “She really had to go through everything by herself.”

“She got an office job, when things were breaking down,” said Josie. “My mother ended up being divorced.” “She ended up losing everything. We had to leave, and get a little apartment”. “We didn’t have a house any more, and he took her car.”

After learning as a child that marriage is to last forever, and that divorce can have terrible consequences, Josie stayed in her unhappy relationship for two decades. She

said, “the lifestyle of the female - how [to survive after leaving] - it’s a major, major part of all this!”

Speaking of beliefs and expectations learned in childhood, Barbara said, “I grew up in a home where you sat down at the dinner table with two brothers and a father, and the two brothers always over-talked me, and I was dismissed, I felt.”

Her mother became alcoholic, and Barbara said, “You do, as a child (of an alcoholic) feel, it’s my fault.” She added, “So she taught me a lot in some ways; maybe it was a negative experience...” “I’ve often wondered if her lack of respect for herself gave me lack of respect for myself.” She emphasized, “We are not taught to be selfish as women.” “Women are not taught the self respect that men are.”

Growing up in her family, Lucy’s beliefs and expectations were influenced by a mother who “was very independent, and not a housewife” and yet who “has major self esteem issues.” Lucy remembers that her mother was “always calling herself down, all the time.” As well, Lucy’s mother was isolated, and without supportive friends. “She never had friends; she was either at home, or at work.” “She never had (a) social network” said Lucy, who eventually realized that she created the same pattern for herself repeatedly, with destructive results in her own life.

b) Gender socialization in society and popular culture

Gender socialization was taking place for the participants, whether, like Claire and Josie, they were girls and adolescent women during the decades of the fifties and sixties, or, like Kara and Lucy, their childhood occurred during the eighties and nineties. Claire said, “In [the media], everything you read, even to this day, and you see movies, where *the most important thing* is whether or not you’re in a relationship. That’s the be-all and end-all of everything.” Barbara said, “Society allows you to believe that if you’re still single, something’s wrong with you. And that’s not true.”

Supplementing Claire’s experience of abuse at home was the experience of early gender socialization in a world that demonstrated power and control hierarchies, and in which a young girl was fairly powerless. Claire said, “I didn’t know there was anything different; I just figured the world was like that.” “I remember, in high school ... the

teacher walked up and down the rows to see if your homework was done. And if it wasn't done, you immediately got hit with the ruler.”

“At church, if you misbehaved, you got a dunce cap and you sat in the corner, so that's humiliation. At home, if you were out of line, Dad had a strap. I just figured the world was like that.”

Josie said, “I was born in the Fifties, and so there was probably a lot of that[social messages to girls], a *female* thing. And my Mom did stay home ... she just did the housecleaning and the cooking.” Josie commented on the cultural belief during her childhood that to make a relationship or marriage work, the woman contributes 90% of the effort and the man 10%, and that is “just the way it is” and to be accepted. “My grandmother ... was a hard-working, *hard-working* woman, and yeah, you would think the 90% and 10% fits into that.”

Lucy gained beliefs and expectations about women from the popular culture, beliefs which were reinforced by her family of origin. “I always played with Barbies,” she said. As well, her mother, who isolated herself and was continually “calling herself down”, was “just dieting, dieting, dieting, all the time.” Lucy grew up to have body image issues and required therapy for an eating disorder.

2. *Learning beliefs and expectations from abuse or other trauma in childhood*

Claire experienced abusive relationships and emotional neglect within the family, and abuse in the social environment around her as well. She said, “[In] my Mom and Dad's relationship, my father never hit my mother, but *he didn't have to*. He was very emotionally cruel, and controlling, absolutely. My mother was a bit more loving and caring, but I think she was a bit afraid to show it, because of my Dad. He was definitely the head of the household. He ruled the house.” She spoke of experiencing emotional and physical abuse from her father. “He would discipline my brother and me, and what was ‘discipline’ was abuse.” “He would take my brother and throw him down on the floor, and sit on him, and pick up his head and bang his head on the floor. And I would run. I would run.”

“My parents taught me to look after myself and to be independent, which are good things, but they taught me them in very cruel ways.” As an adult, Claire came to

believe that her parents had taught her some important things, but that they were “not capable of being emotionally intimate with anybody.”

Lucy’s childhood experiences included tension between her parents. Like Barbara and Josie, she had an alcoholic parent, and some of the family issues were never resolved. “My dad was an alcoholic who stopped drinking when I was about six, *and my mom is still angry.*” Lucy said she had learned in counselling that, as a result of the family dynamics in her childhood, “...it’s part of my personality to be a pleaser.”

Kara remembers that she formed beliefs during childhood experiences as well: “I think also it stems from my father and I having quite an abusive relationship growing up, quite verbal fights ... so I was like, ‘Men aren’t going to treat me like that.’”

Two participants’ childhood experiences involved sexual abuse. One participant told me: “My father was an alcoholic (who) sexually abused me and my sister.” “And after all that,” she said, “I thought I would never get married!”

“I really always wanted to have kids,” she said, but she was expecting bad behaviour from men, because of her childhood experience. She laughed as she described her thoughts as a teenager: “If I was going to have kids, it was going to be I’m going to just choose a victim [sperm donor] and that’s it!”

3. Making realizations about beliefs gained during childhood gender socialization

During adulthood, the participants began to realize that they had beliefs about their gender role and about relationships. They began to evaluate and test the beliefs gained during childhood gender socialization. This did not only occur after the end of relationships with an abusive partner. Significantly, it occurred during the relationships as well. The experiences of Trudy and Claire are provided to illustrate their realizations and evaluation of beliefs.

Trudy, who spoke of coming from a “traditional family, that nobody ever divorced from”, looked at her family and saw that “my sisters and brothers are all still on their first marriages.” Looking back to raising her children during her relationship with a partner who abused her and the children, Trudy remembers that during that time, “I had the belief that children are damaged by a broken marriage or home.” Trudy, like Josie, tried to put the children first by staying in the marriage and by doing her best to teach and

physically and emotionally nurture them. She took care of “the children very well on the physical level with warmth, shelter and nutrition, [and] as well, psychologically, through loving them and doing my best that way.” Trudy said, “I was living for my children”, and to do so would not conflict with societal beliefs about a woman’s role.

As time progressed during her marriage, Trudy came to consciously evaluate her belief that “a broken home” would harm the children. A marriage counsellor had told her early in her marriage that “a ‘broken home’ is not necessarily divorce. A ‘broken home’ is when there are people not getting along in the home. A ‘healthy home’ could be a single parent family or a double parent family, but a ‘broken home’ could be a double parent family too.” Trudy’s belief was tested but it held up. “I didn’t believe him. I thought that was just new thinking and not necessarily grounded.”

Trudy did remember his definition. As time passed, she re-evaluated her belief. She came to see that staying in the marriage was causing harm. “I was desperate to not do harm, and in that, I did harm.” She had to evaluate her belief. It was very painful for her as she realized that “I had a broken home. I gave them a broken home, right along.” At that point, her belief about divorce causing harm to the children was discarded.

Claire spoke of learning the belief that a woman had to be in a relationship. After she left her third abusive husband, her mother attempted to reinforce the social message. “There were three of us in the family, so [my mother] would send me four place mats. To me, those were all little subtle messages that I should be in a relationship”. Claire realized what was happening, and resented the message. She became aware that she had learned a social belief that women had to be, and were expected to be, in a relationship, “whether it was good or bad.” Then, she realized that the belief was coming to her in childhood and now in adulthood, from her family and environment. “And the general message is, if you’re not in a relationship, then there’s something wrong with you.” Next, Claire came to a point where she evaluated the belief. “Afterwards, I found out that my mother had told all of her friends that I was left ‘high and dry’ by my partner.” “She presented me as the poor victim, and the reality is that I left him, and I feel really *proud* about that!” Because her family of origin still held the belief, they could not see that she had taken a necessary and positive step. Claire said that because she left her husband, “I was the black sheep of the family.”

Claire remembers that when she entered college she continued to evaluate her former belief that a woman had to be in a relationship. She began to notice the belief existed in her environment, in books and movies. She saw it in course materials: “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need says you can’t go to the next level unless you’ve got a partner. I remember sitting in class thinking, “Oh, sh-t! I’m not going to go any higher until I have a relationship.” ... Again, that’s your culture. Yeah!”

Claire spent several years working on the issues involved in her experience of being in three relationships with abusive partners. She made important connections: “My mother and father were not capable of being emotionally supportive; neither were any of my partners.” She realized that she had always valued and sought emotional connection, and began to form conscious beliefs and expectations about what she now would want in an intimate relationship. She also began to realize the value of self care, commenting with great irony on another societal belief which she had evaluated and abandoned, that “[taking care of yourself] as a woman, oh, that’s *“selfish”*, yes.”

During the process of consciously realizing beliefs gained in childhood gender socialization and evaluating them, Claire came to realize that in Canadian society, past and present, women are still not treated as equal to men. She connected the disparity in beliefs and values about men and women to the occurrence of abuse, saying,

“The idea that women aren’t equal, I think that plays a big part in the fact that women are abused, because we still teach women to be passive, and quiet and ‘nice’, and non-assertive. And it’s not that they’re bad things. It’s just that we also need to teach women how to be assertive and independent and strong, the same things that we teach men. We should teach the same to both genders. And also, that men learn how to be empathic and understanding and in touch with their feelings, but still be strong too. You can ... teach your children to be both.”

Table 2: Gender Socialization and Family of Origin

METATHEME: GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN FAMILY OF ORIGIN Each example progresses across the table horizontally from left to right.			
ROLE MODELS	GENDER SOCIALIZATION	LEARNED BEHAVIOURS	LEARNED BELIEFS
Males (fathers, brothers) had more social power in the family system than females had.	Participant was “talked over” by her brothers and parents did not intervene.	Participant finds it difficult to express her beliefs, boundaries, and needs to a male, particularly during a disagreement.	Belief: Males have most power in relationships. Belief: “I cannot express myself clearly” to males.
Father dominated and controlled wife and daughter.	Participant was being taught that men’s role is to control women.	One participant had three marriages to controlling men.	Belief: In family relationships, males control females.
Father was physically abusive when disciplining daughter	Participant was taught that physical abuse was normal.	Participant married two men who turned out to be violently and dangerously physically abusive.	Belief: Physical abuse of women is to be expected within the family.
Mother was a hard worker and supported family without help from partner, without ever leaving abusive partner.	Female role model and society both teach that “marriage is forever”.	Participant worked hard to support family financially/emotionally by herself, without ending abusive relationship.	Belief: Men contribute little; women work and hold the family together, whether or not the partner contributes.
For many years, female role model did not leave abusive partner, until crisis (abuse of daughters).	Participant is being taught that she should not end a marriage unless something extreme forces her to do so.	Participant stayed with abusive partner for many years, although contemplating leaving, and final action was precipitated by a crisis.	Belief: marriage is forever; belief: women stay in their marriage no matter how bad it is.
Parents belonged to religion that saw divorce as harmful and sinful and ostracized divorced members.	Participant is taught that divorce is sinful and has consequences such as ostracism and stigma and guilt.	Participant stayed in abusive relationship because she feared the expected consequences of divorce.	Belief: “A marriage is meant to last forever”; Belief: divorce is harmful and even sinful.

Mother and/or father are not emotionally supportive	Parents teach that it is good to be “independent” and teach her not to seek emotional support from friends or family.	Participant tries to be “independent”, facing struggles without seeking support. She yearns for intimacy and emotionally connected relationship.	Belief: It is good to be independent of emotional support.
Parents stayed together and overcame a serious issue in their relationship.	Parents teach daughter, “When you start something, you can never quit.”	Participant strives to fix seriously flawed relationship by herself, over a lengthy period.	Belief: don’t give up on a bad relationship. Belief: By myself, I can fix a relationship.
Family member is a sexual abuser of participant in childhood.	Participant has not had the opportunity to observe and learn about healthy adult relationships.	Participant remains with abusive partner for as long as she believes he loves her.	Belief: abuse is everywhere in society; abuse is normal. Belief: Men’s contribution to family is to be “sperm donors”.
Divorced mother lost “everything” e.g., (house, car, financial resources to raise children, ability to be stay-at-home parent).	Participant learns as child in 1950s that after divorce, women lose home and face poverty.	Participant stays in abusive relationship for many years, rather than bring her children into the poverty she foresees for them.	Upon divorce, a woman will lose “everything”; Belief: divorce will result in poverty and harm to children.
Sisters’ lengthy marriages are deemed “successful”; Divorce is rare in family.	Participant is taught that divorce causes a “broken home” and that a broken home seriously damages children.	Participant endures abuse for many years rather than to divorce which she believes will harm children. Participant expected family condemnation for divorce.	Belief: divorce causes a “broken home”. Belief: A broken home seriously damages children; belief: relationships are to last “forever”.

Table 3: Gender Socialization and Canadian Society

METATHEME: GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN CANADIAN SOCIETY (NOT INCLUDING INFLUENCE OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN)			
INFLUENCE OF PEER GROUPS AND NON-FAMILIAL ROLE MODELS	MEDIA INFLUENCE ON GENDER SOCIALIZATION	LEARNED BEHAVIOURS ORIGINATING IN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	LEARNED BELIEFS ORIGINATING IN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
SOME EXAMPLES FROM CATEGORIES WITHIN THE THEMES Each example progresses across the table horizontally from left to right.			
High school peers taught one participant it was important to be in a relationship, and to be engaged by one's senior year.	Media (by way of movies and television) taught participants that the main focus of life for women was to be in a relationship.	Seeking to always be in relationship, participant quickly went from the end of one abusive relationship to the next.	Belief: Participant once believed that a woman had to be in a relationship. Belief: A woman was a failure if she wasn't in a relationship.
	Media (movies and books) taught participant that men's role is to be strong, to control, women's role is to be gentle, passive, and nurturing.	Participant had three marriages to controlling men.	Belief: In family relationships, males control females, and women do not have control. A 'good', ideal woman is passive.
Participant experienced socially-accepted "emotional abuse and humiliation" at church, physical punishment from teachers.		Participant formed committed relationships three times with men who turned out to be physically and/or emotionally abusive.	Belief: emotional and physical abuse was normal and common in society. Belief: physical abuse of females is to be expected.

<p>Church, social role models and peers taught and acted upon belief that divorce is sinful. Participant saw divorced people lose church and community and be stigmatized.</p>		<p>Rather than end an abusive relationship, participant carried the emotional, financial and parenting load alone.</p>	<p>Belief: marriage is forever; belief: women stay in their marriage no matter how bad it is. Belief: divorce is harmful and sinful. Belief: divorce results in stigma, ostracism.</p>
<p>Participant saw female role models (neighbours, extended family) work hard to hold family together, carrying more than their share of the load regarding finances, nurturing and child rearing.</p>		<p>Participants carried the majority of responsibility for parenting and achieving financial stability. Participants did not confront partner about unequal contributions.</p>	<p>Unequal burdens for different genders was a norm. Belief: Women contribute more than men to a family. Belief: women work hard to hold a family together, whether or not the partner contributes.</p>
	<p>Media (books, movies, television, and magazines) taught that divorce results in “a broken home”, and that a broken home harms children.</p>	<p>Participant stayed in an abusive marriage for a long time, rather than give her children a “broken home”.</p>	<p>Belief: divorce will result in harm to children. Belief: staying together for the sake of the children will help, not harm, them.</p>

Section four: "Awareness of Dynamics of Abuse"

People in general know when someone's behaviour is hurting them, and they resist to the greatest extent that it is safe to do so (Wade, 1997). However, they may, as the participants in this study did, act on beliefs that keep them in the relationship, and make attributions about their partner's hurtful behaviour. They may refuse, for a time, to accept that their partner does not take responsibility for his behaviour and that he will not work on changing it. It is not unusual for an abuse survivor to have not clearly realized that her partner's behaviour could be termed "abusive" until some time has passed after the end of the relationship, especially since she may be unaware that behaviours that do not involve physical attack can still be termed "abusive". Eventually, the participants came to realize that their partner's behaviour was problematic and, in fact, abusive, and they responded to that realization by choosing change for themselves. In this section, transcript excerpts illustrate the participants' increasing awareness of the dynamics of abuse as time passed during their journey of change. At the end of Section Four, Table Four illustrates examples of awareness changes made as time passed.

Jeanette's experience of increasing awareness of abuse

Jeanette said that, "I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it". She describes herself when she entered the relationship as a person who was somewhat idealistic: "I never thought that I would have to put boundaries to people or otherwise they mentally can abuse you. *I thought people were fair.*"

During her marriage, Jeanette's partner would rant at her for an hour at a time, and was impatient and physically abusive to the children. He could not hold a job and contribute financially in a stable way. She knew something was wrong, and it was "coming to a point where I didn't want to live with him." Then one day she was hit by a car, and went home bruised and in pain. "And my husband just left me like that. He didn't bring me to the hospital, nothing! That's when I realized, "What a crock! I don't need this in my life."" Jeanette added that, "I was expecting some support from my husband, and I felt very betrayed, for all the things that I had done for him and then he left me [without medical treatment] like this."

A crisis occurred. "My daughter got assaulted by her dad at school." Although the police and social services came to the house, her partner would not take responsibility for his actions or seek help. Jeanette remembers, "he didn't want to go to any programs, any counselling, any doctors, and he kept on saying, 'Oh, things will be okay.' I gave him the option to go and take care of himself, and he didn't want to."

"He wouldn't go for counselling," said Jeanette. "And he was not changing." She left him and went to a transition house with the children.

In the weeks that followed, Jeanette learned the details of physical and emotional abuse that her children had experienced from their father. Like the other children in this study, her children had kept their own abuse a secret.

During her relationship, Jeanette knew to some extent that her husband's behaviour was harmful to herself and the children, and that he was trying to control her. Looking at what happened when she entered the transition house, Jeanette began to discern even more clearly that her former partner's behaviour was manipulative and controlling. "He tried everything to get close to the transition house ... he was passing letters [by] the kids. He wrote many letters ... and he was telling me what to do." "He was telling me we are going to have joint custody." She added, "And it made me angry that now I was *not* with him, I still had that control thing going on."

According to the Cycle of Abuse model, (Relationships without abuse, 2000), abusive people will use kind, caring behaviour for a time and "be" the person that the woman has wanted them to be. This is termed the Honeymoon stage. Jeanette's partner tried to do this: "And he sent me roses ... Now we are separated, he is giving me a dozen of beautiful long-stemmed roses." Jeanette realized that his action was a form of manipulation.

When Jeanette "was called to go into second stage housing ... I had nothing to put in there, because my ex was not letting me have my own stuff ... blankets ... I had no dishes, nothing. The way I was seeing it was, he wanted control." She saw her children suffer over the Christmas period when helping agencies and thrift stores were closed. They went without dishes, blankets and furniture, while the family possessions sat in the family home. A caring parent would not behave that way to his children; she could see that this was abuse.

“I could not withdraw any money from the joint account without his signature, and he didn’t want to,” she said, and again she made realizations. “He was still financially abusing of the situation.”

Jeanette began to understand the dynamics of abuse while in the transition house and second stage housing. In both places, she could ask for counselling help from staff when anxious, grieving, or confused. “I realized some patterns. Like, his emotional and verbal kind of exploitation and abuse, and being physically violent towards my kids. He had a Dad with [mental illness] and he was abused when he was a child ... living in fear all the time, and their Dad might explode. So, he carried on the pattern.”

She realized that “I couldn’t trust his verbal and emotional violence, so I had to have all the custody and guardianship by myself. I couldn’t trust him with the children.” After leaving her former partner, Jeanette said, “I felt very powerless in those four years.” Her former partner’s behaviour continued to be abusive.

“He stalked me everywhere. And I didn’t know what the word ‘stalked’ means at that time, but the counsellor said, “I think that he is stalking you.”” It was “to the point that he went to my job, wanting to have a fight with me in front of all the [staff].”

The attempts to control and the events of manipulation, emotional abuse, and even physical abuse continue to the present time. Jeanette emphasized, “One of the things that I find very challenging when you leave an abusive relationship is that it never ends. My ex kept on putting the children between.” “Two years after, he assaulted my son. The police and the Ministry were [called].” At the present, “he’s trying to convince my son to go and live with him. So, it never stops.”

“He will tell the kids, “Oh, I don’t need to send any money to you.” He doesn’t have to talk about this to the children.” “Every time he talks to the kids, there’s always an issue.” Before leaving the abusive relationship, and even today, “You learn to always be on the edge. Like, something is going to happen soon.” Jeanette has learned even to predict what abusive behaviour might occur next in certain situations. She said, “I just told you that it never ends. It happened my son’s birthday comes. He will come to our building [despite the Restraining Order] because he knows I am not going to send him to jail on my son’s birthday.”

When children are involved and when visits are permitted by the court, it is not possible to end interaction with the abusive former partner. Jeanette expressed her sadness, “I wish to be away from him, so that I don’t have to deal with his problems and his miscommunication with the kids ... and his lack of responsibility.”

After leaving her partner, Jeannette realized that to end the cycle of abuse would take more than a Restraining Order. She would have to change. She would have to learn about what had happened to her, and what was her own part in the abusive relationship. She says, “Now, I am a bit wiser. I learned from my mistakes.” “Getting back those skills – it’s a long training.”

Jeanette attended a pre-employment program with an extensive life skills component. “I had to gain some skills ... assertiveness, communication ... and some trust that I could deal with people who have anger problems,” she said. “I was looking at facing angry people.” She was “also, getting to know boundaries, and how to put them.” “The counsellor told me about self esteem,” she said. “Self esteem ... there were days when, me, I think I lost it somewhere down the road.”

While in the life skills program, Jeanette began to realize that abuse is an issue that can affect any woman. During a confrontation with women in her program who did not have her education and training, she shared her realization with them: “An abusive relationship happens at any kind of educational level. It doesn’t matter what economic status you have.” “So,” she added, “you [women] are having taboos that we just need to get rid of, because we are all in the same boat.”

In the current stage of her life, Jeanette can recognise controlling behaviour, and can extricate herself from abusive relationships. “I dated a man last spring,” she said. “The first day, he called five times during the day, and the next day he had these *expectations*, and at the end of the week, he was *telling* me things ... there was a lot of control.” The ability to recognise and remove herself from controlling behaviour has helped Jeannette feel “more powerful with relationships.”

Josie’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

Like Jeanette, Josie sensed something was wrong at the start of her marriage. She said, “Well, I’d had some warnings right at the beginning, but of course I was in love, we

were having a family and so I was like, “I can put up with that.” She attributed his “jealousy, right out of the world!” to love. She remembers her thoughts: “Like an idiot, I’m like, ‘Well, he really cares for me. We’ll work on that problem. No problem.’”

Looking back, Josie was hurt by her partner’s problematic behaviour, but she would make attributions. “I’d always have reasons, ‘his father was an alcoholic, and he was a spoiled baby’, so I would always be understanding.” She also attributed his abusive behaviour to mental illness.

Josie reacted to her partner’s behaviour by trying to avoid triggering him. “I just learned, very carefully, how to respond.” She also tried to compensate for his behaviour socially with co-workers and neighbours.

During the relationship, as years passed, Josie came to realize her partner’s behaviour was abusive. “I can honestly say he was verbally abusive, and very controlling, and not being honest ... and always angry, a very bad character, really.”

Like many of the other participants, she took the sole responsibility to try to change her partner. She now realizes that that was one of the dynamics of abuse. “But that was my craziness! I hoped for all those years. I hoped and wished, and tried, and put out.” Near the end of the marriage, Josie came to realize that there was a pattern to his behaviour. She was realizing, “We’ve been through this routine, many times. We had started that same whole routine.”

When Josie and her children entered a transition house after a traumatic and life-threatening crisis, she was still not completely aware of the dynamics of abuse or that what had occurred for her family was actually abuse. She said, “Even while I was in the transition house, I didn’t feel like I *deserved* to be in a place like that. I felt that it was really meant for people who were *really* abused.”

In the interview, two years after she left the relationship, Josie’s words showed that she did not fully recognise what happened to herself and her children as abuse. Only two years, a relatively short time, had passed since she left the relationship, and she had not gone for counselling during that time. At the time of the interview, Josie was at a point of partly recognising the dynamics of abuse and was still confused. At one point she reiterated that she felt a transition house was for women who experienced “real” abuse, and at another point she defended the fact that she considered herself an abused

woman and had volunteered to take part in the study of change for abused women. She said, “Maybe that doesn’t sound as serious as what happened to other women, but it was horrible! It [emotional abuse] is not like getting your head cracked open, but it’s like...!”

