Spirituality as a Means of Resilience for Women Recovering from Intimate Partner Abuse

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək^{w}əŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Intimate partner abuse is a prevalent social concern which causes long-term physical, emotional, and cognitive effects on survivors. Studies suggest that spirituality is a useful resource for individuals recovering from trauma related to intimate partner abuse, however, more research is needed to understand the intricate ways spirituality contributes to the recovery process. Through a qualitative approach, this study examines the ways in which women who have experienced intimate partner abuse use spirituality in the process of coping and recovering. Open-ended interviews were conducted with eight women who have experienced intimate partner abuse and identified spirituality as an essential part of their lives. The results uncovered specific belief systems underlining each participant's sense of spirituality, as well as practices, rituals, and behaviors they engaged in during their experiences in coping and recovery. Participants reported spirituality as a means of reclaiming one's sense-of-self and as fostering empowerment in the aftermath of intimate partner abuse. They also indicated that spirituality fostered forgiveness and self-compassion, and helped them cope with the long-term effects of trauma including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) is a prevalent cause of trauma that affects approximately one third of all women at some point in their lifetime (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). IPA can be defined as "any act or omission which causes death, physical, sexual, or psychological injury, and moral damage to women" inflicted by any current or former spouses or partners (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017, p. 202). Prevalent in all societies, IPA is considered a public health concern as women who have experienced this form of trauma are at increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide and are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and binge drinking (Howell et al., 2017; Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). One American study found that more than one in three women experience IPA in their lifetime, with approximately 7 million women experiencing IPA each year in the U.S. alone (Black et al., 2007; Howell et al., 2017).

Research on resilience among IPA survivors indicates that spirituality is one of several factors that can help women avoid poor health outcomes with this type of trauma and also grow from this experience (Fowler & Rountree, 2009; Howell et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2006). In a study on women survivors of intimate partner abuse, Gillum, Sullivan and Bybee (2006) found that 97% of the participants in their sample felt that God or spirituality served as a source of strength or comfort for them. Furthermore, spirituality can aid in recovery from IPA by diminishing feelings of helplessness and offering a framework for assigning meaning to difficult life-events and suffering (Fowler & Rountree, 2009; Peres et al., 2007). In researching women IPA survivors, Fowler & Rountree (2009) identified key themes regarding the meaning participants assigned to spirituality, the role it played for them, and ways in which spirituality could be incorporated into services for women IPA survivors. They found that participants perceived spirituality as a phenomenon affecting all aspects of their lives and offering them comfort in the face of adversity. The participants also identified various expressions of spirituality such as prayer, meditation, and involvement in religious services, as well as participation in counselling and social services. This study shows that spirituality can manifest itself both as a mindset and through specific sets of behaviors and actions.

The trauma from IPA is a complex phenomenon and individual resilience has many components. This study examines the ways in which women who have survived the trauma of IPA use spirituality in the recovery process to create meaning of their experiences and establish a sense of faith and hope following adversity. The study also explores the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of spirituality that are associated to the process of resilience from IPA.

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2. Literature Review

What is Spirituality?

Over the last few decades, the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and social work have explored the role of spirituality in increasing individual resilience and improving social cohesion. Spirituality can be defined as "an aspect of a person or group dealing with a search for meaning, moral frameworks, and relationships with others, including ultimate reality" (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 44). This definition acknowledges that spirituality exists as a process that includes both private and interpersonal practices and a search for meaning. Spirituality also provides a framework for understanding the world, creating a sense of purpose, and relating to others (Cragun et al., 2016; Fowler & Rountree, 2009; Gillum et al., 2006; Peres et al., 2007). Therefore, it is an important mechanism for meaning-making that is worth exploration (Park, 2005; Vis & Boynton, 2008). As Morgan and Wilkinson (2001) explain:

> In the guise of injustice, affliction, adversity and pain, suffering confronts the limits of rationality; it shatters everyday orientations to the world and impresses upon us the need for other worldly (magical, religious, ecstatic) meanings for experiences which cannot be explained pragmatically (p. 204)

One's ability to create a meaningful explanation for traumatic life events is particularly important in times of struggle and hardship. When dealing with emotionally traumatic life circumstances, individuals often seek out a sense of direction and having a spiritual orientation can offer reassurance and a sense of hope during difficult times.

How spirituality enhances one's resilience in the aftermath of trying experiences has also been investigated both as an individual trait and a process that involves personal growth (Connor et al., 2003; De la Rosa et al., 2016; Green et al., 2003; Harvey, 2007; Keenan, 2010; Manning, 2012; Peres et al., 2007; Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). In this sense, resilience can be seen as a "process of recovery (how well individuals are able to bounce back from adversity), sustainability (the capacity to move forward in the face of adversity), and growth (the ability to

further develop as a response to adversity)" (Manning, 2012, p.2). Finally, another important aspect of spirituality is transcendence. This concept "recognizes that some individuals transcend their experience of even extreme levels of trauma to regain physical and mental health and healing beyond what would be typically expected or considered the normal response or outcome for trauma survivors" (Fowler & Rountree, 2009, p. 10).

It is useful to note the distinction between the concepts of spirituality and religion. Spirituality entails "the search for meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality, however one understands it, which may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions" (Vis & Boynton, 2008, p. 71). Religion can be defined as "an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality" (Vis & Boynton, 2008, p.71). While most religions incorporate spiritual values, spirituality can exist separate from religion as well. The primary difference between the two is that religion entails spiritual beliefs and practices within established social institutions (Canda & Furman, 1999; Farley, 2007). Thus, while there is often overlap between the two concepts, spirituality can exist without religion, just as religion can exist without spirituality (Farley, 2007). Furthermore, there are those who are strongly opposed to religion but may identify themselves as spiritual. In most cases, religion and spirituality serve a similar purpose, providing a framework of meaning and a sense of connection to something greater than the material world. For this research study, religion is conceptualized as one of several spiritual resources that individuals use in their recovery from the trauma of IPA.

2.1 Spirituality in Facilitating Trauma Processing, Coping, and Resilience

Religiosity which typically involves attendance at religious services and participation in religious groups and institutions has been considered a positive influence on life satisfaction and psychological well-being, and associated with reduced anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Sternthal et al., 2010). Sternthal et al. (2010) investigated the association between religiosity and mental health with the aim of identifying specific mechanisms that influence this association. A key mediator is social integration and increased interaction with others that religious involvement provides (Sternthal et al., 2010). Participation in religious groups provides

opportunity to strengthen the number and quality of bonds an individual has with others who have similar value systems. This kind of social support that can be of service, especially during times of emotional difficulty. Religion also offers a sense of meaning and security that can be relied on in the face of struggles that are beyond one's control (Sternthal et al., 2010). Another potential mediator is the spiritual and social belief systems endorsed by religion. Having a belief in some higher power or greater universal plan can elicit feelings of hopefulness and security, while also providing an interpretative framework for dealing with life's challenges (Sternthal et al., 2010). Another factor associated with religious involvement is increased value placed on the principle of forgiveness. Religion can teach individuals to be more forgiving of both themselves and others which in turn can diminish psychological distress, anxiety, and anger (Sternthal et al., 2010).

Research on posttraumatic growth processes underline the power of cognitive reflection in recovery. Rumination involves a process of contemplation through which individuals try to make sense of a traumatic experience (Starnino 2016). Notably, researchers distinguish between positive – or deliberate – rumination and intrusive rumination (Starnino, 2016; Triplett et al., 2012). This may entail finding ways to apply one's current belief system to the situation, or it may require a pronounced shift in one's beliefs. Intrusive rumination can be harmful to posttraumatic recovery, as it consists of unpleasant and often uncontrollable thoughts and images that occur automatically following a traumatic event (Starnino, 2016). While intrusive rumination is natural following such an event, if it goes unresolved it can become detrimental and contribute to prolonged posttraumatic stress. In contrast, deliberate rumination involves a "reflective and intentional effort to come to a meaningful understanding of a trauma event", and is seen as a beneficial part of posttraumatic growth (Starnino, 2016, p. 377). Spirituality encourages reflection and introspection and can therefore encourage people to engage in deliberate rumination.

Sternthal et al. (2010) point out that one's motivations for religious involvement can influence the extent to which religiosity provides positive health benefits. Religious or spiritual individuals can be divided between those who are intrinsically motivated to engage in religion and those who are extrinsically motivated (Allport & Ross, 1967). Those who are intrinsically

motivated internalize their sense of spirituality and incorporate spiritual principles into all aspects of their life. In contrast, extrinsically motivated individuals use religion as a way of obtaining the external awards of religious involvement which may include status, increased social network, and recognition (Sternthal et al., 2010). While there has been less research into the influence of motivational factors, studies so far have found that intrinsic motivation has a positive influence on mental health while extrinsic motivation does not (Sternthal et al., 2010).

External aspects of spirituality such as religious group participation are easier to measure and, as a result, have been researched more than other aspects of spirituality. Quantitative research often looks at attendance at religious institutions as the primary measure of religiosity. In one such study, Sternthal et al. (2010) found that when controlling for age, gender, race, class, and marital status, respondents who attended religious services once a week had fewer depressive symptoms than those who did not attend at all. Survey items measuring sense of meaning, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness were also negatively associated with depressive symptoms. Those who attended religious services two or more times a week reported less symptoms of anxiety as well. Interestingly, feeling that one has a sense of purpose was the dimension of religiosity with the strongest positive influence on health outcomes. Additionally, their study showed that none of the potential mediators they accounted for – including social relationships, individual religiosity, or motivation for attending religious services – could aptly explain the relationship between religious attendance and mental health. Therefore, more research is needed to distinguish exactly how religiosity or spirituality affects mental health and well-being.

Research has also shown that spirituality and religion play a positive role in meaning-making and self-growth for individuals who have experienced a variety of traumatic events such as illness and injury, loss, relational conflicts including emotional, physical, or sexual assault, and life changes such as divorce (Shaw et al., 2005; Starnino, 2016). In response to traumatic events, an individual's internal meaning-making processes are challenged, which in turn raised questions about one's purpose and one's expectations and understandings of how the world works. Trauma in any form tends to have a direct impact on one's mental health. Psychological trauma is strongly associated with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder, social

phobia, and personality disorders, as well as with high-risk behaviours, substance abuse, and suicide (Peres et al., 2007).

Aspects of spirituality that have proven particularly effective in coping include trust in a higher power, belief in the afterlife, and involvement in a spiritual community (Shaw et al., 2005; Starnino, 2016). Individuals often turn to spiritual beliefs and practices to reduce depression, anxiety, and substance abuse occurrence (Starnino, 2016). Faith in some sort of higher power is often used to achieve safety and comfort after a traumatic event and to cultivate hope, gratitude, and forgiveness, which all contribute to resilience (Starnino, 2016). Research on posttraumatic growth suggests that after a traumatic experience individuals may enter a state of disequilibrium in which their previous understanding of the world comes into question (Starnino, 2016). This uncertainty can motivate an individual to find new systems of meaning or worldviews to make sense of what has occurred.

Spirituality offers a means of strengthening resilience in the face of trauma through multiple channels. On the individual level, spiritual orientation can provide a framework to make sense of a traumatic event and encourage feelings of connection with the universe. At the social level, engagement in a spiritual community offers interpersonal resources that can come from participation in a religious or spiritual group (Farley, 2007). Wolin and Wolin (1993) identify several key traits that spirituality aids in developing, which in turn facilitate resilience and recovery from trauma. These include: insight through shaping one's worldview; independence achieved through transcendent experiences and rituals; meaningful relationships that arise from spiritual group involvement; initiative stemming from meaningful service work one may undertake; creativity and inspiration through spiritual connection; and a grounding in morality created through adherence to certain values.

Additionally, spiritual practices such as rituals, prayer, meditation, and mindfulness exercises can provide psychological benefits, provoking a feeling of calmness and a sense of detachment or peacefulness around emotions (Vis & Boynton, 2008). The term coping can be used to refer to various stabilizing mechanisms an individual can engage with to aid psychosocial adaptation during stressful or traumatic periods (de la Rosa et al., 2016). Theories of coping understand it as a multidimensional process, involving the incorporation of situational

factors, such as cognitive appraisals of stressful situations, and environmental factors, including social support networks (de la Rosa et al., 2016). Similar to the term coping, "resilience has been defined as the maintenance of healthy-successful functioning or adaptation within the context of significant adversity or threat" (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017, p. 203). Tsirigotis and Luczak (2017) conceptualize resilience as a dynamic developmental process, that exists under two conditions: 1) exposure to significant threat, adversity, or trauma, and 2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite major obstacles to the developmental process (p. 203). Resilience is found at the intersection of psychological, social, environmental, and biological factors, which interact to shape an individual's ability to develop, maintain, or regain their health and well-being when faced with a specific adverse circumstance or event (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). Furthermore, resilience is composed of both the resistance to destruction stemming from one's ability to maintain composure under pressure, and the ability to create a life worth living despite undesirable circumstances (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017).

While there has been extensive research of the negative outcomes of trauma, other research has highlighted positive outcomes on well-being, often referred to as "post traumatic growth" (Ali & Park, 2005; Flasch et al., 2017). Such studies have identified that survivors of trauma may demonstrate qualities including more adaptive views on life, stronger coping skills, a greater understanding of one's needs, increased assertiveness and independence, a greater sense of self-worth, and greater feelings of control (Ali & Park, 2005; Allen & Wozniak, 2010; Burt & Katz, 1987; Flasch et al., 2017).

2.2 Quantitative Studies of Spirituality and Resilience

One area that has been researched is resilience as it pertains to victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Connor et al. (2003) conducted a study of spirituality, resilience and anger of survivors of violent trauma. They hypothesized that spirituality could lead to a greater sense of control and meaning and help to restore hope. They surveyed 628 survivors of violent trauma including violent assault, accidental injury, loss of a family member to a violent act, serious harm or injury to one's child, sexual assault, and spousal abuse. The

study used quantitative measures to analyze the relationship between spirituality, resilience, and trauma. Respondents rated both their mental and physical health on a four-point scale. Resilience was measured through the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale which includes 25 items (Connor et al., 2003). The specific indicators used to measure resilience were not listed in the article but the authors state that they include "concepts of control, commitment, goal-orientation, self-esteem, adaptability, and social skills" among several other items (Connor et al., 2003, p. 488). Spirituality was measured using 13 questions which included views on the existence of a higher power, the existence of life after death, reincarnation, notions of purpose and destiny, and views on the helpfulness of prayer. Respondents were asked to rate their beliefs in the 13 statements on a scale from one to six. Symptoms of PTSD were measured with the Davidson Trauma Scale, along with the criteria for PTSD featured in the DSM-IV.

Using regression analysis, the study found that greater scores in resilience were associated with better health outcomes (Connor et al., 2003). Interestingly, the authors found that stronger spirituality was actually associated with poorer health. Similarly, they found that higher ratings for spirituality were associated with greater levels of distress and greater PTSD symptoms. These findings may be explained by issues of causality; it may be that those who are experiencing serious PTSD symptoms may adapt more spiritual beliefs as a way of coping. The authors note the complexity of this relationship and add that "for some individuals, religious faith may enhance the ability to cope with negative life events; while for others, negative life events may result in greater religious faith" (Connor et al., 2003, p. 491). The authors included demographic variables of age, gender, and ethnicity in their study as well. They found that women reported higher levels of stress and PTSD symptoms and that mental health was worse among younger people and people of non-white ethnicities. However, these results do not explain the relationship between spirituality, resilience, and health or capture what spirituality feels like for each individual. Qualitative research is thus needed to gain a deeper insight into the narrative essence of trauma and resilience.

One study examined the relationship between religion and trauma with 1385 war veterans receiving treatment for PTSD (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). The authors suggested ''that a primary motivation of veterans' continuing pursuit of treatment may be their search for

a meaning and purpose to their traumatic experiences'' (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004, p. 347). The researchers argue that the relationship between spirituality and resilience is bidirectional, as traumatic experiences can influence individuals to become more spiritual, while spirituality simultaneously provides a resource for recovery. In a review of 11 studies of associations between religion, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth, Shaw et al. (2005) concluded that:

> (i) religion and spirituality are usually, although not always, beneficial in dealing with the aftermath of trauma, (ii) traumatic experiences may lead to a deepening of religiousness or spirituality, and (iii) positive religious coping, religious openness, readiness to face existential questions, religious participation, and intrinsic religiousness are typically associated with posttraumatic growth (as cited in Peres et al., 2005, p. 347).

Peres et al. (2007) also report that religiosity and spirituality reduced feelings of hopelessness or vulnerability, provide a cognitive framework for understanding suffering in a positive light, and strengthen one's sense of purpose.

2.3 Resilience and Recovery Among Women Survivors of IPA

Anderson et al. (2012) report that 31% to 84% of domestic violence survivors experience PTSD symptoms. The severity of such symptoms increases and recovery becomes more difficult the longer individuals are exposed to traumatic events (Anderson et al., 2012; Herman, 1997). While studies report that women have the ability to recover from the damage caused by IPA, how such recovery occurs remains somewhat unclear. Some studies suggest that resilience is an intrinsic personality characteristic, while others see it as a complex interplay between individual traits and social factors (Anderson et al., 2012; Fraser, 1997; Humphreys, 2003; Masten, 2001).

Tsirigotis and Luczak (2017) looked at resilience among women who experienced domestic violence which was operationalized as any type of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse by "individuals with or without family ties who are either related by natural bonds, by affinity or by express will, including sporadic relationships" (p. 202). The researchers included violence perpetrated by male family members, such as one's father, as well as intimate

partners. Their sample included 52 women ranging in age from 30-65 years old recruited from a Crisis Intervention Centre in Poland (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). Seventy three percent of the women had experienced violence perpetrated by their husband and 17.31% cited an intimate partner to whom they were not married as the abuser. The study used the Ego Resiliency Scale (ER89) to measure "the dynamic capacity of an individual to modify a characteristic level of ego-control as a function of the demand characteristic of the environmental context, so as to preserve or enhance system equilibration" (Block & Kremen, 1996, p. 351). Tsirigotis and Luczak (2017) found that women who experienced domestic violence obtained significantly lower scores on the ERS than the mean scores for the general population who have not experienced domestic violence. However, several of the ER89 scale items do not seem to capture resilience but rather measure character traits unrelated to resilience (e.g., "I am generous with my friends" or "I am regarded as a very energetic person"). This suggests that more outgoing or social individuals would score higher on the scale and those individuals who rate themselves as curious or energetic will adjust better to adversity (Block & Kremen, 1996). This also illustrates the issue with objectively measuring resilience instead of studying it as a process in the context of a particular individual's life.

Recovery from IPA can be seen as "a social, spiritual, cultural, and psychological process" involving "reconnecting the fragments of the self by putting into perspective the past experiences of abuse" (Allen & Wozniak, 2010, p. 37, 31). Flasch et al. (2017) examined the lived experiences of recovery from IPA abuse in 123 women who had been out of any abusive relationships for at least two years. The researchers used the term "overcoming past abuse" to refer to "the processes experienced by people who have been abused within an intimate relationship as they move forward following the abuse to achieve positive, satisfying lives and relationships, as well as optimal functioning in various areas of their lives" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3375). Of the sample, 98.4% reported experiencing emotional or psychological abuse, 82.9% had experienced physical abuse, and 70.7% had experienced sexual abuse by their intimate partners. The researchers found that IPA survivors reflected on both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes as central elements of their recovery. Intrapersonal processes included: a) regaining and recreating one's identity, b) embracing the freedom and power to direct one's

own life, c) healing from mental and physical health outcomes of abuse, d) gaining acceptance and forgiveness toward self and abuser, e) education and examination of abusive relationships, f) determining whether and how to enter new relationships, and g) acknowledging the long-term process of overcoming abuse. Interpersonal processes included building positive social support networks and using one's experience to help others. Participants in the study shared that their experiences with IPA had led to either severe damage to their self-esteem and individuality or a complete loss of self. As a result, a central element of recovery involved either finding the way back to one's old self or creating a new sense of identity.