Josie recognises manipulation was part of her experience of abuse, saying, “You are being manipulated, really, and you are following all the rules, just to survive it.” She recognises that control was part of the dynamics of abuse: “He was really just very controlling. He’s *still* controlling.”

She was confused about parts of her role in the abusive relationship, saying, “And it’s still not distinguishable for me, ‘caring for him’, and ‘loving him’. Like, “was that love?” “No.” “Wasn’t it? “Yeah.” I don’t know if that was, you know?”

Barbara’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

Barbara said she did not consciously realize that her former partner’s behaviour was abusive when she lived with him, although she did know that she was being hurt. She said, “I didn’t realize it [was harmful], then.”

At the time of the interview, Barbara said she wonders why she reacted to his behaviour in the way that she did. “He told me that he hated my guts ... and my first reaction was, ‘You can’t really hate me, can you?’” She added, “I turned around and felt badly because I was hated.” Today she wonders why she didn’t leave when her partner’s behaviour was abusive. “Now, looking back, I think, ‘I should have ... walked away, years ago.’”

Looking back, Barbara realizes her former partner was manipulative. He could bring about an emotional reaction in her quite easily. Since she believed she could not argue her point when emotional, he could achieve his purpose despite her objection. She said that, “He realized, ‘Oh, I can get you to cry and get you upset, and now I am getting my own way.’” Abusive! And manipulative. All the things *I* was accused of.”

About her own role in the relationship, she said, “It’s taken me four years to realize that *I allowed it*.” She is learning to divide issues that are his own responsibility from those that are her own, saying, “That [behaviour] was his coping mechanism, which is not my responsibility.”

During the interview, Barbara was working out realizations about feeling guilty during and after her experience of abuse. She said, “I think when you are abused ... you have to understand that ... that is their issue. That is not your issue. You should not ever feel that if somebody ever touches you or abuses you verbally, that that is anything you did. It has taken me four years to realize that I didn’t do anything. All I did is love you.”

Barbara noticed the same type of behaviour as Jeanette mentioned: being hurtful, then bringing roses. Barbara did not have counselling, or support from transition house staff, or attend a life skills program; therefore, she likely never encountered the Cycle of Abuse model (Hill House Manual, 1999; VFVPS, 2000), but she was describing what happens in that explanation of abuse when she said, “He is the kind of person who brings you in, and pushes you away. Brings you in and pushes you away. And I can recognise that now.”

Barbara gave two examples of recently recognising that a person was abusive. Her ability to recognise certain abusive behaviours demonstrates that she is beginning to learn about the dynamics of abuse and is becoming able to act on that knowledge to protect herself. She said, “I said to myself, ‘Bye, honey!’ and left. And I was so proud of myself. I thought, ‘I’ve learnt! I’m finally learning something here!’” And later she said, “I think *recognising* that this is not ideal circumstances, not the kind of person you want in your life, and running, is the best thing you can do.”

Kara’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

During the interview, Kara remembered that in her relationship, “I wasn’t able to make that connection of, “I can only do so much”.” She said, “I took total responsibility for the relationship ... and that I could fix it. *I – could – fix – it.*” For much of the relationship, she “really naively and ignorantly felt that I had power over someone else, that I could help them.” In this respect, she was very similar to Lucy and Josie.

One behaviour that Kara remembers from the relationship is that her partner would set her up for the abuse. “I think that was part of his thing. He would wait till I hit first, and then he’d hit back ten times harder.”

Kara's behaviour began to change as time passed in the relationship. She said, "I started to be more outwardly aggressive, not physically, towards him." She now realizes that "I, myself, took on quite an abusive role *in response to the situation I was in.*"

She noticed something else in her behaviour that also frightened her: "I started to abuse myself before he abused me."

Eventually, Kara remembers, she grew tired of trying to change her partner into the caring, emotionally connected person she wanted to be with. The relationship had deteriorated into times of bonding during drug use, followed by continued abusive behaviour. Kara realized that "I got tired of taking care of his own shit, and I wanted to take care of my own." In abusive relationships, often the abused person is focussed on trying to take care of the abuser's issues and needs, and neglects her own needs. When she gives up doing what he needs to do for himself, and is ready to take care of herself, as Kara did, then she is ready to live without abuse.

Since ending the relationship, Kara has been "really reflecting back and looking at different things" and she has become aware that "it was a big turning point, also, realizing my role in the piece." She began to ask herself, "Did I really get *tricked?* Or did I just not see the signs?" She was able to describe the signs of abuse that occurred, signs that she now realizes signified that he had problematic behaviours and that she could not have a healthy relationship with him. For example, he was completely isolated, had not formed friendships, and had no caring people in his life. Kara believes that should have been the first warning to her. She now also realizes, "I can't force somebody to be communicative with me if they are unable or unwilling to be responsive."

Working on the issues that arose from her experience, Kara said she "has begun to focus more inward, asking, 'What can *I* do to make my life better?' instead of the outward extension of 'what can *other people* do to make my life better?'" By learning to think this way, she is addressing a part of her own behaviour in the past relationship. She has been learning about her own responsibility for what occurred, and "trying to come to terms with my own part in the violence of the relationship." She spoke of her own lack of boundaries when with the former partner, and of learning to practice effective communication near the end of the relationship.

Kara realizes that she lost her “self” during the abusive relationship. It was part of her experience of abuse was that she gave up the right to explore and grow for a time. When she left, she remembers, “I was trying to become me again. And so I spent a lot of [time asking] ‘what do I like? What’s important to me?’” In this respect, her experience was similar to that of Lucy. Since leaving the relationship, Kara is “giving myself responsibility to take care of my needs, and my likes and wants.” She is no longer controlled and emotionally manipulated, but is “self-determined”.

Lucy’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

While with her partner, Lucy noticed that she was beginning to have a pattern in relationships. She was forming relationships with partners whom her friends thought were not appropriate for her, and whom her mother termed ‘renovation jobs’. She said, “I have a habit of getting in relationships with these men ... that have so much work that needs to be done on them, and I am always just trying to do it.” She had the belief that when she started something, she should not quit. Like Kara and Josie, she was taking sole responsibility for the relationship, and she was trying to change her partner. “And that just became more and more and more intense, through the relationship: me trying to work it out, when he doesn’t even try to be rational.”

Lucy realized that during the abusive relationship she frequently “found myself trying to reason with him, and that just made things worse.” She now realizes that she was very concerned with his emotions. “And [when] he was mad about something ... I couldn’t focus, I was so preoccupied with that.” Lucy now realizes that when she confronted her partner about his behaviour, he was manipulative. “I’d get upset about something, and he would throw it back on me. And then I would feel guilty for what I had done, and I *hadn’t done anything*.”

Looking back, Lucy realizes that she was being broken down by the abuse. “I would, as the relationship progressed, feel more and more broken down ... and react by just starting to cry.” She began to believe that she “failed in [relationships] all the time.”

Lucy did not realize until much later that isolation was a harmful aspect of her relationship. Isolation is often an important part of maintaining abusive relationships (Hill House Manual, 1999). She knows that she took part in her own increasing isolation.

She did not speak to friends about crisis incidents. Like Kara, she risked losing the support of friends. Much like her own mother had done, Lucy went to classes, and otherwise, she remained at home. "I really lost touch with friends," she said. "If a friend called me for coffee, I couldn't leave." Like Kara, she was losing her sense of self and her opportunities to learn, explore, and grow. "I didn't do anything that *I* wanted to do." "You closed so many doors when you are in a relationship like that."

Reflecting on the past relationship, Lucy realizes that one reason she isolated herself is that she was not ready to hear what friends would say. "Women are the first ones we shut out when we get into relationships that are unhealthy, because, they'll just tell you, 'Get out!' and you don't want to hear it."

Lucy felt betrayed by lack of support from her partner during the period following a critical medical procedure. During this time of serious emotional and physical weakness, her partner accused her of lying about needing support. When she asked for his help, he threw several bags of groceries down the stairs at her. At this point, she considered leaving, but felt trapped. A further crisis jeopardized her reputation in the community in which she worked and threatened her career, leading to her separation from her partner. On the evening that she left, a further critical incident occurred.

Lucy and her friends recognized that she could weaken and return to the relationship, so she brought friends along when she packed her belongings. Her former partner tried to take her aside. "I remember him going, 'Lucy, I just want to talk to you for five minutes before you go.'" "This is the abuse relationship," she said, pointing out that she recognises that his actions, separating her from her friends, and behaving in a caring and contrite manner were part of the Honeymoon stage of the Cycle of Abuse.

Lucy set out to try to understand her experience. "Counselling started very soon after I left the abusive relationship," she said. "I've thought about it a lot, independently and through therapy." "One of the biggest things that helped, it sounds odd," she said, "but being in [her profession with disabled people], *context is everything!* ... So, I've realized that in that situation, it happened in its own context." "You know, we get so conditioned to how we interact with people; it's hard to break out of that mould!"

Like Barbara, she takes responsibility for her own actions but not for her partner's abusive actions. Lucy said, "It took me a long time to get over the fact that I had been ...

trying to continue this conversation” that led to a violent incident. “Through therapy, and my family doctor and others” helped her to realize that “you could have chosen to jump up and down in the corner but he didn’t have to physically touch you.”

Lucy now realizes the drawbacks of isolating oneself and focussing only on the needs of another. She says, “I don’t do these things any more. If I was gonna go take that Tai Chi class – [then] I’m going to *take it*. I’m not going to stay home and wait for you. And you are a person that is supportive of me, and that’s with no questions asked.”

Claire’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

Claire married her first husband, “the boy next door”, when she was eighteen. She says, “He was physically abusive to the point where I figured I was going to die if I stayed.” She left, to save her life. “He beat the crap out of me for three years ... but, he *got drunk* and beat me up, so I thought it was him drinking. I thought the alcohol caused the behaviour. So the next husband, I made sure he didn’t drink, so I thought I would be safe.” Twenty-one year old Claire went to a counsellor, who, rather than working with her on abuse dynamics, boundaries, or safety issues, chose to address “why Claire was promiscuous.”

Claire remarried. Her second husband, a bouncer, turned out to be involved in organized crime. “He didn’t drink, but he just beat me up because that’s the way he was.” “He would hurt people on a regular basis. I was really afraid of him.”

This time, Claire began to recognise the dynamics of abuse quite soon in the marriage. For example, she “was starting to feel very much controlled and afraid.” As well, she noticed “it seemed like I was spending most of my time just trying to keep this man happy so he wouldn’t fly off the handle.” That is similar to Josie’s statement about “learning carefully how to respond.”

A year into the second marriage, Claire began to consider leaving with her child, but she had been threatened. “He had a knife in his hand and he held it right to my eyes, and he said, ‘I’ll cut your eyes out if you even try to leave me. You’re dead.’ And I believed him.” One dynamic of abusive relationships is that the abused person sometimes has to remain in the relationship until she can find the safest way to leave.

This is discussed under the section for the metatheme, “leaving with the resources they had at the time (internal and external)”.

One day a crisis was eminent and Claire decided she had to make the break. She did not escape without harm: “He broke my nose in the parking lot.” After she left, the Cycle of Abuse continued. She remembers, “My husband was phoning the office every day and threatening me with bombs. And then he’d send roses. And the next day, he’d threaten me again.”

Although she did not weaken during the honeymoon stage when he sent roses, it would be years before Claire would ever learn of the Cycle of Abuse model (Hill House Manual, 1999). She was trying to understand what had gone wrong. She remembers that after the second marriage ended, “that’s when I started to see that there was more to it than me just picking the wrong person at the wrong time.” “I thought, ‘Okay, so this person *didn’t* drink, but he still beat the crap out of me. And the person before did drink, and he beat the crap out of me. So, it’s not just the alcohol.”

There was little time before Claire began a third relationship. She still believed a woman should be in a relationship. She tried to be safe from abuse by being with someone who she thought would never seek a committed relationship. But one day, he did, and he became her third husband.

Again, Claire was in an abusive relationship. This time, it was emotional and financial abuse. “I knew there was something missing in the relationship, but I didn’t know what it was at the time.” “It kept me feeling like I was very dependent on him.” “He sold himself to me. He got me thoroughly convinced that I needed him and I was totally dependent on him.” “When you’re going through psychological abuse, it just seemed that I was up and down, up and down, up and down, up and down, like a yo-yo, all the time. And there was so much uncertainty.”

Claire has realized that isolation was part of the dynamics of her experience of abuse. Moving away from the city and her job, she became “a ‘stay-at-home mom’, living out in the ‘boonies’, totally dependent on this guy for everything, and feeling quite isolated.” “Financially, we were very poor, out in a trailer park, and very isolated.”

“There was never any certainty about whether any money was coming in.” That uncertainty was part of financial abuse. “The conditions under which we were living ...

there was no money to buy oil for the furnace. A lot of times there was no food in the fridge.” Geographic isolation kept Claire from seeking a job.

She was socially isolated from the people in her rural area. “I felt really alienated among the people that lived around us, because my husband had borrowed money from them. He would write rubber cheques to everybody. That was really embarrassing. I felt really caught.”

“So that’s how he was abusive, he was a compulsive liar... he was emotionally abusive And then it finally dawned on me that he has lied to *me*, too.”

Although she did not realize it until after she left him, there was a pattern in her husband’s job loss. “He had a pattern of behaviour. He would find a job, work really hard ... then quit or get fired. He’d come home and tell me that he was going to kill himself! And then my job was to pick him up, help him out of the depression ... and the whole process would start all over again.”

Claire realizes that “he was abusive in the sense that he knew there was something wrong - and he did have mental health issues; he knew that - but he wasn’t prepared to do anything about it.” Claire emphasized that it was his *failure to take responsibility* for his actions that made him abusive. “To me, that’s what an abusive person is; it is someone that causes problems but won’t take responsibility.”

Claire took the children and left. At this point, she says, “I was so tired of turmoil, and emotional ups and downs. I *had* to find peace.” She remembers her fear: “I had a sense that he would harass me and stalk me ... I felt afraid. Fear has been in my life all my life.” Her fears were confirmed: “After I left him, he stalked me. He followed me around town. He started to hang around my building, and to harass me.” She remembers that, “I did go into a transition house for a week, because he was stalking me, and I felt really afraid.”

After she left her husband, Claire worked on the issues arising from her experience of abuse. “Well, I figured that, after the third one, there was a pattern there! And I wasn’t sure what the pattern was, but I thought, ‘I keep doing this’ and ‘why am I doing this?’ and ‘why does this keep happening to me?’” She entered a life skills program that was helpful.

It was at this point that she saw the pattern in her former partner's behaviour. "Then I realized ... Wow! In seven years, he had thirty jobs! And how many times have I talked to him about not killing himself? It was like, 'Whoa!'"

She also began to realize that lack of emotional connection was a problem in their relationship. "What I thought was me wanting to see more of him was in fact me wanting him to be emotionally intimate ... that is what I was missing."

She began to think about all the abuse she had endured during her childhood and adulthood. She was now in her thirties. She reflected, "It felt like an accumulation, the abuse from my childhood, the abuse from my relationships, and that's how I got to this place where I wanted peace in my life ... it was like an accumulation of stress. You deal with this, and you deal with this, and you deal with this, and it piles up. When the pile gets too high, you then start working with it. You've got to *do something with it*, because it is still piling up, and it's affecting your life."

As she dealt with past abuse, she learned about the dynamics of an abusive relationship. She realized her family of origin had influenced her expectations of partners. "That is when I learned, in counselling, that I wasn't a masochist. I didn't enjoy being abused." "[I learned that] because I grew up in an abusive home, I had abusive partners. That is what I was familiar with; that's what was comfortable for me. So, when I met people that were that way, I felt comfortable around them, so I would gravitate toward (them), not knowing that it probably wasn't healthy for me."

She realized that her former partner's behaviour patterns, including threats of suicide, "kept me busy, focussing on his problems that way, instead of what was really going on." Her experience was very similar to that of Lucy and Josie in that respect.

"And finally, what I came to realize was that I don't need to be in a relationship just for the sake of having a relationship; I am okay on my own; and, that a relationship had to add to your life, not make it harder." "As long as I *need* a relationship, I will settle for less. Then I will take whatever comes along." "So those were the things that I realized after the end of my third abusive relationship. Those were the things that I gradually came to realize. I didn't need to be in a relationship. I didn't need to have someone beside me to be a whole, complete person."

Claire has also realized that “It takes incredible amounts of strength to survive in an abusive relationship.” That is one of the aspects of abuse for women. “They know how to survive. And it is just [necessary to] take some of that strength that they already have, and use it for themselves, instead of being in a relationship where it is drained out of them all the time.”

Trudy’s experience of increasing awareness of abuse

At one point in her life, Trudy sought a father for her son. She sought a husband for herself, who would help keep her away from drug use, so that she could be a good mother to her son. When she found her partner, “I knew there was a part of me that was so weak that we fit together like puzzle pieces.” Life with him was “the hard road to get what I needed. There’s the vicious road and the beneficial road; I took the vicious road.”

Her partner was emotionally abusive. He was prone to loud “ranting and raving: what a poor mother I was; how his first wife abandoned him, and betrayed him, and how his biological mother abandoned him, and his adoptive mother abandoned him and betrayed him; *how awful women are.*”

Her partner was also physically abusive. “He hit the children,” Trudy said. “He had always been pretty brutal. I didn’t know how brutal until after we broke up, and the children told me what he used to do when he was in the bedroom with them.”

At the same time, Trudy’s abusive partner “kept saying how we were the ‘best’ family, we were ‘better than normal’, because of this ‘discipline’, and the kids ‘weren’t spoiled’, all of this crap.” Trudy came to realize that her husband “was a brain-washer.” During most of the marriage, Trudy “was brain-washed to believe that I would have been a dismal mother without him. A failure. And, I believed him.”

Like Kara, Trudy found that “I became violent myself.” Only once was the violence physical, and that when she hit him in retribution to his abuse of her child. Similarly to Kara’s experience, there were occasions when Trudy hurt herself. She said, “I stabbed myself, in order to make a point.” “I almost lost the use of one arm.”

Trudy remembers that to survive abuse, she sometimes was dissociated and felt distanced from reality. “What do you call that, ‘derealization’? “People just looked like they were Martians, aliens. I felt very alone. Things weren’t real.”

As time passed, Trudy was helped toward a point of ending the relationship with her abusive partner by her interest in spirituality and meditation, and her progressing feminist beliefs. “Oppression is wrong. Oppression by anybody to anybody ... that discovery helped me get out of the marriage.” Similarly to Claire’s experience with her second husband, fear kept Trudy from leaving. Trudy reflected, “I stayed together with him a long time because I was afraid of what he would do if we left.”

As well, Trudy believed she needed her partner’s control. “There was a turning point at about ten years where I remember saying to myself at point after point, ‘Have I had enough?’ ‘Have I had enough?’ And for years, the answer was ‘No. Well, it still fits. I’m still needing the abuse.’ But at the point at which I asked if I had had enough, and I said, ‘Yes!’, *then* I knew it was abuse.” Looking back, Trudy says, “When I said to myself, ‘I’m still needing the abuse’, the way I look at it *now* is, that’s the addict in me. That’s the unhealthy part of me, still wanting to destroy me.” “Or maybe it’s true, too, that I had to hit rock bottom to be able to come up. And I haven’t figured all that out.”

Table 4: Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse

METATHEME INCREASING AWARENESS OF DYNAMICS OF ABUSE	
BEHAVIOUR OF FORMER PARTNER, AND PARTICIPANT'S FIRST IMPRESSION	CHANGED AWARENESS AS TIME PASSED
Early in marriage, partner chose to be silent, or to "rant". Participant said, "I knew something was wrong but I couldn't put my finger on it." "You learn to always be on the edge."	Several years later, participant continued to endure hour-long "ranting". Participant realized it was emotional abuse and that it felt like violence. She realized the children were living in fear.
Participant thought the partner's behaviour with the children was too "impatient." She was unaware he physically abused them when she was at work. The children kept silent.	Partner's behaviour with the children was physical and emotional abuse. Participant realized he was "carrying on the pattern". "He was abused when he was a child ... living in fear all the time, and their Dad might explode."
With co-workers, participant felt great social embarrassment when they learned her partner was abusive.	Participant came to realize during Life Skills Program that abuse happens to many woman, "at any educational level. It doesn't matter what kind of economic status you have."
In early years, her partner's verbal attacks hurt the participant. She said, "I would always have reasons" (excuses). "I'd be understanding." "I learned, very carefully, how to respond."	When she left her partner, the participant said, "I can honestly say that he was verbally abusive, and very controlling, and not being honest".
Many participants took the sole responsibility to get their partner to change his abusive behaviour. One said, "I hoped and wished and tried, and put out."	The same participant later realized that to take sole responsibility to change someone else's abusive behaviour "was my craziness"; it cannot be done.
When her partner verbally abused her, saying he "hated her guts", one participant felt badly because I was hated."	It was "abusive, and manipulative", she now realizes, adding, "It has taken me four years to realize that I allowed it" (his behaviour).

Section Five: “Changing beliefs and expectations about relationships”

Section five presents data that supports the metatheme concerning the change in relationship beliefs that took place over time for each participant.

Kara - Former belief: one person can take all the responsibility for the relationship

Describing the period before leaving, Kara said, “I took total responsibility for the relationship ... and that I could fix it. *I – could – fix – it.*” “And so I would try all different kinds of things within the relationship, trying to make the relationship work. That was the focus.” She said, “I wasn’t able to make that connection of ‘I can only do so much.’” “I stayed with him longer than I wanted to, because he was going to be homeless.” Eventually Kara realized that “I got tired of taking care of his own shit, and I wanted to take care of my own.”

When she was at the point of taking action to end the relationship, Kara said, “But I still felt very responsible for him”, and she acted on that by giving him a month to find a place, and providing furniture.

During the period after ending the relationship, Kara realized that she had “really naively and ignorantly felt that I had power over somebody else... that I could help them”. She came to realize that “I can’t force somebody to be communicative with me if they are unable or unwilling. I was realizing I’m putting some responsibility *on them.*”

Kara - Forming new beliefs and expectations of an intimate relationship

Kara now realizes that a healthy, fulfilling relationship requires effort from both partners. “I’m like, ‘Okay, well, this is what *I* can do. What are *you* going to be able to do?’” She expects to be able to explore her interests, grow as a person, and take care of herself, “to give myself responsibility to take care of *my* needs, and my likes and wants.”

Lucy - Former belief: one person can take all the responsibility for the relationship

Not realizing that a person is responsible for their own change, Lucy used to believe she could improve her partners. She said, “I have a habit of getting in relationships with these men that have so much work that needs to be *done on them*, and *I am always just trying to do it.*” “That just became more and more intense, through the

relationship: me trying to work it out, when he doesn't even try to be rational." She has learned that trying to change others is a form of control. "I've read a lot of material from Narcotics Anonymous, and (am making realizations about) trying to control others."

Lucy - Former belief: when you start, you can't quit

Lucy remembers that as a child, "My parents said, 'You can't quit, once you start.'" She attributed staying in an unhappy and unfulfilling relationship for so long to that belief. "It's like I wouldn't give up on working it out," she said. "I needed to make the situation work, for whatever reason, so I just couldn't let it go." "I realized that things weren't right, but again, I was just holding on, trying to remedy things always."

Lucy - Former belief: a woman should remain at home and focus on her partner

Behaving much as her mother had done, Lucy carried out the above belief with two of her partners, isolating herself from social support and from developing her own interests. "I really lost touch with friends," she said. "If a friend called me for coffee, I couldn't leave." "I didn't do anything that *I* wanted to do." "You closed so many doors when you are in a relationship like that." Today, Lucy has created a supportive "woman network" and values her friendships. She takes time for self-development and self care.

Lucy - Forming new beliefs about expectations of an intimate relationship

Lucy described her relationship with her new partner as healthy. She no longer isolates herself. "I don't do those things any more. If I was gonna go take that Tai Chi class, [then] I'm going to *take it*. I'm not going to stay home and wait for you. And you are a person that is supportive of me, and that [is] with no questions asked."

Jeanette - Former belief: one person can take all the responsibility for the relationship

Jeanette took sole responsibility for improving the relationship, improving or healing her partner. "I was the 'counsellor' ... *I* was doing everything to keep the family together." "I was making a lot of money but I was the one who paid everything." Her partner would not take responsibility for his actions or seek help. "He didn't want to go to any programs, any counselling, any doctors, and he kept on saying, 'Oh, things will be

okay.’ I gave him the option to go and take care of himself, and he didn’t want to.” “He wouldn’t go for counselling, and he was not changing.” She has now realized that it is not possible for one person to accomplish change for another.

Jeanette - Belief: Marriage is forever

Jeanette ended her relationship when a crisis occurred that threatened loss of her children and career. She grieved the loss of her home and marriage for a long time. Jeanette did not state whether she still believes that marriage is forever, but she knows she cannot live with her former partner.

Jeanette - Forming new beliefs about expectations from an intimate relationship

Jeanette did not speak of her expectations of future partners, other than disliking and rejecting being controlled. She dated occasionally, but recognised controlling behaviours in some of her dates. She spoke of having grown to distrust people because of her experience. At the time of the interview, Jeanette said she prefers to focus on helping her children, rather than spending any energy seeking a new relationship.

Claire - Former belief: a woman has to be in a relationship, good or bad

Claire’s family kept reinforcing the social message that a woman had to be in a relationship, “good or bad”. In her childhood and as a young woman, Claire learned this belief from her family and from social institutions and popular culture. “And the general message is, ‘if you’re not in a relationship, then there’s something wrong with you’.”

After three abusive partners, Claire said that, “Finally, I came to realize ... that a relationship has to add to your life, not make it harder.”

Claire - Forming new beliefs about expectations from an intimate relationship

In the interview, Claire said little about her current expectations of a new relationship. For many years, she “believed that one more abusive relationship will be the end of me.” She said that she has always wanted “emotional support”. She wants the relationship to add to her life. It is also important that she not find the relationship “unfulfilling” and that it is not a relationship that makes her “bored”. She expects that

having realized she prefers same-sex relationships will result in a more positive outcome. Like Jeanette, Claire has a certain amount of distrust of friendships. She focussed on helping herself to be accepting of being alone. Like Trudy, Claire worked on her issues and personal development and rebuilt her life for over a decade before finding a new relationship.

Josie - Former belief: "one person can take all the responsibility for the relationship"

Josie made a huge effort for almost twenty years to "cure" her partner's illnesses, to keep the family together and stable, and to manage the finances. It was a long time before she lost hope that she could accomplish change for her partner. She said, "That was my craziness: I hoped ... and tried and put out ... for years and years and years."

Of trying to accomplish change for her partner, Josie said, "I had *taken care of him*, like a kid, like one of my kids." "I did as much research as I could, and was just having him eat certain foods, and nothing toxic, and cleaning out, and taking all these supplements, and just doing all this stuff." When he was abusive, she had a role: "I was to try and keep the peace all the time."

Eventually, she realized, "Why am I putting in all this effort, right? *He* is not putting in any effort." "He's just having to be self-involved." In the final months of the relationship, she realized "There wasn't even caring, there was nothing coming from him." "So I'm holding the family together; now I've got him on my hands ... and he's treating me terribly." She could no longer live that way.

Josie - Belief: Marriage is forever

There was no data to show that Josie had changed her strongly-held belief. She did say that she could not have sexual relations with a partner who no longer loved her.

Josie - Forming new beliefs about expectations from an intimate relationship

Josie did not state what she now would expect in a relationship. She had not long been out of her twenty-year relationship when she was interviewed, and she had not accessed counselling. She was still feeling grief and remembering trauma. Two years

after ending a lengthy abusive relationship is not a very long time. Josie said she is not even emotionally ready for friendships, let alone a new relationship with a partner.

Trudy – Beliefs: A broken home will harm the children; “I need to be controlled”

Trudy’s belief that divorce would harm the children is discussed in Section 3 (4), above. Trudy believed that she was not strong enough to resist her addiction, and that she needed to be with a controlling person in order to avoid relapse and be able to be a good parent to her children. This belief is discussed in Section 4 (g), above.

Trudy - Belief: what she expects now from an intimate relationship

Trudy has come to realize there are things she would expect in a relationship, things which were missing from the relationship with her former partner. When speaking of praying for a father for her son and a husband for herself, she said, “I forgot to pray for pleasure.” (Laughs). “I forgot to pray for ...um ...” (quietly) “... love.”

It was many years before Trudy began a relationship with a new partner. She said she felt overwhelmed and full of fear. Wisely, she proceeded cautiously as she sought and found a fulfilling, respectful relationship.

Barbara - Former belief: keeping the peace will lead to a happy relationship

Barbara believed that in a relationship she needed to focus on her partner and his needs, even to the point of neglecting her own needs. She said, “I think that is a *big point*, that I didn’t make any boundaries. I wanted to make *him* happy. Forget about making myself happy. I was so busy ... keeping the peace, and being nice, and being quiet.” Looking back at that behaviour, which she viewed as being life-long, she exclaimed, “I am so sick of this!” At the time of the interview, she had begun to change her beliefs about relationships. She said, “This is about me now, not about him.”

Barbara - Forming new beliefs and expectations of an intimate relationship

Barbara struggled with the desire to reunite with her former partner. She said she was just approaching being able to “let go” and “move on”. She did not speak of her expectations of a healthy relationship.

Section Six: Resistance

The metatheme, “Resistance”, arose from participants’ descriptions of behaviour that resisted their partner’s abusive behaviour. The data revealed many acts of resistance among the behaviours of the participants when interacting with their partners before, during, and after the break-up of the committed relationship. Before I provide examples from the data, I must clarify “resistance”.

It is Wade’s (1997) view that any psychological or behavioural act through which a person “attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible” is a form of resistance. Resistance also includes imagining or attempting to establish “a life based on respect and equality, on behalf of one’s self or others, including any effort to redress the harm caused by violence or other forms of oppression” (Wade, 1997). To explore resistance and uncover strengths in the lived experiences of clients, Wade has developed response-based interviewing, which is discussed in Chapter 7, Section A: Implications for helping professionals.

The following excerpts from interviews with Trudy, Josie, and Kara are just a few examples of the acts of resistance revealed by the participants. The resistance behaviour takes covert and overt forms, and is cognitive, verbal, and physical.

Trudy’s resistance to abuse and oppression

Trudy, married to a very violent man for almost two decades, would dissociate frequently in order to escape verbal, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Dissociation, separating one’s consciousness from what is going on around oneself, is a form of resistance. She said, “At times, I would just dissociate. I remember being on the ceiling, just watching the two of us, you know? And just almost feeling shoved out of my body. And resorting to leaving my body.” She remembered doing this when she experienced events that were “pretty traumatic.”

At some point, Trudy discovered that spiritual meditation helped her. Although the discovery of meditation and spiritual practice “has been a blessing” for Trudy up to

the present time, she stated, “I realize now that I used meditation in the same way people use drugs, to escape life, and not have to be here.” Meditation allowed Trudy to escape situations that she did not want to accept or comply with. It was a form of resistance. As well, meditation allowed her to be calm when she returned to reality, and to be able to parent her children to the best of her ability in a challenging situation. In that way, meditation was also a coping mechanism.

Dissociation and meditation were two passive ways of resisting abuse that Trudy used. She also resisted in overt ways. Trudy would verbally resist, and “fight back when it came to (the children’s) safety.” “He loved to yell and scream at me ... and I would ask him to keep his voice down, because they’d be upstairs.” “One time, he pounded my eldest son on the head, because he overflowed the toilet. And he was berating him, violently, and the two older children escaped to a neighbour’s house and phoned me at work... I came in ... and I just turned the TV off and said, ‘Things aren’t okay. That was just not okay to do what you did.’ And I was furious. And then I clammed up. And later that night ... he was, as usual, watching TV, and the back of his head was towards me ... and I took the heel of my hand and I whammed him in the back of the head as hard as I could. ... I had this low, deadly tone, and I said, ‘Don’t you *ever* touch my kid.’ But, of course, he did.”

The foregoing incident was the only occasion on which Trudy used physical violence against her partner. She also threatened him, at one point, saying that he’d better not hit her, “because he had to go to sleep some time, and I would get him back.” She did, however, use physical violence against herself, in a form of resistance. “But I fought. I stabbed myself, in order to make a point,” she said. She does not think it was a suicide attempt. She said, “I think it was mostly (a statement) that ‘I’m willing to *die* rather than to experience what I’ve just experienced from you.’”

Trudy spoke of cognitive resistance. Wade (1997) defined mental acts as one of the forms that resistance can take. First, she said, “I think I had just been pushed down so hard that I couldn’t go any lower. And so, in not going lower, I ... stopped and I looked at myself, and I thought, ‘What is this? I’m here. Who said he’s better than I am, just because he’s male?’” And she took her cognitive resistance a step further, making it verbal. “I said it to [her partner], “I don’t have to be a man to be okay.” Later on, she

said, “I actually had some idea that life could be better.” Attempts to imagine or establish a life based on respect or equality, said Wade (1997), are manifestations of resistance.

When the abuse had, after sixteen years, brought Trudy to the point of having a “clear vision of the death of my soul”, again she resisted. She knew “it was a vision of what was really there” and she knew “that it was wrong” and must not be allowed to occur. “I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t go any farther with him, or I would die.” Simultaneously, she was realizing that her children were receiving “unacceptable” and “awful messages” about male-female relationships. At that point, Trudy knew her resistance would have to take the form of ending the relationship, and leaving. She said, “I was still using the biggest strength I had ... to get out.”

Josie’s resistance to abuse and oppression

Josie, like Trudy and Claire, had a long term committed relationship and children. Her resistance occurred when she set boundaries that prioritized the children. “At one point I just said, “We are not all going to just sit around and watch you be sick. And there’s just no way.” She refused to go on a camping trip with her partner and the large family of children, saying, “Okay, if you are going to be this sick, I’m not going to do it all on my own.” She added that, “he immediately got better ... so, this was really an eye-opener!” Josie’s partner was financially abusive and sometimes squandered their money. She found ways to budget, to supplement the children’s home schooling with extra activities. During the last year of the marriage, when she returned to work, “I really had to hide the money that I was earning, because he wanted to have it ... swallow it up.”

Josie, like Trudy, risked injury during a physical act of resistance. After twenty years of abuse, Josie had reached the point that “when my husband was badgering me, I would start to react physically. I would see black coming in from the sides of my eyes and I was blacking out. The only thing that I could do to stop the physical reaction was to run away.” On one occasion, “I jumped out of the car when he was badgering me. I was trying to run away.”

Kara's resistance to abuse and oppression

Kara's resistance to abusive behaviour took the form of confrontational behaviour. "I wouldn't back down." Her cognitive form of resistance took the form of thinking, "Men aren't going to treat me like that!"

At the time, Kara believed that "I'm in control somehow by swearing back. Like, I'm tough." Although her partner's words hurt her, she resisted with a confrontational manner, intended to send a message: "I'm not hurting, because look at me, I'm tough, and in your face!" "That was when I started, myself, to be more outwardly aggressive, not physically, towards him. I would start to scream, and swear ... so I, myself, took on quite an abusive role in response to the situation I was in."

Kara added, "This is when things started to get really bad. I started to abuse myself before he abused me." Self-abuse can be resistance behaviour. First, it puts control into the victim's hands, and second, it might prevent the partner's impending abusive behaviour.

Kara began to look at her partner's behaviour and to think, "I'm worth more than this". She began to "focus inward" instead of on her partner, and to ask, "What can I do to make my life better?" Kara remembers thinking, "I wanted to make my life happier," and, "I'm growing, and I want to keep growing." To envision and work toward a life based on respect or equality is an act of resistance (Wade, 1997).

When a participant such as Lucy or Kara broke the secrecy and spoke to a friend, she was exposing her partner's acts of abuse. When Barbara sought her father's advice about her partner's behaviour, she was exposing and trying to prevent his abuse. When Lucy decided, after a crisis event, to never again tell her partner the location at which she would be working with a client, it was an act intended to prevent future abusive incidents. Acts that expose and prevent abuse and oppression are acts of resistance (Wade, 1997).

As Wade proposes, it is very important for persons in helping relationships to recognize and honour the spontaneous resistance of people who have been sexually abused, battered, humiliated, and subjected to other forms of oppression (Wade, 1997). I strongly believe that by illuminating the resistance behaviours of clients, therapists and others in helping relationships can play an important role in assisting clients to continue

on with the change process, and to choose new, positive, and ever-evolving change for themselves, just as the participants did in this study.

Section Seven: "Leaving with the resources they had at the time"

In section seven, data is presented that supports the metatheme, "Leaving with the resources they had at the time." Resources are both internal and external. The section includes participants' description of their self-efficacy during the change process.

Participants described leaving a relationship using the only external and internal resources they had. External resources are societal resources such as friends, family, transition houses, social assistance, the police and justice system. Internal resources are psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, self esteem, a drive for self-preservation, communication skills, a sense of empowerment, or an internal locus of control. I provide three examples of participants ending a relationship using the only resources they had.

a.) Leaving, using the only external resources she had

Claire was embarrassed about the way that she had left her second partner. However, she had used the only external resource she had. Claire realized she needed to end the relationship when she saw that her partner was violent and dangerous. When she foresaw that a crisis was approaching and violence would occur, she spoke of her concerns to her employer, and he offered help. She kept her pay in the car.

When the abusive event began, Claire started to leave. Her partner assaulted her on the way to her car and he broke her nose. Claire escaped with her child and went to live with her employer's family in an out-of-town location.

Claire did not have an emotionally or financially supportive family of origin. She did not know that transition houses existed, and she believes they did not exist during her first and second relationships. Her second partner was dangerous and connected to organized crime. She accomplished leaving and finding safety the best way that she could. She used the only resources available, a supportive employer who was able to open his home to her and her child.

After a life-threatening crisis, Josie foresaw that she would have to leave the province with her younger children in order to provide safety. She had virtually no social

resources to help her. She had recently started working, so with her pay cheque in hand and with the family camping gear, she put the children in the vehicle and drove. She had only enough money to buy gas to get them to another province. On arrival, she had to rely on emergency help from a transition house while seeking work.

b.) Leaving, using the only internal resources she had

Trudy left her children with her abusive partner when she left. She left using the only resources she had.

Trudy was not a selfish or shallow person. She had married her partner with the goal of being a good mother and providing a good home and a father for her first son. She loved her children and nurtured them to the best of her ability during the twenty-year marriage. She firmly believed for a long time that a broken home would harm them. Eventually, she came to see that the children, now teenagers, were witnessing her abuse and learning about adult relationships from what they saw between their parents. She did not like the messages they were learning about adult relationships. Trudy did not feel strong enough psychologically to take them and leave; she lacked the resources. She believed she would end the harm by removing herself from the home.

At the time of her realization that she must leave the relationship, Trudy had come to the point of fearing for her own survival. After many years of abuse, she had now come to realize the impending death of her soul or spirit. She had seen it. She took this warning very seriously.

Although the children were the most important thing in her life, by this point she said she had “given up on being a human”. The only resource Trudy had left was spirituality. She could feel well again when meditating and “being in the light”. To save her own spirit, and thus her life, and to stop the harm to the children, Trudy left, using the only resources she had: the desire to find healing in “the light” of meditation, and the instinct for self-preservation.

Self-efficacy – an internal resource. Self-efficacy was an important theme that was part of the metatheme “Leaving with the resources they had”. Self-efficacy is a resource for women, particularly when facing the challenges involved in ending a relationship with an abusive partner. It has been my experience that when a woman’s

self-efficacy rises, she is more likely to take action and face the risks involved in ending the relationship. However, in this study, participants spoke of having low self-efficacy in the period before ending the relationship. They ended their relationships *despite* low self-efficacy.

Josie said that at the points where she considered leaving her husband, she felt “totally incapable” of taking care of the children herself, and even just before she left, she still felt the same way. She clarified that, “this is one hard thing, is your confidence. ...People may think you feel full of confidence, but this kind of ordeal really just puts you to the ground.”

Concerning about being able to handle the risks, the finances, parenting, and other issues if she ended the relationship with her third partner, Claire said, “I felt afraid.” She said, “It’s not so much there *now*, but fear has always been a huge part of my life. And every time I meet an obstacle in my life, I look at, ‘Okay, what am I *afraid* of?’ And it is always based on or because of *fear*.”

When asked how capable she felt of being able to carry on and provide for the children if she left, Trudy said, “Not at all (capable). Zero. ...I said to the children, ‘There is nothing left of me.’” On the day she left, she knew she could only take care of herself. She said, “I was able to do that. I had that much self-efficacy. I knew I could work.” She strengthened herself in the last weeks before she extricated herself from the relationship by reminding herself repeatedly, “I knew my soul was drowning. I was seeing a vision on the exterior of what was on the interior. And I knew I *had* to do something. I couldn’t go any farther with him or I would die. I’ve got to get out. I said that over and over, ‘I’ve got to do it. I have no choice. There is no choice.’”

Why did the data lack examples of rising self-efficacy just before the point of ending the relationship, I asked. I considered two aspects concerning self-efficacy.

Validity of remembered low self-efficacy. First, I considered that it is a retrospective study and the participants are remembering how they felt and what they thought. Perhaps they had higher self-efficacy than they remember now. I asked myself whether Josie would have gotten in the vehicle with her children and left if she thought it would not succeed in saving them from harm, or if she thought they could not survive as a family without her husband’s income and influence. I realized that that is exactly what

happened. I could not negate the validity of what the participants remembered or I would negate the validity of what they had learned from their experiences. I believed Josie when she reported that her self-efficacy was low when she left, and that she feared she could not meet the children's financial and emotional needs if she formed a new family without a father. The data showed that, despite low self-efficacy, Josie ended the relationship in order to end the pain of what was happening at home, to escape the life-threatening crisis that was imminent, and to take a chance (not a certainty, in her belief) that they could make a new life together in another province.

Emotional abuse decreased participants' self-efficacy over time. Second, I remembered that emotional abuse of participants by their former partners included convincing them that they needed their partner and could not cope as a person or parent without their partner. For example, Claire said, "he sold me!" She remembers that while she was with her partner, "I always felt like I was dependent on him, like I really, really needed him." "He did a really good job of *convincing me* that he was the be-all and end-all. Like, he was a great talker. He's a *salesman!* So, he *sold me!* He sold himself to me." Claire said that she was "thoroughly convinced that I needed him and I was totally dependent on him." She said, "I finally realized that *I'm* not the one that is dependent." Similarly, Barbara said, "I no longer feel dependent on him."

Trudy said her partner was pleased that she had been raised to believe that "women are not capable". He helped to decrease her self-efficacy with what she called "brain-washing" behaviour. Trudy said, "I was brain-washed to believe that I would have been a dismal mother without him. A failure. And, I believed him."

As the participants told me themselves, their self-efficacy was low around the time of ending the relationship. Nevertheless, when the decisional balance had shifted and they realized that they must either act, or, as Claire said, "go down with the ship", they faced the risks despite low self-efficacy, and they made the attempt. The implications of this finding will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Section Eight "Imagine: Evolving goals, simple to complex"

In section eight, the metatheme "Imagine: Evolving goals, Simple to Complex" is explored. The data shows that participants formed simple goals to meet basic needs

around the time of ending the relationship. They became able to imagine and strive to accomplish increasingly complex goals as they passed through the stages of change.

Simple goals evolve into complex goals

The goals that participants chose were ‘simple’ to start with. They involved wanting to meet basic needs such as to obtain food, shelter, safety or survival (to save one’s life). The goal could be to end a risk, such as risk of losing one’s career or custody of one’s children. The goals were often described in short concise sentences.

The goals are an integral part of the women’s process of change, and that change did not end when they had left the relationship. More complex goals were chosen as time passed, such as to accomplish purchasing a house, or obtaining an undergraduate degree. The change didn’t end. It grew. It is the same change. The goal to save one’s life or spirit can evolve into a goal that enhances one’s life or spirit. Complex goals such as going on a “spiritual quest” required several steps to accomplish. Complex goals were sometimes contemplated before the stage in which they were begun, the survival or evolving stage. Some of the complex goals that were undertaken during the survival stage actually helped to bring about the evolving stage (e.g., self-exploration, undertaken by Kara and Claire, and spiritual quests undertaken by Claire and Trudy).

Claire’s goals

When Claire left her third partner, her goal was simple: “To get the hell out of the trailer park!” This statement helped me realize that participants’ goals started out being very basic and the simple goals were usually stated concisely.

About this goal, Claire said, “It was survival.” She sought to escape financial abuse that resulted in desperate living conditions for herself and her children: “In the winter we didn’t have any heat ... a lot of times there was no food in the fridge.” “I’ll be somewhere where I have a sink that doesn’t leak, and heat, constant heat.”

She spoke of a second goal at the time of leaving: “I had this tremendous feeling that I wanted peace in my life. I *had* to find peace. I just thought, ‘I can’t do this any more.’ I was searching for peace.” Connected to this goal was the feeling that “one more

abusive relationship would be the end of me.” The search for peace was also a way to find survival.

Six months after leaving and settling in a new environment in town, Claire set a new goal. She wanted to take a life skills course. The course led to creating many more goals. “I made a decision I was not going to have any relationships for awhile. I got counselling, too. I worked on myself quite a bit.” She realized there was a pattern in her relationships, and set the goal to find out “why does this keep happening to me?”

Later, Claire set the goal to achieve her Bachelor of Arts degree and she knew that to accomplish this, she had to prioritize her education. She set the goal to “not have any relationships while I was at university.”

At the same time, Claire “went on a spiritual quest.” She set the goal to “read about all the different kinds of religions ... I did a lot of exploring.” Finding the Wiccan religion, and meditation, she had found “a door that opened into a whole bunch of other things.” She began to set goals that would create a “balanced” life, taking care of herself daily in spiritual, physical, and psychological ways.

“I wanted to learn about myself and figure out what was going on for me.” She set a goal for self-exploration. She asked, “what do I like?” - she discovered she liked to use her artistic creativity – and, “who am I, sexually?” She discovered she was lesbian. Claire ended decades of social isolation and could now “enjoy being social” when she found friendships in the lesbian community. The goals Claire set and carried out helped her to come from mere survival into evolving as a person.

Josie's goals

To begin with, Josie set a simple goal: “I have to get far”, and indeed she crossed Canada with her children, to save their lives. “Not knowing if he was going to kill us all ... I knew this was dangerous.”

While at the transition house, Josie set another simple goal, “to find a job first.” “To get some money rolling in.”

Later, in the Survival stage, Josie had settled into a new and stable environment with her family. She set new goals. “We had to have a house; it could not be too far.” “And we had pets.” After Josie worked and saved for two years, she had the down

payment for a house for the family, and found one. Having their own home, she was able to get their dog back for the children. At the time of the interview, Josie was considering a new goal, to take college courses in a new career area.

Lucy's goals

Immediately after leaving, Lucy set two goals. She decided to try to understand “what just happened here, and how did I ever let this happen?” She saw a counsellor for a year. Also, she set the goal to live one day at a time, “Just for today. Just for today (is your focus)” because she believes “you could go back at any time.”

She set and carried out a goal to use exercise to calm herself, with the support of her doctor and therapist, rather than using medication for her PTSD symptoms.

During the Survival stage, Lucy set the goal to have a healthy, respectful relationship with a supportive partner, and to be independent within the relationship and free to do things for herself. “I’m going to take that Tai Chi class; I’m not going to stay home and wait for you. And, you are a person that is supportive of me, and that (is with) no questions asked.”

Lucy has come to see that it is important to make connections with other women and embrace their diversity, in fact, it is “one of the things that has been really instrumental in maintaining the change.” She has set and carried out a goal to “purposely schedule” time to maintain her relationships with female friends in a network of women of all ages. “I think that is important, to surround yourself with women.”

Jeanette's goals

At a crisis point in her marriage, Jeanette had to make a decision. She set a goal to protect her children. “I was ready to protect my kids.” “I phoned the transition house.”

In the weeks after leaving, Jeanette set another goal: “I’m going to be in charge of my children.” “I couldn’t trust his verbal and emotional violence, so I had to have the custody and the guardianship by myself.”