The authors reported that abuse survivors were able to regain a sense of power over their own lives after experiencing relationships in which "abusers exert power and control, make major decisions, and work to disempower their victims" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3386). Learning about the processes that take place in abusive relationships and understanding the ways in which their abusers had managed to gain control over them was another important step in recovery. Understanding the manipulation to which they have fallen victim allowed the survivors to make sense of their experiences and alleviate self-blame. Reaching a point where they could forgive themselves from the blame around either not leaving the relationship sooner or allowing the abuse to take place at all was highlighted as a difficult but important part of the journey. One participant described this as "a lifetime process of reflection, learning, and forgiveness" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3388). Another challenge involved trying to forgive their abusers. While some participants reported that they had in fact forgiven their abusers, others cited this as a difficult ideal they were aiming to reach but had not yet embraced (Flasch et al., 2017). Participants also shared that the recovery process consisted of ups and downs, and often involved trying to mediate painful feelings around grief and hopelessness. Some women reported turning to destructive coping mechanisms including substance abuse, while others cited friendships, family support, and therapy as useful tools. Interpersonal processes the women described involved "steps that survivors took to build, strengthen, and maintain supportive, positive social support networks, such as friends, family members, co-workers, fellow community members, support group members, professional helpers, and faith communities" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3391). Often, the women reported benefits in connecting

with other women who had experienced similar abuse as particularly beneficial. Furthermore, several participants had found that finding ways of helping others served to further empower them in their recovery. Often this involved connecting with and/or advocating for other women survivors of intimate partner abuse. Additionally, helping others dealing with similar struggles enabled women survivors to find meaning in their own experiences, and thus in their own lives.

Flasch et al. (2017) found that their results were consistent with other research into post-traumatic growth, i.e., that the survivors of IPA sought meaning in their lives, often through helping others, which enabled them to reclaim their sense of identity. However, unlike previous models, the authors concluded that recovery from intimate partner abuse is often not a linear set of stages that one moves through, but is rather made up of complex interconnected processes that one continues to cycle through. They noted that for some survivors "triggers brought up years into the recovery process could catapult them back to where they needed to re-experience parts of the recovery process that they previously felt were complete" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3395). Therefore, the authors concluded that "the recovery process is neither one that has a predetermined beginning nor an end, but rather is composed of numerous factors that cycle through as survivors move through life" (Flasch et al., 2017, p. 3395).

One study on the recovery of women survivors of IPA examined the effectiveness of a trauma-informed, patient-centered care approach called RISE (Recovering from Intimate Partner violence through Strengths and Empowerment) (Grillo et al., 2019). The program offered to women patients from the Veterans Health Administration in New England is described as a modular, variable-length, flexible intervention geared toward improving women's psychosocial functioning. It offers an initial 60-minute counseling session, followed by up to five additional 30–45-minute sessions in which women can choose from modules around safety planning, enhancing social support, coping and self-care, understanding health outcomes of IPV, using resources, and making difficult decisions. Women in the RISE program selected modules based around their individual circumstances and goals. Grillo et al. (2019) aimed to determine whether the program would align with the goals of women veterans recovering from intimate partner abuse. The researchers conducted focus group studies with 25 women to understand what areas such a program could assist with and in which ways.

The results identified five themes of desirable outcomes for a program meant to assist survivors of IPA: empowerment, social connectedness and support, self-esteem, knowledge, and valued action and goal setting. Participants shared that empowerment was a central element in their decision to leave an abusive relationship and in learning to value themselves. The participants also emphasized the importance of increased social connectedness in both crisis and recovery. Connection with other survivors of intimate partner violence was put forth as "a sounding board for advice, an inspiration for healing, and a catalyst for leaving a violent relationship" (Grillo et al., 2019, p. 10). Building self-esteem was suggested as an important goal for an IPA intervention program, as participants reflected that their self-esteem had been greatly diminished both during their abusive relationships and in dealing with the stress after leaving. Furthermore, self-esteem was revealed as central to other areas including one's ability to make difficult decisions, one's ability to reach out for social support, and one's ability to set and reach goals. Women survivors in the study also mentioned a desire to acquire knowledge around intimate partner abuse as a protective measure to prevent further abuse, particularly with regards to the warning signs. Understanding around "the mind-body connection" (Grillo et al., 2019, p. 12) and the mental and physical outcomes of intimate partner abuse was highlighted as another important treatment goal.

Song (2012) conducted a study of 191 women survivors of intimate partner abuse from Taiwan aimed to examine associations between social services and empowerment, perceived changes of self, and life satisfaction in the recovery process. The study focused on women who had received social services related to intimate partner abuse in the past and had either terminated services or whose lives were considered stable and were therefore expected to terminate services soon. Women in the study completed a questionnaire intended to evaluate both the resources they utilized and their satisfaction with these resources. Along with demographic variables, participants were asked about social support, coping strategies, social service involvement, and types of abuse endured. Additionally, survey items were posed to measure the concepts of empowerment, life satisfaction, and changes of self. The variable of empowerment included items intended to measure self-efficacy and internal control, external control, and interpersonal communication and assertiveness. The life satisfaction variable was

measured using seven items involving satisfaction in areas including work, finance, and relationships (Song, 2012). Changes of self was measured using items related to one's ability to accept oneself, one's ability to express oneself, and one's ability to set and reach goals. Quantitative analysis showed that perceived social support and empowerment were significantly related to increased life satisfaction. Furthermore, social support was shown as an indicator of one's sense of empowerment and life satisfaction. The study demonstrated that perceived availability and satisfaction with social support could positively influence one's sense of belonging.

2.4 Interplay Between Substance Abuse and Intimate Partner Abuse

As Rivaux et al. (2008) note, over 5% of adult women in the United States are believed to meet the criteria for substance abuse disorders. The authors add that women face additional barriers when compared to men in seeking formal help with addiction issues in the form of stigma. As a result, men tend to outnumber women in treatment facilities. Another distinction for women facing substance abuse issues is that their success at recovery is often closely tied to the quality of relationships in their lives (Rivaux et al., 2008). For example, one qualitative study of women in substance abuse recovery noted that women struggling with "inability to effectively communicate and express negative emotions, let go of unhealthy relationships, [and] establish and maintain healthy new relationships" were more likely to relapse (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 958).

The harmful negative outcomes of both substance abuse and IPA can be compounded when the two issues coexist (Holleran Steiker, 2009). It is believed there is a bi-directional association between the two problems in that a) women who have been victimized by intimate partner abuse often turn to substance use to self-medicate the adverse physical and mental health outcomes stemming from this trauma, and b) abuse of substances puts women at higher risk of experiencing intimate partner abuse (Holleran Steiker, 2009; Kilpatrick et al., 1997; Young & Boyd, 2000; Widom & Hiller-Strumhofel, 2001). Some research shows that women who are intimate partner violence survivors are more likely to become dependent on certain

substances, such as prescription drugs (Holleran Steiker, 2009; Stark & Litcraft, 1988). Furthermore, women who abuse alcohol and drugs are at greater risk for IPA victimization (Holleran Steiker, 2009). Between 45% to 75% of women in drug treatment programs have experienced life-threatening physical violence or sexual assault by a partner in their lifetime (Holleran Steiker, 2009). For many women, their substance use patterns are often influenced by their relationships with abusive partners, who may use substances as an additional way of gaining control over their victims (Holleran Steiker, 2009).

There are various models that can be used to examine the connection between women's personal relationships and substance abuse and recovery. The relational model suggests that women turn to substance abuse to cope with negative emotions stemming from various types of unhealthy interpersonal relationships, including those that are abusive or violating (Covington & Surrey, 1997; Rivaux et al., 2008). Other researchers theorize that "addiction can be seen as a kind of intimacy in which people develop intense relationships with substances and/or people" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 959). This can explain how one's relationship with their substance of choice often becomes their most significant relationship through the addiction process (Rivaux et al., 2008).

An important aspect of the recovery process for those with addictions involves addressing "addiction issues, emotional well-being, and relational issues in the process of self-discovery and identity transformation" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 959). Rivaux et al. (2008) conducted a study to further understand the ways in which women recovering from both substance use disorders and intimate partner abuse construct personal narratives and reconnect with their sense of self. The researchers identified six key themes from interviews with 17 women in a residential substance abuse treatment centre. The first theme was that participants described seeing themselves as "damaged goods" due to the trauma they experienced with both their addictions and in abusive relationships (Rivaux et al., 2008). The women described a cycle in which they struggled to choose healthy partners in relationships as their past history of intimate partner abuse resulted in them expecting to receive abuse or believing they deserved it. The shame associated with addiction had been a defining feature in

the self-image of the participants, and regaining a sense of 'wholeness' was important in recovery in both areas.

Another theme involved participants discussing the costs and benefits of their choices around using drugs versus staying sober and of leaving their abusive partners versus staying in their relationships. Several of the women in Rivaux et al.'s (2008) study shared that their abusive partners were substances users as well, and that this played into their own addictions. Additionally, the researchers found that "both [abusive] relationships and using drugs posed the same dilemmas in turn of regaining control of their lives and becoming this new self" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 966). A third theme that emerged was around the idea that the women had to give up parts of themselves to maintain their addictions and their unhealthy relationships. For some this involved trading their own sobriety to stay in a relationship with a partner who was using drugs, while for others trading their safety was the main concern (Rivaux et al., 2008). Several participants also described sacrificing careers, goals, or values to maintain an unhealthy relationship. Therefore, as the authors explain, "the recovery process involved not only identifying parts of the self that had been traded in exchange for drugs and intimacy, but also beginning to recover these lost parts" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p.967). The authors describe the fourth theme as "waking from the nightmare", which involves "a process of coming back to themselves and somehow rebuilding or reconnecting with their lives and themselves" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 967). For some, this included returning to parts of themselves that they felt they had lost during their addiction and experiences of abuse, while others described creating a new identity for themselves.

Another interesting discussion was around finding value in the trauma they had experienced, and seeing it as a reminder of a life they did not want to return to (Rivaux et al., 2008). One woman explained, "I don't wish to forget the past… because it will keep me awake and aware of how easily I could strive back into that" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 969). Another shared, "I feel proud of myself for overcoming the things that I have. I still feel ashamed and grief and guilt, but I'm also learning how to put that into perspective instead of letting it control my life" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 970). Another theme that was brought up had to do with finding a renewed sense of strength and control over one's future. One woman in the study explained,

"I actually have boundaries for the first time in my life… of how much power [a man] is going to have in my life" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 971). Several participants shared on how developing a sense of spirituality and belief in a higher power helped them to find meaning in the struggles they had endured. Others described a desire to give back and help other women facing similar struggles as a motivation going forward.

The study demonstrated the ways in which substance use and relationships initially serve similar purposes in the lives of the women interviewed, helping them manage feelings of sadness, loneliness, or insecurity often stemming from incidences with past abuse or trauma (Rivaux et al., 2008). Because of this, recovery often involved finding new ways of coping and meeting their needs that would be conducive to a healthier life. Overall, the researchers found that "the dynamics of women's recovery are complex and have significant interplay with their relationships" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 974). Rivaux et al. (2008) explained that the women they interviewed described both feelings of loss and grief coinciding with feelings of hope, strength, and resilience. The study highlighted the ways in which women recovering from both addiction and intimate partner abuse had found ways to create new narratives around the meaning found in their struggles, which allowed them to create "new stories of who they could be and how their lives could be" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 973).

2.5 The Spiritual Element of Intimate Partner Abuse Recovery

Research suggests that many women who leave abusive relationships ultimately return to their abusive partner at some point (Griffing et al., 2002; Lewis et al., 2015). External factors such as limited economic resources or legal commitments to an abuser are major determinants of whether a woman will return to an abusive relationship or not (Lewis et al., 2015). However, this does not take into account the internal processes that may be influential in one's decision to return to an unhealthy relationship. It is important to note that while external resources including shelters and financial assistance have become increasingly available, the rate at which women return to abusive partners remains relatively high (Griffing et al., 2002; Lewis et al.,

2015). This suggests that perhaps other factors play an important role in many women's decisions to remain in or return to abusive relationships.

One study conducted in-depth interviews with six women survivors of intimate partner abuse to understand the mechanisms at play in the recovery process that takes place after a woman has chosen to leave an abusive relationship (Lewis et al., 2015). Spirituality was cited as an important factor for five of the six participants: it gave them strength to leave their abuser and heal from the psychological effects of their trauma. Four of the six women interviewed described a specific abuse incident in which they believed they were facing death as a catalyst for them to make the decision to leave. For these women, such incidents were important parts of their recovery narrative and contained a spiritual component in that they often credited some higher power with sparing their lives (Lewis et al., 2015).

Anderson et al. (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study to understand influential factors in women's recovery from IPA. They measured resilience using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, which consists of 25 items relating to psychological, social, and spiritual elements of resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003). They also administered survey questionnaires and conducted semi-structured interviews to capture each woman's recovery story. The authors found that among the 37 participants, higher resilience scores were significantly correlated with lower PTSD scores. Specifically, resilience measures related to personal competence, trust in one's instincts, acceptance of change, and sense of personal control were negatively correlated with total PTSD score. The highest scoring individual item on the Connor-Davidson Resilience scale was "I have at least one close and secure relationship which helps me when I am stressed" with a mean score of 3.49 out of 4 for the sample. This indicates the importance of strong social connections in resilience and recovery. Two items relating to spirituality were in the top four highest rated items on the scale. The second highest item stated "When there are no clear solutions to my problems, sometimes fate or God can help". This measure had a mean score of 3.43 in the study (Anderson et al., 2012). The fourth highest rated item in the study related to a belief that most things happen for a reason, with a mean score of 3.32. These results indicate that a sense of spirituality and/or belief in some higher power is an important factor in the recovery process. According to the researchers,

"spirituality and corresponding beliefs played an important role in participants' recovery by giving them strength to prevail, uncovering the benefits of their suffering, and giving their lives purpose" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 1289).

In the interview process, 31 of the 37 participants indicated that relying on some sort of higher power was integral in helping them recovery from the abuse they had experienced. For seven of these women, spirituality was unrelated to organized religion, while the other 24 described their individual spirituality as a blend of organized religion and informal beliefs and practices. Specifically, several participants mentioned that spirituality allowed them to reframe their traumatic experiences in a new light, fostering a sense of meaning and purpose which contributed to sense of resilience. Additionally, belief in a higher power served as "a guiding force that saved their lives, helped them to prevail, and gave them strength to end their abusive relationships" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 1290). Eight of the women interviewed explained that their sense of spirituality changed and evolved after leaving their abusive partners. For these women, God or some higher power was seen as partly to blame during their abuse, however after leaving their abusive relationships they came to believe that there was some greater purpose in the suffering they experienced. Nineteen of the 37 women indicated that the social support that came with involvement in religious or spiritual organizations was integral in their recovery process. These participants described the sense of belonging provided by these organizations as particularly helpful, along with assistance they provided through programs which provided shelter and financial assistance.

Reutter and Bigatti (2014) attempted to further understand the relationship between spirituality and coping by distinguishing between the roles of both spirituality and religiosity in psychological well-being. Specifically, they proposed that: 1) spirituality would partially mediate the relationship between stress and psychological health, and 2) higher levels of religiosity would result in a stronger association between spirituality and psychological health. The researchers collected survey responses from 331 participants including staff from a treatment facility for troubled youth and congregation members from a conservative Protestant denomination. The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) was used to measure "ordinary, everyday spiritual experiences that transcend specific religious traditions, orientations, or

denominations" (Reutter & Bigatti, 2014, p. 59). The Chronbach's alpha for this scale was found to be between .91 to .95, thus confirming strong internal reliability. Religiosity was measured using the Religious Commitment Inventory which examines "the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices" (Reutters & Bigatti, 2014, p. 60). Stress was assessed using the Perceived Stress Scale which focuses on the degree to which a person appraises a stressful life event as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading. Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) was also used to measure psychological distress. The researcher's analysis found that spirituality was a partial mediator for anxiety and depression, accounting for 23.39% of the variance in the full HADS. Higher levels of religiosity were found to moderately increase the mediating effect of spirituality on HADS outcomes although this result was not significant. Examining total HADS outcomes, both spirituality (β = -.178, p = .0013) and religion (β = -.151, p = .004) acted as moderators between perceived stress and psychological health (Reutters & Bigatti, 2014). Additionally, spirituality was associated with both lower perceived stress levels and better psychological health. This implies that spirituality can contribute both to more positive appraisals of life stressors, as well as healthier responses to stressful events. Religiosity however, was not found to mediate the effects of stress on psychological health or the mediating effects of spirituality.

Park (2005) conducted a quantitative analysis of 169 college students who had experienced the death of a significant other within the past year to evaluate the validity of the meaning-making coping model and the relationship between religion and trauma recovery. The study found that religion is associated with more discrepancy between global and situational beliefs and goals in the direct aftermath of a traumatic event. Those with stronger religious belief systems initially reported higher levels of intrusive thoughts and higher levels of depressed mood. However, this association diminished and then reversed over time which shows that religion is positively associated over time with meaning-making coping and positive reinterpretation of an event. Overall, religion was found to be strongly related to well-being later in the bereavement process and consistently tied to higher levels of stress-related growth. The study concluded that spirituality can serve as a meaning system by which individuals can

"reframe their loss, look for more benign interpretations, find coping resources, and perhaps identify areas of personal growth" (Park, 2005, p. 271).

Another study by de la Rosa et al. (2016) used Park's (2005) meaning-making coping model as a framework to examine the relationship between spirituality, resilience, and IPA among 54 Mexican American women who had survived various forms of IPA including witnessing or experiencing abuse in their family of origin. The study used The Resilience Scale, created by Wagnild and Young (1993) to examine resilience as "the capacity to withstand life stressors, thrive, and make meaning from challenges" (de la Rosa et al., 2016, p. 3338). This scale uses 25 items written as statements such as: "My life has meaning", and "I do not dwell on things that I can't do anything about". Various tests of validity of this Resilience Scale have found a Chronbach's alpha above .9 (de la Rosa et al., 2016). To measure spirituality, the study used the Spirituality Index of Well-Being (Daaleman et al., 2002). This scale intended to measure one's self-reported spirituality is composed of two subscales: the self-efficacy scale and the life-scheme scale. Respondents are to select an answer for each of 12 items, on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Items meant to measure self-efficacy include statements such as "there is not much I can do to make a difference in my life". Items measuring life-scheme spirituality include "I have a lack of purpose in my life", and "I am far from understanding the meaning of life". Using multiple ordinary least squares regression analysis, the researchers concluded that spirituality showed a significant association to reported resilience after controlling for marital status, education, income, and years of abuse (de la Rosa et al., 2016).

In a review of literature from neurosciences and clinical and epidemiological psychology on resilience in trauma survivors, Peres et al. (2007) argue that individuals considered to have a strong sense of coherence based on the three elements of comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and manageability have stronger mental health overall. Comprehensibility refers to one's ability to make sense of life cognitively and holistically. Meaningfulness represents how one makes sense of things emotionally and one's ability to reframe difficult situations as challenges and opportunities for growth. Manageability refers to an individual's ability to use available resources to deal with life events. The authors add that individuals with a better ability to

reframe their present challenges in a positive light tend to have an easier time overcoming the effects of trauma. This implies that one's mindset is a major factor in resilience and recovery. The authors also point that spirituality can be a useful tool for understanding events in a more positive light and maintaining hopefulness and play an integral role in the quest to answer ultimate questions about life and relationships with the sacred world. The authors conclude that using a spiritual framework to understand life's challenges as part of a higher plan or as an opportunity for growth can reduce the health implications of trauma. Furthermore, they found that positive religious coping to be associated with better physical and mental health outcomes for those with mental illness, as well as increased resilience in trauma survivors of natural disasters (Peres et al., 2007).

Howell et al. (2017) conducted a study of 112 women who had experienced intimate partner violence within the last six months to examine the social-ecological factors that contribute to resilience. Specifically, they hypothesized that spirituality, social support, community cohesion, and ethnic identity could serve as social-ecological protective factors. They also hypothesized risk-predictor variables including the number of violent partners, the severity of IPV experienced, and whether the respondents had perpetrated IPV themselves. The study controlled for demographic factors including age, ethnicity, education, household income, employment, SES, race, and relationship status. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews that included items from questionnaires intended to quantify these variables. Regression analysis determined that higher resilience was associated with more social support ($\beta = .24$, $p = .009$) and more spirituality ($\beta = .28$, $p = .002$). The authors found that greater social support, more spirituality, and fewer violent relationships predicted higher resilience among women exposed to IPV while community cohesion and ethnic identity were not significant predictors. While this study shows that spirituality has an important impact in recovery from IPV, there are some limitations. More specifically, because each of the respondents had experienced IPV within the last six months, the study did not account for the long-term role spirituality plays in the recovery process.