Jeanette created a new home for her children, setting a goal to keep the family in one place. “Some women move every two years to stay away from the ‘ex’. I’m not going to start to do this. I need to have a life and I need to have my feet planted where I

want to be.” She set the goal to be as safe as possible: “I said, “I need to feel safe where I live. I need to feel safe at work” ... so, I have the Restraining Order for life.”

Jeanette set the goal to take a life skills course, so that she could learn about effective communication and how to deal with angry people. She set a goal to attend counselling. In the years that followed, she set the goal to attend university and work toward a Bachelor’s degree.

Recently, Jeanette has set a new goal. She has set out to educate the public, sharing her knowledge about what happens when a family breaks up because of abuse. “Last fall, I started to give workshops. [The] topics are on leaving an abusive relationship, single parents, what that looks like, and ... what is the family dynamics after leaving an abusive relationship and how to deal with [a child’s] difficult behaviour.” “I did a presentation, and ... some teachers ... were surprised to hear what I told them. They said, ‘We had no idea [what] children go through and the Moms go through.’”

Trudy’s goals

At the time of leaving her abusive partner, Trudy’s goal was survival. “I’ve got to get out”, she remembers thinking. “I couldn’t go any farther with him or I would die.” “I had this clear vision of the death of my soul, and that it was wrong.”

“And my ideas about what my goals were, were still inaccurate, but I was using the biggest strength I had to *get out*.” Although it was not described as a clear goal, Trudy said that, as well, she had an “idea that life could be better.”

She set goals concerning spirituality when at the point of leaving. She wanted “to go to the ashram, and be in a state of pure consciousness, and to give up on being a human.” She said that spiritual goals continued after she left. “I just wanted to explore that. In that first year, that was all I wanted, to be able to live in a meditative – live in the light.” “In that first year, my goal was to really put myself away in an ashram or convent, and not to see people ever again.”

In the decade that followed, Trudy set new goals, eventually seeking her Master’s degree, ending her isolation by making social connections, and finding a loving relationship.

Barbara's goals

Barbara did not set new goals until recently. She did not speak of setting any goals during the four years after she told her former partner to move out. "The focus of my life has been trying to get this guy to come back to me," she said. At the time of the interview, she had set two recent goals: to start her life anew in another town, and to seek medical help for depression. Barbara said she had "gone to the doctor and actually admitted that I was thoroughly depressed about everything, and said I need help."

Kara's goals

Kara didn't speak of clear goals during the Action stage. She set several goals during the Crisis and Survival stages. She set a goal to self-explore, to discover "what do I like? What's important to me?" She set a goal of self-improvement, with a new motivation. In the past, "I was going to make myself better to have kids. Well, now it was: I was going to make myself better just so I could be me."

Kara set out to read, explore, self-educate, and get counselling with two goals in mind. She wanted to understand the dynamics of abuse and her own part in the abusive relationship, and she sought increased skills in communication and boundary setting in order to have healthy, mutually respectful relationships. Carrying out these two goals led Kara to the Evolving stage. When describing herself today, Kara said, "I have a goal. And my goal is to be happy in life ... and (that means) I am not willing to bend over backwards now for my relationships."

Goals evolved

To summarize Section Eight, the data revealed that participants' goals were simpler at the time of leaving, which usually was a time of crisis and strong emotions, and that participants chose more complex goals after they had established a new environment. The goals are a concrete way of perceiving the change, and the goals got more complex as time progressed. The change didn't end; instead, it grew. As goals evolved, it was all part of the same change process.

Knowing that goals evolve, counsellors and transition house support workers would perhaps find it more effective to support clients by validating their simple goals

and supporting them in achieving them. When at the point of leaving, or in crisis, women survivors are likely not ready to work on complex goals. Women in second stage programs may, as time passes, start to choose more complex goals for themselves, as the participants did in this study.

Barbara did not carry out goals during a four-year period during which she continued contact with her former partner and did not emotionally leave the relationship. It appears that if a client is not setting any goals, they might not be ready yet to choose positive change for themselves. However, perhaps if a client received counselling support at that time and chose goals for herself, it might support and strengthen her when she begins to create positive change in her life.

Section Nine: "Finding support from Family and Friends"

Participants Lucy, Kara, and Barbara disclosed that it was helpful to have the support of family or friends at the end of the relationship and during moments of crisis afterward. For several other participants, support of family or friends was not a strong factor in their accomplishment of positive change, and for Jeanette, negative experiences during the period of break-up caused her to have a lasting distrust of friends.

Many participants, especially Claire, Jeanette, Trudy, and Josie, seemed to be mostly alone and unsupported throughout their lives. They stated that this was the case. At moments, however, friends touched the lives of even the most isolated. For example, to her surprise, when Trudy spoke to her sister, she felt validated by her sister's supportive response. Claire's sister-in-law helped in a crisis, as did her employer.

In Barbara's experience of accomplishing change, her father's support was crucial. She said, "I think with the strength of my father is the only way I got out." His intervention at a time of crisis when she wished to die helped her to get up and seek work. "He said, 'Are you going to lie in here and die?' ... and he opened the curtains, and he said, 'Get up and get a job and I don't want to hear any more about it.' And I did."

Barbara's father's support during the period after she told her partner to leave, and his support concerning how to respond to abusive behaviour were highly influential as she processed her experience and learned from it. When he died, loss of his support was

the motivation for her to seek further change in her life, at the time of the interview. A supportive sibling agreed to let her live with him in another city in order to start over.

Lucy's friends helped in many practical ways when she ended the relationship. They helped her to move out her belongings the day after a violent incident. Later, they advised and supported her when she was stalked, and when she laid a criminal charge against her former partner. Lucy disclosed that today she realizes the value of maintaining a "women network". Both Kara and Lucy stated that having women friends can help one to realize what is happening when they are in an abusive relationship.

Section Ten: "Seeking Formal/societal Help"

This section presents data concerning the participants' positive and negative experiences when accessing formal sources of help from social agencies and institutions that are frequently contacted when women are ending relationships with abusive partners. The institutions and agencies that were involved were social institutions such as a transition house or second stage housing program that have mandates to support women, as well as contacts with the police force, lawyers, doctors, Mental Health social workers, and private counsellors. Table Four, at the end of Section Ten, provides several examples of positive and negative experiences accessing help from the above societal institutions and agencies.

a.) Help from transition house staff

When Jeanette stayed in a transition house, staff members were slow to address her concern about a woman in the next room who was verbally and physically abusing her children. Jeanette's children were frightened and upset at the sounds from the next room. Jeanette's children could not understand why their mother said this house was safer or preferential to their home, and wanted to go home. Tension was being added to a stressful situation. Jeanette repeatedly asked staff to intervene. One day, the woman and children from the room next door "just disappeared". Staff failed to debrief the experience afterward with Jeanette and her children.

One counsellor repeatedly told Jeanette, "You are depressed; you are depressed; you are depressed." Jeanette believed that "It's not depression; it's the fact of going

through so many changes.” The “changes”, which were actual events, including the unsupportive social environment for her family, and the personal grief and loss involved in the end of a marriage, were the cause of her emotions. A psychological disorder was not the cause. The counsellor could not see beyond her own concept of Jeanette’s situation, and therefore, said Jeanette, “she was not hearing me out.”

For Claire, the transition house staff’s recommendation that she take an issue to mediation was helpful because mediation resulted in solutions to the problem.

Josie reported that staff referred her to a legal aid lawyer who turned out to be “abusive”. She was filled with “self-doubt” because of her long-term abuse, and because she was living in the transition house with her children, without money or a job, in crisis. She brought her sixteen-year old child with her to the next appointment. Her daughter was “appalled at the lawyer’s attitude and behaviour.” It is important for transition house staff to do their best to get feedback from residents as to whether lawyers are treating them with respect and attempting to provide efficient legal service.

b.) Help during stay in second stage housing

At the second stage housing complex for women leaving abusive partners, Jeanette remembers that staff members were very available to residents. They provided her with helpful support for the year and a half that she was residing there.

Josie was the only other participant who had resided in second stage housing. She lived in a different complex than Jeanette. Josie accessed staff support minimally. She found that when she did have contact, staff were helpful. During the first two years, Josie preferred to escape her negative emotions and troubling memories and thoughts. She said, “Work is a real escape, right? I can put all of this on the shelf, while I’m running around taking courses and going to work and exercising, you know.” “And, I worked like mad, eh?” Work and exercise help her to cope with anxiety.

Josie said that she also declined counselling help for her children while in second stage housing. An individual counsellor for children and a program to address issues for children who have witnessed abuse was available at the complex.

Josie remembers a staff member who provided support in a way that “did not treat me as if I was flawed or sick.” She felt that the staff member interacted with her “like a

friend” and that she did not “feel counselled”. She said she was “treated like a person”, and that was the manner in which Josie wanted to be treated when accessing support.

Josie’s children grieved for their pet dog, which had been left behind. “These little things are really tough on the kids,” she said. She understood that “you can’t have a million animals at the” second stage housing complex. After an abusive relationship ends, the children may be struggling to understand about marriage break-up and about a parent who loves you but could hurt you. In this situation, it is difficult for them to understand why a beloved pet would be left behind in a dangerous situation. To have the pet with them might alleviate stress felt by children as they settle in a new environment.

c. Life skills programs

Opportunities for entering life skills programs which included pre-employment training became available for two participants, Jeanette and Claire, when they became categorized as single parents who had left abusive former partners. The help and education that Claire and Jeanette received during life skills programs was significant. It has been described in detail in other sections of this chapter.

d.) Accessing help from counselling agencies

Counselling help was valuable in supporting participants to create positive change. Three participants had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following their experience of abuse. Several participants stated that they did not have healthy relationships until they took time to work on their issues, heal, develop skills such as assertiveness, and ‘grow’ or evolve psychologically and socially. Two participants spoke of having had three consecutive abusive relationships with only brief periods in between them. The pattern ended after they spent time working on their issues, communication skills and knowledge of healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

Jeanette, Claire, and Lucy spoke of being helped by their counselling experiences. However, Claire and Jeanette had also experienced counselling that was problematic and not supportive, as had Trudy. Claire had many years of counselling after the end of her third abusive relationship. Lucy advises the women she volunteers with at a safe house to reach out to counselling, adding that, too often “people try to leave relationships, *alone*.”

Trudy had only one marital counselling experience, over a period of months. She advises women to focus on their strengths and to “get some hopeful support for yourself.”

Clarifying that statement, she said, “They’d have to tell the truth. They’d have to open up. Which I never did.” Jeanette, Claire, Lucy and Trudy’s counselling experiences are discussed in the sub-sections that follow.

Jeanette’s experience: Jeanette spoke of having worked with several counsellors, from diverse backgrounds, and with differing skills. At the time of the interview, Jeanette had decided that counselling “works quite well” with lay counsellors, because “they can use their own experiences (to) help other people.”

Jeanette had gone to counsellors who did not understand the issues involved for women who are ending a relationship with an abusive partner, and who are parenting children who may be grieving or traumatized. She confronted a counsellor, saying, “*You don’t know* what it is ... to be by yourself and dealing with a difficult child. And then the next day you have to do it again, because you are single. And the *next* day you have to do it again, and again and again. And that’s just *one* challenge, plus the fact that you have to feed your family, find the money. ‘Taking care of yourself’, you (counsellors) think that’s the only part of someone’s life. No, it never ends, all those challenges.”

Based on her experiences with several counsellors, Jeanette had definite ideas about counselling for women leaving abuse. Counselling “has to be long term”. She emphasized that women leaving abusive partners need “support but not judgment” from counsellors.

Of one counsellor, Jeanette said, “Here I come with my problems, and she could not be willing to do them.” She said, “Her background was not really capable of relating to mine.” In Jeanette’s experience, counselling for abused women “works better (with) women counsellors who have life experience close to this” – women counsellors who have experienced abuse and have worked on their own issues. Eventually, Jeanette found counsellors who understood the issues and were informed, skilled, non-judgmental, and good listeners.

Claire’s experiences: Claire sought counselling help just before ending the relationship with her first partner, who was a very violent man and an alcoholic. She had married him at age eighteen and left at age twenty-one. There were many issues involved

that could have been addressed in counselling. Claire said, “For some reason, she wanted to work on why I was promiscuous. I didn’t even know what the word meant. When I looked it up, I thought, ‘Oh! I don’t think I am promiscuous!’”

The counsellor failed to address the violence in the relationship or to help Claire work on learning the dynamics of healthy relationships and of abusive relationships. The counsellor was choosing the goal of the counselling, instead of working with the client to set a goal. The goal seemed to Claire to be irrelevant. Without help to process the first experience and learn from it, Claire went on to spend the following decade in relationships with two more abusive partners.

After leaving the third partner, Claire was diagnosed with PTSD. She found the education and support from counsellors in a life skills program helped her to examine her previous beliefs about gender and relationships, as has been described earlier in this chapter. Claire found counselling to be helpful support with parenting issues and with accomplishing positive change in her life.

Trudy’s experience: Trudy received occasional informal counselling over the telephone from someone who worked for her spiritual adviser. “He suggested that we get a counsellor, so that I could tell (her partner) in front of someone else that I was leaving, like a *witness*.” She and her partner started seeing a counsellor.

During counselling, Trudy “put on hold her decision to leave” her violent partner. The counsellor “didn’t really support me very much. It’s like she wanted to continue trying to get us together again. And I just said, ‘No!’” Trudy added, “I have thought – as a counsellor myself, now – thought back to her methods, and I thought, ‘That’s not competent counselling! It just isn’t.’”

Lucy’s experiences: Lucy had a counsellor who worked with her on recognising and naming her emotions. Her help was valuable. However, Lucy said that her counsellor did not address gender issues or the dynamics of healthy relationships and abusive relationships, despite the fact that the counsellor was aware that a crisis had occurred, that Lucy had ended a relationship with an abusive partner, and that she had PTSD. The counselling occurred during the twelve months following the break-up, and during that period Lucy was being harassed and stalked by her former partner.

Lucy was diagnosed with PTSD after the break-up of the relationship. Her doctor and her counsellor from Mental Health “strongly recommended medication”, but Lucy, with a background in science, “knew that exercise has 100% as much efficacy in relief as medication, so I pushed for that.” The doctor and counsellor did not abandon her as a client because she didn’t comply with their advice. They did not take the position of being the sole ‘knower’ or possessor of knowledge; they shared their social power instead of retaining it all. They supervised her progress as she was “going to the gym, and ... cycling, and ... walking to work twice a day.” “I know exercise helped me,” said Lucy.

The doctor and counsellor empowered Lucy when they supported her in her own choice of methods to alleviate PTSD symptoms. The chance to choose and carry out her own recovery goals helped Lucy to overcome the effects of the abusive relationship.

e). Accessing help from the justice system

As mentioned above, Claire went to mediation with her former partner. Her experience was that mediation was helpful. They successfully resolved the issue. Other participants were not always as fortunate when they accessed the justice system.

i. Seeking help from the police. Two participants, Josie and Lucy, spoke of seeking help from police.

Josie compared the attention and results in two situations: first, when *she* called the police, and second, when *her husband* called the police.

Josie left with the children after a second crisis endangered their lives, “I was reported for abduction by my husband. And it’s amazing, eh? When my eldest son came and was doing all that stuff” - he broke in to her place of employment, physically and verbally threatening her - “I called the police, and I still had to wait an hour and a half for the police to come! It took *no time at all* for my husband to get the police to be searching all over, to be harassing my Mom, to find out where I was and [try to] get those kids back! It’s amazing, eh? How they hop! How they hop for a male!”

Lucy was being stalked and harassed by her former partner, whom she had left after a crisis event. He was involved with drug sales and use, so she had been afraid to

contact the police. She had no drug involvement herself. Eventually, she realized that she needed to stop his harassment.

“So, I called the police. And they actually sent a *narcotics* officer,” she said. “I said what the guy’s name was, and they sent a narcotics officer!” The officer said, ‘We know exactly who he is. We’ve been watching him for at least a year.’ He wanted the names of her former partner’s drug contacts.

Lucy was assertive in the situation. “I said, ‘Absolutely not! That’s not why I have called you. This is a separate issue. I can’t believe you even came here.’” She said, “He left, and they sent another officer. I ended up pressing charges for the evening that I left [my ex-partner], for what had happened.”

Lucy remembers that the police were not supportive of her laying a charge against her former partner, who was continuing to stalk and threaten her. She said, “I would like to say [to abused women] ‘Call the police’ ... but, it’s unfortunate when I eventually did call the police about a crisis situation, the response I got was, ‘Well, *you better be pretty sure that that is what he did*. Because, he can come back and [lay a charge against you].’”

Lucy was able to proceed with a charge. Reflecting on the attempted exploitation by police and the discouraging attitude of the police officer from whom she sought help to end the stalking, Lucy adds, “If this was the reaction that women are going to get, reaching out to law enforcement, then no wonder people don’t call!”

ii. *Accessing legal aid.*

Soon after arriving in a transition house, Josie went to the Legal Aid office to start the process of settling custody and other separation-related issues. “I spoke to a lawyer who was very negative on my whole situation, and acted like I was just in trouble, and I wasn’t going to get anywhere. And there were major problems.” For a woman who had just fled across the country with her children to escape a life-threatening situation, the situation with the lawyer was not encouraging or supportive. Lawyers are not counsellors, but they require some interpersonal skills. Some lawyers forget to use respect and interpersonal skills when they meet with a legal aid client, and some do not.

Josie also spoke of her experience accessing legal aid. She went to see a second legal aid lawyer, who had been recommended by transition house staff. The second lawyer was verbally abusive, and in the end Josie had to find another lawyer.

Jeanette also spoke of problematic experiences accessing help from a legal aid lawyer. Jeanette knew that she needed a Restraining Order. It would give her support whenever she would need to call the police. Her former partner continued stalking her, harassing her at home, and attempting to enter her workplace to cause trouble for her. She expected that he would continue to behave that way, and he did. Jeanette said that her lawyer “was not capable of getting a Restraining Order. And I had to fire the lawyer that I had. She didn’t know how to do this. And I said, ‘I need to fire you, because I need to get another lawyer.’ And she felt very awkward. And I said, ‘You know, I need to have my needs met. I need to feel safe where I live. I need to feel safe at work, and I need to not think that I am being watched all the time.’” In the end, Jeanette achieved her goal. “So, I have the Restraining Order for life.”

Jeanette, Josie, and Lucy had to be assertive and actively work to get their safety needs and other legal needs met in an imperfect justice system and an unsupportive environment. One can expect that women leaving a lengthy abusive relationship might have had much of their emotional resilience broken down, and their assertive behaviour may have been met with violence over the long term. Indeed, the stories of the seven participants support this view. Whether or not the women have been broken down, they will be confronted with a demanding situation as they struggle to accomplish their legal needs. The examples above demonstrate that strength, persistence, problem-solving skills and assertiveness are required of women when they must access the justice system in order to solve custody issues, divide shared property, and legally protect their safety.

Table 5: Seeking Formal/Societal Help

METATHHEME: SEEKING FORMAL/SOCIETAL HELP Some examples from categories within the themes			
<u>Justice System</u> (police, lawyers, and courts)	Police tried to exploit vulnerable woman being stalked. Police asked her to testify against him on unrelated charges, at great risk.	Mediators were reported to be of great help to one participant. Mediation resulted in clarification and resolution of issues.	Legal aid lawyers were abusive to a vulnerable participant during crisis. She doubted herself; teenage daughter confirmed abuse.
<u>Counselling agencies</u>	Counsellor chose own (inappropriate) goal for counseling young participant who left abusive partner to save her life. The goal: to explore “why you are promiscuous”.	A participant (known to have PTSD) was stalked by ex-partner. Counsellor chose to work on “naming your emotions” and failed to address the abuse or gender issues.	One participant’s counsellors lacked understanding of the specific issues for women with children after end of an abusive relationship. Later she accessed helpful counselling.
<u>Transition Houses</u> for women leaving abusive partners (two different transition houses)	One participant arrived with children and no money, and received shelter and support while she sought work.	Another resident was abusing her children, making House feel unsafe. Staff were slow to act, and did not debrief with her.	Two participants accessed subsidized housing and had helpful counselling support while in transition houses.
<u>Second stage housing</u> (Two different residences)	One participant received effective counselling for herself and for her children as well.	One participant declined counselling for self and children even though regular contact with counselling staff was a requirement.	Residence in low cost housing helped one participant with children to regain financial stability and to establish savings.
<u>Life Skills Programs</u> (LSP) (Two different programs)	Two participants benefited from LSP by going on to access university education.	While in LSP, one participant began to examine and test beliefs about relationships and about gender roles.	Two participants learned about communication, healthy relationships, and dealing with anger,

Section Eleven: “Strong Emotions”

Before ending the relationship, immediately upon ending it, and for some time afterward, several of the participants experienced strong emotions. As Barbara described the time after ending the relationship, “I wafted between anger, and ([being] frightened, and then crying.” Shame, fear, anger, and grief were notable examples.

Shame while in the abusive relationship

Shame was part of the experience for some participants during the relationship with an abusive partner. All seven participants spoke of experiencing shame in the presence of friends, neighbours, co-workers, and other outsiders to the relationship when their partners’ abusive behaviour occurred. For Josie, there was a cross-cultural aspect to the shame because they were members of a minority group in their English-speaking, “very Anglo” neighbourhood.

For Kara, Barbara, and Lucy, shame and social embarrassment helped shift their decisional balance toward making a choice to change. Early in her relationship, Kara “isolated” herself from old friends who asked her why she, a “strong woman”, was in such a problematic relationship. She grieved the loss of “two of (her) closest friends”. As time passed, Kara made new friends at work and began to compare her relationship to that of others. She realized “I just started to be embarrassed about our relationship.”

Lucy spoke of several times when she felt social embarrassment. On one occasion, her partner “stormed” into a public location where she was working with a client. He “starts yelling ... saying all this nasty stuff to me” and cursing. She said, “I was just mortified!”

When participants felt shame before being ready to act to end the relationship, they tried to hide their partner’s abuse from others. When they felt shame at a time closer to being ready to act, shame helped shift the decisional balance toward leaving.

Grief while ending the relationship and afterward

Several participants experienced grief and a strong sense of loss. Kara and Barbara had trouble resolving strong emotions when break-up was imminent. Carrying through with the break-up was difficult for a long time for Kara. She would experience

emotional pain when the relationship seemed to be ending: “It was so immense. I cried for days. I was an absolute basket case.” “He was like a drug, kind of an escape. He’d come around and there’d be a break in that [pain].”

Strong emotions after the break-up were problematic for Barbara, who “went to bed, and laid down in bed for a month. I could not get out of bed. I was depressed. I cried. I couldn’t eat; I couldn’t sleep; I couldn’t think. My whole life had collapsed.”

Both Jeanette and Josie experienced very strong emotions during transition house stays immediately after the relationship break-up. Jeanette described crying and grieving for a long time after the break-up. Both women catastrophized their losses, speaking of losing “everything”, losing her “dream home”, “dream marriage.” Similarly, Barbara repeatedly emphasized, “I have nothing.”

The participants’ emotions immediately after the break-up were overwhelming. Experiencing strong emotions left them feeling unsure they could cope with what needed to be accomplished. Josie said, “this is one hard thing, is your confidence ... this kind of ordeal really just puts you to the ground.” Barbara said, “You look fine, but you’re just falling apart.” She believed that emotional abuse had effects that were “damaging, to the core.” Their descriptions made it clear that there is a crisis stage after leaving a relationship with an abusive partner, during which a new and stable environment is sought, and that during the crisis time emotions can be overwhelming and debilitating. As Barbara said, she knew the things she had to do, but “you don’t get off the couch.”

Section Twelve: “Relapse prevention: What got them out, kept them out”

The term ‘relapse’ refers to an attempt to return in some way to the relationship with a former partner who is abusive. Urges to return are common, although they may be kept secret. They can occur because societal obstacles faced by women who have left abusive partners can seem overwhelming at times (e.g., financial stress, parenting challenges, social stigma, societal beliefs about female single parents). They may occur because the women often still feel love for their former partner, and are concerned about him, and miss him. Participants in the study had relapse urges for the above reasons.

Relapse urges for participants in the study took the form of wishing to be friends with the abusive partner, wishing to maintain a sexual relationship with him, wishing to

regain a caring relationship with him, or wishing to reunite with him. Relapse urges occurred as thoughts and yearnings, and for one participant they emerged in dreams during sleep. They were not always realistic or achievable. Sometimes the former partner had remarried, or had stated clearly to the woman that he no longer cared for her.

The data presented in this section describes what participants did to prevent themselves from acting on urges to return to the relationship with the abusive partner. Excerpts from the data show that the realizations, learning, and belief changes that got participants out of the abusive relationship, helped them to keep out.

“What got them out, kept them out” was a realization that emerged very early in the study. When I asked participants how they had maintained the change, they would tell me about the experiences and realizations that had led to ending the relationship. They could not tell me how they maintained the change without telling me what led to choosing the change. Trudy’s list of what kept her out of the relationship was the same as what got her out of the relationship, and I realized that “what got them out, kept them out.” For Trudy, Josie, and Claire, several realizations that they made during the relationship helped them to later avoid returning to their partners in challenging moments or when overwhelmed by life as a single parent.

A parallel to this finding is Wuest and Merritt-Gray’s (1999) process of “relentless justifying”, which is necessary in the “Not going back” stage. It helps survivors to explain their situation to outsiders and to themselves. Wuest and Merritt-Gray focussed on justifying the reality of the abuse experience *to others*. They spoke of resisting social pressure from family, friends, and community to return to the abuser, and of having to measure up to criteria to obtain resources. Participants in my study spoke of justifying in those situations. In my study, justifying to themselves, remembering “what got them out”, also clearly emerged as being a method of relapse prevention.

Relapse prevention was cognitive in most instances. It consisted of reminding oneself of something one had learned, or reminding oneself of undesirable negative situations, behaviours, or emotions from the past. In the remainder of this section, I provide some examples of relapse prevention among the participants.

Trudy was very determined and committed to ending her relationship when she left. Although there was once or twice a memory of the “comfortable parts” of the

marriage, and a thought such as “I wonder if it could happen; I wonder if I could go back”, it was never a strong urge to relapse. She realized it was not realistic. Trudy prevented herself from acting on the urge by “remembering the trouble. Remembering all those reasons that tipped the balance in favour of leaving, very specifically, very consciously.”

Trudy stated very clearly and emphatically that “It was not hard to think of events that I never, ever wanted to be in danger of again.” She reminded herself of “that experience of seeing the death of my soul ... She reminded herself of her goal of stopping the negative messages about men and women that were being modelled to the children. “And there were the messages to the children – I just could not have that happen.”

When her former partner visited Claire and her children after the break-up, he spent money on the family. That was a trigger that could have caused a relapse. When Claire, a financially-struggling single mother, was tempted to return to the relationship because of her former partner’s income, she would remind herself that “I knew he hadn’t changed.” She remembered the turning point in her relationship when she decided that she and the children were not going to “go down with the ship”. At that point, she had realized that her partner was never going to be responsible with the family’s money and that, in fact, what was happening was financial abuse.

Barbara stated “I still love this man!” She admitted she still wants him back, but reminds herself that she only wants to be with him in a situation in which she would not be “treated badly”. Kara remembered her own abusive behaviour which arose in reaction to being abused, and did not want to return to being in that situation. Lucy reminds herself of an incident where her partner told her something “disgusting” about himself, and the memory works to prevent relapse. Although for two decades Josie was very dedicated to the idea of having a lifelong marriage, “for better or for worse”, she now reminds herself that, “there is nothing to go back to.”

Lucy and Kara find women friends will help you to keep yourself honest and realistic about your relationship, if you allow them to. For Lucy, staying out of the abusive relationship is connected to her realization of the value of women. Lucy said, “One of the things that has been really instrumental in maintaining the change is really

opening my eyes to women and seeing all the different, different, different (sic) women around, and really trying to embrace that.”

Section Thirteen: Metatheme: “Achieving Balance”

The idea of balance is based on the bio-psycho-social model (Engels, 1980, cited in Pilgrim, 2005), used in a variety of fields, including Nursing, and Addictions Counselling. Balance and the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7. Bio-psycho-social-spiritual balance occurs along with healing for the participants in this study. Perhaps it contributed to healing. When balance is not present, as in the cases of Barbara, Josie, and Jeanette, then healing is not present. In section thirteen, I describe the progress of participants in achieving balance in their lives.

The two people who had been out of an abusive relationship the longest, Claire and Trudy, most fully described attempting to achieve balance in regard to biological, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of their lives. Achieving and maintaining balance was important in Claire’s experience. She consciously feels the effects when she is carrying out activities that bring balance to her life. Balance was becoming important for Trudy and she was attempting new activities to achieve it.

Claire worked on her psychological issues from the end of her third relationship, on an ongoing basis. Today, she still practices self-care and deals with her issues when they come up. Humour relieves stress and puts things in perspective; it has always been an asset for her. She began taking care of herself physically by establishing a routine of walking and by learning about good nutrition. Not many years after she ended the third relationship, she began and accomplished a spiritual quest, finding a religion that matched with her beliefs. For Claire, balance was attained most successfully in recent years. She, like Trudy, had not experienced and enjoyed the social aspects of a balanced life or benefited from a supportive social network, during childhood or early adulthood. She valued independence and she found it difficult to trust friends. Eventually, Claire came to see that she could relax and enjoy herself among friends in the gay community. Today, social connection is an enjoyable and fulfilling aspect of her life.

Trudy experienced loneliness and friendlessness as a child, when her military family relocated time after time. She experienced two decades of social isolation during

her marriage. She said, “What produced tragedy after tragedy was my disregard of social needs and solutions. I disregarded the importance of other people in my life and the healing power of connection with community and society as a whole.” When that ended, she did not have the ability or desire to reach out, and for many years she isolated herself, connecting only with her children and family of origin. Today, Trudy has realized the value of social, interpersonal relations and is reaching out to form human connections, in social groups and in individual friendships.

Spirituality has been an important part of Trudy’s life since early adulthood. She works on the psychological aspects of life, and today is “more resourced than I have ever been.” During the interview, she did not speak of physical practices such as walking or gym membership.

Barbara had not achieved balance. She was trapped in a cyclic pattern, going back and forth between the Crisis and Survivor stages. She spoke of the value of counselling, although she said she had only informally accessed counselling with a friend who is a counsellor. She spoke of the value of volunteering, but had only occasionally volunteered in an informal way. She did practice a physical aspect of a balanced life, by walking to relieve stress. She did not speak of any spiritual practices.

Lucy highly valued the benefits of exercise and had used it, with medical supervision, to alleviate her PTSD symptoms. She has a gym membership. She also takes care of herself psychologically, for example accessing counselling for a year after the break-up, and accessing counselling for her eating disorder. She did not speak of any spiritual practices. Since the end of the relationship with her second partner, Lucy has come to realize the value of social connection. She has changed her behaviours in a relationship, scheduling time for her own social interactions outside of the relationship with her current partner. She was able to provide many examples of how she has maintained several sorts of social connections, including forming a “woman network”.

Kara values social connection. She had isolated herself from friends during the relationship with her former partner, and deeply felt the loss of two friends who did not approve of her actions at that time. When she went to work and formed new friendships, social embarrassment about her relationship was a factor in helping Kara come to decide to end it. Since the break-up, she has worked on her psychological issues, improved

skills in communication and sought further education. She did not speak of spiritual practices or of physical activities that bring about balance in her life.

The break-up of her relationship is not long past for Josie. In regard to psychological aspects of balance, Josie has not felt ready to access the counselling that has been available during the two years since she left. This is not unusual. Josie has to maintain a sense of stability in order to raise several teenaged children and work at several jobs. It can feel risky to begin counselling on abuse issues when so much is depending on one's psychological and physical fitness.

In training to become a volunteer, she faced some of her issues. She is acquainted with trained staff at her volunteer placement who would be resources should she decide to talk with them. At present, Josie handles negative emotions about the past and troubling memories by immersing herself in work, and by exercising at a gym. She has read materials that concern spiritual matters and taken one workshop, but she felt that she was not fully practicing the principles in what she had read. They had been absorbed into her mind, but not yet into her behaviour. Regarding social connections, Josie felt she was not emotionally ready for friendships. Nevertheless, she made one friend in second stage housing, and was beginning to make a new friend at one of her job sites.

Jeanette, in contrast to Josie, has addressed psychological issues in counselling for a long time. She improved her communication skills and ability to deal with angry people, and learned safe ways to express grief. Jeanette has not yet achieved bio-psycho-social-spiritual balance in her life. She did not speak of physical or spiritual practices that bring about balance. Socially, Jeanette's life has been damaged. She repeatedly spoke of a deep sense of distrust toward people. It hurt when unsupportive co-workers gossiped about her and used her vulnerable situation to advance themselves. It hurt when members of her cultural group tried to reunite her and her partner. Friends failed to respect her wishes and did not take seriously the risk of harm to the children, or the risk to Jeanette's career should she remain with an abusive partner. Jeanette is not ready to take steps to heal her social connections. Repeatedly and emphatically during the interview she expressed her anger, distrust, and sadness. She is a clear example of how one can be in the learning stage without having achieved healing.

Section Fourteen: "Acting for social change"

It is interesting and intriguing that, no matter what stage of change the participants were in at the time of the interviews, six of the participants were involved in creating social change. Several were employed or volunteering with survivors of abuse, and some were currently educating themselves in regard to addictions, which sometimes co-occurs with the experience of abuse. Several began activism when they were barely out of the abusive relationship, with only a year or two to work on the issues and to continue to change. This surprising metatheme and its meaning is discussed in Chapter 7.

Summary

In Chapter 6, I have reintroduced the study's questions and described a typical interview. Issues in data collection were briefly discussed. Twenty metathemes were presented. The metathemes emerged within five time periods or stages (previously presented in Chapter 5). Twelve of the metathemes have been discussed in detail, to examine how they were an influence in the change process for the participants.

In Chapter 7, I will discuss the research findings in the context of the Transtheoretical Model of Change, the stages of healing according to Herman (1992), and current research literature. The utility of the findings for counsellors, support workers, social workers, and other helping professionals will be explored, and I will discuss the implications of the findings for future research.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion and Implications

The metathemes that emerged in this study hold interesting and useful implications for practice and for future research. In the first section of Chapter 7, I will discuss the utility of the metathemes and the stage theory for counsellors, social workers, and other helping professionals. In section two, I address whether the concepts of decisional balance and self-efficacy contained in the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982) match the process of change described in my study. I discuss ways in which the new model suggested in Chapter 5 provides more accurate and useful information for researchers and practitioners than does the TM. In the third section, the participants' activism is discussed in the context of the work of Herman (1997). In the final section, I explore several intriguing directions for future research.

Section One: Utility of the Findings for Helping Professionals

Psychological (internal) and social (external) factors interact

The findings of my study reveal that women who experience abuse from intimate partners have been and will continue to be influenced by many aspects of their environment during the change process. Following a critical social science perspective, during analysis I divided metathemes into internal and external aspects of change. It was more difficult than expected to create distinctions, and as a result, I now see the factors as interactive.

I was studying a process that occurred over time, during which the external factors were interactive with the individual's internal factors. For example, early gender socialization originated externally in the environment (parents, peers, schools, media) and affected the internal thought processes, beliefs, expectations and the resulting behaviours of the participant. As time passed, realizations were made that learned beliefs and values (e.g., "a woman must always be in a relationship", "marriage is to last forever") were not always appropriate for her experience and situation. Values were questioned and sometimes set aside. At the same time, interactions were still happening with the external

environment (e.g., a participant's mother urges conformity to traditional beliefs, a participant encountered feminist teachers) and these interactions influenced the internal processes. A second example is that self-efficacy seems like an internal, or psychological factor, yet it is influenced, and perhaps originally created, by the external environment (e.g., experiences with parents and siblings, experiences at work, in school, and in a marriage, and philosophical teachings from one's religion or culture).

In the end, I came to realize that there is value for helping professionals in discerning where an influence originated. It is also useful to remember that, whatever theory the counsellor follows, a client's psychological constructs and processes will continually have interaction with environmental factors that influence change. Change cannot be accomplished in isolation, solely as an internal, psychological process.

Education for helping professionals about gender and abuse issues

Support from helping professionals can be vitally important when survivors are acting to end relationships with abusive partners. Survivors have emphasized that help is even more important during the struggle to maintain the separation, to avoid relapse, and to begin to heal (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

I was dismayed to learn that during many instances in which participants sought counselling help, they had seldom received helpful, appropriate guidance. In most cases, counsellors did not help them to understand what constitutes a healthy, respectful relationship, what are the dynamics of an abusive relationship, and what are the socially learned gender-based expectations of men and women which can lead to harm. I was outraged that when Claire sought counselling support as a 21-year-old woman leaving a dangerous wife-batterer, she did not receive appropriate help. As a result, she entered two more abusive relationships. It was equally outrageous that Lucy did not receive counselling support that addressed gender issues or abuse issues despite the fact that she entered counselling immediately after being assaulted, was diagnosed with PTSD, and was being stalked during the year of counselling.

Abuse happens to women in all classes and all races, and it co-occurs with other issues that may bring a woman or a man to counselling. Sometimes counsellors encounter women *before* they have ended the relationship with an abusive partner. They

may initially come to counselling for other issues such as anxiety, parenting help, or to address their perception that their world seems crazy and illogical and the resulting fear that they have some severe unknown psychological disorder. They may be trying to make themselves a better person, believing that self-improvement will end the abuse. All counsellors need to educate themselves so that they can recognize abuse issues and be equipped to counsel concerning respectful relationships, the dynamics of abusive relationships, and evaluation of gender-related social teachings.

Education will assist the helping professional to avoid coming across to the client as judgmental. As Herman has emphasized, “It bears repeating that the survivor is free to examine aspects of her own personality or behaviour that rendered her vulnerable to exploitation *only after* it has been clearly established that the perpetrator alone is responsible for the crime” (1997, p. 199).

If the exploration of issues takes place in a judgmental environment, it becomes “simply another exercise in blaming the victim” (Herman, 1997, p. 199). A client at the point of beginning counselling or a woman who has just arrived at a transition house may already have negative thoughts about herself. Exploring gender-related beliefs and expectations and working on healthy communication skills and the dynamics of abusive and healthy relationships should only occur after it has been clearly established in the client’s understanding that she is not responsible for violence or other abusive behaviour that her former partner chose to do.

Gender and relationship beliefs. The findings of this study showed that helping professionals should be prepared to supportively and ethically guide a client in realizing and testing her beliefs. A recent study concerning relationship beliefs of women who have been abused has similarly revealed that beliefs are important factors when women stay with or leave abusive partners. In a December, 2003 community forum in Victoria, Canada, UBC researcher Mary Russell informed helping professionals that learned beliefs underlie the thinking and behaviour of women who are living with an abusive partner. To change beliefs requires time and is part of an evolving process. Beliefs tend to be gendered, following patterns for social roles.

“Belief systems are critical; they underlie everything,” Russell emphasizes (Litwin, 2003). Similarly to the finding of this study, Russell’s research showed that

women frequently have core beliefs that keep them in an abusive relationship. Her research revealed that women will stay because they believe “children need stability and a father” (Litwin, 2003). Women often believe they can’t manage on their own. They believe that their partner’s needs should come first; they feel responsible; and because it has been “really drilled into them (that) their role is to help and nurture” (Litwin, 2003). Russell also found that women may have beliefs that are “out of sync” with the actual situation they are experiencing, and that they may hold conflicting beliefs.

The findings of my study were similar to those reported by Russell in the December 2003 community forum noted above. I see the need for counsellors to be prepared to work with clients to consciously realize their gender-related beliefs. Counsellors may need to confront gender-related beliefs if they are causing a client to stay in a dangerous relationship. Finding the difference between what is actually occurring and what the client wants for herself is one way to gently and ethically confront beliefs that are out of sync with the situation or that conflict with other beliefs.

Become aware of community resources. Helping professionals need to be informed about community resources that provide financial support, parenting support if needed, and counselling support. As Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) suggest, there is a need for helpers to assist women to remove the barriers that could cause them to give up and go back. While coming to a decision to act, and when ready to act, women leaving abusive partners may perceive a lack of resources. Eventually, the participants in the study left with the resources, internal and external, that they had. Counsellors and transition house support workers connected some of them to previously unrealized social resources such as life skills programs, counselling for children who have witnessed abuse, ways to access financial support, child care, second stage housing, transportation, legal aid, and police protection. Some survivors may have a fragile sense of confidence, or feel overwhelmed when dealing with new and complex social systems such as the legal system. Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) suggest helpers should go beyond connecting women survivors to resources. We should help survivors learn to make resources work for them.

Provide support when participants need to utilize the justice system. Finally, participants’ descriptions in Chapter 6 showed that when women seek help from formal

societal sources such as the police, legal aid lawyers, and the courts, they may encounter insensitivity, manipulation of their vulnerability, or blatant sexism. The 1999 study by Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) revealed that past successful experience or lack of it when asking for help from the police and justice system influenced whether participants would call for help from the justice system. In a 1999 study of women's shelters in Ontario, 46% of the residents indicated that at the time they came to the shelter, police were involved in their situation (Grasley, Richardson & Harris, 2000, p. 16). The survey results showed that 32.5% of the women stated that no useful assistance was provided by the police. Although police had a mandate to lay charges against the abuser, they did so in only 26.1% of the cases. In 21.2% of cases the police failed to carry out their mandate. Instead, they advised the woman to lay charges herself.

Sev'er (1997) has published an article laden with dozens of examples of ignorance and sexism in the Canadian courts and police force. "How can women expect protection from a system that is afflicted with such sexism?" she asked (p. 580). Those words were reiterated when my participant Lucy remarked that if the response is to be exploited, no wonder women do not often seek help from the police.

When the justice system fails, it is particularly concerning when we consider the increased risk women face when separating from abusive partners. During the first 10 weeks after leaving a women's shelter, 35% of women continued to experience physical abuse from their former partner (Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994, cited in Grasley, Richardson & Harris, 2000, p. 7). Women separating from abusive intimate partners face increased risk of spousal homicide (Coleman, 1997, cited in Grasley, Richardson & Harris, 2000, p. 7; Statistics Canada, 2002). Between 1991 and 2000, young separated women between 15 and 24 years old were killed at a rate of 113.4 women per million separated couples (Statistics Canada, 2002, p. 4). This statistic for young women was greatly higher than for any other group.

Counsellors and other helping professionals need to be aware that clients will likely encounter unexpected challenges as they struggle to keep themselves safe by means of the justice system. We should remember to ask how the process is going, and find ways to be supportive. We should become aware of changes in the legal system (e.g., "stalking" was introduced to the Criminal Code of Canada in 1993). The stories of

the participants in this study reveal that helping professionals may need to confirm some women's impression that their treatment is unjust. We may need to help some clients to build skills in regard to assertiveness and support them to be proactive despite social obstacles. We should not forget to help them develop personal safety plans.

Helpers need to test their ideas and continue to learn

As a long-time support worker in a transition house told me, "You make the best decision you can at the time." I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been trained by and worked with about a dozen support workers who are dedicated to helping women and their children in a time of crisis and who continually access various sorts of education in order to enhance their helping skills and knowledge. They have been a lantern on my journey; they continue to inspire me.

Counsellors, support workers, social workers and others make the best decision they can at the time, based on their beliefs and knowledge, but that should not be static. We need to keep on challenging our own ideas, wrestling with the ethical questions that continually emerge, and remembering our principles. Support work should not be judgmental or hierarchical. The work should be based on client strengths and developing empowerment, even on the blackest days when the work situation is the most overwhelming. We cannot do that in a vacuum. We need to develop trust and respect for colleagues so that we can safely debate the diverse values that underlie our work, and discuss new ways to educate ourselves as they emerge.

Counsellors have strengths which have been demonstrated

It is imperative that counsellors remember clients have strengths and that they use a perspective and language based on that knowledge. During this study, I realized that even to say that a woman was "in an abusive relationship" completely hides which is the abuser and which the survivor of abuse. I realized I needed to use the phrase "woman who ended a relationship with an abusive partner" in order to be accurate.

The seven women in this study might have been characterized by observers from a gender oppressive perspective as having been 'downtrodden', 'weak', 'irrational', or 'enjoying abuse', at some point in their lives. However, the data revealed that from the

beginning the women knew that their partner's abuse was wrong and unwanted. The women demonstrated many strengths and abilities, such as ability to learn and to evaluate, to make choices, to resist oppression, to survive emotionally crushing events while still in the relationship and to survive danger before and after leaving the relationship. They demonstrated the ability to liberate themselves from abuse, and the ability to choose and carry out simple and complex goals.

I held the assumption that clients have strengths, and the data supported that assumption. For example, it was obvious that before the women reached the point of deciding to end the relationship, they were learners and were capable of making realizations. They were capable of evaluating beliefs. They had the strength to resist oppression and the wits and courage to use whatever internal or external resources they could find. Many counselling perspectives do not overtly take the stance that clients have strengths. Helpers would find it valuable to incorporate into their philosophy and their counselling tool kit values and methods that recognize and build on client strengths. One example is response-based interviewing (Wade, April 17, 2005, personal communication), which I describe next.

Help the client remember her own resistance to abuse

The metatheme "Resistance" was presented in Chapter 5. Resistance has been defined as any psychological or behavioural act with which a person tries to "expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose" oppression. Resistance includes imagining or trying to create "a life based on respect and equality, on behalf of one's self or others, including any effort to redress the harm caused by violence or other forms of oppression" (Wade, 1997, p. 25). The data in my study revealed many acts of resistance among the behaviours of the participants when interacting with their partners before, during, and after the break-up of the committed relationship.

Resistance has been explored by Wade in his article, "Small acts of living: Everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression" (1997). He utilizes a therapeutic approach based on the observation that resistance is ubiquitous. Whenever

persons are badly treated, they resist (Wade, 1997, p. 25). The more likely the threat of retaliation, the less open is the resistance, but on close examination, one will see that it is present. Although resistance is spontaneous, the form that resistance will take depends on the risk of harm and the opportunities in each unique situation (Wade, 1997, p. 28-29).

Wade describes an approach to therapy that can completely transform the self-image of a client who is recovering from traumatic experiences of abuse. The approach arose from the assumption of brief and solution-focussed therapy that a client has pre-existing strengths (De Shazer, 1985, 1988, White & Epston, 1990, and White, 1992, 1995, cited in Wade, 1997). Following Wade's approach, therapists ask clients how they *responded* to the violence, rather than how they were negatively affected by the violence. Clients become engaged in dialogue concerning the details of their own resistance, with the goal of uncovering the implications of their resistance behaviours. As a result, abuse survivors begin to realize their strengths, insights, and abilities during the past.

A single act of resistance can reveal many diverse strengths, often unrealized by the client. Clients begin to experience themselves as being more capable in the present of responding effectively to the issues that brought them to therapy. One of Wade's clients stated clearly that by knowing she resisted, she could feel pride and increased self-worth. She found she regained her dignity and her sense of being valuable (Wade, 1997).

Using response-based questions, client responses to violence and other forms of oppression will be uncovered. In community workshops in October, 2004, and April, 2005, Wade provided counsellors and support workers with an introduction to his method. He suggested that a helper using response-based questions could ask, "When he did that, how did you respond? How did you hold your body? What was going on in your mind? How did this event change the way in which you related to him? When you say you "withdrew", how did you withdraw?" In contrast, "When he did that, how did that make you feel? How did that affect your view of yourself? How did it affect your relationships? What are the long term consequences?" are what Wade terms 'effects-based questions'. They focus on negative effects, and allow the client to reveal and express the trauma and harm done by abuse. Asking for details of *response*, rather than

effects of abuse, uncovers resistance in thought and behaviour (Wade, April 17, 2005, personal communication).

As clients realize their acts of resistance, they will reframe their experience of abuse. One of Wade's clients came to realize that she had resisted the abuse from the start. She said, "It feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders" (Strong, 2002, p. 14). Although the acts of resistance are present, abuse survivors often do not realize that they resisted, or that their resistance has a powerful meaning. Participants in my study who described themselves as having "no" self-efficacy and very low self-esteem could have benefited from response-based interviewing. It would have revealed to them clearly their acts of resistance to abuse, and helped them to understand the strengths revealed by their resistance. Such knowledge is empowering.