Some research on resilience distinguishes between pre-existing psychological factors that promote resistance to trauma and factors that promote recovery once an individual has

already been exposed to trauma (Rusch et al., 2015). To understand the factors influencing these two separate elements of recovery, Rush et al. (2015) studied women who had experienced assault that fell into three distinct groups: 1) those who had no history of psychiatric disorder diagnosis, 2) those with past diagnosis, and 3) those with a current diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder. The study used the 2003 version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, which combines individual scores on 10 items to produce a score ranging from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. Additionally, respondents were evaluated using the Pearlin Mastery Scale, which consists of seven items meant to measure perceptions of control over life altering forces. The Life Orientation Test (Scheier et al., 1994) was used to evaluate levels of optimism versus pessimism. The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory was used to measure positive changes resulting from highly stressful experience, and the MOS Social Support Survey was used to examine perceptions of social support (Tedashi & Calhoun, 1996). The researchers surveyed 56 women who were never diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, 31 women with a past diagnosis, and 72 women with a current psychiatric disorder diagnosis. The researchers found that those with no diagnosis or with only a past diagnosis scored significantly higher on items measuring mastery, optimism, positive coping behaviors, and posttraumatic growth compared to women with a current diagnosis. Those with no diagnosis scored significantly higher in measures of social support compared to those with a current diagnosis. Statistical analysis found that mastery was the trait that was most significantly correlated to having a current psychiatric diagnosis among both those with past history of a diagnosis and those with no history of diagnosis. This indicates that mastery plays a role in both resistance to the impact of trauma and recovery from trauma.

2.7 Purpose Statement

As this literature review shows, spirituality is an important aspect of resilience for women who survive IPA . Its impact and benefits are extensively documented in research and operationalized in various theoretical models of trauma and resilience. However, research on spirituality has been mostly quantitative, and focused on religion more than on cognitive belief systems. Additionally, there is little research on how spirituality is used by women who have

experienced IPA. Research quantifying trauma fails to capture the uniqueness of these human experiences along with their cultural complexity. Similarly, the use of standardized measures for pain and trauma obscures the real burden of suffering and the authentic flow of its lived experience (Kleinman, 1991; Morgan & Wilkinson, 2001). For these reasons, this study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding the process of overcoming trauma through personal narrative accounts and capturing the uniqueness of each person's story.

This study is partly inspired by the concept of sociodicy which explains in part how secular society seeks to reconcile normative understandings of social life with forms of adversity and suffering that escape all reason and meaning (Morgan & Wilkinson, 2001; VIdich & Lyman, 1985). According to Morgan and Wilkinson (2001), the concept of sociodicy is useful in exploring "the ethical and cultural implications of the tension between the human ideals of reason and events of violence, exploitation and suffering, not just to render seemingly 'meaningless' suffering and affliction rationally accessible, but in the hope that its decivilizing consequences are not perpetuated by being ignored" (p. 210). Morgan and Wilkinson add that the concept of sociodicy allows to connect the public and private realms in order to interpret the meaning of adversity. These meanings are best uncovered through language as "an absence of language is an absence of recognition, which perpetuates the pain of suffering itself" (Morgan & Wilkinson, 2001, p. 205). As the authors argue, the significance of suffering that would occur for example with IPA is best understood through the embodied experiences of those who have felt it.

This study is further inspired by Fowler and Rountree's (2009) argument that further research is needed to understand spirituality as an aspect of resilience among women survivors of intimate partner abuse. They point to previous studies which found that spirituality has important benefits for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders--all of which are common among women IPA survivors. Additionally, IPA defies "that which is believed to be fundamentally sacred about intimate partner relationships", violating one's sense of trust and safety (Fowler & Rountree, 2009, p. 3). Thus, women IPA survivors are faced with the task of reconciling their experience and reforming their sense of natural or divine order in a way that can aid in recovery. In such cases,

spirituality offers a powerful mechanism by which women IPA survivors can come to terms with their past trauma, assign meaning to their experience, and enact resilience. However, as the authors note, there is a lack of information on the experiences of resilience from a subjective perspective and the manner in which this occurs in relation to spirituality.

In addressing this gap in knowledge, this study examines the ways in which women IPA survivors have used spirituality as a means of strengthening their individual resilience in the face of trauma. For this study, spirituality is viewed as "an intense awareness of the present moment, a belief in a Supreme Being or higher power, and/or transcendence of self" (Manning, 2012, p. 353). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study also considers the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of spirituality as they relate to each unique individual. Trauma is a complex phenomenon and individual resilience has many components. This study is intended to provide and in-depth examination of resilience for women who have experienced trauma related to intimate partner abuse and document the role of spirituality in recovery.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Park's (2005) Meaning Making Model of Coping. This model proposes that individuals engage in ongoing cognitive transformations of the meaning of stressful events, seek to reappraise traumatic events in a more positive light as opportunities for self-growth. This process involves global meaning systems and the appraised meaning individuals assign to specific events (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997). Global meaning systems include global belief and global goals. Global beliefs are the basic internal cognitive structures by which an individual understands the world, while global goals are the basic internalized values and desired outcomes that motivate people in their lives. Essentially global beliefs are our general understandings of how the world works, which in turn shape our global goals. Spirituality and religion are both examples of global belief systems as they provide ways to understand suffering and loss and thus make reality both comprehendible and bearable (de la Rosa et al., 2016). Appraised meanings are the initial understandings individuals have about events, including explanations for why the event occurred and what can be done to cope with it (Park, 2005).

This model suggests that individuals can experience an uncomfortable sense of loss and a lack of comprehension if there is a discrepancy between one's appraised meaning of an event and one's global beliefs or goals (de la Rosa et al., 2016; Park, 2005). Additionally, the degree of discrepancy between one's appraisal of an event and their global beliefs/goals determines the level of distress they experience. To decrease this distress, an individual must either adjust their appraisal of the event or change their goals and beliefs to accommodate the situation (Park, 2005). Furthermore, "this discrepancy sparks coping strategies (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts) that lead to an adjustment of their view of the event or revision of their views of goals and beliefs about the world" (de la Rosa et al., 2016, p. 3336). This model is useful for understanding why certain unexpected events (i.e., the death of a child) can be far more traumatic than one's that fit with our expectations (i.e., the death of an elderly parent).

Park (2005) argues that in the event of some unexpected tragedy or suffering, religious or spiritual beliefs become more relevant as they help restore beliefs that the world is safe, fair, and controllable. Adapting spiritual belief systems can be a way for an individual to make meaning of a situation and therefore relieve the distress that comes from the clash between their appraisal of an event and their previous belief systems. In the aftermath of trauma, meaning-making mechanisms may include "reappraising events as more positive or creating more benign reattributions, including more acceptable reasons why an event occurred and who or what is responsible for its occurrence" (Park, 2005, p. 710). Religion is a strong source of global belief systems as it informs beliefs about the self, the world, and both mundane and extraordinary events. Additionally, Park (2005) proposes that religion offers an important philosophical orientation that makes suffering understandable and bearable. Religious or spiritual beliefs can shape one's global beliefs and goals and facilitate access to supportive resources.

Spirituality can also aid in changing the appraised meaning of an event by either helping the individual identify positive things that have come from the situation or by providing a means to make more benign reattributions (Park, 2005). Positive reattributions may include seeing a difficult experience as part of God's greater plan and allow an individual to make sense of an event that at first seemed incomprehensible. Instead of changing the appraisal of an

event, an individual may instead undergo changes in their global beliefs about the world or their own life. This may materialize in the adopting of a new spiritual or religious perspective as a way of establishing an alternative framework of meaning and a new system of purposes.

3. Methodology

This project used a qualitative approach to understand the experience of recovery through the perspectives of individuals who have experienced IPA. Open-ended interviews were conducted with participants to understand their unique sense of spirituality, what factors prompted them to leave their abusive relationships, and how they recovered from the trauma they experienced. The intent of this approach was to encourage narrative responses from participants in order to gain an understanding of the role of spirituality in their experiences of IPA, and to provide the researcher with the flexibility to explore the meaning of their stories during data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

3.1 Recruitment and Sampling

Participants in this study are women who experienced any form of IPA and who identify spirituality as an integral element of their trauma recovery process. The conception of spirituality in this study is broad and may include both religious and non-religious elements, such as prayer, meditation, yoga, religious affiliation/attendance, and intrinsic components such as a general sense of faith or belief in a higher power or greater plan.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment and interviewing processes took place virtually. The initial plan for recruitment was to distribute flyers in-person at open meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). This group was selected for several reasons:

1) While the group is focused around alcoholism, many women who attend these meetings have experienced multiple types of adversity including other substance abuse disorders and mental illness.
2) Many AA group members have experienced IPA which reflects findings from research on the experience of IPA trauma and the development of substance abuse disorders (Fowler & Rountree, 2009; Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017).
3) Women in AA who have experienced IPA may be more comfortable discussing their past struggles and their recovery in a safe space and with others who can relate.

Once in person AA meetings were cancelled due to the pandemic, a new strategy was developed to safely recruit participants. A post was uploaded into a Facebook group in which the primary researcher is a member. The group consists of approximately 650 women, mostly residing on Vancouver Island, whom largely identify with spirituality and have experienced some sort of substance use disorder. The post outlined the following key points:

1) This research is being done by a student from the University of Victoria, for the purpose of a Master's thesis in the Department of Sociology, under the supervision of Dr. André Smith.
2) Participants who have experienced trauma resulting from IPA are invited to share their experience with spirituality
3) The identities of and information provided by participants will be strictly confidential, and the identities of participants will remain anonymous.
4) Ethics approval from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board has been obtained and the study will follow the approved ethics protocol.

The post provided the researcher's email address and phone number and asked those interested in participating to contact the researcher. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit additional participants with the Facebook post suggesting the researcher's contact information be shared with any additional women outside of the group who met the criteria and may be interested in participating. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability approach that is useful for recruiting hidden or hard-to-reach populations, particularly when membership in that population involves a stigma (Heckathorn, 2011).

The researcher received responses from seven women who were members of the Facebook group who wished to participate. Additionally, one woman who was not a member of the group reached out with a willingness to participate after a friend of hers told her about the study. The participants ranged in age from early twenties to mid-sixties. Six of the seven women experienced their abuse in heterosexual relationships, while the seventh experienced abuse in her relationship with a woman. Six of the women experienced significant physical abuse, while the other two described primarily psychological abuse, including jealousy, control, and manipulation. Seven of the women were in recovery from alcohol and/or drug abuse, while the

eighth had no history of substance abuse. Two of the women had been married to their abusive partners, while the others had all cohabitated with them. The duration of their abusive relationships varied from several months to several years and occurred at different life stages, ranging from late teens to mid-forties.

3.2 Data Collection

Once the women contacted the researcher with an interest in participating, they were provided with a more in-depth description of the research project, the topic of study, and its importance. Additionally, they were sent a copy of the participant consent form (Appendix I) which they signed before the interview. This was to ensure that participants felt informed, comfortable, and in control of the process. The researcher offered to answer any questions the participant may have to inform their decision about sharing their story.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and, with the permission of each participant, audio recorded on the researcher's personal cellphone. This method of recording was chosen over the Zoom recording option as it ensured more confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed about the goals of the research project and the researcher's own relationship to spirituality. The researcher went over the consent form and the procedures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to email a copy of the signed consent form prior to the interview (Appendix I). Since the focus of the study is on trauma recovery and resilience rather than the trauma itself, the participants were not pressed to disclose any specifics regarding the type of abuse or specific incidents they had endured. The researcher explained that it was up to the participant to decide how much detail they wished to disclose about the IPA they experienced.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with questions designed to guide participants in sharing their experiences in a narrative way (see Appendix II for interview guide). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions meant to prompt participants to share a detailed account of how they identify with spirituality in the context of recovery from IPA. Participants were asked to explain their current spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as what

their understanding of spirituality entails. Participants were also asked about their specific definitions of spirituality and any related terms they may have mentioned, such as "Higher Power/God" or "prayer". They were asked what their sense of spirituality looked like prior to their experience with IPA, or whether they had one at all. To encourage a narrative response, questions focused on how participants' sense of spirituality changed or developed during or after their trauma. Participants were also asked to share on any other resources they found helpful in recovery, such as counseling or other social support.

The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 40 minutes to one hour. The interview process was fluid and conversational and ensuring trust and comfort of the participants was a primary consideration. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions at the end of the interview or to provide additional insight that was not touched upon. Participants were given the option to contact the researcher to review the written transcript of the interview in the weeks following. This was intended to ensure the participant felt in control and properly represented. Participants were also informed that they could contact the researcher if they wished to change, alter, or clarify the meaning of any of their statements in the transcript.

3.3 Data Analysis

Upon completion of each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Aliases were used in all transcribing as well as throughout the paper to ensure anonymity of participants. To begin the analysis process, each transcript was read and reread from start to finish. After the first reading, initial interpretations of the overall interview content were recorded. These included general descriptions of a given participant's spirituality that stood out—for example, if they identify with a specific religion. After adding brief reflections on each individual interview, the interview transcripts and written reflections were analyzed together as a single data set.

A thematic analysis serves as a way to identify essential themes and develop an understanding of the lived experience embodied in the data (Manning, 2012). Thematic coding

is a flexible analytical tool that can be applied within a variety of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this approach, the researcher plays an active role in identifying which themes are significant and in interpreting their meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006). Following this approach, the researcher first analyzed all of the interview transcripts as a unit and then identified themes demonstrating "some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" that relate directly to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Since the focus of this study is on personal experiences, an inductive approach to coding was used to allow themes to be drawn directly from the data, rather than trying to fit data into a pre-established coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meanings were generated by reflecting on the data, without attempting to align the data with any specific theory. The researcher used a semantic approach, creating a coding scheme from the explicit descriptions provided by participants, rather than establishing any pre-set codes prior to the analysis stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed themes to emerge organically from the data, revealing the true essence of the phenomenon.

Through a cyclical process of reading, writing, and reflecting, the researcher developed a deeper understanding of the relationship between IPA-related trauma, spirituality, and resilience. The steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting thematic analysis served as a general guide. This entails moving from the initial reading and memo-writing to coding aspects of data across the entire dataset into general codes, then sorting codes into potential themes. From there, a thematic map was developed and refined, to ensure each theme was clearly defined, distinct, and internally cohesive. Lastly, extracts from the interviews were selected to represent rich demonstrations of themes and meanings, and the ways in which they relate to the research question. After the transcripts had been read over several times, colours were selected to represent themes and subthemes that had emerged in each interview and to underline sections within each interview that represented them.

Ethical Considerations

An application for approval to the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) was completed. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, several steps were taken to

ensure that participants would feel safe and to minimize any potential harm to those involved. Participants were recruited with the understanding that they may be asked to share personal accounts which touch on past traumatic experiences. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the ways in which their interview responses were to be used. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Upon completion of the interview, each participant was mailed a $15 gift card for Starbucks along with a card to thank them for their time and openness in sharing their experience.

Participants emailed a signed consent form agreeing to participate in the study and providing permission to audio record the interview for the use of the primary researcher and Dr. André Smith. The audio recordings were to allow for accurate transcription during the data analysis process. Participants were given the option to review the written transcript in the weeks following the interview, and could choose to change, clarify, or omit any of the information they provided. This was to serve as an additional precaution to ensure that participants felt they were accurately represented and that their anonymity was protected.

To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used in aspects of the study where direct quotes or anecdotes are shared. Any personal details that could make a participant identifiable are omitted. Both the audio recordings and the written transcriptions of the interviews are kept in protected files on the researcher's personal devices. Only the primary researcher and Dr. Smith will have access to these files, and they will be deleted after two years.

While the details of their past trauma were not necessary to touch upon during the interview process, there was a possibility that reflecting on that time could pose risks to the emotional well-being of participants. To minimize risks, several strategies outlined in the University of Victoria's 2018 *Annotated Guidelines for Completing the HREB Application for Ethics Approval for Human Participation Research* were used. Participants were sent the interview questions a few days before the initial interview to familiarize them with the topics that would be addressed, so they could make a conscious and deliberate decision about what they felt comfortable sharing. Additionally, participants were reminded that they could take a break at any point, to stop the interview, or to withdraw from the study. At the beginning of

the interview, the researcher stated that negative emotions may arise during the process and discussed support strategies and resources available to the participant. This served to both fully inform the participant of potential consequences of their participation and to normalize these feelings in advance of their occurrence (Bzruzy et al., 1997). Upon completion of the interview, participants were be provided the contact information for resources available to them should they feel distress after the interview has taken place. This included the Counselling Services at the University of Victoria, the Vancouver Island Crisis Line, and the Citizen's Counselling Centre in Victoria.

Researcher Positionality

When conducting qualitative research, it is important as a researcher to be aware that the lens through which the data is being analyzed will be partially shaped by the researcher's own life experiences. My interest in the topic of spirituality and resilience was formed in part by my own experiences with both intimate partner abuse and spirituality. I grew up in the Jewish faith, however I don't identify as particularly religious in that I do not participate in many of the traditions associated with Judaism and do not identify with most of the underlying rules and beliefs. I have always identified with a more secular form of spirituality, including the beliefs that there is some higher power or universal force that exists, and that most things in my personal life happen for a specific reason.

When a relationship I was in several years ago became both physically and emotionally abusive, I did not believe I had the strength within myself to leave the situation. An incident occurred where my partner at the time and I were in a car accident that almost took both of our lives, as he was driving under the influence. When he was arrested and sentenced to jail time, it provided an opportunity for me to reach out to my family, admit what was happening, and remove myself from the situation. I have always credited some sort of higher power with both sparing my life and with taking him away so that I had a chance to leave the situation. Recovering both physically and emotionally took time, along with the support from a number of sources including family, friends, and professional counselling. Relying on my spirituality also proved a useful source, as it gave me faith that this was an experience that I could grow from

and perhaps use to help other women experiencing similar struggles. Therefore, I recognize my own assumptions going into this study, as I do believe spirituality has been a resource for myself and can be for other women recovering from intimate partner abuse. It was important to try and put my own biases about what spirituality looks like aside to observe the unique experiences of my research subjects. I also acknowledge that recovery from intimate partner abuse is a multidimensional process that typically requires support in a number of different areas of one's life.

4. Findings

Ten themes emerged: 1) Positive attributes of spirituality or a higher power, 2) Prior religious experience or lack of, 3) Spirituality in times of desperation, 4) Rituals, practices, and actions relating to spirituality, 5) Spirituality through the five senses, 6) Working with Others – The importance of Service, 7) Loss of connection to self and spirituality, 8) Coping with the lasting impacts of trauma, 9) Forgiveness, and 10) The sickness framework for understanding abuser or abuse cycle. The first theme reflects the purpose faith in some higher plan or higher power served in the lives of the women interviewed, while the second and third themes emerged when participants were asked to describe the ways in which their sense of spirituality changed or emerged following the experience of IPA. Several participants recalled turning to prayer or faith while experiencing particularly traumatic abusive events. Additionally, many of the participants identified some higher power as saving their lives or giving them the strength to leave their abuser. The fourth, fifth, and sixth themes relate to the descriptions the participants provided of the specific actions they perform regularly as part of their spiritual practice. The final four themes demonstrate the long-term emotional, cognitive, and spiritual impacts of the experience of intimate abuse. The theme of self-image was revealed as each participant identified the ways in which their abusive relationship led them to abandon their sense of self and personal values, and in how they rebuilt this connection to self in the recovery process. The lasting impacts of trauma included the ways in which the participants coped with problems including PTSD symptoms, nightmares, or panic attacks. Often this involved the use of other resources including social supports, various forms of counseling, and involvement in some type of service work. The sickness framework involved participants choosing to learn about social and psychological elements of the abuse cycle and learning to see their past selves or their abusers as unwell.