After data analysis, I saw that resistance is an integral part of the slow shift toward a decision to act. I saw that resistance appears in following stages of change as well. As Wade said, resistance is always present, and therefore, it is there, available to be accessed when helping clients. If counsellors and others in helping relationships realize that the client has resisted, then they can help the client to realize existing strengths and to gain a sense of empowerment. The realization of past resistance to abuse and oppression is extremely valuable (Strong, 2002). It can help a client to gain a new perspective on any sense of shame or low self esteem that may arise from having endured the abuse. It restores damaged self-esteem and self-efficacy. It helps restore a positive self-image. To help a client realize her strengths and demonstrated abilities empowers her to face future challenges.

Increasing self-efficacy

I asked participants about their self-efficacy when they began to decide to end the relationship. It was not surprising that some participants reported low self-efficacy during the relationship, when they were first contemplating leaving. Six of the seven participants knew that if they left, they would face leaving the shared residence and finding a new home, finding a new means of financial support. Two knew they would lose a home they loved and had worked hard to pay for. Four participants knew they

would become a single parent to their children. Five participants believed they would experience some form of harassment (e.g., threats and danger to person or to life, stalking, harmful behaviour toward the children) from the former partner after leaving; this assumption was fulfilled for all five. Many were aware that the risk of physical harm from the abuser is higher after they end the relationship (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Realizing the challenges they would face if they ended the relationship, the women felt low self-efficacy at being able to cope. As well, all of the participants had been emotionally abused during the relationship. Emotional abuse and other emotions such as shame resulting from abusive experiences can lower self-efficacy.

I was surprised by the finding that self-efficacy continued to be described as low when participants reached the point of taking action to end the relationship. My expectation had been that participants' self-efficacy about coping with challenges after leaving would have increased at the point they decide to leave. I found that for most participants that was not the case.

People seldom attempt something they think they have *no* chance at all of accomplishing. However, people *will* attempt something with an estimated low success rate if that attempt seems the best choice at the time, (e.g., jumping from the fourth floor of a burning building). If a person's beliefs have changed and her perception of her relationship has changed, if she has realized there are safety concerns or other risks (e.g., losing custody of her children), and if her decisional balance has shifted toward making the choice to end the relationship, then as a result she may form goals and make the choice to end the relationship *despite* low self-efficacy.

Support workers and counsellors can help raise a survivor's self-efficacy in any stage in which they encounter her. It is very important work to help raise an abused woman's self-efficacy in the Action and Crisis stages, especially if her physical safety is at risk. Many women leave and then return four or five times before successfully ending a relationship with an abusive partner. Even severely harmed women sometimes return several times to the relationship with the abuser. This behaviour is a mystery to most of society, and yet damaged self efficacy may be one of the keys to understanding it.

Often, a woman comes to a transition house, then evaluates the challenges of her situation and decides to return to her partner. That time is the Crisis stage, a time of

evaluation. Self-efficacy is a factor in the woman's evaluation of the situation. If support staff or counsellors encounter a woman when she is evaluating her abilities and the external challenges, they can help her to raise her self-efficacy in two ways, focussing on internal and external resources. They help her to perceive strengths which she has used in the past. For example, one participant worried about coping if she left the relationship and yet, like other participants, she had worked, as she said, "for years and years and years" to successfully maintain and pay for the home and did all the parenting.

As well, when the woman is ready to work on understanding some of the dynamics of abuse, she may see that the abusive partner might have tried to destroy her self-efficacy to keep her in the relationship.

One of the ways to enhance a client's sense of self-efficacy is to engage her in dialogue which draws out instances of her resistance to abuse and oppression (Wade, 1997) and helps her to realize her pre-existing strengths. Wade's "Response-based Interviewing" method that illuminates acts of resistance was discussed above.

It is important that helping professionals assist a woman leaving an abusive partner to realize she does not have to face the changed situation alone. She is no longer socially isolated. They can inform her about social resources (e.g., housing, financial help, support groups, legal and safety-related resources) and offer assistance in connecting to social resources when she is ready. They can offer information about emotional support available through community counselling, second stage programs, and various other forms of support. Information and immediate support can raise her self-efficacy about being able to cope with the challenges after leaving.

Increasing self-esteem

Low self-efficacy seemed to accompany low self-esteem in the participants' recollections of the period before ending the relationship, and the Action and Crisis stages. If an abusive partner is damaging someone's self-efficacy, the behaviour damages the person's self esteem at the same time.

For example, Trudy's former partner told her she could not be a good mother without him. His statement could damage both self-efficacy and self-esteem. She remembers that she believed him. And yet Trudy says of her parenting that she worked

hard to nurture the children physically and to teach them good behaviours, beliefs, and values. Helping a client to remember past strengths and abilities that still exist and are a psychological resource will not only raise self-efficacy, it will raise self esteem.

After leaving abusive partners, women sometimes contribute to their own low self-esteem, for example by punishing themselves with self-blame for staying in an abusive relationship. Claire said she was ‘a slow learner’, and Josie berated herself for trying to achieve the impossible for “years and years” or, like Barbara and Trudy, by telling themselves they have serious defects of one sort or another. Counsellors and support workers can help women who are experiencing low self esteem as a result of emotional abuse and/or self blame by working with them in the following areas: perceiving their strengths; nurturing their self worth and value as a person; understanding the dynamics of abuse which can result in low self esteem; realizing their resistance to abuse during the relationship with their former partner; and, as I discuss in the section below, realizing that they left *when they were able to leave*, using the internal and external resources they had.

Helping the client realize that she left using the resources she had

Some participants experienced strong self-blame for not leaving the relationship earlier, yet the self-blame seemed to me, as the researcher, to be invalid. The interviews revealed that all participants ended the relationship using the internal and external resources that they had at the time. The interviews also revealed that until participants reached the point of having enough internal resources, they could not leave. *It is not useful to blame oneself for not doing what one was not able to do.*

Both internal (psychological) and external (social) resources were involved for participants. The slow shift in decisional balance that was seen in the current study demonstrates that a participant had to undergo her own unique process of learning, making value changes, and making realizations before reaching the point of making a decision. A final boundary crossing or realization (“the last straw”) often had to occur.

When they reached the internal ability to make a decision for change, often the women did not end the relationship immediately. Lack of social (or external) resources could delay leaving. Jeanette waited at home for two weeks before there was a room available in a transition house. Josie took a job and saved money. When she left, she had only a car, gas money to travel several hundred miles, and a friend with whom she and the children could only stay a few days. Claire needed a safe place to go before leaving partner two, a dangerous man. There was no transition house; her only resource was her employer and his family.

While coming to a decision, and when ready to act, women leaving abusive partners may lack external and/or internal resources to support them after leaving. Eventually, the participants in the study left with the resources that they had. Once they ended the relationship, some participants became aware there were more social resources to support them than they had previously realized. For a counsellor to help a client to perceive that she left abuse *when she was able to* would have a positive result by decreasing or negating self-blame. To combine that work with helping her see her past strengths and with resistance work can have effective results in increasing a client's self esteem and restoring her sense of worth.

A new stage model of change

The data in this study showed that the process of change for women who are experiencing abuse from intimate partners will require more than simply leaving and staying out of the relationship. Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) found four stages in a process that they named "reclaiming self". The process involves counteracting abuse, breaking free, not going back, and moving on. Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) found that the stages of change can go on for many years. Their article focused on the period of 'not going back', which they described in detail. Many aspects of that stage correspond to parts of the Survivor stage in the model that arose from my data. For example, their sub-process, "getting situated", involves reclaiming belongings, finding housing, and settling children. This corresponds to creating a new, safe environment in the Survivor stage of my model. In their 1999 article, Wuest and Merritt-Gray did not explore what occurs

after “getting situated”. Herman (1997) also speaks of stages of change which take place over a long period. She provides a broad overview. I set the goal of exploring the process of change comprehensively. From that goal and from data analysis arose the stage model.

It is my hope that the stage model that emerged during data analysis, its concepts such as the tasks of each stage, and the positive framing of terms in its language will be valuable contributions to existing knowledge about the process of change. It could be the first step in creating a useful model for helping professionals and researchers.

Positive framing of language. Positive language arose from the data. During the first stage, the data showed that women who are being abused by their partners are learners, who are actively revising their beliefs and expectations. Learning resulted in a gradual shift in decisional balance. The stage model alters our perception of women in abusive relationships and their abilities and potential. It will alter the language we use to describe them. Language is a societal tool. It is too often used to conceal violence, hide perpetrator’s responsibility, conceal victims’ resistance, and blame or pathologize victims. We, as researchers and as helpers, can refuse to be part of blaming and pathologizing victims. We can choose to use clear and appropriate language that exposes violence, the offenders’ responsibility, and reveals the victims’ resistance (Coates & Wade, 2004). The importance of positive reframing of terms used in work with survivors was discussed in Chapter 5.

Change can progress beyond maintenance. Analysis of the participants’ experiences revealed that their goals can evolve, progressing from simple to complex, but always evolving goals remain based on the beliefs and desires of the women at the time of action, when they chose to create change for themselves.

After action has been taken, the findings show us that during the survival and evolving stages, what got the participants out of the abusive relationship keeps them out. For some of them, learning and growing continued after the action and crisis stages. Their goals evolved, from simple to complex. The period after ending the relationship was not simple, and as discussed in Chapter 5, I discovered from the data that it can be described as several stages, not one stage (the “Maintenance stage” in the TM). Therefore, I believe the findings are a first step in forming a new model of change.

Using the new stage model in practice

Support workers, counsellors, social workers, and helping professionals who use the information gathered from the current study and who work with women who are in a process of change will be able to identify which stage the client is in and how they are managing at meeting the tasks of each stage. Helpers will be aware of the importance of working with abused clients on gender-related beliefs and expectations of relationships. They will ask, "Is the relationship actually giving you what you hoped to get from it (meeting expectations)? What are your expectations of a relationship?" The work should include encouraging the client to evaluate the beliefs.

Helpers will be aware that just before ending the relationship or at the time of leaving women need to accomplish simple goals, and are likely not ready to work on complex goals. They will be aware that women are evaluating resources for support around the time of Action and Crisis, and if the resources seem too difficult to access, women will return to the former relationship.

My study showed that women's experience during the Crisis stage can be a time of strong negative emotions, including shame and guilt at having to reveal to strangers the family secrets of abuse, and can be experiencing much anxiety and fearful beliefs about what the future holds. Transition house workers, housing workers, social workers, and all who are in contact with women at the point of ending a relationship with an abusive partner may forget just how deeply the women may be feeling grief at their losses, fear about the future, anger, and shame. We need to be sensitive in our questions and supportive in our tone and attitude. If a client is feeling personal shame and low self-esteem, helpers can use their learning about resistance from the current model. We can help clients to realize their strengths and their own past and present empowerment by helping them see their resistance whenever it emerges in their story.

One of the important benefits of the stage model that arose from my data is that it demonstrates that women who are in the first stage are learners. They have demonstrated their strengths and their resistance to abuse. The model replaces the negative stereotypes of "flawed" women and the myths about women who want abuse, which were based on lack of understanding, blaming the victim, and fear. In fact, the findings on which the

model is based show that for many women the gender socialization they received in Canadian society created harmful beliefs about gender roles and relationships that kept the women in abusive relationships.

Although some helpers ended abusive relationships themselves in the past, it is still possible to forget in daily work, that clients are and have been strong, and are survivors. Every day, we need to remember the women's strength and to see their potential for continued change. We need to remember that even if a woman remains in the abusive relationship or returns to it, she is still a woman with strengths, who is involved in a learning process (the first stage, the "Slow Shift toward Change").

The model continues to illuminate the stages of change that come after a woman has acted to end the abuse, and gone through the Crisis stage. Counsellors will be aware that women in the "Survival" stage need to finish establishing a safe environment with some financial stability, and resolve legal issues. They will benefit from time set aside to maintain their original goals, and will sometimes experience relapse urges, as well as social pressure to return to the partner. Some will be experiencing grief at their losses. Counselling or other forms of support were found very valuable for immediate issues. Some clients are not ready to address issues arising from the abuse experience at this point, while others benefited from it.

The model shows that some clients eventually come to evolve their goals to a more complex level, which leads to deeper learning, and to healing. Long term counselling can be valuable for learning and healing. It is also valuable to be aware that many women were isolated by their former partner or isolated themselves, and even during the "Survival" stage they may continue to isolate themselves. To help achieve healing, the study showed that women in the "Evolving and Healing" stage benefit from bringing into their lives elements of the social, psychological, physical and spiritual aspects of life, creating balance in their daily lives.

Healing, and the Bio-psycho-social-spiritual model

When participants told me about working to create balance in their lives, they clearly spoke of the physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of life. The details of what some of the participants have done to achieve balance were fully

described in Chapter 6, Section 13: “Achieving Balance”. The metatheme “Balance” occurs in the Evolving stage of change and is linked to healing.

The Bio-psycho-social model has been described by Engel (1980, cited in Pilgrim, 2005), who argued that psychological disorders emerge within individuals who are part of a system. The system has both sub-personal (intrapersonal, physical) elements and supra-personal (interpersonal) elements, in a psychosocial context. Engel argued that explanations for psychological disorders which ignore the interpersonal, environmental factors are partial and inadequate explanations. Nursing and Addictions are but two of the many fields where the model is commonly used in treatment today. Spirituality has been added to the model.

In accordance with the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model, a person has achieved balance when they are using the physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of life in a positive way in their daily life. It was interesting and exciting to see the concepts of balance and a holistic lifestyle emerge from the data concerning evolving and healing in the participants’ interviews.

Other researchers who investigated the psychological process for women ending relationships with abusive intimate partners have found that healing requires far more than leaving the relationship (Farrell, 1996) or maintaining the separation (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999) describe “Reclaiming self”, a social-psychological process that involves reinstatement of self within the larger social context of family and community. Reconnecting socially occurs after the individual has left the abuser and established a new environment that meets her basic needs.

For participants in my study, healing occurs along with achieving bio-psycho-social-spiritual balance, as described in Chapter 6, Section Thirteen. Healing does not occur when a client does not reach out to be part of her social context. The findings imply that helping professionals would find it beneficial to encourage clients to develop a lifestyle that includes all four aspects of life.

Section Two: Contrasting the Transtheoretical Model to the new model

In this section, I do not critique the Transtheoretical Model of change (TM) in its entirety. Rather, I wish to take certain concepts from the TM and discern whether the data analysis showed the concepts to be valid in the context of change for women ending relationships with abusive partners.

The process of change involves more than “maintenance”

According to the TM, after a client came to choose change, she took action, then worked to avoid triggers and relapses, and maintained the change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). For women who have ended relationships with an abusive partner, more is involved than simply getting out of the abusive relationship (Farrell, 1996). During the current study the understanding emerged that when a person chose positive change by ending a relationship with an abusive partner, the change involved more than simply one clear stage, the “Maintenance” stage described by the TM, and more than staying away from the former partner.

For women ending relationships with abusive partners, the TM was not detailed enough to elaborate fully on what occurs after action has been taken to achieve change. The model that I set out in Chapter 5 breaks the time during which change occurs into stages. It provides detail about what to expect in each stage, and sketches the tasks to be accomplished in each stage. The stages after ending the relationship allow for a grief and loss component, and a possible period of “fog” or “limbo”, a time of maintaining the change, and a time of progressing on to learning, healing, and thriving, including involvement in activism for social change for six of the seven participants, which was a part of healing.

Additional stages of change. In this study, it emerged that *without* the “Evolving and learning” stage, participants may form additional abusive relationships, or they may risk staying emotionally stuck feeling grief and emotional pain (in Barbara’s case for four years). Claire, Lucy, and Kara experienced multiple abusive relationships until they came to the point of choosing to try to understand their experiences after ending a relationship. A model of change needs to go beyond the initial maintenance of change.

Goals evolve. In contrast with the TM, which is useful to examine the stages of change in regard to setting and carrying out one single and static goal (e.g., to quit smoking), the current study showed that participants' goals evolved from simple to complex levels, and that higher levels of need were met as time passed. Participants' life skills, cognitive perceptions, and personalities evolved also, and some eventually took the goal to a very high and abstract level when they achieved healing and found balance in their lives.

Decisional balance. The current study showed that not just one event, factor, or realization caused a woman to end a relationship with an abusive partner. She was learning, resisting abuse, making realizations, checking out potential resources. Then several landmark events might occur, and finally something – a huge risk or an event that was “The Last Straw” - tipped the balance. The process in the Transtheoretical Model that was called Decisional Balance proved to be a useful construct to understand the participants' slow shift toward a choice for change for themselves. It portrayed a slow shift, culminating in a decision to act. I believe the current study illuminated the shift in decisional balance, as it occurred for the women in this study. It showed just how complex the shift in decisional balance can be.

Self efficacy. In the TM, self-efficacy is important in achieving change. Data in the current study revealed that participants' self-efficacy was low, as described in Chapter 6 and in the opening section of Chapter 5. Nevertheless, low self-efficacy did not prevent successful change. High self-efficacy is not required for change in the model proposed in Chapter 5. This is an important and intriguing difference in the two models.

Emotions. The realization that strong emotions may be experienced is important in my model of change. Emotions may be part of relapse urges in the TM but are focussed on in more depth in the model proposed in Chapter 5. Strong emotions occurred after events or realizations that were landmarks in decisional balance for some, and they also prevented relapse (Josie perceived encroaching blackness, and Trudy foresaw the death of her soul). The current study shows that emotions are heavily involved at important points of time (e.g., shame, grief and fear can be overwhelming in the Crisis stage while a participant is trying to access resources to create a new and safe environment).

Environmental influence. The majority of the constructs of the TM are intra-psychic and cognitive. It was my impression that the environment appears most strongly in the TM when triggers to relapse are discussed. In contrast, the model proposed in Chapter 5 emphasizes both intra-psychic and external (environmental, social) aspects of change from beginning to end of the process of change.

Social environment and beliefs. The social environment in which participants lived during their lives plays a larger role in my model than in the TM. The social environment influenced participants' beliefs about gender and relationship expectations from childhood through adulthood. The environmental influence can be positive, and/or negative, sometimes simultaneously. For example, Claire was receiving financial assistance and life skills training from various societal branches of her environment, which allowed her an opportunity to re-assess her beliefs about relationship expectations and about gender roles. At the same time, another part of her environment, her mother, was attempting to influence her beliefs by sending subtle messages with the gift of "four placemats" to Claire's three-person, single parent family. Her mother sent not-so-subtle messages to Claire when she told friends Claire had been "left high and dry" to explain divorce, rather than being proud that Claire had left an abuser and taken her children to a safe, stable environment. It is very important to include the influence of the social environment on women's beliefs in the theory that is the basis of our practice. Referring to beliefs, researcher Mary Russell suggested in a December, 2003, community forum that rather than asking, "Why doesn't she leave?", we ask instead, "How does she ever leave in a situation where there are so many barriers to leaving?"

Activism. Acting to change the social environment for others was a way in which six of the seven participants carried out their process of change, and was an interesting aspect of change which is discussed in the following section. Such interaction with the environment as part of the process of change is not a component of the TM.

After comparing the findings of the study to the above-noted constructs and stages of the TM, I conclude that although the TM is a useful change theory, it needs to be adapted and supplemented if it is to be used to help women who are or have been experiencing abuse from intimate partners.

Section Three: Activism and Herman's Stages of Healing

In this section, I describe coming to understand the participants' activism, and I discuss two ways in which the participants' activism differed from Herman's description of activism.

As reported in Chapter 6, Section Fourteen, it was surprising that six of the seven participants were now involved in activism, and that several began their activism only one year or two after their experience of an abusive relationship.

The study and the interview questions were not designed to explore *why* the vast majority of the participants all work or volunteer their support in areas that create societal change for minority groups, particularly women. Nevertheless, the finding exists that the participants work toward creating social change in their environments. When I tried to understand why that surprising finding would happen, I explored two aspects of the metatheme: healing, and resistance.

Activism promotes healing for survivors

First, I remembered that Herman, (1997) proposes that activism can be a part of healing. She sees it as redemption of a traumatic experience. In her experience as a therapist and researcher, activism occurs for a minority of survivors, and it occurs in a later stage of healing, a stage of reconnection with others. She termed the activism "Finding a Survivor Mission".

"These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission" (Herman, 1999, p. 207).

Social action offers a source of power that draws on the survivor's own abilities, and offers an alliance with others involved in a shared purpose. The mission can take many forms, ranging from engaging in activism with individuals to engaging in abstract intellectual pursuits (Herman, 1997, p. 207-208). It can involve efforts to change laws and policies. It can involve educating the public, as Jeanette did. There can be a spiritual dimension involved in the survivor mission, as there is for Trudy.

Survivors engaging in a survivor mission want to acknowledge the truth about oppression that has occurred and continues to occur. Often it is important to survivors to engage in truth telling, to “speak about the unspeakable in public” (p. 208) to help others. Such action provides survivors with a sense of hope. Herman holds that “public truth-telling is the common denominator of all social action” (1997, p. 208). She speaks of a principle of social justice that holds that the fate of others is connected to our own. Therefore, holding the perpetrators of abuse accountable is important not only for the survivor’s well being, but also for the benefit of the larger society (Herman, 1997).

Herman concludes that although the essence of a survivor mission involves giving to others, people who undertake a survivor mission are doing it for their own healing.

Activism as resistance

I perceive the participants’ activism as part of their healing, and it may be chosen as an act of redemption, but I see activism as a form of resistance as well. To resist oppression by changing society is a way that participants can choose to promote their own healing.

To reach the conclusion that the participants’ activism is a form of resistance, taking place after their committed relationship with an abusive partner has ended, I examined my own experience of change, and I looked at the definition of resistance, described in Chapter 6.

When I looked back at my own process of change after leaving a long term abusive relationship, I remembered that five years after ending the relationship I was still experiencing the world as a “survivor of abuse” and not yet as a “thriver”. Yet, at the five-year point in my process of change, I began volunteering at a transition house, and felt very dedicated to that work. Like some of the participants, I began the activist work toward social change when I, myself, had not yet evolved or healed to any great extent.

When I examine my own process of change and when I examine my own actions and consider why I have been doing them, I can clearly see that, for me, my activism is resistance. Resistance has been part of my personal healing and evolution. I have expanded my resistance beyond resisting abuse and oppression on the personal level, in the past relationship with my former partner, which ended a decade ago. I have brought

my actions of resistance to the societal level. In the paragraph that follows, I will explain how this action is resistance, as defined by Wade (1997).

When I volunteered, when I became employed helping women in transition, and when I educated myself in formal, academic ways concerning abusive relationships and the process of change, I was resisting. When, like several of the participants, I worked to enhance my skills of interpersonal boundaries, assertiveness, and my knowledge about healthy and unhealthy relationships, I was resisting; I was preventing a recurrence of oppressive, abusive personal relationships for myself and others.

Later, when I counselled women and men about abuse, and when I conducted research to add to existing knowledge and understanding of the process of change for women leaving abusive partners, it was – for me – resistance on a societal level. I was being the change that is needed in the world, at least in my corner of it. By my actions, I continue to “expose”, “prevent”, “withstand”, “impede”, “strive against”, and “refuse to comply with” acts of violence or oppression, ranging from disrespect to overt abuse, and the conditions that make such acts possible. My actions therefore fit the definition of resistance provided by Wade (1997), as do the actions of six of the participants who work or volunteer to help women and other oppressed social minority groups.

Using myself as a tool for understanding the data, I conclude that the participants’ activism was a form of resistance to oppression, and that resistance enhances healing. Although Herman (1997) viewed activism as occurring in the last stage of recovery, the data in this study revealed, as shown in Chapter 6, that acting for social change can appear in much earlier stages of the process of change. It is important for helping professionals to recognise that activism at any stage is resistance, and resistance is a strength that clients possess.

Section Four: Future directions for research

Having conducted seven interviews that were interesting, intriguing and inspiring, and having spent over a year immersed in the data, and discovering the findings, there still remain some areas which I believe would be valuable to explore in greater depth.

This study, based on critical social science and phenomenology, began the work of finding an effective model to describe the process of change for women ending

relationships with abusive partners. It would be valuable for future research to further clarify the stages of change, the tasks of each stage, and the constructs necessary in such a model. It would be useful to explore the non-linear aspects of the process of change. The participant maps in Chapter 4 clearly show that change was not a linear process.