4.1 Positive Attributions of Spirituality

4.1.1 Spirituality as Dynamic and Evolving

Spirituality in its essence refers to unseen forces, powers, and meanings. As such it was difficult for the majority of participants to explicitly describe what the term 'spirituality' means for them and what their conception of a Higher Power entailed. The women interviewed described the ways in which their concept of spirituality evolved and changed over time.

Several women used the term 'energy' to describe the ways in which spiritual awareness underlines their connection to all things and beings. Denise described spirituality as "an energy that's all around", encompassing both something outside of herself and something within herself. She further explained: "When I think of spirituality I think of that energy, you know? I think of the feelings of it. It's love, it's support, it's encouragement, it's strength, it's peace, it's that balance, it's clarity, it's strength". Regarding interconnectedness, Elaine explained, "there's something bigger than me. I am a part of something. So, I'm like… I'm one cell in a part of something very big, and there's something very big inside of one of my cells". This was similar to Denise's depiction of spirituality as something both within and outside of the individual. Alice reiterated this idea of connection and energy saying "what I believe and create inside myself is reflected outside of myself". Jennifer also described spirituality in similar terms, explaining "I believe more in energies and universal guides" and added that an infinite power flows through everything in the universe.

A few participants described how they spirituality as being more like a force or a higher power. For example, Carolyn expressed that she does not envision her Higher Power as God or a specific individual but rather as "a universal force… that speaks to me through my intuition". Erica shared that her conception of a higher power is shaped from both her religious upbringing and her own experiences. She brought up the concept of ancestry, which came up in several of the interviews. Erica explained, "sometimes I call my higher power God, sometimes I feel like it's my grandma or, you know, my grandpa, or my grandparents". Denise also acknowledged the impact ancestry has had on her continuously evolving conception of a Higher Power. When asked about her Higher Power she explained, "it ebbs and flows… for a long time it was my

grandmother and she walked with me when I was really struggling". Denise said she referred to her higher power as "creator" or "God" but that sometimes she saw it as the ocean or anything larger or more powerful than her alone. She explained that when she first got sober, she saw the group of people she was in treatment with as her Higher Power. For her part, Elaine studied and taught yoga for most of her adult life, which she identifies as a central practice in her spirituality. Her conception of a higher power revolves around the idea of "love in the universal sense" rather than a religious God. Similar to Erica, Elaine's spirituality is often tied to her ancestry. When asked if she prays to a specific Higher Power, she shared that her prayer is more about putting intention out into the universe although at times the image of her deceased grandfather comes to her mind. She explained that in her morning spiritual ritual, she sits on a chair that was passed on to her from her grandfather to do her daily meditation. She explained:

> I've never met my grandpa. He was dead before I was born… I think I saw a picture of him once, but I don't even think I own a picture of him… But the minute I put my head down on that chair I picture his face. So, it's like I feel my ancestry there too.

She also explained that her sense of spirituality continues to evolve as she grows and added "I believe in love in the universal sense. Love is the medium and the message".

Participants also talked of the evolution of their sense of spirituality. For example, Elaine described her spirituality as a feeling based around "freedom from fear" and noted that she added her "first major spiritual experience" as occurring in the hospital after she had given birth to her son. She described that the fear she initially felt around dropping her son when the nurse handed him over to her vanished immediately when she had him in her arms and attributed that feeling to her spirituality. She said:

> The moment he was in my arms… I was just enveloped in this white – or soft white lite – is the only way I can describe it. It was just the most powerful feeling. And the thought that came into my mind – this is going to sound bizarre – [was] 'I would kill for you'. It was just such an overwhelming feeling. There was no way I was going to drop this child. And it was amazing… It was a spiritual experience. It was love – I don't know if I'd ever really felt love

> before that. It was just the most intense feeling of love. And to me love is the most spiritual thing.

In contrast, Alice shared that her journey into spirituality stemmed from a "curiosity" around "knowing on some intuitive level that we are more than flesh and bone… that there's more to life than just going through the motions of… what we do in this manifested realm". When asked about her conception of a Higher Power, Alice explained that she does not believe in a singular higher power, but rather a "web [of] spiritual beings and influences from outside of this realm". She adds, "I don't think I believe in one supreme being… I think there's a council up there".

4.1.2 Karma – Do Your Best and Good will Come

Several of the participants viewed karma as central to their spiritual belief systems. Alice explained:

> The basic belief [is that] everything is connected – and that everything has spirit in it… and that we are energetic. Even the house I'm living in has a feeling and an energy and a spirit to it – as well as nature of course – and each other. And as long as we go on harming each other, the world around us, and ourselves, we're not living to our full potential.

For her part, Denise emphasized that kindness is "one of the most potent things that us as humans can give one another". She emphasized the importance of empathy, explaining that when another person acts hostile toward her, she tries to remember to pray for compassion toward that individual and to understand that they might be going through something difficult.

For Jennifer, some of the basic values underlying her spiritual beliefs stem from her Catholic upbringing. She mentioned that while she has moved away from what she called the more "shame-based" elements of Catholicism, she still identifies with some of the basic principles, such as "[the belief that] we should treat other people with respect, and you should respect your neighbor and your parents, and you shouldn't kill people, and you shouldn't steal".

Erica expressed a belief in karma as well, explaining that she tries to consistently be the best version of herself and "do the next right thing". For Rebecca, "just showing up" is central to her belief that if you try to do your best, things will fall into place. She explains "[it] really helps me, just thinking I can only really do so much and the rest isn't up to me; the rest is up to

whatever the universe throws in my path". She mentioned karma as well, adding, "I think if you show up and if you do good things, and you always try your best, and you work hard, then good things come out of that". Sharon expressed a belief in the principle of karma as well. She explained that she chooses to identify with the ideas of karma, or universal energy, rather than a religious God. Sharon added that she often prays to have compassion and love in her interactions with others.

Elaine emphasized the idea of manifestation and how the energy that one puts out into the world comes back into their life. She stated that "what is above is below [and] what is below is above", reiterating the sense that her spirituality is both within her and in the world around her. Alice echoed this statement, explaining that "what I believe and create inside myself is reflected outside of myself". On manifestation, she emphasized the importance of words and intention, explaining: "What I intend and what I get behind with my word… becomes manifested… The voice is very powerful – speech is very powerful. So [with] intentions… you know, if I'm clear on what I'm intending in my life, I'm going to see the results".

4.1.3 A Greater Purpose

Virtually all of the participants referred to the idea of some greater plan and the belief that everything happens for a reason. Denise noted that understanding the purpose in her life experiences comes in retrospect. She shared, "I get to live this life today because of the choices that I made, but I didn't know why I was making those choices [at the time], right? So, I fully believe that my higher power put everything in my place".

Erica expressed that she sees her experience with addiction and IPA as something she can use to help other women. She shared the rhetoric often used in 12 step fellowships that "you can't keep what you have without giving it away". She saw service work as integral to her healing:

> Doing things like [this interview] show me that there's a bigger purpose. You know, sharing honestly with pretty much anyone that will listen… shows me that there's a reason that I wasn't beaten to death… Maybe I'm supposed to share parts of my story… so it helps someone else.

She added, “I read something actually one time, that it’s important for women that have been in abusive relationships to talk to other women that have been in abusive relationships… It’s one of the biggest ways that women will a) leave and b) heal from it”.

Rebecca expressed the belief that if she shows up and tries her best, the universe will generally bring good things into her life. Rebecca currently feels an appreciation for what she has learned through her journey. She explained:

> I do appreciate what I’ve been through and what it taught me. I don’t think I’d have that without… having some kind of connection… but at times I look back and I’m embarrassed, and I wish I never went through what I did and I hate it. But at the same time when I really evaluate it and I look at where I am today… I’m grateful that everything brought me here, I guess”.

She added, “I’m not happy about what I went through, but the things I have today… I have those things because I had to go through what I did.

Jennifer also expressed the belief that everything happens for a reason and “everything is divinely in its place”. Denise similarly shared that, “throughout my life I’ve always been sort of in tune with spirits and… things that happen around me [are] not coincidences… I believe that things are happening for a reason”.

Carolyn also shared the belief that everything happens for a reason, explaining “when I’m able to step back and look at what I can learn, it allows me to change my perspective and to be consistently growing stronger”. She mentioned that her first spiritual experience occurred when she attended inpatient treatment for substance abuse. This experience allowed her to “connect with other people who had been through similar situations” which she refers to as “the start of my healing journey”. Carolyn also believes that her experiences with IPA have allowed her to help other women with similar struggles. She said that she now views challenges experiences as opportunities to grow. She added, “even the abusive relationship – like as traumatic as it was – I learned so much from it and I learned a lot about myself and… I don’t know if I would be who I am today if it wasn’t for that relationship… It’s allowed me to kind of see who I want to bring in to my life and who I don’t and… allowed me to not make the same mistakes again”.

Carolyn told a story about reaching out to another woman online who had dated her abuser after her, after having an intuitive feeling that he may have been victimizing this woman as well. She explained:

> I just kept dreaming about her. So, I was like "you know what, I'm going to trust my gut – something's telling me I need to reach out to her." So, I sent her this message and… I just told her that I'd been in a relationship with him previously and that he'd been really abusive toward me and… I wasn't sure if that was the case with her but if it was that she could contact me. And she wrote me back the next morning [saying] "oh my god, thank you for contacting me". He had been physical with her… [and after they broke up] she was really really struggling.

Carolyn said her higher power guided her intuition and compelled her to reach out to this woman. She expressed that her spirituality has provided a framework by which she can see struggles as opportunities to grow.

Denise echoed this, explaining, "I turn every experience into an opportunity, right? Each problem has a solution… All experiences are opportunities for me to learn and grow". She adds that she believes her higher power will not give her anything more difficult than what she can handle. Denise explained that she has been able to look back on experiences in her life and understand that they were part of a greater plan. She tells of a car accident where she was nearly killed, explaining "my higher power had a bigger plan for me that day; it wasn't time for me to leave… this physical world". Denise used the term "automagic" to describe her higher power, referencing the ways in which "[life] is just automagically happening".

Sharon similarly shared the belief that everything happens for a reason. She pointed out that she has not yet gotten to a place of appreciating her experience with IPA as the relationship ended only a few months before our interview. However, she expressed faith that in time she will get there:

> I haven't gotten to that place out of this relationship where I'm really glad for everything that has happened yet and I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. Because cognitively I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. But my heart is still fucking aching.

Sharon did indicate that the relationship has allowed her to do some self-reflecting. She shared the insight that she was seeking to recreate a dynamic she experienced in her family-of-origin, after growing up with an abusive mother. Pointing out the value in this lesson, she added "now that I know that… [it's like] know better, do better. I don't think I could ever enter another relationship like that and stay [with this knowledge]".

Denise noted the value her challenges in allowing her to help others. She reframed a traumatic head injury as "a gift" as it has allowed her to work with women who have had head injuries. She sees her service work both at a hospice and connecting with other women in Alcoholics Anonymous as a gift that provides her with a sense of community in contrast to the isolation she experienced during her addiction and recovery from her head injury. Denise has also gotten involved with Haven society, a non-profit organization that deals with domestic violence and partner safety. She shared a story about allowing a young woman to stay in her home and sponsoring her in the Alcoholics Anonymous program. She explained how this service work allows her "to go back and observe that time in my life, versus being in it and being paralyzed by it". While Denise sometimes wishes she had not spent 25 years of her life in the cycle of addiction and IPA. She shared, "I get comfort knowing that that's what the plan was". Denise echoed Rebecca in the importance of sharing her experience with others:

> This is what the program teaches us – to give away what we were so freely given – and that for me is information, that's love and support, and people have shared their experience with me… I believe that I've had all these experiences for a reason and I've got to share them.

Elaine described seeking ways to help others as central to her spiritual growth. After leaving her abusive relationship she returned to university to pursue social work. She explained that in retrospect she may have been drawn to social work as a way of avoiding looking at her own trauma, "I could deal with everybody else's problems [which is] a great way to not look at your own problems". Elaine identified her work teaching yoga in a maximum-security prison as a powerful opportunity for spiritual connection, referring to the "absolute grace and beauty" she experienced there. She mentioned that the opportunity was presented to her unexpectedly. While she initially had some anxiety around teaching in a prison but that once

there, “I just fell into teaching how I always taught, which is with love; because to me, yoga is love”. She shared that despite being in a room with potentially violent offenders, her spiritual alignment protected her so that she never felt afraid. She said her work had a spiritual impact,

> I found a lot of grace there. Sometimes I would be having a difficult day [when] my anxiety would be really bad, because I’ve dealt with anxiety all my life… and I’d be driving there and I’d get there… [Once] I just start teaching, [the anxiety is] gone. And I have no explanation for that. At all.

She also noted that “for me it’s kind of like ‘well we’re all here, we’re all stuck on this planet together’ and we’ve got to find a way to heal”. She added that in both social work and teaching yoga, “you don’t always know what the end result is going to be and you have to be comfortable [with that]. She compared this to the time “When they were building big huge old churches – like some of those gigantic churches that would take a hundred years to build – the person who laid the foundation wouldn’t live to see it built, right? You just kind of have to think that way, I guess.”

4.2 Prior Religious Experience or Lack of

Several participants said they acquired religious views in part from growing up as a member of a religious family but also from their own exploration with religion. Both Erica and Jennifer grew up in the Catholic religion and identified this element as an important part of their introduction to spirituality. Erica stated that her grandparents are “super Catholic”, attributing cellphones, bars, and her childhood dream of becoming a singer to “the devil”. She explained that “When I would go visit my grandparents, they would let us read children’s bibles and stuff. So, I always – even today really – I’ll identify as Catholic… if I had to give it a title. [But] I don’t really believe all the things Catholics believe”. Erica said that her parents’ spiritual orientation was less based in the Catholic religion and that they encouraged her to define her own conception of spirituality. She shared, “My dad’s parents were super Catholic and my mom was Christian but she had me really young so she never wanted me to get baptized or anything. She always wanted us to like… figure it out for ourselves”. She explained that when her mother

got sober through Alcoholics Anonymous, she was introduced to different forms of spirituality. This later shaped her ideas that spirituality can be adaptable and evolving, which set a foundation for her own journey when she later entered the program of Alcoholics Anonymous herself. She shared:

> As I got older my mom got sober so her spirituality started changing, so then she – at first – was super like Indigenous spiritual… so she would see a dead animal and she'd throw one of her cigarettes out the window and I'm like "what the fuck are you doing? [And she'd explain] 'it's for the creator'… So, it was kind of cool because when I got sober it was nice for me to know that spirituality can be changing for you.

Jennifer's story indicated a complicated relationship with the Catholic religion—she highlighted both the negative and positive impacts her religious upbringing had on her self-concept throughout her life. Jennifer said she was raised "very Catholic", attending Catholic elementary and high schools and mandatory masses and Sunday school, along with attending church on a weekly basis with her family. She indicated that the rigid rules about right and wrong that the Catholic religion imposed on her initially deterred her from reaching out for help when she experienced sexual abuse and intimate partner abuse as a teenager. She explained:

> My religion was a huge part of my life before everything, and I think it was a big part of it during as well… just even all the sexual abuse I went through with people I wasn't necessarily in a relationship with… A huge reason that I stayed or, you know, didn't tell anybody or didn't get help or anything was that I viewed it as a sin, and that if people new that about me… like I would have to confront that sin, right? And I would be rejected – rejected by my family or rejected [by the community].

She pointed out that she views Catholicism as "very shame-based" with an emphasis "around guilt and punishment, and [the idea that] if you don't do what you're supposed to do then you're punished". She opposed the tradition of attending monthly confessions that her parents enforced on her growing up, believing that what the church deemed sins were just "basic child behavior" such as getting in an argument with a sibling.

Because of the Catholic notion that sex outside of a committed relationship was a sin, she initially partly blamed herself for her victimization and saw her abuse as a result "of the sin

of just putting myself in those situation [or] using substances, [or] possibly wearing provocative clothing or acting unladylike". She viewed her behavior as going against the expectations under which she was raised, "that women are quiet, that they're proper, that they're… devoted wives, devoted church folk, [that] they bake and cook and clean and don't act wild". She explained, "I had a lot of shame and guilt around all these things that I had done and these situations that I had deemed that I'd created for myself… [and] that all came from my religious upbringing".

Jennifer began to turn away from the Catholic religion around age 16 and said that her struggles with addiction and sexual assault lead her to question her faith. When describing this period, she explained:

> That was around the first time that I was raped, and just had started going through all this shit with my addiction and everything. And growing up so religious, I think it just made sense that I blamed God for those things, because he was the one in my life who was supposed to be the Almighty, right? So, when things started going bad for me… that's when I started rebelling against God.

The religious notion of a punishing God initially provided a framework for Jennifer to blame both herself and God for her struggles as a teen. Recalling her thoughts from this period, she explained:

> I justified what was happening based on my actions… I wasn't behaving to the best of my ability – like I was drinking, I was using [drugs], I was not working… - and so I deserved to be punished, right? I deserved to be abused, I deserved to be hit, I deserved to be called these names, because they were true. I just saw [the abuse] as my punishing – that this is just God punishing me.

This played into the cycle of IPA and addiction for Jennifer. She said that "part of me sought that out… because I needed to be punished". She added, "in order for me to keep drinking and doing drugs and behaving stupidly or messing up my life, I had to be punished or that. Because if I wasn't then I couldn't do it anymore".

Jennifer also indicated that in order for her to heal, she needed to reconstruct her idea of spirituality and a higher power. This involved "going through the process of tearing that ideal down and rebuilding one that fit for who I actually was and what I truly believed in". Redefining

her Higher Power allowed her to view her abusive relationships and harmful behaviors in a new framework. After getting sober, Jennifer turned to religion to try to find a spirituality that fit her values. She explains that she tried participating in a variety of religious institutions - including Unitarian, Presbyterian, and Christian churches, Buddhist temples, and even a return to the Catholic church – before deciding that none of them were a good fit for her newfound self-concept. At that point, as she noted:

> I just kind of started making my own ideal… picking and choosing the things out of all these different belief systems that I agreed with and that I liked and that felt right to me, and I kind of just created this little bubble of my own. And so, through that… I was able to kind of look at [the faith she was raised in] and be like "that's not right for me anymore – that's not okay and that's not what I believe in, and that doesn't support the compassion and kindness and love and… all those things that I want in my life and I believe are good in the world".

This idea of replacing a punishing Higher Power with a compassionate one has been central in Jennifer's spiritual journey. She shared:

> Growing up I had this vision of like this bearded white man on a cloud, right? Like God, Jesus Christ, this person. And this person was the one who was punishing me for my behaviors. And this person was the one… continuously putting me in relationships where I was being abused… He was the one that brought on rape and sexual assaults and all these bad things that happened to me, because this guy in a cloud was like "you fucked up" [or] "you didn't do something right", right? So when I shifted my spirituality to something that was more positive… I just kind of envisioned an angel – because that was the most positive light thing that I could think of was just this beautiful woman – you know, all gowned in white, with beautiful wings and the halo… So, when I envisioned that… I couldn't see her punishing me.

This new conception of her Higher Power as loving and forgiving helped Jennifer see that she did nothing to deserve the abuse she was subjected to and allowed her to forgive herself for what she initially believed were sinful behaviors that she felt God was punishing. In her words,

"I think reinventing my higher power was, for me, the key to be able to move forward in a healthy way".

Jennifer said that she no longer holds resentment towards Catholicism or religion in general. She shared that when she goes back to visit her family, she'll still partake in church services with them but she has chosen not to believe in the aspects that she feels are harmful to her. While Jennifer has moved away from some of the practices of her Catholic upbringing, she explained that it continues to impact her self-image, particularly with regards to her sexuality. She shared that despite currently being in what she considers a healthy committed relationship, she still struggles with the idea in her head that "it's wrong, it's a sin, [and] God doesn't approve".

Despite these struggles, Jennifer recognized that being part of the religion initially offered her a sense of community and belonging that she was seeking in her childhood. She explained:

> I leaned into it [initially] because it was inclusive, right? Like I had a huge fear of not having my place, not being wanted… My mom left when I was a child which really just [brought up] all those abandonment things. So, I was… I guess like your typical child where… I did whatever I had to do to be included, right? I needed to be a part of.