The process of change during the Crisis and Survival stages was a time of anxiety, stress, grief, and much new learning for many participants. I believe that women would benefit from counselling support at that time. Many have no access to free or low cost counselling. It would be interesting for a researcher to develop a mentoring program for women at that stage. There is a huge lack of second stage programs across Canada.

Women who do not have access to counselling and peer support in second stage programs could benefit from a peer mentoring program. Because of the surprisingly high rate of participants in this study who help other women leaving abusive partners, I believe there are women who have accomplished a healing journey and who would be motivated to take part in a peer mentoring program. Researchers might have to assist transition houses in developing it for residents who leave, and for others who apply. They could study the program creation progress, and observe the program's effects.

It would be valuable to separate the population and explore change for single women and for single parent women. As well, there are many questions concerning culture and race that have not been addressed. Were there ways in which the experience of Josie and Jeanette differed from the others because of their French Canadian background? Considering the importance of the environment, gender socialization, and scarce or problematic social resources for women and their families when leaving abuse, as was revealed by this study, what would the change experience be like for women of First Nations, Asian, African, or Middle Eastern ancestry?

Remembered low self-efficacy was an interesting aspect of the participants' lived experience. Despite it, they achieved their goals for positive change. Perhaps for this population there would be a lower rate of "relapse", returning to the abusive partner out of desperation or finding another problematic partner, if self-efficacy could be enhanced at critical points such as the Crisis or Survival stages. It would be worthwhile for a future study to focus on and illuminate self-efficacy during all the stages of change.

The relationship expectations and gender role beliefs of the participants emerged as more important than I ever expected. This area of research could be fruitful. Recently, UBC researcher Mary Russell has been exploring relationship beliefs of women who have been abused. She reported her results in a December, 2003 community forum in Victoria, British Columbia. Russell has discovered that beliefs may be conflicting and in flux, and that although they are learned, they evolve over time. Gender-related beliefs can keep a woman in an abusive relationship even after her safety is endangered. A useful direction for future research could be to explore how helping professionals can ethically and supportively guide female clients to evaluate their beliefs.

The acts of resistance of women experiencing continued abuse from intimate partners would likely reveal much that would add to theoretical and practical knowledge if they were explored in a study solely designed for that purpose.

It is my view, as stated in Section One, that response-based interviewing (Wade, 2004) would raise clients' self-efficacy. A study which investigates the effect on self-efficacy of response-based counselling in regard to client resistance to abuse could provide very valuable knowledge for transition house support workers and other helping professionals who meet women at critical stages of their change process.

A study that focuses on ways that helping professionals in all areas of society and the agencies and institutions that employ them could increase the effectiveness of the help they provide to women in the early stages of change would be of benefit. In the present study, Jeanette focused on effective and non-effective helpers, providing several useful examples during her interview. She is dedicated to improving the understanding of teachers and counsellors in regard to what a family experiences during break-up caused by abuse. Barbara, Kara, and Claire also spoke about this topic. To study in detail the support that women leaving abusive partners receive from institutions and agencies would be illuminating and would lead to needed improvements.

Finally, a further study in regard to theoretical philosophy that supports the stage theory would strengthen the present findings. I realize that the metathemes and stage theory and its interpretation are based on the data. With regard to theory, I found concepts in the Transtheoretical Model that were supported by the data, and I observed

that as Herman had noted in 1997, activism was an important aspect of the process of change. The work of researchers such as Wade (1997, p. 23) supports a philosophy that clients always resist violence and oppression; Wade shares with the brief, solution-oriented and narrative therapists the perspective that it is valuable to work from the perspective that all clients have strengths (Wade, 1997, p. 24; Strong, 2002). I focussed mainly on what emerged from the data, and its practical uses for counsellors. It remains for the stages and metathemes to be linked to existing theory.

I have begun to see a connection between my findings and Maslow's theory about human motivation. It could be useful for further research to investigate the connection. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954, 1971), the lowest two levels, "Safety Needs" and "Physiological Needs", were the basic, simple goals for participants such as Claire and Trudy when they ended the relationship with an abuser. They were meeting what Maslow termed deficiency needs. As they achieved those goals, they were able to choose more and more complex goals - Maslow termed them growth needs - and to seek abstract goals (e.g., self-discovery, or a spiritual quest). Trudy and Claire in some respects sought goals that brought them to a level that Maslow terms self-actualization (to find self-fulfillment and realize their own potential). Perhaps they even reached the level of self-transcendence: connecting to something beyond the ego or to help others find self-fulfillment and realize their potential (Huitt, 2004). As one becomes self-actualized and self-transcendent, one develops wisdom. All participants had developed wisdom which they were motivated to share with others. Their words are attached as Appendix G, "Sharing the Wisdom". Both Trudy and Claire are clear examples of participants in the study who developed wisdom. In their chosen careers they now have the opportunity to share that wisdom with others.

Interestingly, by connecting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954, 1971) to the findings of this study, one could investigate how to provide appropriate information and help to women in the Learning, Action, Crisis or Survival stages, help that is suited to their level of need. Norwood (1999, cited in Huitt, 2004) has proposed that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be used to discern which of five sorts of information people require.

At the lowest level, people seek coping information to meet physiological needs. Norwood reports that information that is not directly linked to immediately meeting the physiological needs is left unattended. Abuse survivors or others who are at the second level and seek safety, need helping information. Those seeking to meet their “belongingness and love needs” at the third level in the hierarchy will require what Norwood terms enlightening information (e.g., information about developing relationships). At the fourth level, people seeking to meet esteem need require empowering information. Norwood proposes that to achieve esteem people seek information on how their ego can be developed. From my own perspective, I see the third and fourth levels as a time when helpers can assist clients to realize their strengths and to realize that they have already demonstrated them. When people reach Maslow’s growth levels of cognitive, aesthetic and self actualization, they seek what Norwood terms edifying information. As I understand it, at this point people want knowledge at an abstract, philosophical level. They want to discover how to connect to something beyond themselves, or knowledge that links them to altruistic behaviour.

With regard to practice and to theory formation, it may be worthwhile for a future study to compare and contrast the stage theory to Maslow’s hierarchy. I believe that the fit would not be exact. Maslow proposed that one need must be fulfilled before a higher need can be addressed (1954, 1971). That aspect of the theory needs to be more flexible to fit with the findings in this study. After leaving abuse, at least three participants successfully worked on higher levels before addressing lower levels (e.g., Jeanette educated the public, Trudy went on a spiritual quest immediately upon leaving the abuser, Josie became a valued helper of women leaving abusive partners). A less rigid model of need might emerge from the comparison, and the information from Maslow’s hierarchy might supplement the stage model in valuable ways.

Summary

In my research, I set the goal of adding to the existing knowledge and understanding of the process of change for women who have ended relationships with abusive partners. I reviewed the literature in regard to existing models of change, with the hope that my research would go a step further to improve the framework for understanding the change process.

Data provided by the participants was a gold mine of information. From it I drew twenty metathemes that revealed important aspects of the process of change for women leaving abusive partners. I was able to discern in the data a new stage model, illuminating the important steps in the process of change. The data supported the use of anti-oppressive language in the terms of the stage model.

Finally, I elaborated in detail the usefulness of the findings for researchers and practitioners, and suggested interesting directions for future research. It is my hope that future researchers will further explore the process of change for women like Barbara, Kara, Trudy, Jeanette, Josie, Lucy, and Claire. It is also my hope that the findings of my study will inspire both researchers and helpers to improve the ways that helping professionals can be more effective guides.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
 OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH
 HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Participant Consent Form

“Maintaining Change”

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled **“Maintaining change: Factors which influence success for women who have left abusive intimate partners.”** The study is being conducted by Julia Allain.

I, Julia Allain, am a Graduate Student in the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have further questions by telephone at (250)818-4140 or email at morgana@uvic.ca.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Geoffrey Hett. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 721-7783 or 478-2727 and hettg@uvic.ca. This research is not being funded by any funding agency.

THE PURPOSE of this research project is to investigate the lived experience of women during the first year after the breakup of a relationship that involved abuse by an intimate partner. I want to discover how the women successfully maintained change, living apart from their former partner.

RESEARCH OF THIS TYPE IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE it may uncover factors in successful change that can be helpful to other women leaving abusive partners. The information that is discovered may also be helpful to professionals, such as transition house workers and counsellors.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you responded to the advertisement placed with the Cridge Centre for the Family (Dovetail Second Stage program), or you have responded to the advertisement placed with a counsellor in Victoria, B.C., or in a community agency or college/university counselling centre.

You are volunteering to describe your life experience during the first year after leaving a relationship with a partner who was abusive.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include:

- (a) taking part in a personal interview that will be audiotaped with your permission, wherein you will have the opportunity to tell the story of your experience in your own words;
- (b) an opportunity for debriefing the interview experience, immediately after the interview;
- (c) an opportunity to obtain by mail a summary of the researcher’s analysis of themes in the study when the research has been concluded.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. The interview is expected to take one hour, followed by an opportunity for debriefing the interview experience

(an estimated five to fifteen minutes). Interviews will take place at the University of Victoria, or The Cridge Centre for the Family, or Citizens Counselling Agency. The only inconvenience is the time it takes to go through the interview process.

The following paragraph describes the potential risks to you by participating in this research.

Participation will entail recalling a period of time that, for some participants, may have been emotional. It may have involved important decisions, and turning points in your personal life. For some participants, this time may have involved traumatic events, as well as positive and even joyful emotions. Recalling and describing the events and their personal meaning may cause you to remember strong emotions and to review the decisions you have made during challenging times. This is natural when conducting such a personal review of the events in one's life. I advise that you consider the emotions which may be remembered, and consider consulting a family member or a counsellor before deciding to attend the interview.

In order to minimize risks involved in participating in this research, the following steps have been taken.

- (a) During the interview, I will be fully supportive and respectful of your wishes. At any time during your participation in this research you may stop and ask for time to consider the benefits or harm to yourself by participating. You may withdraw from the study entirely if you so choose, and I will respect your decision and release you from the study.
- (b) The interview questions have been designed in a way that does not focus primarily on negative experiences and emotions. The questions help you, as a participant, to realize your strengths, learning, and positive life changes you have made during your first year out of the relationship with your former partner.
- (c) I will provide you with a list of resources to contact for counselling support, should they be required.

The following paragraph describes the potential benefits of your participation.

- (a) It is an opportunity to tell the history of your past experience, in your own words. In a supportive atmosphere, you will be exploring a time that had a large impact on you.
- (b) Sharing your story of the first year will allow you to validate your pain and joy, and to realize your strength and your learning from your experience. This can be an empowering process.
- (a) Telling the story of your successful experience may reinforce your awareness that you have made positive decisions and carried them out.
- (c) You may discover a broader perspective of your life.
- (d) Through telling our stories and connecting with other women's experiences, we begin to heal.
- (e) You may benefit by knowing that your participation in this study is going to help other women going through similar experiences in the future.
- (f) You may benefit by knowing that the learning from your experience will help counsellors and support workers to assist women who are changing their lives in the way that you have already done.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed by myself.

In order to assure myself that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research, I will ask for your consent before beginning the interview, and will ask you verbally at the end of the interview whether you still consent for your story to be used in this study.

Protecting your anonymity:

To protect your anonymity, I will be the only person who will be able to identify you. To encode your identity, I will ask you to either provide a pseudonym (code name) of your own choosing, or to select a code name from a list that I will provide. The decoding key will be kept in a locked room.

You may have been informed about this study by a counsellor or support worker at an agency in Victoria. To protect your anonymity, it was left up to you to decide, on your own, whether to contact me, and the phone call to contact me was made by you. Counsellors and support workers who told you about the study will not be told by me (the researcher) whether you ever decided to take part in the study.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected as follows. Tapes, consent forms, and transcriptions of data will be stored in a locked cabinet. Immediately after transcribing your story, the tape will be destroyed by myself. The transcription of your story will be stored on the hard drive of my computer and on computer disks. I will control access to the cabinet and keep it locked at all times when it is not being used by me. My supervisor, Dr. G. Hett, and committee members Dr. N. Trace and Dr. J. Milliken may have access to your story, or discuss it with myself, but all identifying information will have been removed or altered *before* they read or discuss your story. Data will be destroyed following completion of my thesis.

If you share something in the interview and realize that you wish to keep it confidential, the information will be omitted from the transcribed interview at your request.

The data from your interview will be used in the thesis in a modified form (as themes) and in an unmodified form as well, as excerpts from the interview transcript. Identifying details (such as names of yourself and others) will be altered to maintain confidentiality.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. The results of this research will be presented in written form in a thesis, and results may also be published in a professional journal. The results will be presented orally to my thesis committee, in fulfillment of the research requirement for completion of the degree of Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria. The results may also be presented from time to time in written or oral presentations to other professionals and interested groups. In whatever way the results of this research are communicated to others, I will strictly maintain anonymity and confidentiality in regard to yourself and other participants, as has been described above.

Should you and other participants choose to do so, you may provide your mailing address and receive a summary of results of the study.

Data from this study will be disposed of in the following manner.

Tapes will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. One year following the completion of this thesis, I will delete all data that contains the interviews with participants from my computer hard drive and diskettes. I will shred all physical data such as handwritten notes concerning interviews, the key to code names, and the printed transcripts of interviews and parts of interviews.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Notice

Have you made a major change in your life?

I would appreciate your help with my study of women who have changed their lives. Would you be interested in telling me about your experience?

If you have left a relationship with a partner who was abusive or violent, and if you have been out of the relationship for at least one year, I would appreciate talking to you about how you left and stayed out of the past relationship.

What was the first year like for you?

What would you like to tell other women about how to make it through the first year?

My intent is to make this a positive experience for you. As well, your experiences may be helpful to other women in the future.

Your name and the identifying details of your experience will be kept confidential.

I am currently a counsellor in Victoria, and our interview will help me with my Masters thesis in counselling.

Interviews which take from 1 to 1 ½ hours of your time will be conducted privately at a time that meets your convenience, in a meeting room at whichever of the following locations you choose: the Cridge Centre for the Family, or the University of Victoria, or at Citizens Counselling Agency.

If you are interested, please call me at **818-4140**, and we will discuss your participation in the study.

Julie Allain
(250) 818-4140

Appendix C: Interview Guide - Sample questions

1. Two questions concerning urges to return:

(Statement preceding questions: “Many women experience a strong urge at times to go back to their former partner. This is normal, and it can be quite a learning experience, whether or not a woman does temporarily go back.”)

“Did you experience any thoughts about returning?”

“How did you deal with the thoughts?”

2. Two questions concerning environmental, interpersonal, and intra-psychic stimuli (“triggers”) which create urges to return:

“What triggered these thoughts about returning to the former partner?”

“What was happening in your life at that time?”

3. Questions concerning self-awareness, change over time, strengths:

“Have you learned anything from that experience?”

“What would you tell another woman in the same situation?”

4. Question concerning self-efficacy:

Ask when participant is describing contemplating ending the relationship:

“How capable of leaving did you feel you were at that time?”

Appendix D: List of 20 Metathemes

“changing awareness of gender socialization”,
“changes in relationship beliefs”,
“increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”,
“resistance”,
“realization of risk”,
“shift in decisional balance”,
“The last straw/the sinking ship”,
“leaving with the resources they had at the time (internal and external)”,
“Imagine – evolving goals, simple to complex”,
“trust”,
“What got them out/relapse prevention”,
“evaluation”,
“strong emotions”
“parenting challenges after break-up”,
“self-discovery”,
“wisdom – understanding the past”,
“achieving balance”, and
“acting for social change”.
“finding support from family and friends”, and
“seeking formal/societal help”.

Appendix E: Themes that support the Metathemes

The metathemes that occur in each of the five stages and themes that support them are as follows. Each metatheme appears in one or more stage of the change experience.

a.) Stage One, the “Slow Shift toward Change”. Participants are “Learners”.

Metatheme: “Changing awareness of gender socialization”, formed from themes: Born a woman, Early gender socialization in family of origin, Gender socialization and religious beliefs, Gender socialization and the media, Gender socialization in school, Waves of feminism, and New beliefs about women.

Metatheme: “Changes in relationship beliefs” formed from themes: Changing expectations in relationships, Changing beliefs, and Early influences on relationship expectations.

Metatheme: “Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”, formed from themes: Taking total responsibility for the relationship, “I must be crazy”, Hurting myself first, Seeing a pattern, My role, Realizing behaviour is abusive.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from themes: Breaking silence, Resisting abuse.

Metatheme: “Leaving with the Resources they had at the time (Internal and External)” formed from themes: Self esteem, Isolation, Lack of Family Support, Self efficacy During Relationship, Self efficacy Immediately Before Leaving, Seeking resources, Preparing to act, Seeking safety.

Metatheme: “Realization of risk”, formed from themes: risk to life, risk to self, soul or spirit, risk of loss of career, risk of harm or loss of children.

Metatheme: Shift in Decisional Balance, formed from themes: “Turning Points and Landmark events”, Realizations, Social Embarrassment, Cross-cultural shame, Contemplating ending the relationship, Losing hope for change.

Metatheme: “The Last Straw/the sinking ship” formed from themes: Last Straw/Sinking Ship realization, “Unbearable”.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes Food and shelter, and Evolving goals. In Stage One, goals were simple.

b.) Stage Two, “Action”. In the brief “Action” stage, each woman is an “Actor”. The metathemes in this section describe ending the relationship.

Metatheme: “Leaving with the Resources they had at the time (Internal and External)”
formed from themes: Self esteem, Isolation, Lack of Family Support, Self efficacy
During Relationship, Self efficacy Immediately Before Leaving, Seeking resources,
Preparing to act, Seeking safety.

Metatheme: “Finding support from family and friends”, formed from themes: Family
support, Friends’ support, Women network.

Metatheme: “Seeking formal/societal help”, formed from themes: Transition house
experiences, Second Stage, Police/“They hop for a male”, “Restraining order for life”,
Custody and visitation, Counselling.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes
Food and shelter, and Evolving goals.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from themes: Breaking silence, Resisting abuse.

c.) Stage Three, “Crisis”. Immediately after ending the relationship, each woman is an
“Evaluator”, seeking and evaluating resources to form a new environment.

Metatheme: “Strong emotions”, formed from themes: Still loving, Grief and Loss, Guilt
and shame, Crisis, Urges to return, Confusion, In Fog, Working to distract.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes
Food and shelter, and Evolving goals.

Metatheme: “Seeking formal/societal help”, formed from themes: Transition house
experiences, Second Stage, Police/“They hop for a male”, “Restraining order for life”,
Custody and visitation, Counselling.

Metatheme: “Evaluation”, formed from contrasting themes: Resources, How will we
live, Anything is better, Panic, Urges to return.

Metatheme: “What got them out/Relapse prevention”, formed from themes: Urges to
return, Let’s stay friends, Can’t go back, Missing the comfortable parts, “What got me
out, kept me out”.

Metatheme: “Realization of risk”, formed from themes: risk to life, risk to self, soul or
spirit, risk of loss of career, risk of harm or loss of children.

Metatheme: “Trust”, formed from themes: Something better, Help is available.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from themes: Breaking silence, Resisting abuse.

If activists, they have chosen to actively contribute to improve society for women or other social minority groups such as the elderly, by volunteer or paid work.

d.) Stage Four, “Survival”. The “Survivor” sets out to create a new environment and to cope with external obstacles and internal thoughts and emotions. She sets out to maintain the change she has chosen. For some, the change process ends at this point.

Metatheme: “Seeking formal/societal help”, formed from themes: Transition house experiences, Second Stage, Police/“They hop for a male”, “Restraining order for life”, Custody and visitation, Counselling.

Metatheme: “What got them out/Relapse prevention”, formed from themes: Urges to return, Let’s stay friends, Can’t go back, Missing the comfortable parts, “What got me out, kept me out”.

Metatheme: “Parenting challenges after break-up”, formed from themes: “It never ends”, Public education, Visitation by abuser, Parenting wounded/confused/abusive children, Counselling for children who have witnessed abuse, Societal expectations, Entering the public school system.

Metatheme: “Strong emotions”, formed from themes: Still loving, Grief and Loss, Guilt and shame, Crisis, Urges to return, Confusion, In Fog, Working to distract.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes Food and shelter, and Evolving goals.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from themes: Breaking silence, Resisting abuse.

Metatheme: “Acting for social change”, formed from themes: Volunteer, Giving back.

e.) Stage Five, “Evolving” The woman is a “Thrivers”. Learning and healing are two separate aspects of the Evolving stage.

i) “Evolving while Learning”.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes Food and shelter, and Evolving goals.

Metatheme: “Changing awareness of gender socialization”, formed from themes: Born a woman, Early gender socialization in family of origin, Gender socialization and religious beliefs, Gender socialization and the media, Gender socialization in school, Waves of feminism, and New beliefs about women.

Metatheme: “Changes in relationship beliefs” formed from: Changing expectations in relationships, Changing beliefs, and Early influences on relationship expectations.

Metatheme: “Increasing awareness of dynamics of abuse”, formed from themes: Taking total responsibility for the relationship, “I must be crazy”, Hurting myself first, Seeing a pattern, My role, Realizing behaviour is abusive.

Metatheme: “Wisdom – understanding the past”, formed from themes: Realizations, and “What I’d tell another woman just like me”.

Metatheme: “Parenting challenges after break-up”, formed from themes: “It never ends”, Public education, Visitation by abuser, Parenting wounded/confused/abusive children, Counselling for children who have witnessed abuse, Societal expectations, Entering the public school system.

Metatheme: “Self discovery”, formed from: Self-exploration, Education, Spiritual quest.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from themes: Breaking silence, Resisting abuse.

Metatheme: “Acting for social change”, formed from themes: Volunteer, Giving back.

ii) “Evolving while Healing”.

Metatheme: “Imagine – Evolving goals, simple to complex”, formed from themes Food and shelter, and Evolving goals.

Metatheme: “Wisdom – understanding the past”, formed from themes: Realizations, and “What I’d tell another woman just like me”.

Metatheme: “Self discovery”, formed from Self exploration, Education, Spiritual quest.

Metatheme: “Achieving balance”, formed from: Who I am today, Exercise, Meditation, Tai chi, Health, Balance, Spirituality, Fulfilling, Community, Women network.

Metatheme: “Resistance”, formed from theme: Breaking the silence, Resisting abuse.

Metatheme: “Acting for social change”, formed from themes: Volunteer, Giving back.

Appendix F

“Honouring the Women Victims of Spousal Homicides in the Greater Victoria area since 1997”

1997:

Patty Lavery

1998:

Laurie (Laureen) Lees

Katerina Perry

Stephanie Thomas

Lisa Louie

1999:

Oksana Rogalsky

Harjit Walia

Crystal Martin

Victoria Adams

Vikki Ferrando

2000:

Tammy Miller

Sharon Frick

2001:

Kellie Brook

2002:

Heidi Geroux

Brenda Lawless

Phoebe Mack

Tammy Miller

2003: No deaths.

List was provided by M. Goley, Co-ordinator of Dovetail Second Stage Program. An updated list is read each year at a public gathering during Prevention of Violence Against Women Week.

Appendix G: Sharing the Wisdom: Excerpts from a Dialogue

Women share their wisdom here, to encourage and benefit other women.

BARBARA – “I’m not going to die like this”

J.A.: **And what I would like to ask you is, now, supposing you met somebody and they were going through the same stuff you went through.**

They are having a hard time expressing themselves and sticking up for themselves, and now the break has happened. And they’re really feeling messed up.

They’re grieving. **What would you say that helps them?**

Barbara: What they should *do*, or what would make them feel happier?

J.A.: Sometimes what makes us feel happier isn’t always what we need to do right then. What would help them survive this experience and get stronger and healthier, and choose a good life for themselves?

Barbara: (quietly) **I think the first one is that they’ve got to understand that it isn’t going to happen overnight.**

You’re not going to feel good about yourself overnight.

It’s bloody hard work, and you have to keep it up.

It’s hard work. **But *you’re worth it!***

And you really are worth it, if you can only make yourself believe that.

That’s the hardest part, is suddenly realizing you are worth it.

I would immediately suggest there are a lot of free support systems, **get counselling.**

It is something I didn’t do, and I regret it terribly!

I think what you have to do is keep an open mind and listen to what the counsellor says.

It’s okay if you made a mistake. It’s okay to be wrong.

... I don’t know if Earth is a punishment, or if it is just a testing ground to see where you go next, or if this is it and then you die, I don’t know.