Jennifer explained that her current conception of a Higher Power is "more universal" and inspired more by Buddhism. She believes in energies and universal guides but does not conceive of "God as like a figure or a man up in heaven". She no longer attends church regularly but participates in Alcoholics Anonymous, which she sees as "pretty spiritual as well, [regarding] the connection with other people and sharing spiritual experiences with other people". She added, "I kind of consider my meetings like my church".

In contrast to Jennifer and Erica, Elaine grew up in a secular household. She shared a favorite quote that "God has no religion" but acknowledged that her sense of spirituality involves elements from a variety of religious belief systems. She expressed an interest in reading and learning about various religions: "I'm reading something from somebody – she's called Cynthia Brigeou – she's an Episcopalian. I've read things on Buddhism. I don't know much about the Jewish faith but… what I know of it and read of it I think it's quite beautiful. I've gone

with my friend who's the priest to his big beautiful church downtown and felt… something happens there". She explained "I don't picture somebody sitting up there with a beard and long hair or whatever, but I'm okay with that too".

Denise grew up Christian. However, aside from attending church "at Christmas and for funerals", religion did not play a large part in her upbringing. She saw her lack of experience around religion as an attribute that allowed her to create her own concept of spirituality. She explained, "I think that it was a lot easier for me not having a previous experience with God to create my own higher power".

Alice identifies as part of the Wiccan religion, but shared that she is also influenced by several spiritual belief systems, including Shamanism and the Buddhism. She described how her shamanistic beliefs involved recognition of "non-ordinary realities" and other "realms that we can learn to move in and out of in a spiritual way". She explained how journeywork into three non-ordinary realities as a central spiritual practice for her:

> There's what is called the middle world, which is kind of like where we are now, but in a different sense – it is kind of like going through the veil and being on the other side. Then there's the upper world [which is] more ethereal, [with] more angelic themes. And then there's the lower world that is… the deep natural world… a more grounded kind of place.

Alice cited the Buddhist belief in reincarnation as part of her spiritual orientation. Denise also shared a similar belief, explaining "I believe that when people leave the physical world they're still there in spirit, [and] I believe that I can interact with them".

For Alice, growing up on Vancouver Island during the 1970s shaped her interest in Wicca/witchcraft. She described Vancouver Island as "a highly magical place" with the water surrounding the island serving as "a conduit for emotion and feeling". She explained: "In those early 70s… the lid was being taken off of witchcraft again, you know – and off of eastern religions. I can remember in Victoria [seeing] Hare Krishna's changing downtown".

Alice likened shamanism to "a part of just having a good first aid kit for yourself", providing tools for techniques such as a "pattern collapse" whereby – through journeywork – one can "make a shift… [altering] patterns we get stuck in". Alice has been studying shamanism for eight years. She added that hers is not "an Indigenous based shamanism" but rather "what

is called core shamanism, which has taken from many realms around the world… and created [a practice] for a western mind to access".

4.3 Spirituality in Times of Desperation – God Doing for Me What I Couldn't Do for Myself

Several of the participants spoke of the circumstances that allowed them to leave their abusive relationships, and credited their occurrence to a higher power or greater force. Denise said that having faith allowed her to see that even in the darkest moments "I had given up on myself, but something didn't give up on me". For Carolyn, the strength to leave her abusive relationship came about after learning that her partner had been physically abusing her cat. She felt that a higher power and the experience with her cat resulted in her being able to live the relationship before the abuse becoming physical rather than just psychological:

> What actually saved me, I believe, from physical abuse – because I do believe it would have got there – was my cat… He was getting physical to my cat and I didn't know, because he wouldn't do it while I was there. But my cat was acting really strange, and he would hiss when he was around him – and my cat is so nice to everybody, he doesn't often do that. And he started doing weird things, like he would pee on the floor or he would hide. And so, my intuition was kicking in that something was up. And… we had gone away for Christmas… and we came back because I had to work. And so, I went to work and he called me and he was yelling, and he's like 'your cat pooed on the floor again, like 'he's a piece of shit'… And so, I had this weird feeling, and so I just got in a cab and I came home unannounced, and he had my cat in his cat carrier in the shower – like locked in the cat carrier – with the water running. And so that was my final straw – like it was like I wouldn't leave for myself, because I kept convincing myself that things would get better… but that was what pushed me to leave. Looking back now I believe that was my higher power just being like… my cat saved me basically…. I couldn't leave for myself but I could leave for my cat.

Carolyn also credited her spirituality with allowing her to walk away from another relationship. She explained that her new partner had started exhibiting similar behaviors to her ex, and that

"because of my spirituality and… Alcoholics Anonymous and my connection to my higher power, I feel like I was able to see those things and address them… [and] I did walk away." She added, "I believe for me that was my higher power… showing me that I can do this and that I have the confidence to stay true to myself."

For Rebecca, entering inpatient treatment for substance abuse helped her leave her abusive relationship. She credits her Higher Power with giving her "a push" to seek out help for her addiction. She shared the story of how this came about:

> This one particular time I had an overdose and I was taken to the hospital and I had to be revived… But for some reason when I was in the ambulance, I guess they'd asked for my address, and I didn't give them my address, I gave them my family's. So, my family got this ambulance bill. And… it just seemed so strange, like, even going through that I knew what my address was. [But] it was like there was something in me that told me to ask for help… They got that bill and they were like "why were you in the hospital?" And I was out of lies – I had nothing left to say. So, I just told them. And I… I just feel like there was something there that gave me a push… I just think all the pieces had to come together to perfectly to give me that push that was like "I need help".

Rebecca added that for the first month or so in treatment, she "had some ideas about staying with him" but that over time she was able to "see it for what it was" and accept that she could not return to the relationship.

Erica also attributed her Higher Power with giving her the strength to leave her abusive relationship. She shared a story of the first time she ever "physically felt God in [her] life", during a particularly traumatic physical altercation with her ex-partner. She said:

> I'd fight back a lot… there was a part of me that was just like "fucking let him kill you… just let it be the end", right? Like, this one time he cracked my ribs… and I remember being like "just let this be the end of it, otherwise you're never going to get out… he's never going to let you leave… just give up… stop trying to fight back". And then there was just – I just chills talking about it – I can't explain what it was… it was just like "don't give up" …it was like an outer body experience.

Erica shared that “the moment I left him I know there was something greater than me there”. She explained that she had tried to leave the relationship several times before but would end up coming back. She talked of the day that gave her an opportunity to finally leave for good, and the kindness of a stranger that day which she attributed to her Higher Power:

> My whole addiction was tied to him… and I was on the other side of the country away from my family, and… he like never left the house… and by some grace of God, two days before [I left] he got a job offer. And it was a Friday that he was starting, which is super weird for you to start any kind of job on a Friday before a weekend. And it was like the only day off that I had… and he left that morning… and I left…. I couldn’t afford to fly, so I had to pack all my shit…. Take a cab to a greyhound station, and then take the cab to the airport… and like, I had $50 in my account after I paid for the greyhound, which ended up only being like $75, so I was really surprised… And the cab driver was just like “you know what” – because I was on the phone with my mom – he’s like “you know what, you’ve had a hard day”, and just let me… he paid for the cab for free. He waited for the greyhound… helped me move boxes… And things like that show me it’s something bigger than me.

Sharon articulated that her higher power provided the circumstances that ended her abusive relationship, saying “God did for me what I could not do for myself”. She added that she would never have left the relationship on her own and explained that when she would try to end the relationship, her partner would threaten suicide which prevented her from ending it. She described reaching out to a friend who is a healthcare professional and admitting that she was “an emotional hostage”. However, in explaining what kept her in the relationship, she said:

> I didn’t have it in me to leave. I couldn’t leave – there was something there… I stayed in this relationship with this abusive person, who turned out to be abusive just like my mother… because I had to fix this relationship. I was compelled to stay. And also know – what if she goes and kills herself? If I break up with her and she kills herself? I couldn’t live with myself, right?

After several attempts at breaking up, Sharon’s partner finally agreed to end the relationship. However, she continued living in Sharon’s home for a period of time. Two weeks after they

came to this decision, she found out her ex-partner was in a new relationship. She credits her Higher Power in creating these circumstances as they provided a motivation for Sharon to ask her ex to move out. She shared, “when [they] say that God did for you what you could not do for yourself – that was exactly it… I never would have left that relationship – I know that about me”.

4.4 Rituals, Practices, and Actions

Ashley described the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as foundational to her spiritual practices. She explained that her daily prayer involves “giving up my will every single morning” and “giving thanks every single night”. She said that she often “restart my day by giving up my will over and over again a thousand times a day”. Additionally, she uses her own tarot deck to do a tarot reading for herself each morning, and “centering [herself]” in what cards she pulls and how she can apply them to the day ahead of her. She also cited going for psychic readings two to three times a year as an important spiritual practice.

Rebecca shared that she does not do a traditional prayer addressing a higher power as part of her daily spiritual practice. Instead, she does what the program of Alcoholics Anonymous calls a “moral inventory”:

> When I’m driving to work or driving home, I set out some intentions for myself, or I just think about… how I can do well today, how I can show up for other people and be kind… or because I work with vulnerable people, I think [about] if they have anything going on in their lives, how I can help them through that. And then usually when I’m driving home, I’ll think about what I did that day, what was good and what was negative, and just kind of like, put it out there… I guess it’s like, by reviewing what I’ve done in a day, I can figure out how I can do better or where I went wrong.

Like Rebecca, Jennifer does not engage in what she considers traditional prayer, but states that she “talks to God or [her] higher power all the time”, even if it is just to express gratitude, or “give acknowledgement”. She shared that she tries to incorporate meditation into her spiritual practice, often listening to guided meditations she finds on YouTube. She also described breathing exercises as important and explained that she would “lay flat on the floor and do

deep breathing for like five minutes" and "try to find one aspect of myself that I can just solely focus on to try and connect with myself and the energy that flows through me".

Sharon shared the practices she began to partake in after the dissolution of her abusive relationship, which allowed her to deepen her spiritual connection. She said she meditates daily, and that "at the beginning [after the breakup] it was three, four five, times a day". For her morning and evening prayers, she found it important to physically get onto her knees to pray: "I literally get on my knees… and I ask to be of service every single day to somebody else, and for [Higher Power] to guide me, and help me get through the day". Denise also echoed the value in praying on her knees:

> I had been hearing in the rooms [of Alcoholics Anonymous] that people would get down on their knees and pray, and so I started trying it, and holy shit – what a difference for me. Because it was a physical action, right? Of surrender… So, I took it that extra step and started getting down on my knees.

Sharon also pointed out the importance of being able to "sit and be with [her] feelings", explaining that before exploring her spirituality "I would always just react to [my feelings] or I would feel pain and I'd be like 'nope – I will do anything else but feel pain right now'". She now consciously give herself permission to sit and experience her pain or negative emotions before making a decision to put these feelings aside.

Sharon added that meditation and prayer helped they allow her to change her thoughts and feelings. She alternates between silent meditations – which she typically does for around six minutes – and guided meditations which can last up to 20 minutes. For the guided medications, she said:

> There's one woman in particular, her name is Sarah Blondin, she is so easy to listen to and it's so moving, and she's just talking directly to you. Like it's rare that I'll do one of her meditations and I don't end up just crying.

Denise also described breathing exercises as "being present enough to feel the breath coming into my body, holding it, and letting it go". Jennifer too practices meditation and breathing exercises regularly, "I'll just lay flat on the floor and do deep breathing for five minutes – I guess which is kind of a form of meditation – [and] I try to find one aspect of myself that I can just

solely focus on to try and connect with myself and the energy that flows through myself… so I do that by breathing".

Denise shared that she added additional prayers shared by friends who have "native heritage" into what she calls her "nonnegotiable" in the morning – a set of routines she deems essential to her spiritual well-being. She added that during her prayers, she looks out into "a beautiful treescape and nature" to connect with the world around her. Like Ashley, Denise often does her own tarot readings as part of her spiritual practice. For her breathing exercises, she counts to five as she inhales, then hold her breath for three counts before exhaling. In explaining the importance of these numbers, she said "five is my life path number…. [and] there's something with threes that just fill my soul". Denise also described a visualization technique which allows her to let go of resentment throughout the day. She explained, "if I'm not able to handle something through the day, I just have this visual, physical thing, that I'll just package it up and hand it over and not worry about it and let it go".

For Carolyn, prayer and meditation allow her to achieve a deeper connection with her higher power. She said "when I ask my higher power for guidance and I'm able to listen, I will intuitively know what to do". For meditation, she find guided ones online while at other times, her meditation "is just like walking in the forest and just… trying to live in the moment". Carolyn shared that prayer allowed her to deepen her spiritual connection, explaining, "praying and being in touch with my higher power is probably the most important thing", allowing her to feel "more balanced, safe, secure, and supported". Like Denise with her daily 'non-negotiable' routine, Carolyn pointed out the importance of a daily spiritual practice. For her this includes reading a daily reflection and prayer, along with yoga several times a week. She shared that she often finds guided meditations online to listen to, while other times she will do a walking meditation through a forest and focus on being present in her surroundings.

Elaine echoed the importance of a daily spiritual practice even when she feels disconnected from her spirituality:

> I have a spiritual practice and – to use a quote that I really love – whenever I'm feeling like I'm being completely disingenuous in my spiritual practice and in my morning [routine]… I'm reminded of a quote that "enlightenment is always an accident" – or

> becoming awake, whatever you want to call it – is always an accident, [and] "spiritual practice can make you accident prone".

Elaine's morning routine includes reading something "spiritually based' which may include AA literature or other spiritual texts. She then will "contemplate it a little bit and then write out a little list of intentions for the day [which] includes things like stillness". After reading, Elaine will do "a spontaneous writing" of one page, in which she reflects on what she has read. Following this practice, she sits in a designated spot in her home to pray and do a silent meditation. She shared that she will sit in a chair that once belonged to her grandfather and pray, "asking for help" and putting intentions "into the universe".

Alice spoke on the importance of ritual in her spirituality, emphasizing the "transformative pieces" of performing ritual. Alice explained that ritual is traditionally an important way to mark transitions in life, such as births, birthdays, holidays, and deaths and that bringing intention to these traditions is essential. She said that rituals can be as simple as a personal ritual of how one starts their day and added that "when I bring a little bit more attention and appreciation for routines and rituals in my day… it's like it tunes it in just that much more and makes it that much more enriching". Alice feels that society today has moved away from the importance of ritual, so she makes a conscious effort to embrace ritual in her life and particularly within her own family. She explained the importance of ritual in her Wiccan practice:

> In terms of my spiritual community, ritual is one of the ways that we mark the seasons [and] that we mark our own transformations in our lives… We've had some bigger group rituals that we've created for the larger group, and then there are smaller sections of us that will do smaller rituals – you know, anywhere from let's say four to eight people. And then [we] do them a bit more formally, where we would call the directions, create a sacred space, stand in a circle.

Alice said that "a ritual needs to have something that we participate in that takes you through to the other side – so there's some kind of participation". She added that ritual can entail "something as small as holding a glass of water and putting some intentions into it I, taking a sip and passing it on" or more elaborate traditions. She mentioned that she does not engage in

traditional prayer daily, but considers “calling in the directions” during her journey work or during group rituals as her version of prayer. Alice also described the ways in which performing various rituals helped with healing after ending her abusive relationship. She mentioned that she did a house clearing, getting rid of any belongings that reminded her of her ex-partner, and smudging:

> I took some ritual baths, I did some acupuncture, some body talk sessions. I did more dreamwork… I did some bond breaking, where I would just take a flame and a thread and intentionally say, you know, “I am no longer connected to you or you to me” and break [the thread] over the flame.

4.5 Spirituality Through the Senses

Denise articulated the ways in which the five senses tie in to her understanding of spirituality. When asked how she conceives of a higher power, she said:

> Sometimes it’s the ocean. Sometimes it’s a sound – so I go through the five senses, right? Sometimes I see something, sometimes it’s more of a sound, sometimes it’s more of a touch, you know, [or] a taste… it ebbs and flows.

Denise emphasized the importance of scent in connecting her to her spiritual side. She shared that she uses a diffuser and uses different essential oils depending on what she feels she needs help with. She shared, “I have Palo Santo wood too, so if somethings really throwing me off, I’ll burn a stick of that. And I walk around my house – you know, I clear my house”. Denise described marking the one-year anniversary of her father’s passing with a ritual where she brought her shaman kit down to the ocean, threw oyster shells in, and burned sage which allowed her a sense of “peace within” and “stillness”. Ashley explained that she burns “a lot of sage” and has a whole area of her home that she uses to light and burn sage. Denise and Sharon also mentioned burning sage as part of their spiritual practice. Denise described using scents in a shaman set she was gifted:

> As soon as I pick up a shell [from the shaman set] things change. And then as soon as I put in the sage and the sweetgrass and tobacco, it’s just like every cell in my body

> becomes alive, becomes more aware, becomes more connected to everything around me…. And then I light everything that's in the bowl. And I have a wonderful feather set that was given to me, and I pray and smudge.

Alice talked of the importance of scent in her spiritual rituals, explaining that candles and incense – which are often used in the Catholic religion that she grew up in – "segued nicely" to her Wicca practice. She described the importance of the element of sound in some of her individual spiritual practices, including the visualization involved in her journeywork. She explained that she puts on "rhythmic beating" music, intended to activated beta rhythms in the brain, and will visualize a garden as a starting place for her journey into non-ordinary realities. She described her "own personal garden" as a "realm that I've built over the years" which contains "whatever I've created there… like flowers and trees". She perceives this garden as a safe space in which no other beings will come unless she consciously invites them in. She begins the journey with an intention, which often involves an attempt to "collapse a pattern" in her life, altering some kind of unproductive behavior. She said that there are three different realms to which she journeys to:

> In these non-ordinary realities, there's sort of three realms. There's what is called the middle world, which is kind of like where we are now, but in a different sense; it's kind of like going through the veil and being on the other side. Then there's the upper world which has sort of a more… ethereal, up-in-the-head sort of feeling to it [with] more angelic themes… Then there's a lower world that [involves] going down deep – which for me shows up kind of as a forest – so the deep natural world, [which is] a more grounded spirit realm.

She continued:

> If I'm going to ask a guide to do a pattern collapse, that would be done in the middle world… if I'm wanting to inquire into people who have passed in my life… I would go [into] the upper realm… Say I have some sort of health issues, I would probably go down into the lower world to inquire into it.

Along with journey work, Alice discussed the importance of reading spiritual texts, as well as her interest in dreamwork. She explained that she worked with a Jungian therapist doing

dreamwork therapy and now makes an effort to pay attention to her own dreams and journal on them. Additionally, she has participated in a chakra process group with other members of her Wicca organization and has taken courses in tarot reading.

Denise also talked of a visualization technique that enables her to better handle challenges in her day-to-day life: "I just have this visual, physical thing, that I'll just package [a difficulty] up and hand it over [to a higher power]. Because I can't deal with it properly so I hand it over and [don't] worry about it and let it go". Denise explained how other visualization techniques have been useful in helping her cope with symptoms of PTSD:

> Wherever [the negative feeling] is happening in my body, [I] just close my eyes and focus on where it is – like whether it's anxiety, whether it's fear – and label it. So [I] give it a colour, give it a shape… is it spinning, is it moving… anything like that… Just describe it, right? Because what happens when I'm doing that is that I'm isolating just that one area, right? So it doesn't become too overwhelming – especially because with my head injury things become too overwhelming. And then… with [my] mind's eye, bring in a calming colour and… ask [a higher power] to surround the [feeling] that's been described – that trauma place.

Denise shared that she uses the mobile app Audiojoy, which provides access to audiobooks, guided meditations, soundscapes, and other recordings focused around self-improvement. She explained that she often will put on a guided meditation before bed and allow herself to fall asleep to it, "I mean I'm only awake for so many hours of the day and so I believe that subconsciously I'm also absorbing the information [while asleep]". She shared that she has lately chosen meditation recordings around practicing kindness to herself and to others.

Carolyn also includes yoga in her spiritual practice: "I have kind of a daily practice – like things that I do every day. Like when I wake up, I do the daily reflection [reading], I pray every day… I don't always go to yoga, but multiple times a week". For Carolyn, being in nature is another important part of her spirituality. She added that going to inpatient treatment on Vancouver Island was an opportunity for her to reconnect with her spirituality as "[the treatment center] is in such a beautiful setting – like in the forest – and I grew up in a mountain town, so nature was always part of my spirituality as well".