And I won’t know till I die, and I’m not coming back to share that, but ...

until you get your lessons right, **until you pay attention to doing the best you can for yourself, you’re going to be miserable.**

And that may be saying, ***“No, I’m not doing this any more.***

I am not going to die like this.”

J.A.: So that’s what you would all say to a person who is just starting out on the path that you’ve been on for the last few years here?

Barbara: Yeah. **Because we *are* worth it.**

But I don’t have to believe that you are worth it.

You have to believe it yourself. And that is so hard.

Some of the exercises they give you, like writing down what's good about you and what's bad about you – you know what? **I don't think you should focus on what is bad about you. I think this is one time you should only focus on your good points.**

I'm a kind person; I make a good cake.

Ridiculous as it may sound, only focus on your good points.

And if somebody tells you something that is bad, take your weakness and file it away for when you are feeling better and you can deal with it.

And look at those strengths.

Like, I'm a good mother.

Oh, I get up in the morning with my kids and make sure they go to school.

That is not a small event.

And they (need to) really focus on what is good about them, and don't allow anybody to get into their space and tell them what's bad about them.

What can you do?

See a counsellor.

Exercise. When you exercise, the world becomes a different place.

And ... **do something for somebody else.**

Join a volunteer group.

When this started, my father told me to take this little old lady for a walk.

I thought, 'I'm tired ... I need to do something for me'.

Then I thought, 'God, that's cruel, and that poor old lady is sitting there, and she's blind'.

So I went. *Boy!* That made me feel good.

And I think that people don't understand that when you are volunteering and doing something for someone else, you're really not doing it for them at all!

You are doing it for you.

That makes you feel good about who you are.

So volunteer, and do something for someone else, like going to an old persons' home.

It's something that takes you outside of your environment that you are in.

That's what I did.

What else did I do?

I exercised. I walked. Minimum of an hour a day.

Because there's something about your brain functions differently when you're walking.

Those endorphins check in and you don't worry about your problem. Not as much.

You are clear-thinking. And that's what I do.

I do believe that working with older people, too, is such a wonderful thing, because they can give you advice and experience – even though you don't want to hear it!

And the other thing you can do is, when people give you advice, it's hard to discern what is good advice and what is not.

And at this point in your life, you are *trying everything*.

Because you are not sure what is right and wrong.

J.A.: Maybe trying a lot of different things is good?

Barbara: Yes, yes.

J.A.: Strategies! Try new things.
 Barbara: **And don't feel you failed.**
And talking helps.
You are letting go of the past.

The other thing is to keep busy.

You know, not to sit around and think about it, or watch TV....

And I'm a stewart. I'm a big stewart.

Like, I'm awake at four in the morning, going, "*Oh my God! What the hell is happening to me?*" ... I try to do those deep breathing things when I get like that.

But ... it's just so hard to learn to love yourself, when you feel nobody else has....
 Or you've loved someone, and you've felt that, and it's so important and they've just kicked it aside like you're a piece of junk. It's so important. It's so hard to get back that love for yourself.

We are not taught to be selfish as women. But, be damned, if you aren't good to yourself, nobody is going to be good to you.

And so, seriously, for your own self-esteem, get up and leave.

If you feel that you are being verbally abused, when you have asked somebody not to talk to you like that, get up and leave.

And if they don't like it, and then they don't come back,
 then *you scream with joy, as hard as it is.*

Because you've just saved yourself.

And you don't have to tell them off. You know that?

Walking away and smiling as you do it is punishment in itself, because they know they're wrong. And you haven't had to tell them; you've showed them.

That's the way to do it. Walk away. Be a success.

J.A.: Okay! I think you're going to be a success.

Barbara: I don't know about that!

J.A.: And thanks for sharing all your words with us.

Barbara: If anything I've said helps one woman....

J.A.: I think the stuff you've said, in answer to what you would tell someone else, that was powerful.

KARA – "I wanted to take care of my own"

J.A.: Now, suppose you met another person, and suddenly you realized their situation was a lot like yours, back then. What would you tell them?

Kara: I ask, "what do *you think* you should be doing?" "What's feeling good *for you?*"

... and I just do a lot of listening.

I ask them *what's right for them.*

I would really talk about *honouring themselves*.
And letting themselves be first.
And I could do that by giving my own example.

But again, my belief is I wouldn't want to *tell* them what to do.
But can I suggest ...?

I tell them, "I got tired of taking care of his own shit
and I wanted to take care of my own".
 In those kind of words.
 It is like, "**What can you do for you?**"
 Because, he's gonna do his thing.
 Like, what can *you* do?

And that may mean staying in the relationship, or not...
 And then, honouring that and supporting them in that.
 You need to stay? Okay, but **be aware that that is a choice**.
They are choosing to stay or they are -

You may not be able to leave,
 because you don't have the money, or any resources or ...
 your children are going to be abused or hurt, um -
I would be sharing information.
 I would talk, I would talk about resources.
 I could tell them about the transition house...
 because that's something I did at one point, in another relationship.
 Um, **just to go talk to somebody**.
 I would say, go talk to somebody outside of that relationship.

That's something else I want to talk about.
 I am very careful when I talk to people
 to make themselves ***be critical of the advice*** their friends or parents are giving them.
 ... I go, "well, they are probably coming from this place of caring.
 And yet, **what do you really need?**"
 Again, I'm focussing on their own (strength).
They know what's right or wrong.
 And I *really believe* that.
And that people can really try.

And I ask, **what are they willing to take?**

I also, I do a lot of the pros and cons list,
And ... just because a con list is twenty pages long and a pro list is five,
 well, maybe that one pro outweighs your twenty cons.
 J.A.: ... your child's safety or life? It could outweigh twenty on the other side.

Kara: And so again, for me, **the focus is not on what they can do in the relationship, what they can do with a partner.**

It is what they can do *with themselves* ...

to be happier now, or to feel safer right now.

And that may either mean staying in the relationship, or not.

I really try to show my respect for my self, towards them.

J.A.: You say that in such a gentle way, but what you are saying is really meaningful and really strong. Thanks for those words!

TRUDY – Turning “the swamp into the lotus”

J.A.: Supposing it’s today, and you meet someone whose situation has been very similar. And now they are thinking about leaving, and they’ve made the decision to leave. What would you say to them?

Trudy: With one particular woman ... I supported her strengths.

I supported her strengths as she expressed them ...

and her knowledge that *she knew what she knew*,

because he was always trying to tell her she *didn’t* know.

And, step-by-step ... conveying to her that I knew, because I had been through something similar.

I just let her know that I knew that **life would be way better after – or, *could be*, better after.**

Eventually, she entered a support group, and I knew that she’d be able to get the skills there to deal with him.

J.A.: Your face looks really happy that you were able to do that!

And I’m hearing that it’s growing out of your own experience, that you were able to say “You *do* know what you know.”

Trudy: Yeah.

J.A.: You had the chance to be supportive in ways that clicked with what happened to you.

Trudy: It was just click! Click! Click! Right along! It was unbelievable.

And of course, other women too, but she was probably the most ... how do you say that? Her experience correlated, right along.

J.A.: So, in your work you sometimes get to help people who are in a very similar situation. And we both know abuse has many different faces, but for ones who have been very similar, **you’ve had that chance, to be part of the change.** How does that feel?

Trudy: Whew! (Laughs). **Like a gift. Just a real gift. Giving back, also....**

All those people, and thoughts and whatever contributed to *my* being able to leave. So, giving back to the world. *Delightful!*

J.A.: We actually would *never choose* to go through these experiences. But the fact that we did, if we can help someone else, and use it for our own wisdom or our family's wisdom, then we are turning ... turning manure into flowers. (Laughs).

Trudy: Absolutely! Isn't that it! Yeah!

It's like, the swamp into the lotus, or manure into roses. Yeah.

That is it too, isn't it? I never thought of ... I know that counselling is a gift, to me. It's so special, it just shines! I guess that is part of that process.

J.A.: Is there anything else really important you'd want to say to women in general who are leaving abuse? Any practical advice, or ideals, or anything you'd want to say?

Trudy: Whew! Um... yeah, **just don't give up. Don't give up on yourself!**
Yeah, maybe **get some hopeful support for yourself.**

J.A.: Hopeful support?

Trudy: Positive support for yourself. Yeah.

J.A.: I'm always a concrete person, so, how would they "concretely" do that?

Trudy: **They'd have to tell the truth. They'd have to open up.** Which I never did.

J.A.: It's pretty difficult sometimes.

Trudy: Rather difficult.

J.A.: But it's part of healing and recovering.

Trudy: Yeah.

J.A.: Well, today's your first time talking about these things...

And especially, talking about the whole big picture ... that is a *lot* to be talking about all at one time.

Trudy: It's huge. It's huge.

J.A.: It is. And I admire your courage for doing it. And I'm *sure* that if this thesis does help any other women, some day, it will be partly through your efforts, and especially your really clear thoughts you've given us, that are going to be really helpful.

JOSIE – "You will get support"

J.A.: Say you met someone and their situation is similar to yours. Say they had a lot of children, and they had put up with whatever *their* partner's type of abuse was for a *long* time. She is thinking about leaving, but she is afraid she can't make it on her own. But it's just unbearable to keep living there.

Then, what would you tell her if she said, "**Okay! I've decided to leave.**

But I'm really afraid."

Josie: (pause). Well.... I guess I would say something like,

"You know, if you've decided to leave, that's that! You've decided to leave.

And yes, it's scary!

There's no doubt about it; it's scary!

And, it doesn't necessarily stop being scary right after you leave!"

"So, you've got to be prepared to adapt to being, maybe, scared for awhile, but, **follow your decision.**

If your decision is this, then, it's the right decision."

J.A.: **What else would you say to her about how to get through that first year?**

(Pause). And say the kids are ... *upset*. You know? They *will* be!

Josie: They *are* upset. It's horrible. You know?

J.A.: Yeah. How's she gonna get through that?

Often, women say they're worried that they are damaging the kids by going off and trying to live with them as a single parent.

Josie: **The problem is, is that, you have to try and put it in the balance.**

Which is damaging the kids more?

Like, it was very plain for me.

The situation was *really bad!*

So I mean, you just have to put it in the balance.

I think, when it comes to the point where you've decided to leave, you've decided to leave because anything else is better than what that is.

Because you're – you're their Mom. You're living through it and you are seeing what it *is* doing to them. And you are already *in* the crisis, right?

And the kids are in crisis when you are at the transition house. Right?

It's like, whew! That's *already* the *big* thing.

So, are you gonna go *this* way, or are you gonna go *that* way?

If you go *that* way, you might be here again.

J.A.: So, how does she survive this? And how does she strengthen herself, and what does she do to get that strength?

Josie: Well, you know what?

If you want support, and you need support, you will get support.

And, in the autumn, I just had moved into the second stage housing.

Um. It was my first birthday after I came here. I was at a road beside the ocean.

This man was drowning.

He was out; he was floating off in the ocean.

And uh, I had to go out. **I saved him.**

And I wrote him a note that I hope the ambulance driver gave to him, saying,

"There's a reason why you're not dead."

And I said, **"If you want support, there's support."**

"There is support, if you want to change".

It was basically like, "Obviously you're not dead, so if you're here, you need help.

It's available in the city. You just ... *find it!*"
And that's what I believe, for women too.
Because look at what happened to me.

And you know, ever since I got into second stage housing, I knew we had to have a house. **That's what I focussed on.**

We had to have a place to live.

We had to have a house; we couldn't go far, because I don't think I could afford a million cars for everybody, you know.

But, you know? **It all happened!**

It all happened.

There is some stage that, you know, **whatever you believe in, sort of comes for you, a bit ... not all the time!**

CLAIRE – "A year of healing"

J.A.: "If you met someone who was in the same boat that you had been in back then, and she said, "I've decided to leave, but I'm really afraid about leaving, and what this is going to be like." What would you say to her about what that first year is going to be like? The plusses, and the minuses.

Claire: Well, I'd say ...

**"I'd be lying to you if I told you that it's all going to be easy from here on in.
 But by leaving, you have done the hardest part.
 You've done half the work, by leaving.
 The rest isn't going to be smooth sailing,
 But it is going to be better than it was."**

And then sometimes I say, too,

"I guarantee you that if you give yourself a year, you will be in a different place".

"Give yourself a year of healing. A year of healing and time to yourself."

"If you give yourself a year, I guarantee that you will feel so much better."

"It takes time to heal from any relationship.

Even if your relationship wasn't abusive, you'd still need time.

And different people process stuff at different rates of time."

Like, I'm still processing stuff I learned (years ago).

So one day I will go, "Ahhhhhh! So that's what he was talking about!"

"Oh, okay!" (Laughs).

J.A.: If she is worried about, "can she do it? Can she handle it?" what would you say?

Claire: **"If I can do it, you can do it".**

“It takes *incredible* amounts of strength to survive in an abusive relationship”.

And so *now*, you can just take a small portion of that strength that you still have, and use it for yourself, then you can accomplish *anything* you want.”

“Yeah, they know how to survive.

And it is just taking some of that strength that they already have, and using it for themselves, instead of being in a relationship where it is *drained out of them* all the time.

It is about learning how to give to yourself. And that is not “selfish”.”

J.A.: Have you learned anything that helps women see how culture and society influence women in relationships?

Claire: **“Just the idea that women aren’t equal.**

I think that plays a big part in the fact that women are abused, because we still teach women to be passive, and quiet and “nice”, and non-assertive.

And it’s not that they’re bad things;

it’s just that we also need to teach women how to be assertive, and independent, and strong.

The same things that we teach men.”

So, that’s what I believe: we should teach the same to both genders.

And also that men learn how to be empathetic and understanding and in touch with their feelings, but still be strong too.

I believe that’s the right combination.

I believe that you can focus on that, and teach your children to be both.

LUCY - “Doors will just start to open”

J.A.: **What would you tell another person... a person whose situation is a lot like yours. Now, they tell you what happened, and they say, “I finally decided I’m going to leave. I’m positively going to leave. But, I’m really scared.”**

What would you tell them, about what to look for in the year to come, and how to get through it?

Lucy: Well, I certainly would tell them that if they are walking or running away from this relationship, that **they just have to *trust* that they are walking or running toward something else.**

I feel really strongest on that, because, you know, we get so conditioned to how we interact with people, it’s hard to break out of that mould.

And you just have to trust that once X, Y, and Z are gone, in your environment, it will be easier to focus ahead.

And I think, just really reassuring what they are feeling right now, and not judging.

... And now, *you just have to focus on now, and now it will be better.*

And now you open so many doors.

And you closed so many doors when you are in a relationship like that.

**And doors (will) just start to open, one after the other,
and, the healthier you get, the more you are able to walk through them,
and take advantage of what is on the other side.**

J.A.: So would you advise them to reach out to **counselling, or to local second stage programs?**

Lucy: Absolutely, absolutely.

J.A.: And to look for support that way, for them, and for their kids if they have kids?

Lucy: Oh, yeah. I think people try to leave relationships, *alone*, too much.

And I remember, one of the two times that I went back,
my friends had said, "*Don't go there by yourself.*"

... And whether that's because the person is going to retaliate physically
or whether you are going to end up in bed with them, or whatever,
you shouldn't go back.

But um, **you shouldn't try to do it alone.**

I always will say, "Call the police if you need to."

... **What I think, too, is, making as *clear a break* as you can.**

And being firm in your decision,

because people say, "why don't you try to take some space?"

... You know, I am thinking about my friend....

She just keeps saying, "**Well, I just get through the next couple days.**"

I just say, "**Something major needs to happen, for this to change.**"

And it is either going to be you guys having a big blowout,
and the police showing up or somebody getting hurt, or killed,
or, it is going to be you going, "*That's it!*"

But, **don't let him back, and don't you go back.**

Clean cut!

It's like when you quit smoking, 'cold turkey'!

... **Absolutely.**

'Cold turkey' is the way to go."

"Because it's like, you *could* go back at any time.

Just for today, (is) your focus.

***And every day is one more day of recovery* from that.**

So it is like your "clean time", almost, you know."

JEANETTE – “I’m here to learn, and I want to get it”

Drawing on her own experience, Jeanette spoke of what is most important for women with children to know when they are considering leaving an abusive partner.

Jeanette: My priorities were in the right place
I knew that I had to take a decision. I felt ready to protect my kids.
**The message was clear. If the situation happened again, then I am losing the kids.
So I had to make a choice between Dad and the kids.
The choice was very clear.
*I would put my priorities on the kids, and protect them, for sure!***

**So, a few days after that, I phoned the transition house.
My heart was so torn that I decided this is it!
And I can’t really lose the children. *I can’t do this any more.*
Like, my life was the children.**

When I left, I said, “Some women move every two years to stay away from the ex.
I’m not going to do this.
I need to have a life, and I need to have my feet planted where I want to be.”

So, I spent a lot of time with the kids.
And that summer I started to see a counsellor, to deal with anger.
I think before, *not only* I was feared of angry people like my ex,
I think I went into a post-traumatic stress.

It was hard. I had to gain some **skills**,
and some **trust** that I could deal with people who have anger problems.
And I had to work on my **assertiveness**.
That summer it was good that my kids went to Day Care
and that **I took care of myself**.

And the counsellor who I met, she used to counsel women who have left abusive relationships. She was very good.

I had a hard time to accept the fact that I was depressed.
And she said, “You have left an abusive relationship;
you went in a down-sized home; you lost your “dream home;”
“You lost your “dream family”. And there has been a lot of loss,
so, of course, **you have good reason to be depressed**”.

And as we talked, I felt “gosh, it’s normal, to go through this, and to feel like this!”

So one of the things the counsellor said, she said,
“Jeanette, if you need to cry, pick your time of the day it’s time to cry.”

So when the kids would be in Day Care and I had one to three o'clock, that was my time to cry. You know, **after awhile, I have no more tears!**

She told me about **self esteem.**

You know, *I had no idea.*

There was days when I think I lost it somewhere down the road.

And boundaries.

I never thought that I have to put boundaries to people or otherwise they mentally can abuse you. **I thought people were fair.**

At the end of the sessions, the counsellor said most of the things were self esteem, boundaries, and especially anger issues.

She said that *women* seem to lose themselves in those topics.

Yes, I was angry at ... all those people being judgmental, ignorant, at my workplace, but I was starting to put pieces together.

Things have to be logical for me, otherwise, I am kind of lost into it.

Then, the counsellor started to talk about a training program for women leaving abusive relationships. So I went to school there for a year.

My attitude was: "I'm here to learn, and I want to get it."

One day I had to say to the other women,

"Look. I'm in the same boat as all of you.

I'm here because I left an abusive relationship.

And I have to look at my future.

We all have the same reasons, everybody. I'm in the same boat as you."

And it sort of relaxed them after that.

And then I said to them,

"An abusive relationship happens at any kind of educational level.

It doesn't matter what kind of economic status you have.

... So you're having taboos that we just need to get rid of, because ***we are all in the same boat.***"

There was a time when I thought I was going to give up.

Then I thought, 'yes, this is the right place'.

And I was working on my communication skills.

And after that, things got better.

I don't think that it solved *all* my problems or *all* my goals

but I was looking at facing angry people, working on my communication skills,

and my computer skills, and it started giving me an idea

that, maybe, I needed to go to university.

I had to leave second stage housing.

But I felt like, um, I was a bit insecure leaving, because they have counsellors.

when you need to talk to someone you can go there;

and the neighbours sort of developed a support system....

But then, when I moved in the new place, **I was starting to feel normal**, like everybody else ... that I didn't need to be so much dependent.

So, **what did it take to get there, to be independent? *I think I'm just starting.*** And it has been (several) years. **I'm just starting to feel strong.**

I've been starting to do workshops for single moms, and parents who have difficult things with their children. Especially with women who have left abusive relationships; the family dynamics are not easy, after that.

The family dynamics were very difficult, when I was on my own with the kids because I went through a weak period. I was not as strong as before. My kids tried to take over. They also witnessed, um, some patterns from my ex, that he could control me and yell at me.... So, being caught in the middle and witnessing that, my kids thought they were the boss.

You have kids who have witnessed control and power and so on. It is going to be like this.

You have to be ready to face it, that they want to take charge. And they want to be the parent; they want to be the boss. So, be ready for it. Yeah, and I think that whatever a child sees, you know, 'role models', it works. **It has a lot of power, what they see.**

J.A.: If you were telling another woman, what supports helped with the kids?

Jeanette: **I would *always* suggest going to a transition house, and after that you get support automatically for the children and for yourself. But if you don't go, it is hard to get the services that you need.**

So, my kids went to the **Children Who have Witnessed Abuse program** for awhile, and the School counsellor sometimes was a help. So, there's a **long (road) of counselling**, I find.

When I was in university, too, I used a counsellor service over there, because I had a hard time with my son and my daughter. She was a *big help!* **So I would say for women who went through this, (to choose) to be followed by a counsellor, for the *long term*.** **It has to be long term.**

After I separated, what I needed was a lot of support, and no judgment.

Well, one of the things that I find very challenging when you leave an abusive relationship is that *it never ends*.

He is not letting it end.

Every time he talks to the kids, there's an issue.

Like I said, when it happens, it's like this: you don't see any end.

You have to always expect the worst to be coming.

You know, **I need to have my needs met.**

**I need to feel safe where I live. I need to feel safe at work,
and I need to not think that I am being watched all the time.**

So, I have the Restraining Order for life.

I just told you that it never ends.

I wish he was away from me; I wish to be away from him

so that I don't have to deal with his problems and his miscommunication with the kids and the medical issues and his lack of responsibility ... you know?

So, that's why I say it never ends; what kind of issue are you going to deal with next?

**My hope is that when they will be nineteen, both of them,
then I can go, "Whew! I did it!"**

And the thing is, I've seen a lot of women going into other relationships.

I can't even *trust* going into another relationship.

And, I'd rather sacrifice this side and be with the kids,

... because, we went through a lot of problems.

So, people would tease me, "Oh, you're single.

You should go and look for a man."

I'm going like, "*Nnnnope!*"

... And I feel a bit more powerful with relationships.

Like, I have learned not to be too emotional.

And I think that it's good to not trust, in some ways.

I've seen Moms trying to keep their house,

because they're being told by counsellors that you need to not change the environment of a child as much as possible when you leave.

And they try to keep their home as long as they could,

and they have *no money* when they sell the house.

They have *lost everything*.

**So there are things that people have to be careful what they say to women
because that financial independence is very important.**

So, I have seen women leaving the house; they are in debt.

They are still paying for things from the house, and they have nothing!

And some of them go to a relationship because they need some financial cushion.

You know?

They made some wrong decisions. I have *seen* this.
 And I knew when I separated, “Uh-uh, I’m not going to do this!”
 Like, it was very clear.

Well, you know, ***whatever direction you are taking, you get to be blamed anyway!***
 No matter what kind of decision you make.
As a *mother*, you know, there’s a lot of pressure.

There was a time when I said to a counsellor,
 “*you don’t know* what it is.
 How is it, to be by yourself and dealing with a difficult child.
 And then the next day you have to do it again, because you are single.
 And the *next* day you have to do it again, and again and again.
 And that’s just *one* challenge,
 plus the fact that you have to feed your family, find the money.
 ‘Taking care of yourself’, you know, you think that’s the only part of someone’s life.
 No, it never, never ends, all those challenges.”

J.A.: Thinking about the growing and learning you had...?

Jeanette: **I think it is more a growing experience.**
I felt wiser than before, being able to pass on the information.
 And when I give workshops, I do tell them that I make mistakes too.
 And how it was hard for me to guide my children and discipline them.
 I felt very powerless for four years.
But now ... I am a bit wiser.
I learned from my mistakes.
It’s a long training.

**I think if you had asked me to talk about this experience three years ago,
 I would have cried during the whole session.
 I don’t think it’s depression; it’s the fact of going through so many changes.**

And I am a person who reacts to change, you know?
 And seeing how much I lost.

J.A.: So, what have you ***gained***, though?

Jeanette: It feels good to give support to other families.
 Yeah, it feels good to do that.
 And the parents who I help, they ... welcome better a Mom who went through it.
 And I find that being able to be humble and help other people is a good feeling.
 So that’s why I think I gained some wisdom.
 And I’m better off by myself, even if I don’t make the same salary.

J.A.: Thank you ... what you are telling me will be really useful for other women.