Rebecca emphasized that movement is an important part of her spiritual practice, which often includes yoga four or five times each week in the morning. She shared that she would like to incorporate meditation into her spiritual practice, however she finds sitting in stillness quite challenging. She explained, "I was diagnosed with PTSD and I have a really hard time sitting and being quiet in my mind… It's actually a little bit triggering for me to sit and connect with my body and think about how my body feels". Rather than meditate in stillness, Rebecca stated that she prefers "practices that move my body like jogging or yoga… [which] help me to connect and feel my body without thinking about [discomfort]".

Elaine also includes "about 20 minutes of some movement" which often involves yoga. Explaining the benefits she finds in yoga, Elaine said: "It's not just about moving your body. A lot of the stuff [I do] is like pausing, reflecting, breathing, thinking, looking at self-worth and all that". She also explained that her physical yoga practice allows her to move her focus from her mind into her heart and her body, thus tapping in to her spirituality.

Jennifer described the ways in which 'body work therapy' served as an important tool in deepening her spiritual connection and healing from the traumas of her past. She describes techniques that include "breathing, punching, and stuff like that [which is] body activated". Jennifer also works with a hypnotherapist, "it's like a really deep meditative state… and we go into my subconscious mind, and we dig up the fears, and the thoughts and stuff around my trauma". Jennifer's hypnotherapist also uses calming music and a metronome to bring her into a guided meditation through a process she described as "very relaxing".

Similar to Denise and Jennifer, Sharon talked about the ways that technology has enabled her to connect to her spirituality in new ways. She shared that she often listens to "really positive, upbeat, enlightening podcasts and YouTube [videos]" that help with "raising [her] vibrations… putting out better energy into the universe and being open to receiving something better". She searches Solfeggio Frequencies on YouTube and pointed out the importance of sound in her spiritual practice:

> Different frequencies do different things to your body. Like one of them is for healing, one of them is for intuitiveness, one of them is for pain… And everything that I started

> to look into – the meditation, the frequencies, the podcasts, the inner source stuff – it's all about raising vibrations.

Sharon shared that a friend introduced her to Chakra work when her abusive relationship first ended. She said that her friend first did a reading for her using "angel cards" and that "things started to shift immediately". When asked about the process involved in aligning her chakras, Sharon explained: "we rubbed our hands together to create energy, then we kept our left hand out to keep receiving the energy… while we aligned our chakras. And [my friend] did a meditation the whole time." Sharon shared the sensory experience she felt:

> One time I was near my heart chakra… I put my hand closer, back and forth, so I'm passing energy that's coming through to me, into my body, into my heart chakra – and it was like all of a sudden, I couldn't push any closer to my chest because I could feel my heart chakra – like it was that strong.

Sharon also mentioned the importance of journaling to her spiritual practice as it allows her to be "mindful and present" with her emotions. She described the experience as sometimes painful: "it's just raw. It's just me and the paper and I just get to put it out there and feel it". Another important step she took in healing from her abusing relationship involved writing a timeline of the relationship. She explained:

> I did a timeline [of] the stuff that had happened – like the painful, terrible shit – and it was good. Like it was really good for me to see that. Because even in the in-between times – the good times – they weren't particularly good times. So, it was good for me to see like what is it about this relationship that I actually miss, right?

Sharon also added that she does readings on mindfulness, often stemming from Buddhist work. She shared that she has started journaling, which is sometimes "painful… because it's just me and the paper" but has allowed her additional perspective on herself. Carolyn also views journaling as an important part of her spiritual practice. She shared that she makes "gratitude lists" or reflects on her day. Carolyn also mentioned readings from her book of daily meditations as part of her spiritual practice. She also partakes in what she calls "an accountability group" where once a week her and a group of friends check in and hold each other accountable for maintaining their spiritual routines.

4.6 Working with Others – The Importance of Service

Ashley explained that she sponsored several women through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, which helps her connect to what she sees as "a bigger purpose" in her life and "a reason I wasn't beaten to death" in her abusive relationship. She got involved with other service work through Alcoholics Anonymous after getting out of inpatient treatment for her addiction. She noted that "you can't keep what you have without giving it away" and saw that helping others as essential to maintaining her spiritual connection.

Jennifer also mentioned the importance of the Alcoholics Anonymous program in her spirituality, and that she has completed the program's 12 steps numerous times. She explained, "the connection with other people and sharing spiritual experiences with people [is] a big practice for myself". She added, "I kind of consider my meetings like my church". Elaine also mentioned that "the 12 step are interwoven" into her spiritual practice, and she finds "some real wealth" in the various texts of Alcoholics Anonymous. Elaine explained that "the focus in AA on looking at your part in things" has been a useful tool for her to identify patterns in her own behaviors.

Carolyn shared that she is part of an accountability group, in which her and some friends help keep each other on track with maintaining their spiritual connections and being their best selves. She explained that the group checks in with each other once a week, which encourages her to "keep things in balance" in her life. She discussed the benefits of this group, explaining "I'll find I get busy and off track, but knowing I have this group – like during the week I'm like 'okay what am I forgetting', 'what do I need to be doing' – because I know I'll have to check in with them". Along with this group, Carolyn has attended twelve step groups including both Alcoholics Anonymous and Codependents Anonymous, which has allowed her to address her "desire for external validation" that she believes led her to seek out an abusive partner. She found value in a particular workbook called The Women's Way through the 12 Steps, and participated in a workshop going through author Melanie Beatty's book *Codependent No More* with a group of women.

Denise also does service work through Alcoholics Anonymous including sponsoring other women and helping them work through the program's 12 steps. She talked about the

benefits of sponsoring one young woman who had experienced similar struggles to hers: "It did so much for me because… I was able to go back and observe that time in my life, versus being in it and paralyzed by it". Denise credited working through "a couple sets" of the program's 12 steps an essential part of her spiritual journey. It allowed her to see patterns in her behaviors, particularly in intimate relationships:

> I get to have this community of people that care about me no matter what [and] call me on my bullshit, I get to do the steps, I get to look at myself, I get to find awareness, and acceptance, and be willing to do something about it. And I can find my own self-worth and my own self-confidence within me, right? With my spirit… You know, everything that I do in the program with the women that I sponsor… it just comes full circle.

Denise also volunteers through a program that "deals with domestic violence and partner safety". She said her higher power played a part in presenting this opportunity to her, as it has allowed her to work with women who have had head injuries similar to what she experienced. Through this foundation, she helped a women build a website for an education program for men in prison who were convicted of abusing their partners. She explained:

> It was cool to look at the other side of it, right? Like men are typically… the violators… and that's kind of the work she does – like to change that. And she does it even with early childhood education too… to define what's right and what's wrong, and what's acceptable or not. But to see this side of it… and to see where I can find my voice… it really got me thinking, like "what have I done for myself?" You know, I've done a lot. And I get to do that, right? Like, I get to live this life today because of the choices I made, but I didn't know why I was making those choices, right? So, I fully believe that my higher power put everything in my place. All that I needed to do was… open my eyes, open my ears, and open my heart.

Denise also volunteers weekly at a hospice and thrift store. She shared on the spiritual fulfillment she experiences doing service work:

> One gentleman last week – his wife passed away. You know, 45 years old. And him and [his] son brought in all of her clothes… You know, watching him kind of [revisit] those memories… I can imagine what was going through his mind – it's like, you know, he

> remembered seeing her wear that… So I think in that case it's like [feeling] everybody's higher power just meshing together as a bubble and just surrounding [us] with love and compassion.

Elaine explained that she has always had an interest in helping others. She said that she initially was drawn to social work as her trauma made her feel comfortable dealing with others in difficult life circumstances. She added "it's a great way to not look at your own problems, dealing with everybody else's problems". Elaine emphasized the spiritual value she finds in her work teaching yoga classes at a men's prison, "I have been in classes with people who are on trial for homicide, spousal abuse, all of it… and yet… you think it's such a dark place but I find moments of absolute grace and beauty there". She shared that although she was nervous before starting this job, she "just fell into teaching how [she] was taught, which is with love", because for her "yoga is love". Focusing on helping others allowed Elaine to get out of her own head, which she said is particular useful on days she's experiencing high anxiety. For her, the value in helping others is more about the process than the results:

> You don't always know what the end result is going to be and you have to be comfortable [with] that – like when they were building those big huge old churches that would take a hundred years to build… the person who laid the foundation wouldn't live to see it built, right? You just have to think of it that way, I guess.

4.7 Loss of Connection to Self and Spirituality

Virtually all of the participants described feeling as though they had "lost themselves" during their abusive relationships, and that "finding themselves" again was a key part of the healing process. Erica stated that "there is nothing that took away who I was as a human being the way an abusive relationship did". She explained that as a result of the abuse she experienced, she had "zero self-esteem" and sharing her experience with other women who have endured similar struggles has allowed her to rebuild her sense of self. Carolyn reiterated the idea of poor self-esteem:

> Looking back now I always had these feelings of low self-worth and insecurity, and I think that's kind of what led me into being in this relationship in the first place… I got into a relationship with this man and over the course of like eight months he just turned into a nightmare of a person… just fully narcissistic… He basically just broke me down… and in the end I was just a complete shell of who I was in the beginning.

Carolyn explained that part of her journey was learning to see herself as valuable and worthy. She shared that in the past she would become "obsessed" about a partner choosing her, rather than seeing herself as worthy of being the selective one. She explained "I would change myself a million times over for them to choose me. Whereas now I'm like 'no I'm choosing them', and I'm in touch with that part of myself".

Carolyn grew up with spirituality in her family and noted that before entering her first abusive relationship yoga and meditation were important to her, but that she "completely self-abandoned" in her abusive relationship and lost touch with her spirituality. She shared that after leaving her abusive partner, her drinking became increasingly problematic as she was using it "to cope with the feelings of low self-worth and the trauma" she had experienced. She further explained:

> Initially I turned to alcohol to cope… and over time that developed into an addiction… I just felt so spiritually, physically, and mentally bankrupt that I eventually sought out help and went [to treatment]. So that was kind of my first experience reconnecting with my spirituality.

Carolyn's time in treatment helped her learn to trust herself again and become more in touch with her intuition. Through participating in Codependents Anonymous, she was able to identify behaviors including "people-pleasing" and "care-taking" that led to her being in an abusive relationship in which she was concerned only with the wants and needs of her partner. Carolyn conveyed that she sees her old self as someone vulnerable to abuse:

> … being insecure and having low self-worth, when somebody like that comes along and they're giving you that validation, you're just like 'okay I'm in – this person loves me'. And you just abandon everything because you think that they love you that much, and then over time it's like… they end up depleting you even more than when you came in.

For Carolyn, healing from an abusive relationship allowed her to develop confidence in her worth and intuition. She explained "I don't know if I would be who I am today if it wasn't for that relationship, [since] it's allowed me to see who I want to bring into my life and who I don't". She shared that she was able to use her spiritual connection and newfound sense of self to avoid falling into subsequent unhealthy relationships. She explained:

> I went to treatment and [then] got into a relationship… and he started exhibiting the same behaviors as my [abusive] ex. And because of my spirituality and AA and my connection to my higher power, I feel like I was able to see those things and address them. And although I did stay longer than I probably should have… I did walk away. And it was super empowering and I believe that was my higher power showing me that I can do this and that I have the confidence to stay true to myself.

Like Carolyn, Elaine recalled feeling "lost" in her young life, sharing "I had no self-esteem [and] I didn't know how I'd make it in the world". She did not have a clear conception of a higher power initially. She recalled praying as a child, explaining that she has always been "a seeker". When asked about what made her decide to leave her abusive relationship, she said:

> Well, I knew all along that this was not the right person for me. But I was young and I had a baby so I thought "okay I've got to try here". [But] I think I just… I just knew… Because I grew up, I had no self-esteem, I didn't think I was worth anything, and something in me went "no I don't deserve this. This is not okay. I'm worth it".

For several years after leaving the relationship, Elaine avoided dealing with the trauma she had experienced. She explained "I shoved it all down to my big toe for about 15 years… I just pushed right through… I didn't tell anybody, I didn't talk to anybody, I didn't get any help". She explained that initially she struggled with guilt, stating "a part of me still thought that I provoked him that night [that she feared for her life] somehow – that I must have let his friend flirt with me or I must have done something".

Jennifer also struggled with feelings of guilt and shame around her abusive relationship, particularly due to her Catholic upbringing:

> During the period of my life when I was in abusive relationships and… even all the sexual abuse I went through with people I wasn't necessarily in a relationship with… a huge

> reason that I stayed or you know, didn't tell anybody or didn't get help or anything like that was that I viewed it as a sin, and that if people knew that about me… I would have to confront that sin, right? And I would be rejected – rejected by my family or [community].

She added, "I had a lot of shame and guilt around all these things that I had done and these situations that I had deemed that I'd created for myself". Jennifer also described feelings of low self-esteem growing up. She explained "I had a huge fear of not having my place, not being wanted… Like my mom left when I was a child, which really just [brought up] all those abandonment [issues]". At around age 16, she began "rebelling from the church" She shared:

> That was around the first time that I was raped and I just had started going through all this shit with my addiction and everything. And so growing up so religious, I think it just made sense that I blamed God for those things… because he was the one in my life who was supposed to be the almighty, right? So when things started going bad for me… that's when I started rebelling against God.

She learned through her religious upbringing that "if you don't do what you're supposed to do then you are punished" played a part in her blaming herself for the trauma she experienced. She further explained:

> I started hating God. I started blaming him for the things that were happening in my life… I definitely used the God card in like making it my fault… like I wasn't behaving to the best of my ability – I was drinking, I was using [drugs], I wasn't working… and so I deserved to be punished, right? I deserved to be abused, I deserved to be hit, I deserved to be called these names, because they were true. And I think a large part of that for me stemmed from my religious upbringing, in that when you don't behave a certain way you are punished. And I just saw that [abuse] as my punishment – that this is just God punishing me.

Jennifer came to believe that she sought out abusive relationships a way for her to be punished for using drugs:

> I sought [abuse] out because I needed to be punished… I had to be punished for the shit I was doing – like that's what made it okay for me to keep doing it, if that makes sense. In

> order for me to keep drinking and doing drugs and behaving stupidly or messing up my life, I had to be punished. Because if I wasn't then I couldn't do it anymore. It was like this weird fucked up thought that I had that made abusive shit okay.

Sharon also felt that the trauma she experienced in her relationship with her family of origin influenced her to choose unhealthy partners:

> In that [abusive] relationship I was recreating family of origin stuff. And now that relationship that I was looking for with my mother – who was abusive, who I found in a partner – is gone…. I've been looking for my mother to fix the relationship that I had with her when I was a kid, and it's over… So [now] I'm grieving the loss of the relationship [and] I'm grieving the loss of the relationship with my mother that now I'll never fix.

She added, "I stayed in this relationship with this abusive person who turned out to be abusive just like my mother – I stayed in this relationship because I had to fix this relationship. I had to fix it. I was compelled to stay".

The gaslighting Sharon experienced in her abusive relationship made her question herself, which led to her to keep the abuse a secret. She recalled the first incident of abuse:

> We went on a holiday and the first thing that happened that I knew there was something wrong – I got a little shove and I got knocked off my feet. And I said "uh you pushed me and you knocked me over". And she said "no I didn't". And I said "ya you did". And she said "well no, I just grabbed your arm" … And I knew if I talked about it anymore at that moment, things were really going to escalate… the reaction was way disproportionate to the incident, right? And instantly I'm confused, - and I'm a very rational individual – I've been sober for a very long time, I know what just happened, but now I'm being told explicitly by the person who did it "you're wrong".

Sharon's abuse led her to withdraw from her friends to avoid drawing attention to what she was experiencing. She explained that "nobody who knows me would even recognize me… I got so lost in there. I stopped talking to my friends, I didn't talk to my sponsor for almost a year… I kept hiding this relationship, hiding my pain". Sharon expressed that she felt shocked that she found herself in that type of dynamic, "I'm the friend that watches other girlfriends go through that and I'm like 'what are you doing?' And here I was… I just couldn't believe it". Sharon

recalled that her abusive partner made her believe she was "the most cruel person on the planet [and] nobody else would put up with [her]". She credits her higher power with ending the relationship, which occurred when her partner began seeing a new person. She admitted she would never would have left on her own.

Sharon described developing self-awareness after her last abusive relationship ended:

> For years people were trying to tell me. I remember when the shoe dropped. I was sitting outside – I had just finished meditating – and I went "oh my god, this is what I'm doing". And I phoned someone and… I kind of said "do you know what I've been doing?" And she just kind of started laughing at me. And I'm like "you knew this?" And she's like "ya I've been trying to tell you – like, this is it". And I'm like "oh my god". I'm the only one who didn't know this was my pattern.

The pain she experienced during the breakup led Sharon to pursue professional counselling. She discussed the benefits, including learning about concepts such as "trauma bonding" and "mother hunger", which allowed her to work through issues stemming from her family of origin. Sharon shared that she is still struggling with the breakup, and often feels lonely or that she misses her partner. But she explained that she is able to reframe those thoughts and learn to sit with the uncomfortable emotions, without having to act on them. She avoids reaching out to her partner, as she knows that the abuse pattern would inevitably continue. Sharon shared the way in which learning to love herself helps her make these decisions. She explained: "Every time I think about sending a text or a message, just to say 'hi how are you', and I don't do it – every time I don't do it, I'm picking me. And so, I have to remember that, like 'choose you'".

In Alice's case, she believes her spirituality actually kept her in denial about the psychological abuse she was experiencing in her relationship. She explained that her partner was not physically abusive, but became very controlling and jealous. She shared that initially she felt flattered by this behavior. Additionally, she explained that her spirituality delayed her "waking up" to the reality of how unhealthy the situation was since her spiritual lifestyle made her believe she had a healthy sense of self. Alice described the abuse as "a long slow drip" that initially went undetected, since her and her partner did not live together for the first few years of the relationship. She explained, "looking back, my instinct was 'this isn't going to work'. In

some ways I wish we had moved in [sooner] because the whole thing would have collapsed a lot sooner". After 15 years of what she described as "living apart together" her partner sold his house and moved in with her. At this point, Alice explained "it just absolutely blew up [and] was just unworkable once I was actually with him all the time". She explained the pressure she felt at the time:

> I was feeling so stuck because he'd sold his house [and] moved in. We'd combined our lives after all these years. It just felt like so much was riding on it. I'd had a difficult breakup with [her former partner]. I didn't think I could ever handle another breakup. It was fear – you know, I just didn't think I could emotionally do it.

Alice explained that a dream gave her the final message that she needed to put an end to the relationship. However, like the other participants, she described having "a crisis of faith" in herself as a result of the experience. She shared: "I had a really hard time. I was really angry and I was really, really disappointed in myself. I really felt like I'd let myself down… because I'd always thought that I would never put up with [abuse]."

Coming out of the abusive relationship gave Alice a chance to learn about herself, her values, and what boundaries she needs in relationships. She explained that in retrospect she was able to see warning signs that existed early on in the relationship and to take a look at why she may have avoided acknowledging those signs. Like Sharon, Alice realized that she could not maintain contact with her ex for her own well-being. In the first two years after the breakup, her and her partner maintained communication. However, she shared that "it went badly every time [and] afterwards it would take a week or two to kind of recover from any contact with him". Eventually she decided that having no contact was a key boundary to maintain for her recovery.

Denise also described how her abusive relationship highlighted the disparity in the image she projected of herself to the outside world compared to how she felt about herself deep down:

> I had a wonderful career, an amazing career – I excelled in that. I was a strong team leader. I was a worldwide technical marketing manager managing hundreds of people. I'd

> stand up and deliver training to 500 people, no problem. But at home with [my relationship] I had no self-confidence. I had no self-worth.

Erica had a similar experience, as the role of a victim seemed incongruent with the image her loved one's had of her. She shared:

> The saddest thing that had happened was [when] my step mom had told my dad [about the abuse] … My dad has a lot of denial and delusion around it, and he said to my step mom… "do you know who my daughter is? Like there is no way she would ever let somebody do that to her". Because I mean, I came home – so many times – [in] handcuffs. I'd call my dad and tell him I'd just beat somebody up… so he couldn't imagine that would happen to me. And so, when I heard that I was like "well I can't go back" – like I didn't want to let down my dad because I'd already let myself down.

Erica described the way in which experiencing intimate partner abuse led to a loss of self, "It's like nothing else I've ever experienced in my life. I've been in lots of fights or whatever… but there's nothing that took away who I was as a human being the way an abusive relationship did".

Like Jennifer, Denise's substance abuse was tied in to her abusive relationship. She said that her abusive partner was her drug dealer, which allowed him an added layer of control over her. She added: "I was controlled not only by the violence, but by the substance". Denise described the ways in which experiencing trauma and abuse destroyed her sense of self: "the [lack of] self-worth, the self-hatred – all of those things that I had in those relationships – that's the identity that I took on, was that victim".

Denise described going to treatment to get sober as "an escape" from her life. Getting involved in a twelve step recovery program allowed Denise the chance to identify patterns and underlying motives in her behaviors around romantic relationships. She explained:

> I see where I try and fill that void, right? So even though I can be strong and independent and courageous in certain aspects of my life, when it comes to relationships with men, I'm learning [that] I seem to pick the ones that… aren't good for me. But the cool thing is that I get to have this community of people that care about me no matter what [and] call me on my bullshit. I get to do the steps [of AA], I get to look at myself, I get to find awareness

and acceptance and be willing to do something about it. Andi can find my own self-worth and my own self-confidence within me.

For Denise, it was not until getting sober that she truly learned to "sit with" herself. She shared that at age 45 "it was the first time I had moved into a place by myself in my entire life. I'd always had roommates, I had a fiancé from 17-22… and then I was married for 25 years, right? So, I didn't know who I was".

4.8 Coping with Lasting Impact of Trauma

While the amount of time that has passed since the end of their abusive relationships varied across participants, each described still having to cope with the lasting impacts of the trauma. Elaine shared that she was brought to tears in a recent yoga practice. She credits this to the fact that she is "starting to grieve" after going many years without crying. Denise shared that she still suffers from PTSD related to the trauma she experienced in her addiction and her abusive relationship. She said, "I had a lot of PTSD triggers that came up at Canada day with fireworks. It brought me back to a shooting and then it was just kind of like this video of every violent thing that happened." Upon the advice of a therapist, Denise made lists of the triggers and the memories associated when they come up and, as she explained, "if I write it down or I talk about it, it takes the power away".

Carolyn described that partaking in individual therapy and working the programs of both Alcoholics Anonymous and Codependents Anonymous have been essential in her healing. She explained that therapy has provided support around "dealing with my inner child [and] those insecurities and core beliefs about myself that I've had for along long time". Carolyn shared that there are still things that trigger her, particularly in romantic relationships, however she stated, "now I can see them as opportunities for growth".

Jennifer explained that she still struggles with the impact on her abuse in her current relationship. While her current partner is healthy, she shared "there's parts of me that are like 'why are you not abusive?' or 'I don't understand how this dynamic works'… which ultimately just comes down to my fears and my survival mechanisms and stuff, right?". Jennifer's self-

awareness allows her to notice when she is defaulting to unhealthy behaviors. She explained "I notice myself like sometimes I'll almost push him to the point where I want him to abuse me, you know? Because – I don't know – there's just something sick in my fucking head that is like 'it's not real unless [there's abuse] or you don't care enough unless you're doing these things". Jennifer's current partner has experienced intimate partner abuse in the past. She also mentioned, "it's easy to decipher when we're leaning into that and when we're not and it's nice to be able to talk about it while we're in a relationship".

For Erica, a tattoo that her abusive partner made her get serves as a reminder of the challenges she came through. She described sometimes wanting to get the tattoo removed, while at other times embracing it as a symbol of her strength:

> Every single time I am naked in front of a mirror I am reminded of him. For the rest of my life. And I could go and get it removed but I don't want to spend the money to be honest… I would rather have it there and it be a reminder of what I never want to do [and] also where I come from… Like I would never get 'powerful' or something like that tattooed on me…. I don't like to name myself as a 'domestic abuse survivor' or anything like that… But [the tattoo] is just one of those things that I have that reminds me [of my story].

Erica described the lasting psychological damage that IPA has had on her:

> I'm terrified to go do trauma therapy. I was diagnosed with complex PTSD, so to be honest I'm terrified… There's so many things I don't remember from my life or from being beaten unconscious… [and] I'm just so scared to remember. And the longer I've stayed sober, the more things already come up… and they're devastating blows to deal with every time, so I've always been really scared to work on a lot of things trauma-based.

Erica talked of being aware that there is still some healing to do and that she could probably benefit from trauma therapy. She shared "my friends are great, the twelve steps are great, and god is great. But it's sometimes just not enough… for me it won't be enough". However, she explained "the fear [of revisiting trauma] is almost as big as my faith in that sense".

Rebecca shared that she was diagnosed with PTSD not long after leaving her abusive relationship after experiencing panic attacks, nightmares, and sleepwalking. While professional

counselling helped somewhat with these symptoms, the impact of the trauma Rebecca experienced is still part of her life today:

> I guess I had an initial negative experience [with therapy] because I was under the impression that I would get treatment for PTSD and then it would be gone – like I wouldn't have to deal with it. So, I felt so disappointed going to see a therapist and then after months of making progress I finally asked, "so when does it go away? When do I never have a panic attack again and never have a nightmare or sleep walk?" And she's like "well you're building the tools". So, I don't have those things anymore but it never really like goes away… So, I felt super disappointed and then I stopped seeing her…

4.9 Forgiveness

When the interview with Sharon took place, it had been only about seven months since her abusive relationship had ended. Since the hurt was quite recent, she was not at a place of forgiveness and acceptance yet, "I haven't gotten to that place yet out of this relationship where I'm really glad for everything that has happened and I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. Because cognitively I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. But my heart is still fucking aching".

For Elaine the question of whether to forgive her abusive ex-partner was complicated by the fact that they share a son together. She explained that her partner remarried soon after their divorce and add more children. Him and his new wife took Elaine to court to request visitation rights for the son they shared. Elaine initially believed that that her ex seemed to be "doing really well" with his new family and that it was important for her son to know his half-siblings, so she decided to allow her son to spend time with his father's new family. However, things took a turn when her son came home from a weekend visiting them with bruises. She took her ex-partner back to court, which brought up the trauma and pain from her past. Elaine explained that at the time she avoided dealing with these feelings and self-medicated with alcohol. However, several years later the trauma came to the surface:

> When my daughter was about five, I was a social worker working full time, I had a teenager who was starting to show his trauma… and that's when I fell apart. And that's when I met therapy… and I got put on a shitload of drugs – which was insane. Some of them maybe were warranted but not to the point that that happened. But that's what happens when you get put into the psychiatric system… So, I've been unwinding from that for a long time.

Elaine's work teaching yoga in a men's prison has been important in her journey toward forgiveness. She told a story about an encounter during a yoga workshop that she had with another woman who had experienced IPA. The other woman was triggered by Elaine's work, as she felt that the violent men in the prison were "horrible people" and did not deserve to partake in yoga classes. Elaine explained, "For me it's kind of like 'well we're all here. We're all stuck on this planet together. And we've got to find a way to heal".

Rebecca described conflicting feelings about the impact the abuse she experienced had on her life:

> I guess in one way I do appreciate what I've been through and what it taught me… but at times I look back and I'm embarrassed and I wish I never went through what I did and I hate it. But at the same time when I really evaluate it and look at where I am today… it sounds like so gross to say "I'm so grateful" [for the experience] because nobody's grateful if you're physically or verbally abused. But I'm grateful that everything brought me here, I guess.

She added, "I'm not happy about what I went through… but the things I have today, the way my [current] partner treats me, the way I don't put up with people disrespecting me or speaking to me in ways that demeans me anymore… in a way I think I have those things because I had to go through what I did". For Rebecca, working the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous provided some help in letting go of some of the resentment she held toward her ex-partner. She explained:

> I kept feeling like [the resentment] was coming up over and over and over… like I just felt hateful. And I just couldn't get over it. Like I felt angry and I would just wake up thinking "I hope that I find out he'd die today" – like it was horrible feeling like that.

She shared that writing a letter to her abusive ex that she knew she would not actually send to him was a helpful process in working through her hurt and anger:

> In that letter I put down everything I was mad about… like I said "I hate you sometimes", "I hate you for this", "I wish that you never did this to me and sometimes I feel like you ruined my life". But in doing that I was also able to address like "I wish I had never hurt you in this way", "I wish I never said the things that I did", "I wish I never hit you back"…. So, I kind of got to do this back and forth conversation with myself.

After writing the letter Rebecca did a sort of ritual, where she read the letter to a close friend and then burned it. For Rebecca this process of a 'written amends' as described in Alcoholics Anonymous helped her to get to a place where she felt like "by doing that I actually got over it".

For Erica, forgiving her abusive ex-partner seems both impossible and potentially dangerous. She explained that healing from the trauma of intimate partner abuse has been "the one thing [she] struggled with the most" adding that "it's actually been easier for me to not drink and do drugs" than it has been to fully recover from the abuse she experienced. While she has not had contact with her ex-partner in several years, she still has "really sick behaviors around it". She provided an example:

> Like I'm going home to visit my family in Calgary and I made a fake Instagram account to follow him – because he's obviously blocked on all of mine – to make sure he's not in Calgary and he's still out east. Because… I'm still so scared.

She added, "I fucking hate him. Like there's no tomorrow I hate him… I mean, I will never fucking forgive him. I won't even pray to remove my resentment [toward] him… I enjoy being angry about it and I feel like it keeps me safe". When asked to explain how the anger keeps her safe, Erica shared:

> I just feel like I'm scared to go to a place where its full forgiveness and understanding [toward him]… There's just part of me that never wants to see him as a human again. And so, if I just kind of remember all the bad things and stay angry, I have a hard time seeing him as a human… I know it's not healthy – like my life coach is like "you know, you really need to work on that and let that go and you'll move on" and like I – I just don't want to. Like, I no longer wish bad things upon his ex-partner or child – which I really did for the

first little while – but I mean I would be so fucking stoked if I heard he was dead. And I know that's evil, but… like I'm terrified of this man.

4.10 The Sickness Framework and Abuse Cycle

Several of the participants described learning about the abuse cycle and understanding themselves and their abusers as unhealthy as part of their healing process. Denise described the pattern of "aggressiveness, the blow-up, the ramifications of that" and "that cycle where he'd either fall asleep or he'd leave – something would happen and there was quiet". In reference to her abusive ex-partner, she explained "he has his own addictions and his own problems and he's going to have to deal with that on his own – it's not for me to fix". For Denise, her partner's threats to hurt himself kept her in the abuse cycle for some time. She shared an incident in which "he sat in front of me with a loaded shotgun in his mouth and told me it was going to be my fault if he pulled the trigger".

Elaine also referred to the "pattern" where her partner would "lose control [then] probably hate [himself]". Like Denise, Elaine felt fearful in trying to leave the relationship as she worried her partner would try to kill himself. She explained the efforts her partner took to ensure she wouldn't leave:

> He didn't want me to leave… but it wasn't because he loved me or was having loving feelings for me. But he did want me back… There was that- you know – "I love you more than anything"… There was all that that went back and forth for a few months. He went to counselling even.

Carolyn described a similar cycle of abuse to the others. She shared:

> He basically love-bombed me in the beginning like they do, promised me the world, and we moved in together like right away… and slowly over time, he just started gaslighting and manipulating me and I was ignoring my intuition, just trying to prove to him that I wasn't the person he was saying I was. And I just got fully sucked into this toxic, abusive relationship.

Reading about narcissism and healing from being victimized by a narcissistic individual gave Carolyn perspective that helped in her recovery. She also came to understand herself as suffering from codependency and began to work on healing her "inner child".

Alice described a similar pattern to the "love-bombing" described by Carolyn. Describing her abusive relationship, she said: "He was controlling and very intensely jealous. Which – since I'd had no dating experience really – I was really quite flattered at first by the jealousy, because it was like 'wow I must really be something to be jealous over'". She added that her partner's jealousy stirred jealousy within her as well, creating "a sick and twisted" dynamic between the two of them. Part of her recovery process involved learning about the cycle of abusive relationships. Alice shared that she began reading about emotional abuse and gaslighting which helped her understand the ways in which she had been manipulated. She shared:

> I did quite a bit of reading [about gaslighting] and that was like "oh my god"… all the signs and symptoms and the way that it can leave a person feeling - there I was… And that was helpful to see that I had actually been, you know, entrapped… by myself and by my partner.

Erica shared that her drug addiction was heavily tied to her relationship and her abusive partner, making it increasingly difficult to end the relationship for good. She said, "I ended up on the other side of the country from my family with this crazy abusive human… and I'd gone back to him. Like we had broken up and I had gone back to him several times". She added that while she has not forgiven her ex-partner, her own recovery around mental health and addiction has given her a new lens by which to view his behavior toward her. She explained, "I did learn and I believe that he is really really sick. Like he is probably the sickest human I've ever met in my life… so there's a part of me that can understand that like… there's something seriously wrong". Rebecca shared a similar view, stating that "it's easier to look back on it and see it as two really sick people going through something bad together".

For Sharon, looking at her relationship with her abusive ex-partner in the same lens as her relationship to the substances she was addicted to in the past was useful. She explained "that relationship that I was in… that was my drug of choice". She added:

> I don't think I miss the relationship. It's a lot like when I got sober. It's not that I wanted the alcohol or the drugs – I just didn't want to feel the way I was feeling anymore. So when I am feeling lonely or sad or you know, thinking about how we used to do this and we used to do that… I'm not missing the relationship. I just don't want to feel the way that I'm feeling right now. So, I feel like if I had that relationship [back] I wouldn't feel this way anymore. And then I think "but ya remember how you felt when you were in it".

Sharon also was manipulated into staying in the relationship as her partner would threaten suicide when she tried to leave. She explained, "immediately when we would start fighting, I would say 'I don't think I want to do this anymore, like there's something not right here. This isn't working'. And she would say 'fine well I might as well just kill myself'". She continued, "she'd say 'you're never going to see me again, this is it… I might as well just drive myself off the road and into a telephone pole'". She shared on the time she finally reached out for help:

> I reached out to somebody who was also a healthcare professional, who know my partner, and I said "hi my name is Sharon and I'm an emotional hostage". And I knew I was immediately. But I didn't have it in me to leave… I was compelled to stay – and also knowing, what if she goes and kills herself? I couldn't live with myself, right?

For Sharon the abuse cycle continued even after she was finally able to break up with her partner for good and her partner had entered a new relationship. She explained:

> After it was all done… it didn't stop. The text messages didn't stop, the emails didn't stop, the phone calls didn't stop. Even though I asked repeatedly. And it was always the same, you know. I would get slammed with text messages and I would reply, and I'd get another that said "stop contacting me". And I'm like "huh".

Like several of the other participants, she described learning about abuse and identifying with it. She explained:

> I saw this thing on TikTok… it was about gaslighting. And it was about this woman sitting in the passenger seat of this car screaming 'I don't want to be here anymore'… and the driver – her boyfriend – cool as anything, like videotaping her like she is the crazy one, right? And I think it's some kind of reverse [victimization] or something… so they make you look like you're nuts.

It was also suggested to Sharon by several peers who knew of her experience that her ex-partner may have had borderline personality disorder. She shared “I started to research that a little bit and the shoe fit beautifully. And so, I started to read about being the ex-partner of someone who is borderline, and everything that had happened made perfect sense”.

Jennifer shared that she struggled to change her behaviors and learn to stop repeating patterns in her relationships. Early in her sobriety she got into another relationship that ended up being unhealthy. She described:

> We definitely got together from our traumas, right? We trauma-bonded hard over all of our shit and then we did similar stuff on and off. Like first it was like he’d push me away and he’d shut me out and he wouldn’t talk to me and all this stuff. Then I would leave and he would chase me. Then I would come back and then he’d push me out and I would leave and he’d chase me. And we did that for almost two years and then… finally I was just like “I can’t do this this. I need to be on my own and figure out… why I keep going back”.

5. Discussion

For the women interviewed in this study, spirituality provided a framework for making sense of various traumas they had experienced in their lives. This finding aligns with what Starnino (2016) refers to as the process of "deliberate rumination" whereby survivors of traumatic events engage in deliberate reflection on their experiences to find a meaningful explanation for such experiences. Erica, for example shared that she has found a greater purpose in life by surviving her experience with IPA. She believes that she is meant to share her story to provide hope to other women in similar situations. Other participants, like Rebecca, expressed gratitude for the challenges they had gone through, as without these experiences they would not have the life they currently have.

A key element of recovery involved using spirituality to create new narratives to interpret their pasts and form, as Rivaux et el. (2008) put it, hopeful "new stories of who they could be and how their lives could be" (p.973). According to Rivaux et al. (2008), this process is part of the dynamics of recovering from IPA and substance abuse. The authors found that the women they interviewed emphasized the importance of reflecting on their addiction and abuse experiences, as these memories served as reminders of how far they have come and the life they don't want to return to. This notion of creating new narratives which can help make sense of past struggles being opportunities for growth was mentioned by several women in this study. For example, Carolyn shared that "as traumatic as [the abusive relationship] was – I learned so much from it and I learned a lot about myself and… I don't know if I would be who I am today if it wasn't for that relationship… It's allowed me to kind of see who I want to bring in to my life and who I don't and… allowed me to not make the same mistakes again". Like Carolyn, several participants used their sense of spirituality to come to a place of gratitude for the struggles they had endured.

The findings also reflect Park's (2005) Meaning-Making Model of Coping which suggests that spirituality can serve as a mechanism by which individuals can reappraise traumatic events in a more positive frame and create more acceptable reasons for why an event occurred. This can involve, for example, reinterpreting a traumatic event through a spiritual lens or seeing a

difficult experience as part of a higher plan. For example, Erica explained how "it really helps me just thinking I can only do so much and the rest isn't up to me; the rest is up to whatever the universe throws in my path". The other participants shared a similar perspective that things unfold the way they are meant to. This mindset allowed them to accept the trauma they experienced in their abusive relationships. In a number of cases, the women expressed a belief that the reason they were put through those challenges was to enable them to help others experiencing similar struggles. These ideas confirm findings from previous studies which suggest that individuals who reframe difficult experiences in a more positive light and maintain a sense of hope are also more successful in minimizing the negative mental and physical health outcomes of trauma (Kubanzky et al., 2001; Peres et al., 2007). These findings are consistent with those of Anderson et al.'s (2012) who reported that for women recovering from IPA, the notion of a higher power served as "a guiding force that saved their lives, helped them to prevail, and gave them strength to leave their abusive relationship" (p. 1290). The women in this study consistently described using spirituality as a tool for rebuilding their sense of self following their experiences with IPA. Several participants credited a higher power with helping them to survive the abuse and ultimately escape the situation.

Some of the women referred to particular events that served as catalysts for them to leave their abusers and not return to the relationship. For Rebecca, overdosing on drugs was the event that led her to admit to her family the struggles she was enduring with both the relationship and her addiction. She credited her higher power for giving her the courage to be honest and to accept help. Alice credited a dream she had with providing her the clarity and strength she needed to leave her abusive relationship. Elaine described having a spiritual experience during one particularly violent encounter with her ex-partner, explaining:

> I remember an incident… the really bad one where I thought he was going to kill me… and I got away. And I remember feeling – not feeling scared – feeling determined and strong. And I don't know where that came from. Because before in my life I was terrified of him to the point where I wouldn't even let him know my address, right? And I don't know… this strength came and… I can only attribute that strength to love, which again I relate to spirituality.

For Sharon, her abusive relationship created an opportunity for her to examine family-of-origin trauma that she had not addressed – specifically, abuse she suffered in her relationship with her mother.

Flasch et al. (2017) identify the following intrapersonal processes women engage in when recovering from IPA: a) regaining and recreating one's identity, b) embracing the freedom and power to direct one's own life, c) healing from mental and physical health outcomes of abuse, d) gaining acceptance and forgiveness toward self and abuser, e) education and examination of abusive relationships, f) determining whether and how to enter new relationships, and g) acknowledging the long-term process of overcoming abuse (Flasch et al., 2017). Several of these processes were also in evidence among the women who participated in this study. Carolyn described being a "shell" of herself following her abusive relationship, and noted that during the relationship she had abandoned spiritual aspects of her life that had been important to her, such as yoga and meditation. Carolyn identified building self-worth as an essential element of her recovery process after leaving the relationship. Virtually all the participants shared that they believe poor self-esteem played a part in them entering unhealthy relationships in the first place, and that the abuse then further depleted their sense of self. Jennifer explained that her substance use was an element in this cycle as well, as she felt deserving of abuse, believing that she should be punished for her drug use. Also, forming positive social bonds and being of service to others was a central theme across the interviews. Service work was mentioned by several participants as a key element of their sense of spirituality. For example, both Denise and Erica shared the sentiment often mentioned in 12 step programs, that the best way to maintain a spiritual connection is to be of service to others. Jennifer shared the importance of community in her recovery, explaining that "I kind of consider my [12 step] meetings my church", adding "the connection with other people and sharing spiritual experiences with people is a big practice for myself". Carolyn described participating in an "accountability group" consisting of other women who strive to grow on a spiritual basis and work toward being their best selves. Denise and Elaine both described volunteer work as a fulfilling and integral element of their spirituality, while Alice described her connection with other women in the Wicca community as beneficial.

In a study of women recovering from IPA, Anderson et al. (2012) found that personal competence, trust in one's instincts, and acceptance of change were negatively correlated with PTSD symptoms. Additionally, the items with the highest average scores for their sample included "I have at least one close and secure relationship which helps me when I am stressed" and "when there are no clear solutions to my problems, sometimes God can help". This highlights the connection between close interpersonal bonds and a sense of faith in aiding in recovery and minimizing negative lasting impacts of trauma. This connection was reported by several participants. Jennifer shared that "the connection with other people and sharing spiritual experiences with people is a big practice for myself". Denise explained finding value in participating in Alcoholics Anonymous: "I get to have this community of people that care about me no matter what [and] call me on my bullshit, I get to do the steps, I get to look at myself, I get to find awareness, and acceptance, and be willing to do something about it". These findings are also consistent with other studies that identify connecting with other survivors of IPA abuse as essential in the healing process (Grillo et al., 2019).

The interplay between substance addiction and IPA came up in several of the interviews thus reinforcing findings from previous studies that found the association between substance abuse and intimate partner abuse to be bi-directional (Holleran Steiker, 2009; Kilpatrick et al., 1997; Widom & Hiller-Strumhofel, 2001; Young & Boyd, 2000). Denise, Erica, and Rebecca all shared that their ex-partners were suffering from their own addictions, which played a role in the relationship dynamics. Denise said, "I was controlled not only by the violence, but by the substance" as her abusive ex-partner was also her drug dealer. Some of the participants believed that their substance use led to poor self-esteem which then made them more vulnerable to abuse, while others explained that being with an abusive partner – often who was experiencing their own addictions – allowed their addiction to escalate. Jennifer shared that her Catholic upbringing compounded with her being victim to sexual abuse and abusing substances fostered a belief that she deserved to be mistreated by her partners. She shared that when she was sexually abused as a teenager, she blamed herself, viewing the abuse as a consequence of her "sins" such as "dressing provocatively" or "acting unladylike". The self-blame exemplified in Jennifer's story echoed results from Rivaux et al. (2008) who reported that women who have

experienced both substance abuse and IPA struggle with seeing themselves as "damaged goods". An essential element of Jennifer's recovery involved developing a new conception of her higher power, as one that is loving and forgiving, rather than punishing.

Another theme that emerged reflected findings from Rivaux et al. (2008) around the idea that both addiction and unhealthy relationships often force women to give up parts of their selves including their safety, careers, goals, or other relationships. Therefore, "the recovery process involves not only identifying parts of the self that had been traded in exchange for drugs and intimacy, but also beginning to recover these parts" (Rivaux et al., 2008, p. 967). All the women interviewed described feeling as though they had lost themselves through their experiences with abusive relationships and that spirituality has played an essential role in the process of trying to recover their relationships with themselves. Erica explained, "there's nothing that took away who I was as a human being the way an abusive relationship did". Carolyn shared that although she had a sense of spirituality prior to entering the abusive relationship, the relationship led her away from this as she "completely self-abandoned", neglecting the beliefs and practices that had once been an important part of her identity. She shared that seeking out treatment for her drug and alcohol addiction enabled her to begin the process of reconnecting with her sense of self, her spirituality, and her intuition. Sharon also described how her abusive relationship pushed her to withdraw from important parts of herself including her relationships with her friends and her connection to her sponsor in Alcoholics Anonymous. She explained that honoring herself is something she keeps in mind when she feels tempted to reach out to her ex-partner. As she put it, "I'm picking me… and so I have to remember that".

For her part, Sharon was able to see parallels between her substance use and the abuse cycle. She described coping with the loneliness and discomfort after leaving the relationship as similar to how she felt when she got sober. This aligns with the conclusions from Rivaux et al. (2008) that often substance use and unhealthy relationships serve similar purposes – particularly for women who have experienced past abuse or trauma – as they initially help to manage feelings of loneliness, grief, or insecurity. For the women interviewed, strengthening

their spiritual connection and partaking in communities based on spiritual beliefs became an alternative method for coping with these negative emotions.

Flasch et al. (2017) also found that for many women, gaining knowledge on the abuse cycle was an important step in making sense of their experiences and alleviating self-blame. This was true for the women in this study as well. Several women discussed learning to understand their ex-partners as mentally or spiritually unwell. All of the participants described patterns in the abuse they experienced from frameworks that seemed to account for the perspectives of the abuser. Several participants depicted the insidiousness of the abuse cycle, describing the ways in which their ex-partners initially established a dynamic that led them to let their guards down. Alice and Carolyn both shared that initially the jealousy and control their partners demonstrated came across as flattering, but later became suffocating. Several of the women shared that learning about psychological concepts such as gaslighting, narcissism, trauma-bonding, or borderline personality disorder helped them to view their ex-partners as "sick", thus diminishing the amount of power they held. Rebecca explained, "it's easier to look back on it and see it as two really sick people going through something together". Carolyn shared that realizing that she suffers from codependency and engaging in therapy to work through this was important in her recovery. Sharon described learning about concepts such as "trauma bonding" and "mother hunger" when she sought out professional counseling after her abusive relationship ended. She shared that gaining self-awareness around her patterns has allowed her to heal from the pain of what she experienced. This also aligns with findings from Grillo et al. (2019) who reported that acquiring knowledge around IPA can serve as a protective measure to prevent further abuse.

For several of the women interviewed, physical and psychological problems stemming from their experiences with IPA still occasionally occurred despite the fact that some time has passed since leaving the relationship. This reflects the notion that resilience is multidimensional and ongoing and can present differently in various arenas of an individual's life (Howell et al., 2017). Therefore, a person may excel or experience little to no negative impacts of trauma in one area, but may face challenges in another. Denise highlighted this, sharing:

> I had a wonderful career, an amazing career – I excelled in that. I was a strong team leader. I was a worldwide technical marketing manager managing hundreds of people. I'd stand up and deliver training to 500 people, no problem. But at home with [my relationship] I had no self-confidence. I had no self-worth.

Erica shared that despite having several years of recovery from both her substance addiction and her abusive relationship, she continues to avoid any kind of trauma therapy, for fear that it will trigger symptoms of her PTSD. She described an internal battle between knowing that she could benefit from this type of therapy and feeling fearful of opening up past wounds. She shared "my friends are great, the twelve steps are great, and god is great. But it's sometimes just not enough… for me it won't be enough". As she explained, "the fear [of revisiting trauma] is almost as big as my faith in that sense". Rebecca had hoped therapy would help her be rid of symptoms of PTSD including panic attacks, nightmares, and sleepwalking. She described feeling somewhat defeated after attending therapy for several months and learning that she may never fully be rid of these symptoms which she still experiences on occasion. The interviews demonstrated that recovery from IPA is often a lifelong journey, and that while one can build tools to help cope with the effects of trauma, it may not be possible to eliminate the effects altogether. This aligns with the idea that we should view "trauma survivors as simultaneously suffering and surviving, [suggesting] that both trauma recovery and the process of posttraumatic growth require the survivor to somehow access his or her resilient capacities" (Harvey, 2007, p. 15).

6. Conclusion

Intimate partner abuse sadly remains common with one third of women globally estimated to experience this form of trauma at some point in their lifetime (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). This experience has detrimental social, psychological, and physical effects, as women who have experienced IPA are at risk of developing PTSD, depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideations, and are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2017). Additionally, experiencing IPA can have direct implications for one's worldview or sense of spirituality as it violates an individual's understanding of key concepts such as safety, trust, and love (Fowler & Rountree, 2009). Yet, despite the high prevalence of IPA and its horrendous impact, there remains a lack of information on the subjective experiences of women who recover from IPA and the role that spirituality plays in this process. To address this gap in knowledge, this study sought to explore the ways in which women who have experienced IPA conceptualize spirituality and the role this played in the process of recovering from the negative social and psychological outcomes of intimate partner abuse trauma.

The study examined the perspectives of eight women, seven of whom recovered from a substance abuse disorder. The women were asked to define what spirituality means to them, identify their personal spiritual beliefs and practices, and reflect on the ways in which their spirituality aided them in coping with the effects of intimate partner abuse. The findings are consistent with those from existing literature on resilience, trauma coping, and spirituality, as well as studies on the relationship between substance abuse and intimate partner abuse. Each participant identified spirituality as a tool that allowed them to regain a connection to themselves and find a greater purpose in the trauma they had experienced. As Park (2005) remarks, people often turn to spirituality as a meaning-making mechanism after experiencing some unexpected or unexplainable stressful event as it provides a framework in which one can view suffering as more explainable or bearable.

The findings also show that suggests a key element of trauma recovery involves creating more hopeful narratives for one's future, which aligns with Park's (2005) Meaning-Making Model of Coping. The participants in this study described how spirituality helped them see

themselves as strong and resilient. The women also credited some sort of higher power with providing them the strength and clarity needed to leave their abusive relationships. Several of the participants described using spiritual practices to reconnect with a sense of self that was lost in their abusive relationship or to form a new sense of identity altogether. As Flasch et al. (2017) noted, women recovering from IPA engage in processes of regaining or recreating one's identity and embracing the power to direct one's own life.

Several of the women also described seeking out information about narcissism, family of origin dynamics, and other psychological concepts that allowed them to reframe their abuser as "sick". Lastly, each woman interviewed described finding a sense of purpose and strength in sharing their experiences with others and being of service. For several of the participants, this service work centered around involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous, while others described involvement in volunteer work or spiritual groups. This aligns with previous literature which identified social supports as an essential element of trauma recovery and resilience (Anderson et al., 2012; Flasch et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2003; Grillo et al., 2019; Sternthal et al., 2010).

Recovering from experiences of IPA thus encompasses a multidimensional process of social, behavioral, spiritual, and psychological practices used to rebuild one's sense of self and understanding of the world (Allen & Wozniak, 2010). This study also offers insight into how women IPA survivors engage in a process of reflection where they attempt to find some deeper meaning or cause for their suffering. For them, spirituality became an essential contributor to resilience, as both an individual trait as well as an ongoing interactive process by which they regained physical and mental health and achieved personal growth after experiencing adversity (Fowler & Rountree, 2009; Manning, 2012). Spirituality offers these women a framework to make meaning of the struggles they've endured and cultivate a sense of hope for their future.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

Overall, this study contributes insight into the psychological and social benefits that spirituality has in the trauma recovery process. Along with restoring a sense of hope and self-confidence, spirituality provided a means by which survivors of IPA in this study enhanced their

well-being by learning to forgive themselves, the universe, and perhaps their abusers. This insight may be of interest to counselors and social service workers who provide support to women survivors of IPA. For women who have a spiritual orientation, the reframing of their experiences through a spiritual lens and the use spiritual practices may be very beneficial.

This study is limited in its applicability as it examines the experiences of a very small sample of women who have experienced intimate partner abuse. Additionally, there are several similarities among the demographics and life experiences of the women interviewed. All eight participants were raised in Canada and currently reside on Vancouver Island. Seven of the eight women were recruited from an online group of women recovering from substance abuse disorders. All seven identified twelve step recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous as an essential element of their spirituality. While these types of programs are not necessarily religious, 12 step programs stem from Christian faith-based models, emphasizing belief in a monotheistic God. Therefore, it is possible that individuals raised in other religious or cultural traditions may not be attracted to such programs. Conducting a larger scale study with participants from other geographic regions and a wider range of cultural or religious backgrounds could provide further insight into the potential spirituality has in helping women recover from trauma related to intimate partner abuse.

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Appendix A

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Information for Potential Participants

Spirituality and Resilience: Spirituality as a Means of Resilience for Women Recovering from Trauma Related to Intimate Partner Abuse

I (Samantha Nadal) am looking for women to participate in my research on **Spirituality as a Means for Resilience.** I am an MA student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. This research is being done as a requirement for completion of my degree.

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) is a specific type of trauma facing women that often has serious negative implications on our mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Spirituality can offer a promising tool in the process of trauma recovery. Through spirituality, women recovering from trauma can reestablish a feeling of meaning, purpose, and autonomy in our lives. While it is a promising resource, academic research on the potential benefits of spirituality is lacking. This project is intended to address this knowledge gap, to uncover the ways in which spirituality can positively influence resilience, helping women to recover from the long-term emotional and health effects of intimate partner violence.

I am looking for **volunteers to participate** in individual interviews for my thesis project for my Masters in Sociology degree at the University of Victoria. Participants who have experienced intimate partner abuse (IPA) in the past and identify spirituality as an integral part of their recovery process are invited to participate. Additionally, if any group member knows of another woman outside of the group who has relevant experience that they may be interested in sharing, I ask that they share my email address with this individual and ask them to contact me.

I am asking that participants contact me via email if they wish to participate. I will not approach any members individually. Participation is completely voluntary and group members are under no obligation to participate. The decision to participate or not will not affect an individual's relationship with me or with the group. Your decision to participate or not will also be kept private and will not be shared with other group members. You will have the option of rescinding your choice to participate at any point.

The interview process will ask you to share on your definition of spirituality, and to recall the way your sense of spirituality changed or developed in response to your experience with IPA. The details of your trauma will not be necessary, as the focus is on **spirituality and recovery.** The information you provide will be **confidential**, and your identity will remain **anonymous.**

Due to the circumstances of COVID-19, you will have the option of being interviewed over Skype or Zoom, with video or audio-only.

If you are interested in finding out more or participating in this study, please contact me by email or telephone. I appreciate you taking the time to consider this opportunity for sharing your experience.

Sincerely,

Samantha Nadal
Department of Sociology
University of Victoria

Appendix B

University of Victoria

Participant Consent Form

Spirituality and Resilience: Spirituality as a Means of Resilience for Women Recovering from Trauma Related to Intimate Partner Abuse

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Spirituality and Resilience that is being conducted by Samantha Nadal

Samantha Nadal is a graduate student completing a Masters in Sociology at the University of Victoria.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of **Andre Smith**.

Purpose and Objectives
The purpose of this research project is to explore the ways in which women who have experienced past trauma resulting from intimate partner abuse have used spirituality as a tool in their recovery. The project will examine the personal stories of women who credit their sense of spirituality as helping them recovery emotionally and/or make sense of their experience. The aim is to understand what the spiritual beliefs and practices for these individuals look like and how they are applied in their lives.

Importance of this Research
Research of this type is important because intimate partner abuse is an experience that affects a large number of women at different points in their lifetimes. The resulting trauma can lead to isolation and feelings of hopelessness. This project will develop an understanding of the tools that have helped real women find strength and resilience as they re-establish themselves outside of a traumatic situation.

Participants Selection
You are being asked to participate in this study because you have expressed a desire to share your experience with applying spiritual principles and practices in your recovery from intimate partner-related trauma.

What is involved
If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include completion of a one-on-one interview online, with the option of video-and-audio or audio-only. You will be asked to select the format you are most comfortable with, and to choose Skype or Zoom as the platform. You will be asked to choose a time for the interview that is most convenient for you as the participant. The duration of the interview is expected to be approximately one hour, however you as a participant can decide whether less or more time is desired. You will be asked to share your definition and understanding of spirituality and the practices you incorporate in your life. You will not be required to share details of the trauma you have experienced, as that is not the focus of the study. The interview will be a chance for you to share your experience and your story. With your consent the interview will be audio recorded, so that the researcher can accurately transcribe the information afterwards. The

audio recordings will not be shared with anyone outside the primary researcher. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the primary researcher (Samantha Nadal) will contact you via email asking if you would like to be sent a copy of the transcript to review. This is so that you may revise the data, in case you wish to alter or omit anything that has been said from being used in the study. This will ensure that you as the participant feel completely comfortable with what information will be used in the study.

Inconvenience
Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time required for the interview.

Risks
There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include emotional or psychological distress that may result from revisiting a difficult time in your life. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken:

1. You will be provided the interview questions a week ahead of the initial interview, so that you may make a conscious decision about what you wish to share or to exclude.
2. You will be offered time to debrief with the researcher after the interview if you wish to discuss any negative emotions that arise.
3. You will have the final say in what material is included. After reviewing the transcript with the researcher, you may choose to alter any information provided or exclude any statements entirely.
4. You will be provided a list of resources you can use should you experience any distress in the days or weeks following the interview, including free counseling and a 24-hour crisis hotline.

Benefits
The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contributing to knowledge about the potential for spirituality as a strong tool for hope and resilience. Your experience can provide hope and understanding, particularly for women who have had similar experiences.

Voluntary Participation
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 may still be used in with your permission, or will be omitted entirely and any electronic records of your data will be deleted.

Group members should not feel any pressure to participate and will not be approached individually. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the primary researcher (Samantha Nadal), with this group of Alcoholics Anonymous, or with Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. Your choice to participate or not will not be shared with any other group members.

On-going Consent
To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, you will be reminded throughout the process of your choice to withdraw from the study at any time. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any point before or after the interview. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any point, any data collected from you will be deleted.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, the only personal information that may be included in the final project may be your age and gender. Any other descriptives (i.e.: career, personal relationship status, etc.) will only be included should you choose to mention them during the interview and provide consent to include them in the final transcript. Your identity will only be known to the primary researcher (Samantha Nadal), however aliases will be used in storing the recordings and transcriptions of your information.

Confidentiality
Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected as only the primary researcher will have access to the audio recordings or the initial transcription of the first interview.

Dissemination of Results
It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, as part of Samantha Nadal's thesis project. The final thesis report may be available on the University of Victoria website. Again, aliases will be used in this report and no descriptive that may give away any participant's identity will be included.

Disposal of Data
Audio recordings and written transcriptions of interviews will be kept in a password-protected folder on the researcher's personal computer. These digital files will be disposed of upon completion of the project.

The Use of Zoom
For those who choose to be interviewed over Zoom, please note that Zoom servers are located outside of Canada and Zoom stores users' names and usage data outside in the U.S. As such, there is a possibility that information about you may be accessed without your knowledge or consent by the US government in compliance with the US Freedom Act.

To protect your identity and increase the protection of personal information you can choose to use a substitute name in Zoom instead of your actual name. You may also choose to turn off your camera and use audio-only for your interview.

Incentives
To thank you for taking the time to participate in this study, you will be given a $20 gift card to Starbucks. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any point you will be allowed to keep this gift as a gesture of appreciation.

Contacts
Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Samantha Nadal or supervisor Andre Smith (see contact information at top of form).

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

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 C

Interview Guide

1. How would you define spirituality?
2. What are your core personal spiritual beliefs?
3. What sorts of spiritual practices do you engage in (i.e.: prayer, meditation, religion)?
4. What role – if any – did spirituality play in your life before your experience with intimate partner abuse?
    a. If spirituality was not part of your life before, can you tell me about how your sense of spirituality developed?
    b. How did your spirituality change after experiencing IPA?
5. Aside from spirituality, what other resources - such as therapy, 12 step meetings, etc. - were helpful to you in recovering from your experience with intimate partner abuse?
6. Is there anything you would like to add?